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Designing a behavioral experiment to study the factors underlying procrastination

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Abstract

Procrastination is ubiquitous, but its underlying processes are poorly understood. Studies of procrastination have used self-report questionnaires and therefore have limited use as the basis for process models. As typical procrastination behavior is characterized by a delay in starting the work and rushing in the end, we argue that studies should emphasize the time course of progress. We designed a reading task to quantify the time course of procrastination. Subjects were given seven days to work online on a boring and lengthy reading task. We tested whether reward delay is a predictor of procrastination. We introduce a metric for quantifying the degree of procrastination from the time course of progress. The degree of procrastination tends to be higher in the delayed reward condition than that in the instantaneous condition. We also observed great individual variation in the progress course. Further work needs to investigate what factors contribute to this variability.