



Brief Report

Procrastination: Different time orientations reflect different motives

Joseph R. Ferrari^a, Juan Francisco Díaz-Morales^{b,*}

^a Department of Psychology, DePaul University, 2219 North Kenmore Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614, USA

^b Departamento de Psicología Diferencial y del Trabajo, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Campus de Somosaguas, s/n, 28223, Madrid, Spain

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Abstract

Because procrastination concerns a person's ability to meet deadlines, temporal dimension is clearly important to this personality construct. In the present study, the characteristic profile of arousal and avoidant motives of procrastinators were related to past, present, and future time conceptions. Participants (140 women, 135 men; mean age = 49.4, $SD = 5.55$) completed measures of arousal and avoidance procrastination, and time orientation. Results indicated that avoidant procrastination was associated negatively with present-fatalistic time orientation, and arousal procrastination was associated positively with present-hedonist and negatively with future time orientations. The variance accounted for by time orientations was modest, yet provides further evidence that there are distinct motives for chronic procrastination.

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1. Introduction

Although shown to be associated with affective, behavioral, and cognitive characteristics reflecting more than inefficient time management (Ferrari, Johnson, & McCown, 1995; Ferrari & Pychyl, 2000), the concept of *procrastination* remains closely related to meeting

* Corresponding author. Fax: +34 913942820.

E-mail addresses: jferrari@depaul.edu (J.R. Ferrari), juanfcodiaz@psi.ucm.es (J.F. Díaz-Morales).

deadlines within a specific timeframe. Chronic procrastinators compared to non-procrastinators spend less preparation time on tasks likely to succeed and more time on projects likely to fail (Lay, 1990), underestimate the overall time required to complete a task (Burt & Kemp, 1994), spend less time searching for information needed to complete tasks (Ferrari & Dovidio, 2000), start tasks intended to be completed early at the last minute (Lay & Burns, 1991; Pychyl, Morin, & Salmon, 2000), and are “present-oriented” (Blatt & Quinlan, 1967; in Ferrari et al., 1995). Procrastinators report difficulties in structuring their time and viewed their time use as less personally meaningful than non-procrastinators (Vodanovich & Seib, 1997).

Given the obvious importance of time to procrastination, time orientation seems to be a particularly important variable to consider with regard to the problem of procrastination. Zimbardo and Boyd (1999) defined time orientation as a non-conscious, continual flow of personal and social experiences assigned to temporal categories, or time frames, that help people give order, coherence, and meaning to these events. This model includes past, present, and future temporal dimensions and affective valence assigned to the present (hedonistic and fatalistic) and past (positive and negative) orientations.

According to Brislin and Kim (2003), emphasis on *past time orientation* might enable a person to take a long-term perspective, avoid risks, and emphasize stability, whereas an emphasis on *present time orientation* might facilitate a person to live in the here and now focusing on short-term perspectives. Studies have shown that a motivational mechanism of procrastination may include neglecting previous experience, particularly failures (Buehler, Griffin, & McDonald, 1997), which result in postponement of action motivated by an avoidance response. In contrast, a present-focus orientation may relate to completing tasks as close to a deadline as possible. Such a strategy may energize the individual to work quickly especially if the task is unattractive or not challenging (Van Eerde, 2003). An emphasis on *future time orientation*, in contrast, requires a long-time perspective. A person with this orientation may need longer time for important decisions, especially when there are long delays along the course of action.

Despite the obvious importance of time to procrastination, little research has examined this important relationship. Jackson, Fritch, Nagasaka, and Pope (2003) showed that procrastination, after controlling for negative affect, had robust associations with a negative evaluation of past, a fatalistic or negative view of present, and a positive view of future. Specter and Ferrari (2000) found that procrastination was negatively associated with future time, positively associated with a past time, and not associated with a present time orientations. Neither of these previous investigations considered how different types of procrastinators might conceptualize time.

2. Overview and predictions

In the present study, we examined two motives for procrastination, avoidance, and arousal (Ferrari et al., 1995; Ferrari & Pychyl, 2000). Avoidance refers to the tendency of individuals to postpone activities perceived as unpleasant in order to prevent negative information about self-worth and/or personal performance. Such individuals procrastinate as a means to avoid threatening task feedback (Ferrari, 1991). In contrast, arousal motives for procrastination delay task completion in order to experience the pleasurable arousal of rushing to meet a deadline (Ferrari, 2000, 2001). Avoidant motivation is negatively related to need for cognition, and self-esteem, while arousal motivation is associated with

sensation seeking. Both motives for procrastination also have been shown to be associated with putting off Christmas shopping but for different reasons. Avoidant procrastinators delayed shopping due to a dislike for shopping or lack of effort, while arousal procrastinators delayed because of other commitments (e.g., business affairs: Ferrari, 1993).

We predicted that these types of motives for procrastination would be related to each other, but would also show different associations with time orientation. First, because all procrastination shares an essential difficulty in planning for the future, we expected both forms of procrastination motives would be associated with lowered future time orientation. Second, we expected avoidant procrastination would be associated with negative attitudes toward the present and future. Third, we expected arousal procrastination would be associated with more hedonistic views of the present.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants were 275 adults (140 women, 135 men), middle-aged (mean age = 49.4 years old, $SD = 5.55$; range = 25–63), and employed as either administrative staff (9.2%), housewives (25.4%), business professionals (8.8%), specialized (9.2%) and unspecialized workers (22.8%), public health professionals (9.2%), and professors (6.6%), or unknown in profession (2.2%). Most participants (77.1%) were married, had on average two children, and completed some higher education (70.0%). All participants volunteered to participate in this study; they were debriefed with a brief report of results when the study was completed.

3.2. Procedure

Spanish versions of both procrastination (Díaz-Morales, Ferrari, Díaz, & Argumedo, 2006) and time orientation (Díaz-Morales, 2006) scales were used in this study. Scales were translated into Spanish by the first author, and then back translated by an independent bilingual expert (see Paunonen & Ashton, 1998). Adult participants were recruited using a “snowball approach,” such that a group of trained students ($n = 47$) gave all three scales (in counterbalanced order) to people from their circle of older friends, with the restrictions of gender and age to maintain a balanced distribution.

3.3. Psychometric measures

Each participant completed demographic items (sex, age, marital status, education level, and number of children), two procrastination scales, and one time orientation inventory.

3.3.1. Avoidant procrastination

Developed by McCown and Johnson (1989; see Ferrari et al., 1995 for details), the *Adult Inventory of Procrastination* (AIP) examined procrastination motivated by fears of success or failure, avoidance of disclosure of skill inabilities, and insecurities of performance (Ferrari, 1991). Respondents rated 15-items along a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree*; 5 = *agree*), with seven items with reverse score. Sample items included “*I don’t get things done on time*” and “*I am not very good at meeting deadlines.*” The scale had a Cronbach’s

alpha of ≥ 0.80 with Spanish samples (Díaz-Morales et al., 2006), and with the present sample of 0.79 (mean score = 32.3, $SD = 8.49$).

3.3.2. Arousal procrastination

Lay's (1986) 20-item, 5-point (1 = *not true of me*; 5 = *very true of me*) *General Procrastination Scale* examined behavioral procrastination tendencies, such as delays in the start of completion of everyday tasks, and associated with a need for a thrill-seeking, sensation seeking experience (Ferrari, 1992, 1993). Sample statements included "I generally return phone calls promptly" and "I usually buy even an essential item at the last minute." With Spanish samples the scale had an alpha of ≥ 0.84 (Díaz-Morales et al., 2006), and in the present sample of 0.83 (mean score = 48.7, $SD = 10.23$).

3.3.3. Time orientation

The 56-item (5-point rating scale) Spanish version of the *Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory* (Díaz-Morales, 2006) measured subjective beliefs, preferences, and values about temporal experiences. Five dimensions identified with this scale (see Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999), namely: *past-negative*, a general negative, aversive view of the past ("I think about the bad things that have happened to me in the past"); *present-hedonist*, a hedonistic risk-taking attitude toward time and life ("Taking risks keeps my life from becoming boring"); *future*, goal planning, and achieving ("I am able to resist temptations when I know that there is work to be done"); *past-positive*, an attitude optimistic, and positive toward the past ("I enjoy stories about how things used to be in the 'good old times'"); and *present-fatalist*, a hopeless attitude toward the future and life ("My life path is controlled by forces I cannot influence"). With the present sample, coefficient alphas of the subscales were 0.66 for present-fatalist, 0.69 for past-positive, 0.70 for future, 0.74 for present-hedonist, and 0.79 for past-negative.

4. Results

Preliminary analysis showed that there were no significant demographic profile differences in terms of gender, marital status, number of children, or educational level on either procrastination or ZTPI measures. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and zero-order correlates among procrastination, time orientation scores, and chronological age. Scores on both procrastination scales were highly correlated, indicating that for the present adult

Table 1
Zero-order correlations coefficients between procrastination motives, time orientation and age

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Avoidant	32.4	8.5	—						
2. Arousal	48.7	10.2	.71***	—					
3. Past-negative	2.6	.54	.03	.13*	—				
4. Present-hedonist	2.9	.55	.14*	.20**	.22**	—			
5. Future	3.7	.53	-.53***	-.59***	.01	-.08	—		
6. Past-positive	3.3	.65	-.09	.01	.36***	.13*	.20**	—	
7. Present-fatalistic	2.7	.54	.28***	.31***	.40***	.29***	-.31***	.19***	—
8. Age	49.4	5.5	-.10*	-.09	-.02	-.18***	.11	.00	.07

$n = 275$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

sample chronic procrastination behaviors patterns (arousal and avoidance) were not mutually exclusive, consistent with other multi-cultural samples of adults (e.g., Ferrari, Díaz-Morales, O’Callaghan, Díaz, & Argumedo, 2006). Also, time orientation scores were moderately interrelated. Past-negative orientation was related to present-hedonist, past-positive, and present-fatalist orientations; present-hedonist orientation was related to past-positive and present-fatalistic orientations, while future orientation was related positively to past-positive and negatively to present-fatalistic orientations. Finally, past-positive orientation was related to present-fatalistic orientation. While future (negative), present-fatalist (positive), and present-hedonist (positive) orientations were correlated to procrastination scores, past-negative orientation was related only to arousal procrastination, and past-positive was not significantly related to neither of the procrastination scale scores. Finally, there was a significant relationship between chronological age, avoidant procrastination, and present-hedonist time orientation.

4.1. Regression analyses

In order to analyze the contribution of time orientations on the two procrastination scales, we performed two *hierarchical regression analyses*. In the first step, the relative impact of each procrastination motive and age were entered, and in the second step the five time orientations. Table 2 indicates that although each procrastination motive accounted for substantial variance in the other, time orientation factors accounted for an additional percentage of variance in avoidant ($R^2 = .03$) and arousal ($R^2 = .09$) procrastination motives. Regarding individual predictors of procrastination, results indicated different profiles. That is, high levels of avoidant procrastination were associated with high scores on the present-fatalistic factor ($p < .05$). After controlling the significant effects of arousal procrastination and age, present-fatalistic orientation accounted for 3% of the variance of an avoidant motive of procrastination. However, arousal procrastination was predicted marginally by higher scores on present-hedonist ($p < .06$) and high scores on past-positive

Table 2
Hierarchical regression analysis of time orientation and age on procrastination motives

Predictor	Avoidant		Arousal	
	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2
Step 1		.52		.51
Avoidant	—		.72***	
Arousal	.71***		—	
Age	-.08 ⁺		-.01	
Step 2		.03		.09
Avoidant	—		.55***	
Arousal	.63***		—	
Age	-.09*		.04	
Past-negative	-.09		.07	
Present-hedonist	.00		.08 ⁺	
Future	-.13		-.32***	
Past-positive	-.01		.08 ⁺	
Present-fatalist	.11*		-.02	

$n = 275$; ⁺ $p < .06$; * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

Note: β is standardized regression coefficient.

($p < .06$) orientations, but significantly by lower levels of future orientation ($p < .001$), after controlling for avoidant procrastination scores and age. This pattern of relations accounted for the 9% of variance of arousal procrastination.

5. Discussion

The present study provides further evidence that there are distinct forms of procrastination, supporting previous research that the construct is multidimensional vs. unitary (e.g., Watson, 2001). This point is especially important, given that the data from the present study showed remarkably low levels of independence among responses to procrastination scales used previously with international samples (see Ferrari, O'Callahan, & Newbegin, 2004; Ferrari et al., 2006). Other studies indicated that time orientations were associated with task delays, but used student samples focused on academic procrastination (cf. Ferrari & Pychyl, 2000; Schouwenburg, Lay, Pychyl, & Ferrari, 2004). The present study, in contrast, demonstrated among an adult sample that distinct personality styles of procrastination may be related to specific, dominant forms of time orientation.

Avoidant procrastination was related positively with present-fatalistic orientation, a sense that their future is predestined regardless of one's actions, whereas the present seems controlled by fate (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Avoidant procrastinators may fail to have a global vision of their life, perhaps trying not to face necessary skills that achieve future goals or present sub-goals (Specter & Ferrari, 2000). Procrastinators often cope with the anxiety and threat derived of accomplishment of tasks by actively avoiding the start of a task until there is insufficient time to perform optimally. Consistent with Van Eerde (2003), avoidant procrastination seems to be a purposive strategy to avoidant temporary threat in order to protect one's well-being. Our results showed that the protection of the well-being in the *short term* may be achieved by a fatalistic view of time. Regarding age, McCown and Roberts (1994) found in a telephone survey conducted on people aged 18–77 years old that scores of the *AIP*, a measure of avoidant procrastination, declined at age 55, an effect more pronounced for men than women. It is possible that the responsibility of later adult life, compared with life projects at early adulthood, accounts for lower scores in avoidant procrastination. The tendency is similar to age differences for the Big five's Consciousness dimension, a factor with which the construct of procrastination has the strongest association (Johnson & Bloom, 1995; Schouwenburg & Lay, 1995; Van Eerde, 2003; Watson, 2001). Arousal procrastination was related with lower future orientation, perhaps because chronic arousal procrastinators avoid or dismiss future goals in favor of reducing present tension (Ferrari, 2001) or seek more immediate and pleasurable rewards than longer plans or future goals (Pychyl, Lee, Thibodeau, & Blunt, 2000). Therefore, arousal procrastination may arise from a lack of planning for future goals, and by orientation toward present enjoyment, pleasure, excitement, and an emphasis on novelty and sensation seeking.

The principal limitation of the present study was its correlational nature and that all data were cross-sectional. Future studies might consider experimental designs to ascertain causal relations between procrastination and time orientations. The present study also relied exclusively on self-report information. Research on procrastination and other personality variables benefit from collateral data as well as behavioral outcome measures of task delays.

The two scales of procrastination used in this study measured separate but related indicators for the same underlying construct (i.e., time delay tendency). Obviously, future

studies are necessary to shed more light about the discriminant validity of these two forms of chronic procrastination. For instance, the type of task (i.e., the level of challenge, amount of self-relevance, and potential for excitement) or situations (i.e., autonomous vs. regulated work) which prompt people to procrastinate from arousal or avoidant motives needs investigation. Studies also should be designed to examine the prevalence and problems associated with domain specific areas of procrastination, such as delays in corporate settings or interpersonal relationships. These studies might assist counsellors and therapists design and assess the effectiveness of interventions to treat chronic procrastination. Treatments for persons who procrastinate for a thrill-seeking experience seem different than persons who procrastinate because of low self-confidence and self-worth (Schouwenburg et al., 2004). Still, effective outcome studies treating motives for chronic procrastination with adult populations is lacking. We believe that the present findings provide a further step towards a more complete understanding of the nature, functions, and origins of procrastination as related to time.

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