

Procrastinators and Clutter: An Ecological View of Living with Excessive “Stuff”

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Abstract In the present study, young adults ($n = 346$; M age = 21.5 years old) completed self-reported measures of procrastination, self-identity with possessions, clutter, place attachment, and psychological home to provide an ecological understanding of the context in which chronic procrastinators live. Results found behavioral procrastination tendencies related only to clutter (a belief that living spaces have too much “stuff,” feeling overwhelmed with excessive possessions, and that one’s personal life is negatively impacted by many possessions). Clutter in one’s living space, negative emotions, and impaired social ability all predicted high procrastination scores. Clutter was the best predictor of procrastination as determined by multiple regression. Taken together, chronic procrastinators reported too much clutter (possessions, or stuff), and that clutter interferes with a strong quality of their lives.

Keywords Procrastination · Clutter · Possessions · Ecological context · Social relations

As many as 20–25% of global citizens may be characterized as self-reporting dispositional *chronic procrastination*, a needless delay of relevant and timely tasks across situations and

settings (Ferrari et al. 2005, 2007; Tibbett and Ferrari 2015). Moreover, studies indicate that chronic procrastination is related to a variety of personality variables, including low states of self-confidence and self-esteem and high states of depression, neurosis, self-awareness, social anxiety, forgetfulness, disorganization, non-competitiveness, dysfunctional impulsivity, behavioral rigidity, and lack of energy (Beswick et al. 1988; Ferrari et al. 1995; Lay 1986; Senécal et al. 1995).

Ferrari and Díaz-Morales (2007) reported that chronic procrastinators claimed self-presentation styles that display a person who self-sabotages tasks, but attempts to justify and excuse performance failure. Procrastinators, compared to non-procrastinators, claim lower self-esteem and self-worth (see Ferrari et al. 1995; Ferrari 2010). Previous research indicated that procrastinators were very concerned over their social, public image (Ferrari 1991, 2010), suggesting they seek approval and want to be liked by others. Ferrari (2010) demonstrated that chronic procrastinators are extremely social-oriented, in that they are focused on social relationships and the perception of others about them.

Most research on procrastination focuses on individual difference variables (e.g., personality traits and social interactions). Few studies compared chronic procrastinators compared to non-procrastinators on “what they do,” namely the tasks they complete or fail to complete. Ferrari and Scher (2000) asked procrastinators to record the tasks they engaged and/or planned to complete on each of five consecutive days. Results found that procrastinators worked on tasks that were “fun” and engaging. Scher and Ferrari (2000) collected over a thousand tasks procrastinators expected to complete across those five days and organized them into categories such as academically related, social or individual domains, needing effort, importance to self or others. They found that both procrastinators and non-procrastinators did not report significant differences in the tasks they completed or did not complete.

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However, procrastinators compared to non-procrastinators completed fewer tasks. While these studies focused on chronic procrastinators and their activities, they do not examine procrastinators compared to non-procrastinators on “what they own.”

In the present study, we explored contextual, environmental variables in the lives of chronic procrastinators. We believe that to understand procrastinators more fully one must take a holistic, ecological view of their life (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Consequently, we examined self-reported procrastination tendencies related to overabundance of possessions (known as *clutter*; Roster et al. 2016), and one's identification with settings within the context of their life (i.e., the psychological meaning of home, Signmon et al. 2002). No published study assessed the relationship between procrastination and possessions, especially when those possessions become excessive and in overabundance. Roster et al. (2016) found that an overabundance of possessions (aka, clutter) impacts one's perception of home as a safe place. Clutter has an adverse impact on relationships with others. Because previous research showed procrastinators are overly concerned with their social relationships (Ferrari 2010), and because clutter impacts on a person's interpersonal relationships (Roster et al. 2016), we wondered if chronic procrastinators reported clutter in their lives.

Therefore, in the present study we explored how procrastination, with an emphasis on maintaining positive relationships (Ferrari 2010), might be related to extreme possessions or clutter. It is possible that procrastination tendencies relate to high levels of clutter, because the procrastinator never takes the time to discard or fails to decide what items to keep. Understanding the role of possessions for procrastinators provides some insight into the ecological lifestyle of this maladaptive pattern for many adults. Compared to non-procrastinators, do procrastinators more or less identify with their possessions, with certain places, like their home; do procrastinators perceive their sense of home? Given the strong need for social relationships reported by procrastinators, we expected procrastination to be related to possessions and clutter, and we explored how clutter might predict procrastination tendencies. We had no a priori expectations concerning chronic procrastination and place attachment or psychological home.

Method

Participants

A total of 346 university students (247 women, 99 men; M age = 21.49 years old, $SD = 3.17$) from a large, Midwestern private institution who volunteered in the present study as part of an introductory psychology requirement. Most participants self-identified as European-American (54%) and a Roman

Catholic religious affiliation (52.9%). Participants also were most likely to indicate they were lower division students (first-year or sophomore = 57.2) who did not transfer into the university (63.3%).

Psychometric Measures

The Adult Inventory of Procrastination (AIP) All participants completed the *AIP*, a 15-item, 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) self-report developed by McCown and Johnson (1989); see Ferrari et al. 1995, for details). This scale measured tasks delays motivated by fear of success or failure, exposure of skill inabilities, and insecurities of performance (Ferrari 1991, 1992, 1993).

Social Desirability Scale All participants completed the unidimensional 13-item true-false forced choice *SD* measure by Reynolds (1982) from the longer Crowne and Marlowe (1960) measure, assessing a respondent's global tendency to give socially appropriate responses.

Place Attachment Scale (PA) Participants also completed the *PA* scale, an 8-items proposed by Williams and Roggerbuck (1989) that assess the extent to which a person views the place they live as essential to their life and a source of personal identity along a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Four items assessed the level to which a person self-identifies with a place, and four items assessed the sense of *dependence* one perceives with the place.

Self-Extension of Identity with Possessions Scale In addition, participants completed the SET measure by Ferraro et al. (2011), an 8-item unidimensional scale developed to ascertain the extent to which individuals use personal objects (possessions) to reflect their self-identity. Respondents indicated the percentage to which their possessions reflect their self-identity from 0 to 100% (sum range = 0 to 800%).

Clutter Quality of Life Scale (CQLS) All participants completed the *CQLS* developed by Roster et al. (2016), an 11-item inventory where respondents indicated along a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) the extent to which they live with clutter, defined as an overabundance of possessions. Roster et al. (2016) found the *CQLS* to assess 4-items measuring the *livability of space*, 4-items measuring the level of *emotional* attachment to possessions, and 3-items measuring how attachment to possessions reflect a *social* factor.

Psychological Home Scale (PSYH) In addition, participants completed the 8-item, unidimensional *PSYH* scale developed by Signmon et al. (2002) along a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) that reflects the

extent to which a person considered home (either physical or psychological) as a relaxed, safe, and personally meaningful aspect to their life.

Demographic Items At the end of the questionnaire, respondents answered a few demographic questions, including gender, age, ethnicity, year in school, whether they transferred into the university or completed all four years at the school.

Procedure

Using a website managed by the psychology department for a research participant pool, participants completed an online survey anonymously. The survey consisted of demographic items as well as each of the self-report psychometric items listed above (listed in counterbalanced order). All survey items were posted on-line for eight weeks. Pilot testing indicated it took individuals about 25 min to complete.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the *zero-order correlates* between procrastination and the other self-perceived scale scores assessed in the present study. There was no significant relationship between procrastination and social desirability scores. Nor were social desirability scores significantly related with the other self-reported scale scores. Therefore, we concluded that social desirability responding was not a significant variable affecting our data and, in turn, no further analysis with social desirability was conducted. As noted from Table 1, procrastination was significantly related to each of the self-reported ecological variables; positively related to self-extension of one's identity with possessions, place attachment, and clutter, and negatively related to one's sense of home.

A *multiple regression analysis* then was conducted to see whether each of the contextual variables predicted procrastination tendencies. All variables were standardized and any

individual with missing data were removed. Normality was assessed with skewness and kurtosis values, all of which were within acceptable ranges, with was positively skewed and very leptokurtic. The regression model significantly predicted procrastination tendencies, adjusted $R^2 = .435$, $F(7, 350) = 4.19$, $p < .006$. Only the three clutter variables were significant predictors of procrastination, namely: clutter/ineffective use of one's living space, $\beta = 0.41$, $t(355) = 2.80$, $p < .05$, clutter/feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and worried by excessive stuff, $\beta = 0.55$, $t(355) = 2.99$, $p < .04$, clutter/negative impact of stuff on social interactions, $\beta = 0.40$, $t(355) = 2.78$, $p < .05$.

From an ecological view, these results suggest that procrastinators report excessive clutter and they find their overabundance of possessions negatively impacting on their identity. These results extend our understanding of procrastination beyond the usual personality and social dispositional level found in the literature (see Ferrari 2010; Ferrari and Tibbett 2017), to exploring environmental factors to personality. Persons who procrastinate claim an overabundance of possessions (clutter), which they identify as a part of themselves and as an extension of their identity, and reflect a lower sense of home (i.e., comfort and security in one's intimate dwelling). Roster et al. (2016) found that one's identity with their home was hindered by excessive clutter and the present study extends to a relatively common behavioral tendency. Clutter might undermine the comfortable, everyday experience of feeling at home people take for granted, since disorganization of one's possessions may erode an ability to find things, move safely throughout their home, and uses spaces as intended. The present brief study extends the results by Roster et al. (2016) with the maladaptive style of procrastination, suggesting that cluttered possessions may impact on the quality of life of those persons who delay in taking actions.

We recognize that the present study has limitations. For example, the participants were young students; future research should include community samples of adults who have dwelling where they may reflect more possessions and the elderly

Table 1 Mean sum scores, Cronbach alpha, and zero-order correlates between procrastination and self-reported variables

| | <i>M</i> sum score | Cronbach alpha | Procrastination Tendencies |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| Social desirability | 41.20 (10.07) | .855 | -.15 |
| Self-identity/possessions | 447.84 (205.75) | .952 | .22* |
| Place attachment: <i>identity</i> | 10.83 (4.24) | .894 | .24* |
| Place attachment: <i>dependence</i> | 12.34 (4.02) | .898 | .34** |
| Clutter: <i>living space</i> | 10.48 (5.51) | .818 | .39** |
| Clutter: <i>emotional</i> | 9.59 (5.66) | .855 | .42** |
| Clutter: <i>social</i> | 8.55 (4.39) | .790 | .40** |
| Psychological home | 47.11 (7.67) | .897 | -.31** |

Value in parentheses is standard deviation

$n = 346$ * $p < .05$ ** $p > .001$

who are at risk for clutter. Related, because the present sample were young adults, they may not have had time to accumulate mass amounts of items, and a longitudinal study of collecting possession over time might be more revealing about procrastination and clutter. The present study was correlational, so it is unclear if clutter leads to procrastination or if procrastination leads to clutter. Future research needs to focus on these relationships in greater depth and explore how other individual difference factors might relate with an overabundance of possessions. Nevertheless, as an initial step in understanding the ecological context of procrastination tendencies (specifically around one's possessions) the present study extends the literature, yielding some interesting possibilities.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest JR Ferrari declares that he has no conflict of interest. C Roster, K Crum, and M Pardo declare each that they have no conflict of interest.

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