

# Is it time for 'active' procrastination?

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Life, as it is called, is for most of us  
one long postponement.

Henry Miller

We live in a time-constrained society. People are rushing, running, pushing and striving to meet deadlines that symbolise that they have achieved tasks, whether in a professional, educational or social context. Successfully meeting these target temporal goals and their requirements, on one level, represents people's productivity (input/output) and, on another level, their self-worth. If a person can multitask and be successful at accomplishing several tasks at once in a short time frame, then we praise that person's ability and admire their talent. If the quality is satisfactory and the production rate is fast, we value these traits and try to adopt these same qualities and/or teach them to our children. *Faster* is synonymous with *better*, and a person who delays prompts reflection about that person's worth and value within our society.

In this competitive world, where we are expected to perform perfectly and keep up with the constant pressure (Burka & Yuen, 1983), procrastination enables us to escape from the high-pressured and perfection-conscious norms. Yet we are taught that procrastination is a bad habit, a dangerous vice that one should learn how to change in order to have a better, healthier, happier and more successful life.

I was always fascinated by the construct of procrastination. Cultural, environmental, biological and genetic

components all come into play when looking at it – it's clearly a complex issue. However, most of the literature has focused on the negative, referring to procrastination as a 'self-regulatory failure' (Dietz et al., 2007; Steel, 2007) or linking it to an increase in negative affective outcome that is apparent with an increased level of depression, anxiety and lower self-esteem (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). People often joke about procrastination and tease each other about it. It is often referred to in vernacular as laziness, self-indulgence, or unproductive behaviour and has a negative self-image (Choi & Moran, 2009; Tice & Baumesiter, 1997) It can be described as harmful and self-handicapping, a destructive and self-defeating strategy because it undermines the quality of the performance (Tice & Baumeister, 1997).

Yet we all do it. Why? Can a psychological consideration of procrastination shed light on the pros and cons?

## Lessons from history

Procrastination may have been with us since the beginning of human civilisation, only increasing in visibility in Western society, particularly during the Industrial Revolution (circa 1750), when effective time management started to have a burgeoning impact on the social value of individuals (Knaus, 2000).

Consider striking historical examples of 'classic procrastinators'. It took Charles

Darwin, one of the brightest minds of the 19th century, 20 years to write and publish his book *On the Origin of Species*. One could argue that he delayed the publication of his manuscript because of the nature of the work that would have been seen as very controversial, contentious and, most likely, an attack on the church and religious teaching. It was later revealed that what prompted Darwin to finally publish his book was that Alfred Wallace (1823–1913) was going to put forward the concepts of evolution before him (Quammen, 2007). Another example of a notorious procrastinator is Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) who is often described as the archetype of the Renaissance man, a scientist, mathematician, artist, writer, inventor, engineer and anatomist (Pannapacker, 2009). Leonardo shared so many ideas well ahead of his time, and his notebooks were full of inventions, groundbreaking research in human anatomy and beautiful artwork. Yet, most of Leonardo's ideas and concepts were never delivered and published, such as the Mona Lisa. Was he a maladaptive procrastinator or an adaptive procrastinator whose creative mind and constant search for perfection enabled him to contemplate the cosmos, questioning the universe?

This argument is by no means a claim to validate and encourage procrastination. Instead, I argue that not all forms of procrastination are to be categorised as 'shameful vices', and that some forms of creative procrastination can lead to inspiration and innovation and break away from what Pannapacker (2009) describes as 'productive mediocrity'. For example, consider a professor who needs to publish a voluminous quantity of papers and books, attend conferences and teach certain courses. This might inhibit the curiosity that animated and drove such individuals to pursue academia in the first place, leaving not enough room to let their creative minds wander. Their shorter-term professional obligations and productivity are evaluated in terms of each minute pulsing on the chronometer and not as

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much by the longer-term outcome. The same could be said for countless numbers of scientists and researchers working for big corporations who are bottom-line driven, cutting long-term 'blue sky' type research and development to focus on shorter-term, incremental product improvements.

Indeed, procrastination has been shown to have a particular effect in academic settings, especially for students, whose lives are characterised by regular deadlines (Chu & Choi, 2005). According to Ellis and Knaus (1977), 80–95 per cent of college students engage in procrastination, the act of 'putting off something until a future time – postponing or deferring action', and these numbers are escalating.

### Why do we procrastinate?

Procrastination is a multifaceted construct that has deep emotional roots. People who procrastinate might do so out of fear of: failure, success, separation, being unlovable, social comparison, attachment, hard-work, reflecting low ability or revealing their true selves (Burka & Yuen, 1983). Additionally, procrastination has been attributed to low frustration tolerance, hostility and low self-worth (Covington, 1992; Ellis & Knaus, 1977). Common descriptions in the literature described procrastination as a maladaptive and negative behaviour that undermines academic performance, learning and achievement (Wolters, 2003) or as failure to effectively self-regulate (Senécal et al., 1995). However, I argue that not all forms of procrastination are negative and that some forms can be adaptive and productive in terms of outcome.

My own interest in procrastination grew more ardent and led me to conduct my MPhil research project at Cambridge University on this topic. I interviewed 10 postgraduate students who self-identified as 'chronic procrastinators'. They reported that the advantages of procrastination were sixfold, enabling them to: (1) push

things at the forefront of their mind, (2) learn new skills, (3) increase attention to detail, (4) gain better tools to do the task at hand, (5) do things that they would not normally do, and (6) come up with new, more creative approaches. However on the flip side, they reported that procrastination could (1) be seen as dangerous and undermining their 'true' potential, (2) cause them to feel guilty, stressed and anxious, (3) lead them to miss out on crucial opportunities,



### Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks were full of inventions and groundbreaking research

(4) make them let people down, (5) have a negative effect on their immediate environment, and, most importantly, (6) affect how people saw and labelled them. In other words, procrastination is something of a double-edged sword.

### The role of competition

Procrastinators can be overly concerned with their self-presentational image and

displaying a favourable impression (Ferrari, 1991; Ferrari & Tice, 2000; Wolters, 2003). By using self-handicapping strategies, defined as 'the deliberate creation of conditions by which failure can be attributed to causes outside the person's control' (Geen, 1995, p.97), the procrastinator can shield their image in the eyes of other people. This would paint a picture of procrastinators as work avoidant and non-competitive, a characterisation shared by both Ferrari and Tice (2000) and Burka and Yuen (1983), who stated that procrastinators who are afraid of failure do not like competition because they are afraid of losing, and people who are afraid of success do not enjoy competition because they fear success.

I question these findings.

I think competition is actually a key feature for procrastinators. Procrastinators enjoy competition and are driven by outperforming their peers because this reinforces their self-worth and elevates their self-esteem. Students who self-handicap and procrastinate have been shown to be more ego-orientated in the way they go about their studies (Martin et al., 2003). Ego-orientated students tend to be competitive, thrive when outperforming others and view performance as reflective of ability rather than effort.

Protecting their self-worth is paramount in ego-orientated students as they are predominantly vulnerable in achievement situations where there is a threat of failure (Covington, 1992). Shielding their self-worth is vital in order to gain self-validation, approval, love and respect from others (Covington, 1998). This explains why procrastinators have been shown to be more extrinsically motivated than nonprocrastinators because they are concerned with how people will view them (Martin et al., 2003). On the other hand, task-orientated students are more concerned with the

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task out of interest rather than driven by outperformance and attribute success as primarily due to effort versus ability.

### A 'maladaptive' behaviour?

When most people think of procrastination, they think of what is known as the 'passive' form: where an individual does not intend to postpone a task, but does so because they are unable to act quickly and efficiently (Chu & Choi, 2005). Passive procrastinators feel pressured and have doubts regarding their ability to achieve, which provokes feelings of guilt, depression which, in turn, increases the possibility of failure.

But not all consider procrastination to be negative or dysfunctional behaviour that is harmful and that leads to negative outcomes. Chu and Choi (2005) introduced the notion of an active form of procrastination where an individual is capable of acting on their decision in a timely manner and deliberately chooses to postpone a task and divert attention on to more important ones. Active procrastinators enjoy and prefer working under pressure and feel challenged and motivated when doing so (Chu & Choi, 2005). Active procrastinators are also able to meet deadlines and are satisfied with their outcome (Choi & Moran, 2009). Active procrastination is depicted as a multifaceted construct that comprises a cognitive (individual decides to procrastinate), affective (preference for time pressure) and behavioural (completion of the task on time) facets.

Active procrastination is positively related to polychronicity, where individuals can engage in multiple tasks at the same time and can adapt their work schedule to meet the multiple deadlines

they have in a timely manner (Choi & Moran, 2009). They use more task-oriented coping strategies when they are under stress, unlike passive procrastinators who tend to use avoidance-coping strategies and rely on emotional reactions. Active procrastinators are both motivated by intrinsic motivation, where they choose to work under time pressure, and extrinsic motivation, where they need to be imposed by a certain deadline to complete



the task in time (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Individuals who actively procrastinate display a certain level of self-reliance, autonomy and self-confidence because they are aware of the risk of subjecting themselves to last-minute pressures and still consciously decide to do so (Choi & Moran, 2009).

Other authors have introduced different positive attributes of procrastination. Tice and Baumeister (1997), for example, mentioned that procrastination could increase performance because 'the imminent deadline creates excitement and pressure that elicit peak performance' (p.454). If an individual is not negatively affected by the stress and pressure of the imminent deadline, then procrastination could also act in a

beneficial way as further useful information becomes readily available to that individual and enables them to produce a better piece of work because they are more informed.

### Need for a theoretical model

If one envisages procrastination on a continuum ranging from positive to negative, the latter is the most widely accepted construction and associated with maladaptive and detrimental behaviour. For example, Sigall et al. (2000) linked procrastination to wishful thinking by stating that procrastinators have skewed expectations of a task and that enables them to think that they can finish it in a timely manner. They have faulty motivated reasoning and are unrealistically optimistic about a task. Sigall et al. (2000) have gone as far as linking procrastination to elements of narcissism, stating that individuals who procrastinate have feelings of superiority. Pushing it to the end of a negative continuum, Sabini and Silver (1982) have described procrastination as the 'psychopathology of everyday life' (p.126).

On the positive end of the continuum, Chu and Choi (2005) have introduced this notion of active procrastination, which has positive implications for individuals in terms of emotional stability, self-efficacy and coping with stress and with performance. Choi and Moran (2009) developed an active procrastination scale that reliably assesses four measures:

- | preference for pressure;
- | intentional decision to procrastinate;
- | ability to meet deadlines; and
- | outcome satisfaction.

The nomological network of the construct was assessed for scale reliability and validity, and Choi and Moran (2009) introduced this new construct of active procrastination in the literature. I think this is a positive development: in my opinion, active procrastinators are driven by strong self-regulatory processes, and this form of procrastination may actually enhance well-being and performance in people.



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