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How Long Will It Take?

Task Duration Salience Reduces Procrastination

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SUMMARY

Procrastination has been defined as delaying a task until 'tomorrow' without foreseeing that the task will be delayed again when the 'tomorrow' comes[1]. People procrastinate because even though it seems like a good idea to spend the effort to get the benefit from afar, when the time came to actually commit, the cost of doing it 'now' appears larger than the cost of doing it 'later[2]. In other words, **while the benefit of the task appears relatively constant, the cost does not appear so**. Then, a question arises naturally: how can we keep the cost appear 'fixed'? To the question, we suggest **making the task duration salient at the point of procrastination decision making**.

In fact, it seems that our suggestion is in line with an intuition people have about procrastination. When googling the solutions for procrastination, one of the searched popular hacks involves making the task duration salient (e.g., 3-minute rule). Some existing findings from duration sensitivity on intertemporal choice support our proposition[3].

Across different contexts with various task durations (total *N=2340*) , we show that **making duration salient (vs. not) decreases procrastination**. We make task duration salient by presenting the information at the point of procrastination decision making and demonstrate that the effect holds **regardless of who estimated the duration** (e.g., participant-generated vs. group mean from a pre-study).

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

STUDY	TYPE	DESIGN	TOTAL SAMPLE	MAIN EFFECT	CONDITIONS: Participant Generated Dur. Estimate	Explicit Deadline	Other Info specific to the Task	Other Events In the Agenda
1	Scenario	2(duration) by 3(task)	451	M_c = 4.10 (1.97) M_d= 3.51 (1.97)**				
2	Scenario	3(duration) by 2(deadline)	479	B = -.235·, SE = .134	●	●		
3	Scenario	2(duration) by 3(concrete)	422	M_c = 3.92(1.78) M_d= 3.51(1.70)*	●		●	
4	Scenario	2(duration) by 3(event)	423	M_c = 4.19(1.79) M_d= 3.45(1.73)**	●			●
5	Scenario	2(duration) by 3(competing)	480	M_c = 3.79(1.75) M_d= 3.41(1.63)*	●		●	●
6	Field	Single factor	85	B=-1.1890*, SE=*5490*		●		

· *<.10, * <.05, **<.01*

METHODS (STUDY 1)

Pre-study

- *Read a short scenario about having a task that needs to be completed*
- *Estimated the duration of the task in the scenario*

A vignette: making a reservation, replying to an email, submitting a tax report

"When you woke up, a thought popped in your head that you need to file your taxes. You use an online program to submit your documents electronically. However, you didn't want to file your taxes right away.

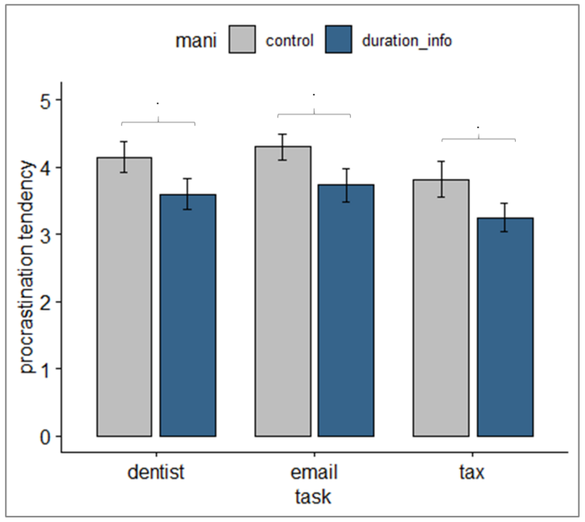
***Later in the day**, you remind yourself that you need to submit your tax report at some point. [You know you **can complete it within 1 hour**.]"*

Task durations:
- Tax: 1 hour
- Email: 20 mins
- Dentist: 10 mins

Procrastination tendency: 1 – not at all likely, 7 – very likely

› How likely is it for you to further *delay / procrastinate / put-off* [submitting the tax report]?

RESULTS (STUDY 1)



·P < .10, * p<.05

› Significant main effect of duration information : F(1, 445) = 9.06, p-value = 0.003
› Marginally significant effect of different tasks: F(2, 445) = 2.39, p-value = 0.09
› No significant interaction effect: F(2, 445) = 0.00, p-value = 0.99

METHODS (STUDY 4)

A vignette (making a doctor's appointment):

It is today at 10 AM. You have been experiencing some pain in your body Yesterday morning, you thought you need to schedule an appointment at your doctor's office to see about that pain. However, you did not feel like making the call right away.

This morning, you remembered that you needed to schedule that appointment at some point.
You are still not keen on making the call.
*[At the same time, you know that it takes less than **(Participant's own duration estimates) minutes** to set up the appointment]*

Those in the salient condition estimated the task duration before seeing the vignette.

A vignette (an event in your agenda)

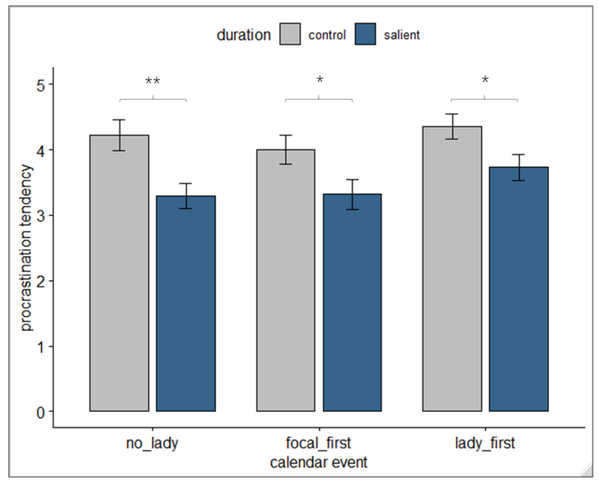
You know that your neighbor's cleaning lady is coming over to drop off your neighbor's house key at 11AM. […]

Procrastination tendency: 1 – very likely, 7 – very unlikely

How likely is it that you would put off / procrastinate calling the doctor again?

RESULTS (STUDY 4)

Note: results are presented in a 'reverse scale' for easier communication



* p<.05, ** p<.01

- Significant main effect of duration salience: F(1,417)=9.809, p=0.002
- No significant main effect of calendar event: F(2,417)=0.749, p=0.473
- No significant interaction effect: F(2,417)=0.295, P=0.745

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1. Akerlof, G. A. (1991). Procrastination and obedience. *The American Economic Review*, 81(2), 1-19.
2. Shu, S. B., & Gneezy, A. (2010). Procrastination of enjoyable experiences. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 47(5), 933-944.
3. Zauberman, G., Kim, B. K., Malkoc, S. A., & Bettman, J. R. (2009). Discounting time and time discounting: Subjective time perception and intertemporal preferences. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 46(4), 543-556.