



A critique of the construct validity of active procrastination



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ABSTRACT

Although research demonstrates that procrastination is an instance of self-regulation failure with deleterious consequences, Chu and Choi (2005) have defined a new construct called *active procrastination*. Active procrastination is the deliberate deferral of tasks to the last minute resulting in positive outcomes despite the delay. The present study examined and challenged the construct validity of active procrastination. We used key defining characteristics of procrastination (e.g., self-regulation, intention-action gap), correlates (e.g., self-efficacy beliefs, conscientiousness) and related outcomes (e.g., stress, depression) as identified in the extant research literature to re-examine the relations that define the construct's nomological network. Results revealed that active procrastination is heterogeneous in nature consisting of two theoretically and empirically distinct constructs: *purposeful* and *arousal delay*. Correlations and a Principle Components Analysis failed to replicate the nomological network of active procrastination demonstrated in previous research, and we argue that it is more appropriately construed as a deliberate delay that is purposeful, not procrastination. Limitations associated with the active procrastination construct, empirical evidence and the corresponding inferences in developing the Active Procrastination Scale are discussed.

1. Introduction

Procrastination is a form of self-regulation failure (e.g., Steel, 2007; Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000) that is self-defeating in the sense that it is related to negative effects on performance, psychological functioning, well-being and even health. Compiling evidence from both published and unpublished studies in two separate meta-analytic reviews, Van Eerde (2003) and Steel (2007) summarized a whole host of negative outcomes related to procrastination such as low self-control (e.g., Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000), low conscientiousness (e.g., Watson, 2001), low self-efficacy (e.g., Haycock, McCarthy, & Skay, 1998), poor performance (e.g., Tice & Baumeister, 1997), as well as deleterious consequences for well-being and health (e.g., Sirois, Melia-Gordon, & Pychyl, 2003). Drawing on the findings from his meta-analysis, Steel (2007) concluded, "Procrastination is usually harmful, sometimes harmless, but never helpful" (p. 80).

Given that the extant literature clearly identifies procrastination as a self-regulation failure and a negative form of delay, it is surprising that some researchers have conceptualized a positive form of procrastination labeled "active procrastination" (Choi & Moran, 2009; Chu & Choi, 2005). Active procrastination is defined as a type of procrastination where a decision to delay work to the last minute is deliberately made, and the work is done closer to deadline to seek pressure and enhance motivation to do the work, while the individual remains confident that

the work will be done well. These researchers explain that active procrastination is not related to the negative outcomes found in previous procrastination research, rather it is associated with positive outcomes such as higher GPA, better performance, better health and mental well-being.

The fundamental flaw associated with the definition of active procrastination is that Chu and Choi (2005) have misconstrued purposeful, deliberate delay as procrastination. Strong empirical support for different types of delay has been found by Haghbin and Pychyl (2015) who developed a typology of 6 types of delay. Based on this typology of delay, active procrastination may be understood as a combination of purposeful and arousal delay, not procrastination per se. In fact, as Chu and Choi's research reveals, individuals who score high on the measure of active procrastination resemble non-procrastinators who actively choose to delay their tasks by reprioritizing them when necessary to meet the deadline of the scheduled goals.

Recent research by Corkin, Yu, and Lindt (2011) and Hensley (2015) has also identified the inconsistency if not incoherence of the notion of active procrastination. They reinforce our argument that *active procrastination* is in fact active or purposeful *delay* that possesses the characteristics of adaptive forms of self-regulatory processes. To date, however, no studies have systematically addressed the nomological network of the active procrastination construct. The purpose of our study was to replicate and extend the research conducted by Chu and

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Choi (2005) and Choi and Moran (2009) to demonstrate both the logical and empirical flaws in their research and construct definition.

2. Active procrastination and its conceptualization

Chu and Choi (2005) have conceptualized active procrastination using four defining characteristics: preference for pressure, intentional decision to procrastinate, ability to meet deadlines and outcome satisfaction. Based on a self-report questionnaire and factor analysis, Chu and Choi (2005) developed the *Active Procrastination Scale* (APS) consisting of these four defining factors operationalized by 12-items.

To investigate the outcomes hypothesized to be associated with active procrastination, Chu and Choi (2005) categorized procrastinators into three groups: *passive*-, *active*- and *non-procrastinators*. Compared to active procrastinators, they described *passive procrastinators* as “traditional” procrastinators who do have the intention to complete a task, but engage in the task at the last minute due to indecisiveness and low self-control, and are incapable of managing their time to finish tasks and consequently suffer negative consequences. In contrast, *non-procrastinators* make effective use of their time, are more organized, and engage in thorough planning to complete tasks. This attempt to differentiate *passive procrastination* or simply “procrastination” from that of *active*- and *non-procrastination* based on having a time-management problem is misplaced, as previous empirical work has shown that procrastinators and non-procrastinators are equally accurate in estimating their study time, and procrastinators are aware that they will study later and study less (Pychyl, Morin, & Salmon, 2000). However, Chu and Choi (2005) misconstrued procrastination as a time-management problem failing to take into account important research findings relating procrastination to the misregulation of emotion (e.g., Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000).

Chu and Choi (2005) distinguished *active*, *passive* and *non-procrastinators* using a number of psychological characteristics and correlates. What they found was that active procrastination is not correlated with passive procrastination, and active procrastinators have stronger self-efficacy beliefs, can make purposive use of time, are driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and use proactive coping strategies to deal with stress much as non-procrastinators do and unlike traditional procrastinators. They also found that active procrastinators experience positive outcomes such as better performance, life satisfaction, low stress and depression (Chu & Choi, 2005). Of course, an alternative, more parsimonious interpretation of their non-significant findings between *active* and *passive procrastination*, and the pattern of results demonstrated using these correlates, is that active procrastination is not a type of procrastination at all, but rather it is a strategic delay which is purposeful in nature.

Additionally, two important limitations of active procrastination research are worthy of discussion. First, Chu and Choi used a median split in distinguishing procrastinators from non-procrastinators in their study. Using a median cut-off score, it is not possible to determine that those who score higher than the median are in fact “procrastinators,” and those who score below the median cannot be guaranteed to be “non-procrastinators.” Another major disadvantage of this procedure is that it involves considerable loss of data (Cohen, 1983). Chu and Choi (2005) also used an arbitrary score of 4.33 to differentiate active from traditional procrastinators. Their reason for using this score was to obtain samples of comparable sizes for active- and traditional-procrastinators. It is important to have a cut-off score based on some theoretically or empirically derived standard, not simply statistical convenience.

Second, when Choi and Moran (2009) expanded the Active Procrastination Scale into a 16-item scale loading on to the four defining factors using factor analysis, the items for outcome satisfaction, preference for pressure, and ability to meet deadlines were all reverse coded. Reverse coding nearly all of their items for this construct is a significant shortcoming in their scale construction, as it is conceptually difficult to

interpret a construct (DeVellis, 2003), and endorsing that one is “not unhappy” does not mean that one is happy. Also, reverse-coded items tend to load on a separate factor than the expected factors (Weijters, Baumgartner, & Schillewaet, 2013).

3. Construct validity of active procrastination

Clearly, the construct of active procrastination creates a semantic debate as to how an individual can “actively” procrastinate. Given that one of the defining features of procrastination is *self-regulation failure* (e.g., Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000), we might use a substitution of this phrase in their construct as “active self-regulation failure.” When expressed like this, it becomes obvious how active procrastination might be considered an oxymoron. Semantically, Chu and Choi (2005) have confused active procrastination with strategic delay used by non-procrastinators. The basis for this distinction is Pychyl's (2013) argument that “all procrastination is delay, but not all delay is procrastination,” which has been overlooked in the research on active procrastination.

There is strong empirical support for a distinction between procrastination and other forms of delay in the work of Haghbin and Pychyl (2015) who developed multidimensional scales to assess and differentiate problematic delay or procrastination from other forms of delay. Among these types of delay, Haghbin and Pychyl's (2015) research demonstrated extensive validation and ample evidence supporting the constructs *purposeful* and *arousal delay*. Not surprisingly the definition of active procrastination coincides with the definition of both purposeful and arousal delay making active procrastination a heterogeneous construct. A construct is said to be heterogeneous when it includes features of two separate constructs under one single construct (Edwards, 2001). In the case of active procrastination, the decision to deliberately procrastinate on certain tasks and not others in order to prioritize work according to the external demands resembles *purposeful delay*. Conversely, delaying tasks to feel the time pressure which then acts as a motivating factor to work more effectively resembles another type of delay, which Haghbin (2015; Haghbin & Pychyl, 2015) identified as *arousal delay*. Empirically, these researchers provided a clear distinction between *purposeful* and *arousal delay* in terms of their own etiologies, consequences and relations to different emotional experiences. *Purposeful delay* does not include any internal need to postpone tasks, but the reasons are external situational factors, which require people to make rational decisions and reprioritize their tasks. In contrast, *arousal delay* includes the internal need to experience high arousal, thrill and excitement as a motivation by delaying tasks to the last minute but no external factors are in effect to enforce task completion. Furthermore, both types of delay relate to different personality traits, well-being and personal outcomes. For instance, Haghbin (2015; Haghbin & Pychyl, 2015) found that *purposeful delay* had a positive relation with conscientiousness, self-control and well-being, whereas the opposite was found with *arousal delay*. This further questions the conceptualization of active procrastination as it includes only positive outcomes even though it includes *arousal delay* in its definition, which involves negative outcomes.

Additionally, despite being labeled as a type of procrastination, active procrastination does not include any of the defining features of procrastination even though it has been noted as a form of procrastination. Klingsieck (2013) and Haghbin and Pychyl (2015) specified voluntary *needless* delay, *irrational belief*, an *intention-action gap*, *delaying despite the probable negative consequences*, and *delay accompanied by subjective emotional discomfort and/or poor outcomes* as the defining characteristics of procrastination. Based on these defining features alone, it is apparent that what Chu and Choi (2005) label as active procrastination is not procrastination at all, as active procrastination is neither needless nor based on irrational beliefs, there is no intention-action gap (only a delayed intention to act until later), and the outcome is neither negative in terms of performance nor subjective experience.

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