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Social comparisons by procrastinators: rating peers with similar or dissimilar delay tendencies ☆

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Abstract

This study examined how procrastinators judge a peer who delays academic or everyday real-world activities. Participants (103 women, 57 men) previously self-reported procrastination tendencies and then read a brief hypothetical conversation between a procrastinator or a non-procrastinator focusing on either academic tasks (declaring a major, studying, and working on an assignment) or everyday tasks (buying tickets for a concert, making vacation travel plans, getting a summer job). Participants then were asked to allocate monetary resources, via choice matrices, and to complete rating and attribution scales regarding both persons in the conversations. Results indicated that across academic and everyday activities procrastinators favored non-procrastinators by attributing to similar procrastinating peers fewer resources, lower character ratings, and more internal attributes for performance. Implications related to the social perceptions of procrastinators suggest that persons with high rates of task delays are dissatisfied with the delay tendencies of other procrastinators, perhaps reflecting a dislike of their own behavior style.

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1. Introduction

Procrastination may be defined as a needless delay of a relevant and timely task, estimated to be as high as 20% among normal adult men and women (see Ferrari, Johnson, & McCown, 1995;

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Harriott & Ferrari, 1996). People who self-report frequent procrastination are more likely to engage in self-handicapping behaviors (Ferrari, 1991b; Ferrari & Tice, 2000), positive impression management (Ferrari, 1991a), avoidance of self-relevant evaluations (Ferrari, 1991c), and fraudulent excuses attributing task delays to factors other than themselves (Ferrari, 1993; Ferrari, Keane, Wolfe, & Beck, 1998). Chronic procrastination is related to a host of 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 (Beswick, Rothblum, & Mann, 1988; Effert & Ferrari, 1989; Ferrari, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1992, 1993, 1994; Lay, 1986; Senecal, Koestner, & Vallerand, 1995).

Studies have found that fear of failure may be a primary motive for procrastination (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984), and people report they delay more on tasks they perceive as unpleasant, boring, or difficult (Milgram, Sroloff, & Rosenbaum, 1988). Baumeister and Scher (1988) classified procrastination as self-defeating behavior that reflects the person's willingness to perform tasks poorly (i.e., exam failure) in exchange for its short-term advantages (i.e., reduced amount of effort). Ferrari (2001) found that procrastination may be considered as ineffective self-regulation of performance. In short, procrastination is a complex phenomenon. While situational task delays may appear to be a breakdown in structural components of action, for persons who report chronic procrastination purposive delays may be a motivated deficit.

Burka and Yuen (1983) observed that most chronic procrastinators are unhappy with their frequent delay tendencies and attribute their failures to themselves. Little is known, however, how procrastinators perceive peers with similar delaying tendencies. A study conducted by Ferrari (1992) may yield some insights in this area. Working adults self-reported their tendency toward frequent avoidant procrastination (i.e., a tendency to delay tasks motivated by avoidance of performance valuation, as opposed to delays designed to heighten arousal from "rushing"). At a later point, procrastinators and non-procrastinators evaluated the poor performance of a fictitious employee described either as a "procrastinator" or a "perfectionist." All participants agreed that the employee's performance delays would adversely affect the company's productivity. However, only procrastinators deemed it necessary to have this employee penalized by not performing his usual duties and should be fired from his position (regardless of whether the employee was labeled either a procrastinator or perfectionist). Both men and women procrastinators evaluated the fictitious employee's delaying performance as a direct reflection of the person's abilities as opposed to some external factor. This study by Ferrari suggests that procrastinators, perhaps, "project" resentment of their own inadequacies onto peers who thereby deserve to be punished for their delay tendencies, despite the fact that they are similar to themselves. These findings have implications for the way people perceive others who are similar to themselves. Demonstrating that procrastinators are viewed negatively by their peers has implications for understanding the dynamics of public perceptions of task delays, and may be useful when designing interventions to reduce this maladaptive life style among chronic procrastinators.

In the current study, participants formed impressions of two strangers from reading (bogus) conversation transcripts or narratives, a procedure similar to Khan and Lambert's (1998) "get acquainted paradigm". In that study participants read a conversation between two students whose gender was apparent only by name (i.e. "Ann" and "Jim"). The present study asked

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