

Blameworthiness and Moral Responsibility in Students That Procrastinate versus Delay

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Background

Any type of procrastination is delay, not all delay is procrastination. As opposed to rational delays, the needless postponing of intended actions without a logistical reason is referred to as procrastination. Procrastination is also typically considered to be a failure of self-regulation (Baumeister, 1996; Pychyl, 2010), as compared to delays which can help one to self-regulate (Pychyl, 2010). Procrastination is the voluntary, needless delay of an intended action despite potential negative consequences such as poorer performance (Steel, 2007), greater stress and poorer health (e.g., Sirois, Melia-Gordon & Pychyl, 2003), as well as anxiety (Ferrari, 1991; Lay et al., 1989; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984) and shame (Fee & Tangney, 2000). **The key feature of procrastination is the needless intention-action gap.** These negative emotional consequences are commonplace in educational settings given that about 95% of all students frequently engage in procrastination (Ellis & Knaus, 1977). In academic settings, procrastination has been seen as a motivational problem involving a personal failure to enact intentions, that arises due to a lack of time management skills and results in impaired emotional well-being (Senecal et al., 1995).

From an experimental-philosophy perspective, Knobe (2006) examined folk-psychological conceptions of intentional action. He argues that moral considerations can influence the way in which individuals view behaviours as being intentional or unintentional, which then generates their label of that behaviour. For example, people are more likely to attribute blame to situations that render negative outcomes than those that have positive outcomes. This concept is also very similar to the well-known fundamental attribution error, which states that a person is more likely to emphasize internal causes for a given behaviour of others and external causes for their own behaviours (Jellison & Green, 1981).

The purpose of my study was to extend this work exploring the folk-psychological conceptions of procrastination in relation to blameworthiness and moral responsibility and have a look at these maladaptive learning strategies for student achievement. This study represents an intriguing extension to work in educational psychology as well as experimental philosophy in helping to better understand the nature of moral judgments surrounding procrastination in educational settings.

Method

Participants were 211 first- and second-year students received grade-raising credits for their participation. In this online study, participants were randomly assigned to one of 8 groups of 2 scenarios. Students read scenarios that involved a combination of the following **three factors: target** (about themselves vs. about others), **reason for inaction** (procrastination vs. delay), and **outcome** (negative outcome vs. positive outcome).

Example: Self, Procrastination and Negative Results

You want to apply for a research assistant position. You have two weeks to get two letters of reference and to fill out the application form. You needlessly put it off until the last minute and no professor is able to write you a letter in time for the deadline. The department says that they will not accept your application without letters of reference; therefore you do not get the position.

Example: Other, Delay and Positive Results

Josh is in charge of doing data analysis on SPSS for a presentation. He decides to begin the analysis 2 weeks prior to the date of the presentation in order to be well prepared. He does not have SPSS software on his laptop and he is then forced to go and see his friend in order to use it. Josh can only work for a few hours a week because his friend has such a busy schedule. At the end of the first week his friend informs him that she accidentally deleted the project. He then begins to work on it all over again. The result is that he ends up finishing in time and doing amazing on his presentation.

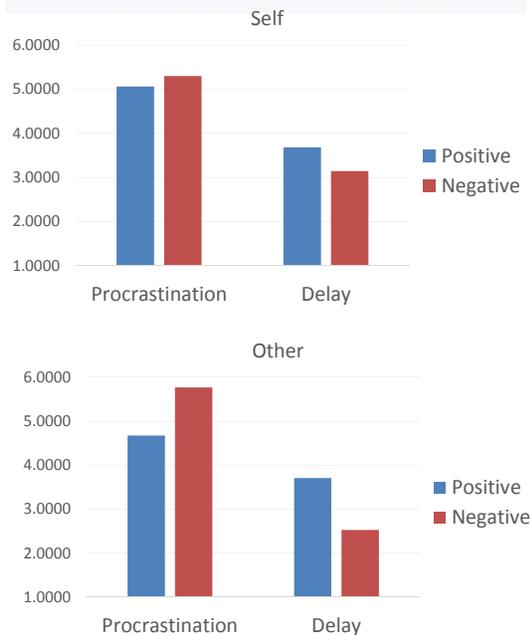
After participants read each scenario, they rated their agreement to the following items on a 6-point Likert-type scale: 1) the agent was morally responsible, 2) the agent was blameworthy, 3) the agent was procrastinating (manipulation check).

Analysis

Total scores for blameworthiness and moral responsibility were calculated based on the scenarios. These scores were included as outcome measures in respective univariate ANOVAs with experimental factors as independent measures, namely target (self vs. other), reason for inaction (procrastination vs. delay), and outcome valence (negative vs. positive). Age and gender were used as covariates in this analysis.

Results

The results showed significant main effects between procrastination and delay, $p < .001$, on both dependent variables (blame and moral responsibility). Results revealed no significant interactions for blame, however, a 2x2x2 ANOVA revealed a 2-way interaction between reason for inaction (procrastination and delay) and outcome (negative and positive), $F(1,153) = 20.48$, $p < .001$ and also, a 3-way interaction for responsibility, $F(1,153) = 4.60$, $p < .05$.



Discussion

The results of the present study have implications for students in identifying the psychosocial consequences of procrastination, as compared to more rational delays based on situational circumstances, with respect to responsibility concerning one's own and others' procrastination behavior.

Discussion (cont.)

First, the results revealed that participants viewed an agent more morally responsible in cases of procrastination than delay. This finding suggests that programs for students in which the differences between these behaviors are more clearly delineated (e.g., time management seminars) could help to alleviate unnecessary negative connotations of otherwise productive prioritizing strategies. Secondly, according to the results, attributing moral responsibility to agents that procrastinate depended upon the target (self versus other) and the outcome (positive versus negative). In support of our assumption, participants viewed others as more morally responsible than themselves for both procrastination and delay. In cases with positive outcomes, the agent was seen as more responsible for delay than for procrastination, whereas with negative results the agent was seen as more responsible for procrastination than for delay.

This result further underscores a potential challenge for programs aimed at curbing procrastination in students in suggesting that the negative consequences of procrastination for academic and personal development must be convincingly addressed in order to optimally highlight the role of personal responsibility in preventing it in the future. In sum, the present research offers potentially useful findings based on an experimental paradigm with respect to the development of procrastination-related programs for struggling students in providing novel findings concerning how students understand and feel about procrastination, as compared to intentional delay strategies, in academic settings.

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