
Procrastination as a Predictor of Task Perceptions: Examining Delayed and Non-delayed Tasks Across Varied Deadlines

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ABSTRACT - Participants ($N = 120$), in random order, wrote a paragraph describing a task they engaged in but did not delay in completing and then one task that they delayed, under past, present, or future deadlines. Perceptions of the task were assessed along 18 statements evaluating motives and task concerns. Results revealed a main effect for the delayed condition, as well as a time by delay interaction. Subsequent regression analyses revealed that rates of procrastination predicted differences in perceptions for only delayed tasks in the past and present time frames. Procrastinators were more likely to perceive delayed-past tasks as requiring greater effort and less clarity for task completion, and, more likely to think that had they completed the task, it would have had a positive impact on them personally. Higher levels of procrastination also predicted lower perceived enjoyment for delayed-present tasks. Implications are discussed for how person's with different procrastination tendencies perceive their task deadlines differently.

It is apparent that some people report frequent rates of task delays or incompleteness across many situations in their life - a tendency known as *procrastination* (c.f., Ferrari, Johnson, & McCown, 1995; Ferrari & Pychyl, 2000). The frequency of procrastination has been estimated to be as high as 70% for academic-specific tasks among college students (Ellis & Knaus, 1977), and about 20% among normal adult men and women in the U.S. (Harriott & Ferrari, 1996). Chronic procrastination is more frequently reported by "white collar" workers as compared to "blue collar" workers (Hammer & Ferrari, 2002). It has also been found that people who frequently delay tasks are more likely to engage in self-handicapping behaviors (Ferrari, 1991b; Ferrari & Tice, 2000), use

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impression management strategies (Ferrari, 1991c), are avoidant of self-relevant evaluations (Ferrari, 1991d), and are perceived negatively by others (Ferrari & Patel, 2004). Empirical studies further reported that chronic procrastination is related to a number of personality traits, including low states of self-confidence and self-esteem and high states of depression, neurosis, public self-consciousness, social anxiety, forgetfulness, disorganization, non-competitiveness, dysfunctional impulsiveness, behavioral rigidity, and lack of energy (see Beswick, Rothblum, & Mann, 1988; Effert & Ferrari, 1989; Ferrari 1991a, b, c, 1992, 1993, 1994; Lay, 1986). In short, procrastination is a complex phenomenon involving more than ineffective time management.

Procrastination also may represent a discrepancy between an individual's intention to act and actually performing the action (Lay 1986; 1988; Lay & Brokenshire, 1997). Blunt and Pychyl (1998) reported that chronic procrastination was related to a state-orientation and found that individuals who actually worked on daily projects were lower in procrastination tendencies as they attempted components of the project. Whether situational or dispositional, some tasks may have perceived features or attributes that interfere with successful performance. For example, a recent study found that people in negative moods were more likely to procrastinate in situations when there are *interesting* (as opposed to *boring*) stimuli nearby (Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001, Experiment 3). That study and others (e.g., Dewitte & Schouwenburg, 2002) showed that task characteristics may have an impact on whether the completion of a target task is delayed or not delayed.

Scher and Ferrari (2000; Ferrari & Scher, 2000) focused on intended daily tasks which people reported they completed or do not complete, as opposed to an emphasis on self reported trait procrastination tendencies. More specifically, participants listed intended daily tasks the day before the actual task needed to be performed, and then indicated the next day whether they completed or had not completed the task. Generally people procrastinated on intended daily tasks that were tedious in nature; but not all individuals procrastinated on the same tasks. This fact implies that even though the aversive and tedious nature of a task may be one possible reason why people delay on present, daily tasks, there may be other important task characteristics that contribute to its delay. Procrastinators also tend not to focus on future tasks needing attention (Specter & Ferrari, 2000), further suggesting that procrastination involves some relation to time perceptions. Furthermore, it is also likely that a person who procrastinates often is engaged in some other task or activity (e.g., Pychyl, Morin, & Salmon, 2000), which is irrelevant to the target task (Lasane & Jones, 2000). Previous research found that future oriented individuals focus on preparatory elements needed for task completion and are not easily distracted from the target goal (Lasane & Jones). In short, the person engaging in frequent procrastination delays in completing an intended target task, while often engaging in an irrelevant task.

Therefore, past research suggests that procrastinators may perceive both the

tasks and the timeframes in which the tasks are being completed, differently from those persons low in procrastination tendencies. In the present study, we considered how levels in procrastination predicted differences in perceptions, experiences, attributes, and emotional reactions about both non-delayed and delayed tasks, across three time frames; past, present and future. We were interested in the question of how procrastinators *actually think* about their tasks. Overall, we hypothesized that levels in procrastination would predict differences in how people perceived the tasks they engage in. Further, differences in task perceptions would be affected by whether the task was delayed or not delayed, and whether the task deadline was in the past, present or future time frame. This research was intended to be exploratory with the intent of beginning to understand how procrastinators might perceive or think about their tasks in unique ways.

Method

Participants

A total of 120 college students (71 women, 47 men, 2 non-disclosed; *M* age = 20.5 years old) from a large Midwestern, urban university participated in this study. Most participants were first or second year college students (72%). Participants took part in the experiment to receive credit for their introductory psychology course.

Psychometric Scales

All participants completed Lay's (1986) 20-item, 5-point (1 = *not true of me*; 5 = *very true of me*) *General Procrastination Scale* (GP) that examines behavioral procrastination tendencies; delays in the start of completion of everyday tasks. Sample items included "I often find myself performing task that I had intended to do days before," and "I generally return phone calls promptly (reverse-coded)". This scale has acceptable temporal stability (retest $r \geq 0.60$) and internal consistency (present sample $\alpha = 0.89$; *M* score = 66.32, *SD* = 11.11), as well as construct and predictive validities for use as a research inventory (see Ferrari et al., 1995).

Procedure

During the second week of class, students completed the GP embedded among several other research measures (in counter-balanced order) during a large group testing session. Approximately one week later, respondents signed up for an experiment (titled "Tense Descriptions"), which was described as a study involving written descriptions of everyday activities and tasks. After signing and returning a consent form, participants were administered randomly a file folder focusing on one of three deadline time frames. That is, some participants ($n = 40$) were asked to think of a task with a *past* deadline of a *week* or two, while others ($n = 40$) were asked to think of a task in the *present* with a

deadline within the next few days or week, and a third group of participants ($n = 40$) were asked to consider a *future* task with a deadline of a couple of weeks to come.

All participants then read along as the experimenter stated aloud instructions on how to describe, in a prose format, both non-delayed and delayed tasks with the specific time frame deadline. *Non-delayed tasks* were defined as tasks that they had not put off starting and/or finishing, whereas *delayed tasks* were defined as tasks they had postponed starting and/or finishing. Sequence for writing self-described delayed and non-delayed tasks were in random order. The experimenter answered any questions concerning the instructions. Participants were instructed to print both descriptions, and were given three minutes to write each essay as signaled by the experimenter.

After describing each delayed and non-delayed task for three minutes, respectively, the experimenter instructed participants to stop, turn the page, and respond to 18 questions regarding their perceptions of the task, rated on a 7-point Likert scales (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). Table 1 presents the actual 18 rating scales. Together, these rating scales exemplified possible attributes, perceptions, and emotional reactions about the described tasks. Thus, perceptions of both delayed and non-delayed tasks served as our dependent variables.

Table 1
Questions Related to Participants' Task Perceptions

1. How much are you committed to this task?
2. How much do you value this task?
3. How difficult is this task for you?
4. How much effort does this task require of you?
5. How confident are you to do this task?
6. How clear are you on how to do this task?
7. How many obstacles are there to do this task?
8. How much have you attained this goal in the past?
9. How satisfied are you with your progress on this task?
10. How much are doing this task to please others satisfaction with you or to improve other's perception of you?
11. How much ambivalence do you feel towards this task?
12. How likely is this task to be successful if you take no actions?
13. How enjoyable is this task?
14. How important is this task?
15. How stressful is this task?
16. How probable is this task to complete?
17. How much would completing the task impact on you positively?
18. How much would completing the task impact on you negatively?

Results

In order to determine if there were any overall effects caused by procrastination levels, the delayed condition or the time frames, we initially classified participants as non-procrastinators or procrastinators based upon a median-split of GP scores ($Md = 65$). Participants who reported GP scores ≤ 65 were labeled *non-procrastinators* ($n = 90$), while participants reporting a GP score \geq were classified as *procrastinators* ($n = 98$). We then calculated a 2 (*type*: procrastinator vs. non-procrastinator) \times 3 (*deadline time frame*: past vs. present vs. future) \times 2 (*task performance*: non-delayed vs. delayed) *MANOVA*, with repeated-measures on the last factor. We found an overall multivariate main effect for the task performance condition, $F(1, 160) = 187.79, p < .0001$, and a task performance by deadline time frame interaction, $F(1, 322) = 2.80, p < .0001$.

Table 2
Regression Analysis of General Procrastination Scores on Task Perceptions for Delayed-Past and Delayed-Present Tasks

Question	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>
<i>Delayed Past Tasks:</i>				
task is difficult	.044	.018	.408	2.45*
task requires effort	.047	.018	.427	2.63*
clarity on how to do task	-.024	.011	-.373	-2.24*
task is enjoyable	-.034	.011	-.480	-3.05**
task completion would have positive impact	.035	.014	.407	2.48*
<i>Delayed Present Tasks:</i>				
Task is enjoyable	-.030	.012	-.404	-2.58*

Note: $n = 120$

Given that task perceptions were affected by both the time frames of the task and whether the task was delayed or not delayed, we further examined how procrastination levels predicted task perceptions under these various conditions. We conducted subsequent *univariate analysis* using a regression function in order to preserve the richness of the original GP score, a scaled variable. We regressed each of the dependent task perception response scores onto the participants' GP scores on all possible combinations of the time frames and delayed/non delayed conditions. Overall, it was found that levels in procrastination were only a significant predictor of task perceptions for task that had been delayed (i.e., the person did procrastinate on the task) and for the past and present time frames (i.e., not for future tasks). Table 2 contains significant *non-zero beta weights* detailing the effects of GP scores on task perceptions for delayed past and delayed present tasks.

Specifically, we found that for delayed past tasks, procrastinators were more likely to see the task as *difficult, not enjoyable* and as a task that required a larger amount of *effort*. As well, procrastinators were more likely to state that they *lacked clarity* in how to complete the task. However, if they had completed the task, procrastinators believed it would have had a *positive personal impact*. Procrastination also predicted lower perceived *enjoyment* for delayed-current tasks.

Discussion

We found partial support that self-reported procrastination predicted differences in how people perceived their task in a variety of ways, though it depended upon whether the task was delayed or not delayed and in what deadline time frame the task existed. That is, procrastination levels did not appear to affect task perceptions overall. However, differences in perceptions based on whether the task was delayed or not delayed and whether the task's deadline was in the past, present or future time frames, was supported by a significant interaction effect.

What we found particularly interesting was that individual differences in procrastination were only a significant predictor of perceptions for tasks that had been delayed, but not for the non-delayed tasks. When delayed tasks were considered specifically in terms of their time frames, we discovered that the effects of procrastination on task perceptions was only significant for delayed past and delayed present tasks (i.e., not for the delayed future tasks). Stated another way, procrastinators only appear to differ from non-procrastinators in perceptions for tasks which they in fact procrastinated. The tasks that are completed by either procrastinators or non-procrastinators are perceived similarly. Though it seems relatively intuitive that a procrastinator's unique task perception would only manifest itself during cases when the person delayed (i.e., procrastinated), it was important to the literature on individual differences in chronic procrastination to find empirical evidence supporting this notion.

One question that arises then is why individual differences in self-reported procrastination did not predict significant differences in task perceptions for delayed future tasks. These tasks had a future deadline and were started by participants but procrastinated in completion. Perhaps, participants considered the time frame for when the task was to be due. That is, the notion of a deadline might not have affected how procrastinators viewed the task because the deadline date was considered in a distant future. The procrastinator might have considered he/she could still complete the task and work well under the time pressure (Ferrari, 2001). They might have actually believed they would act on their intentions to meet the deadline (Lay & Brokenshire, 1997). In contrast, in the past and present deadline conditions when describing delayed tasks participants might have recalled their actual experiences. Thus, the results seem to support the idea that once procrastination does take place, procrastinators may perceive the tasks differently from non-procrastinators. Specifically, procrastinators are more likely to see tasks that they postpone as being more difficult, less enjoyable, and requiring more effort; as well as stating that they lacked clarity on how to do the task, but had they completed the task, it would have impacted on them positively.

There are limitations to the present research, largely based on the fact that the research was exploratory in nature. For example, of the 18 questions that the participants responded to, only five were found to be significantly predicted by self-reported levels of procrastination. Future research needs to confirm and expand our findings with these five variables - *task difficulty, effort, enjoyableness, impact, and clarity* - as affected by levels in procrastination. Furthermore, future research should consider populations other than college students such as working adults with real-world deadlines. Nevertheless, the present study adds to the current body of personality research by demonstrating that individual differences in procrastination may be related to how people cognitively reframe their perceptions of task postponements as related to task deadlines.

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