

THE EFFECTS OF CONSTRUAL LEVEL ON INTERPERSONAL SELF-CONTROL

CONFLICTS

by

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Abstract

Construal Level Theory describes the relationship between psychological distance and the extent to which a person's thinking is abstract or concrete. According to this theory, the relationship between temporal distance and level of abstractness should have an effect on how soon a task is completed. Previous studies have found that there is a negative correlation between construal level and self-control where high-level construal (abstract thinking) shows implications of poor self-control. People in high-level construal view events in a more distant manner, which leads to better ability to control impulses (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The present study examined the relationship between construal level and procrastination. Procrastination is defined as the absence of self-control in response to an impulse. Using Amazon Mechanical Turk, participants were asked to complete a procrastination scale that measured procrastination habits and a behavioral identification scale that measured construal level. In a correlation analysis of the mean procrastination score and the mean behavioral identification score, we found a positive correlation between construal level and procrastination. The relationship was opposite of what was expected. It is hoped that this study will further the research on construal level and procrastination behaviors.

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The Effects of Construal Level on Interpersonal Self-Control

Procrastination is the voluntary postponing of an action that a person had plans to take part in, despite the negative effects of the delay (Klingsieck, 2013). Procrastination habits can lead to a person doing poorly at work, failing classes at school, or even going into debt. It is important to study procrastination so that people can better understand their habits, why they may be partaking in them, and how those habits may be affecting them. Procrastination is the absence of self-control in response to an impulse.

Self-control is the ability to inhibit one's impulses in regards to emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Conflicts with self-control can arise when preferences and desires are inconsistent over a period of time. For example, a person may go into a store with their mind already made up that they are only buying one thing so that they can save money, but when they get into the store they may give into the temptation to get more than what they came for despite their original desire to save money. Along with overspending, self-control conflicts can occur with things like exercising, biting nails, smoking, and procrastination. There are many studies that have looked at the relationship between self-control and cognitive abstraction, as described in the Construal Level Theory.

Construal Level Theory (Lieberman & Trope, 2010) states that the distance between a concept/object and an individual can influence whether a person's thoughts regarding that object are abstract or concrete. According to the Construal Level Theory, more physically/psychologically distal objects are perceived in abstract terms than objects that are more physically/psychologically proximal. There is high-level construal and low-level construal. High-level construal refers to a strong preference for longer-term goals and consequences. It "enhances people's appreciation for the goal-relevant implications of their choices" (Fujita &

Carnevale, 2012). In low-level construal, the focus is on the here and now, most present benefits. It “directs people’s attention to the salient, secondary, incidental feature of their choices” (Fujita & Carnevale, 2012). Construal levels influence all thoughts and behaviors, including self-control. Previous research commonly finds that high-level construal leads to better self-control, while low-level construal leads to poor self-control (Fujita & Carnevale, 2012).

For example, in their research on self-control conflicts and construal levels, Fujita and Han (2009) hypothesized that high-level construal of temptations would be more negative than low-level construal, meaning that compared to people in low-level construal, people in high-level construal would be less likely to give in to temptations. They tested their hypothesis using three experiments that manipulated construal level using the why vs. how and category vs. exemplar tasks. In the why vs. how manipulation, participants were given a phrase (e.g. “why do you maintain good friendships?”) and for those in the high-level construal condition, each “why” question would provide a more abstract response. The low-level construal was given “how” questions (e.g. “how do you maintain good friendships?”) Each “how” question would prompt a more concrete response. Participants also took an Implicit Association Test (IAT), a reaction time that measures whether a person associates a concept with negativity or positivity. Using the IAT, they found that higher-level construal made it easier for people to associate the here-and-now temptations with negativity, which promotes self-control.

Also interested in construal levels and self-control, Fujita, Liberman and Trope (2006) examined whether the activation of high-level construal would lead to greater self-control compared to low-level construal. In six experiments with high vs. low construal manipulations, they were able to look at the effects of self-control and the underlying processes of self-control that attribute to success. Using why vs. how, category vs. exemplar and description

manipulations Fujita, and colleagues (2006) investigated the effects of each manipulation on multiple measures of self-control (e.g. physical endurance, preferences for immediate over-delayed outcomes, behavioral intentions to undertake activities requiring self-control and evaluations of temptations). They found that high-level construal led to decreased preferences for immediate over delayed outcomes, greater physical endurance, stronger intentions to exert self-control, and less positive evaluations of temptations that undermine self-control.

In addition to construal level, task deadlines can have an impact on procrastination. McCrea, Liberman, and Trope (2008) investigated whether manipulations of construal level would influence how soon individuals completed a task for a reward. Participants were given a questionnaire manipulated construal level among them. The questionnaire listed 10 activities (i.e. "open a bank account") and those in the high-level construal condition were asked to describe characteristics of each activity, and those in the low-level construal condition were asked to describe how one would complete each activity. Participants were given three weeks to complete and return their responses to the questionnaire with promises of a compensation upon completion. They found that participants in the low-level construal condition were more successful at goal pursuit than participants in the high-level-construal. In other words, the low-level-construal group were less likely to procrastinate on performing the task and returned their questionnaires before the deadline.

Also interested in the relationship between deadlines and procrastination, Ariely and Wertenbroch (2002) explored task performance in relation to self-imposed deadlines. Their first study studied procrastination with free choice vs. no choice in choosing task deadlines. As a part of a class, all participants in study 1 were told to write three short papers where half were given fixed, evenly spaced deadlines (no-choice condition). The other half of participants were given

the opportunity to choose their own deadlines (free-choice condition). They found participants in the no-choice condition earned higher grades than those in the free-choice condition. They also found that participants in the free-choice condition were willing to choose their own deadlines with the intent to overcome procrastination even when those deadlines were risky (i.e. choosing an early day in the course despite wanting to wait until the end of the course). These findings are important to the topics of self-control and procrastination because they offer the knowledge that self-imposed deadlines may cause students to complete a task on time, but may not cause better grades. Fixed deadlines may lead to better grades than self-imposed deadlines.

The interest level of a task can also have an effect on procrastination. In a study looking at how task characteristics relate to procrastination, Ackerman and Gross (2005) analyzed instructor-controlled assignment characteristics and how they could possibly influence student procrastination. Using 10 constructs from the Paden and Stell procrastination model (Paden & Steel, 1997) they found that students procrastinate less on assignments deemed interesting. However, they found that assignments that required students to use a variety of skills did not influence procrastination. They also found that the clarity of an assignment (ambiguous vs. unambiguous instructions) did make a difference on how interested or uninterested a student were, which suggests that step-by-step, unambiguous instructions work best. Clear and direct instructions make assignments less overwhelming to start, thus making people more likely to procrastinate less.

Along these same lines, Sher & Ferrari (2000) investigated whether students are more likely to procrastinate on the completion of academic tasks versus non-academic tasks. In their study, participants were asked to record their daily academic tasks (e.g. studying, reading an assignment, homework) and non-academic tasks (e.g. exercising, running errands, returning

phone calls and emails) and whether they completed them for five consecutive days, at either the beginning or the end of a semester/term. Students reported that they procrastinated on some of the same tasks they indicated they would not procrastinate on. Students also completed a higher number of non-academic tasks compared to academic tasks, showing a better interest and less procrastination for things like playing sports or exercising. Students were significantly more interested in the non-academic tasks. The link between interest and procrastination is valuable to look at because it may serve as a factor for future implications of research on procrastination. If people are aware that less interesting tasks may cause an increase in procrastination, they may add in some aspects to make the task a little more interesting.

Also looking at the way task interest influences procrastination, Blunt and Pychyl (2000) examined task aversiveness, or the extent to which a task is unenjoyable related to personal, everyday projects (i.e. losing weight or studying for an exam). They believed that individuals procrastinate on tasks perceived to be unpleasurable. Participants completed projects in four stages: inception (initial awareness), planning (gathering material support), action (project launching) and termination (signal of the conclusion of a project). Principal components analysis (PCA) revealed that boredom, frustration, and resentment emerged as project dimensions were associated with task aversiveness. Each principal component identified as unenjoyable was found to be positively related with procrastination.

In addition to the studies that focus on the various reasons and effects of procrastination, there are few studies that talk about what can possibly be done to reduce procrastination (Ackerman & Gross (2005), Blunt & Pychyl (2000), Sher & Ferrari (2000). For example, Eckert, Ebert, Lehr, Sieland & Berking (2016) theorized that emotion regulation is a crucial part of reducing procrastination. Participants completed the Academic Procrastination State Inventory

(Schouweburg, 1995) to measure procrastination in academic settings, and the Emotion Regulation Skills Questionnaire (Berking & Znoj, 2008) to measure emotion regulation. Using a cross-sectional analysis, they found that emotion regulation and procrastination were related in that more emotion regulation was associated with less procrastination and that this relationship was mediated by a person's ability to tolerate negative emotions. People who were better able to tolerate their negative, avoidant emotions procrastinated less whereas people who were unable to better tolerate those emotions procrastinated more.

Likewise, in their study on treating procrastination, Rozenal and Carlbring (2014) assessed the link between procrastination and the impact it has on mental health, and possible interventions. Using prior research on treatment interventions for procrastination, they explore the idea of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) being effective in treating procrastination. They found that CBT would be an "informative and useful" treatment (Rozenal & Carlbring, 2014), but more research with randomized conditions would be necessary to assess the efficacy of it.

Also interested in procrastination, Nordby and colleagues (2016) explored the effectiveness of an intervention against it. Using an Irrational Procrastination Scale, which is a self-regulation scale and a time management scale, they were able to assess changes in procrastination scores related to the intervention used. Each participant was exposed to the interventions. The intervention consisted of information about procrastination and its causes/consequences, time management skills and goal setting, and cognitive behavioral therapy techniques. They found that students who scored high in procrastination before the intervention demonstrated significant reduction in procrastination scores and an improved score in time management skills. These findings indicate that intervention methods can be used to reduce procrastination and increase in students.

This review of previously conducted literature shows a consistency of high-level construal leading to good self-control and low-level construal leading to poor self-control, and a good amount of research on the many sub-themes of procrastination (i.e. interest level and task deadlines). Task deadlines and interests are major factors when considering the reasoning behind procrastination. To further the research on procrastination and Construal Level Theory, I would like to look into the way construal level affects procrastination in individuals in everyday interpersonal social activities. We hypothesize that people who have a tendency to engage in high-level construal will be less likely to procrastinate.

Methods

Participants

This study had 150 participants with an age range of 18-60+ years old. All participants were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk crowd sourcing website. Users on Mechanical Turk register as "workers" and then accept assignments in exchange for a small amount of monetary compensation. Participants were anonymous. The only identifiable information available to the PI was the serial number that Amazon uses to track users. Surveys took between 10-15 minutes and participants were compensated with \$1.85.

Materials

All participants completed a demographic questionnaire that asked them to report data such as age, gender, education, and ethnicity. In addition, participants completed a 20-item Procrastination Scale (Lay, 1986) containing statements regarding procrastination habits. The scale asked them to identify how closely the statements were characteristic or uncharacteristic of them ranging from "extremely uncharacteristic" to "extremely characteristic". A 25-item scale called the Behavioral Identification Form (BIF) was also given. The BIF presented participants

with various behaviors (e.g. picking an apple) and asked them whether they subjectively interpreted that behavior in a concrete way (e.g., pulling an apple off of a branch) or an abstract way (getting something to eat). Responses were given on a scale from 1, the highest level of construal to 7, the lowest level of construal.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk crowd sourcing website. Using the Qualtrics platform, each participant completed the informed consent process. After agreeing to continue the study participants began the procrastination scale, which reported procrastination behaviors. This was followed by the BIF scale, which tested for construal level followed by the procrastination scale. After taking each scale, participants answered demographic questions and were debriefed about the study.

Results

We anticipated that procrastination and construal level would be negatively correlated, such that higher BIF scores correlated with less procrastination. Using data from the procrastination scale and the BIF scale, we computed a procrastination mean score (\underline{M} = 2.99, \underline{SD} = .323) for each participant by averaging their responses to the 20 items. A high procrastination score means more procrastination. A high BIF score means the participant is in high-level construal. We also computed a BIF mean score (\underline{M} = 4.15, \underline{SD} = .440) the same way by averaging their responses to the 25 items. We then computed a bivariate correlation for the procrastination scale mean and the BIF scale mean. Results of the correlation indicated that there was a positive association between construal level and self-control, $r(150) = 1.45$, $p = .077$ suggesting that there was a positive marginally significant relationship.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between construal level and self-control. More specifically, it examined whether high-level construal would be negatively correlated to high self-control within social self-control conflicts. Previous research consistently shows that high-level construal leads to the prioritization of long-term goals rather than shorter term goals. This can be explained with the Construal Level Theory (CLT, Liberman & Trope, 1998, Liberman, Trope & Stephan, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2003), which states that the psychological distance of an event is associated with abstract ways of thinking, or high - construal level. Contrary to the hypotheses, the results indicated that there was a positive correlation between construal level and procrastination measures, which means that an increase of construal level showed a increase in procrastination measures. This relationship was marginally significant, meaning that the significance was between .05 and 1.0.

Because both, the BIF scale and the procrastination scale were self-report measures, it is possible that some participants' answers did not truly reflect their reality. There also may be a possibility of participants having a psychology background, which could prime them to this kind of study. If participants were recruited in person (i.e. Purchase College campus), we may have been able to control for that by eliminating students with a psychology background. There were also a couple of issues on the BIF scale that may have caused confusion amongst participants. One question contained wording that was meant to be deleted, and another question contained extra numbers (i.e. instead of 7 options to choose from, there were 10 options).

To extend these findings, researchers could look manipulate construal level among participants instead of measuring their construal level as we did in this study. It is possible that this kind of research could be used by teachers in getting the most out of their students

academically. In an instance of giving a construal scale (i.e. the BIF scale) to students at the beginning of a school year, a teacher could help students understand about who will likely have a harder time getting assignments done in a timely matter. A teacher could then use the information to formulate resources for those particular kids who may feel they need extra tools, like daily checklists, to get things done in a timely manner. It is possible that anxiety played a factor in the unexpected correlation direction. Anxiety can alter behaviors and thoughts, which could cause a person who normally would not procrastinate, to engage in procrastination behaviors. As a future extension of this study, researchers may want to include a measure of anxiety to examine whether anxiety affects the relationship between procrastination and construal level.

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