

Leisure Reflections No 52: Procrastination and Leisure

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Procrastination, it seems, has a bad name in some circles. In those centered on personal development, Napoleon Hill, an expert on how to sell personal services, described it as “the bad habit of putting off until the day after tomorrow what should have been done the day before yesterday.” Victor Kiam, who writes on entrepreneurship, observed that “procrastination is opportunity’s natural assassin.” According to Wayne Dyer, speaker and author in the field of self-development, “procrastination is one of the most common and deadliest of diseases and its toll on success and happiness is heavy.”

The psychology of procrastination takes a largely disapproving view of the subject, at least that is how it is summed up in *Psychology Today* (2019). It is said to be personally harmful for a person to procrastinate, to delay meeting an obligation to self or someone else. Discussions of the practice in psychology and management share this focus on the negative antecedents of procrastinatory behavior. Still, that leaves the story only half told. In other words, we have yet to learn about what people do during the time they would have met the unwanted obligation or why they decide to do the substituted activity instead. What are their options at this time in the process?

Options

One option, which is positive, is to meet another obligation that, at least at the time, is more agreeable than the object of procrastination. Thus, I should shovel the snow off the sidewalk, yet a leaking waterpipe also needs my attention. Both demand my immediate attention, but fixing the leak requires more knowledge and skill than shoveling snow and so offers a measure of householder savvy, do-it-yourself acumen. An analogous choice might be having to decide between sewing a button on a shirt and washing the supper dishes, where both are defined as chores. In psychological terms these examples present avoidance-avoidance conflicts.

Just as common in the psychology of procrastination is approach-avoidance conflict featuring a disagreeable activity to be delayed while an agreeable one beckons. This where leisure enters the picture. This possibility came to my attention when reading the following,

which Julia Moskin (2018) calls “procrastibaking”: the practice of baking something completely unnecessary, with the intention of avoiding “real” work — is a surprisingly common habit that has only recently acquired a name. Medical students, romance writers, freelance web designers: Almost anyone who works at home and has a cookie sheet in the cupboard can try it.

More accurate, from the standpoint of this article, would be my neologism “procrastileisure.” That is, in principle, any leisure activity (casual, serious, project-based) could be appealing enough to lure a person away from the object of procrastination. Especially for home-based workers, it is always there like Circe offering a multitude of appealing alternatives to the demands of work and the non-work obligations.

Leisure appears to be a main avenue for procrastination, though certain kinds of leisure are more alluring as a delay than others. Whatever the kind, the activity must be handy, since procrastination tends to demand an immediately available option. The casual type is usually the most widely accessible, as in watching TV, reading popular material, playing solitaire, and just plain loafing (loafing as leisure is explored in Stebbins, 2019). Serious leisure (eg, playing a musical instrument, throwing darts, tending to the garden, baking cookies) and project-based leisure (such as work on a jigsaw or crossword puzzle, or a kit-based macramé plant hanger), being less common free-time pursuits than the casual ones, are therefore less likely to spring up as an option in a general sample of procrastinators when procrastileisure beckons.[1]

First, consider casual leisure. Its basic appeal is hedonic though note that hedonism can vary in the intensity of its appeal and therefore its capacity to offset the negative aspects of the procrastinated obligation. Thus, the prospect of watching TV is more appealing to John than doing his homework, but only marginally so since he finds the programming available to him to be only lightly interesting and there are no other options. Even loafing is out of the question, for in such bland activity, it can be difficult to avoid thinking about the neglected homework and other pressing matters. This balance of options borders on being an avoidance-avoidance conflict.

But what if John has the procrastileisure option of engaging in a serious leisure activity? Let us say that he is an amateur pianist. The thought of playing the instrument outweighs his commitment to the unpleasant obligation, and so he passes valuable time on the instrument. The critical point here is that doing such leisure is an expression of a career in personal development leading to self-fulfillment (Stebbins, 2020). This kind of reward emanating from the serious pursuits has no equivalent in casual leisure. The first has an uncommon power to override, however momentarily, many of the unpleasant obligations that we face in life.

Pondering Everyday Activities

Pondering everyday activities (PEA) is at once both a mental process and a behavioral activity (Stebbins, in press). By engaging in PEA we routinely understand, remember, coordinate, organize, and compare our involvements in the three domains of work, leisure, and non-work obligation. The latter category refers to *disagreeable* obligation. It has no place in leisure, because, among other reasons, it fails to leave the participant with a pleasant memory or expectation of the activity. This third domain is the classificatory home of all we must do that we would rather avoid and that is not related to work (including moonlighting).

So far, I have been able to identify three types in this domain (Stebbins, 2009, pp. 24-26).

Unpaid labor: activities people do themselves even though services exist which they could hire to carry them out. These activities include mowing the lawn, housework, shoveling snow off the sidewalk, preparing the annual income tax return, do-it-yourself, and myriad obligations to friends and family (eg, caring for a sick relative, helping a friend move to another home, arranging a funeral).

Unpleasant tasks: required activities for which no commercial services exist or, if they exist, most people avoid using them. Such activities are exemplified in checking in and clearing security at airports, attending a meeting on a community problem, walking the dog each day, driving in city traffic (in this discussion, beyond that related to work), and errands, including routine grocery shopping. There are also obligations to family and friends in this type, among them, driving a child to soccer practice and mediating familial quarrels. Many of the "chores" of childhood fall into this category. Finally, activities sometimes mislabelled as volunteering are, in fact, disagreeable obligations from which the individual senses no escape. For example, some parents feel this way about coaching their children's sports teams or about helping organize and run a road trip for the youth orchestra in which their children perform.

Self-care: disagreeable activities designed to maintain or improve in some way the physical or psychological state of the individual. They include getting a haircut, putting on cosmetics, doing health-promoting exercises, going to the dentist, and undergoing a physical examination or surgical intervention. Personal and family counselling would generally fall within this type, as would the activities that come with getting a divorce (the counselling having failed).

Some activities in these types are routine obligations, whereas others appear only occasionally. And, for those who find some significant measure of enjoyment in, say, grocery shopping, walking the dog, do-it-yourself, or taking physical exercise, these obligations are defined as agreeable; they are effectively leisure. Thus what is disagreeable in the domain of non-work obligation rests on personal interpretation of the actual or anticipated experience of an activity. For instance, most people dislike or expect to dislike their annual physical examination, but not the hypochondriac.

Procrastileisure is a segment of life rich in opportunities to study how PEA operates. Sometimes the individual finds that such pondering blurs the common-sense boundaries of the three domains. That is, in making our daily existence workable in a given domain, we are forced to view it in the larger picture of the domains.

For example, putting off doing the dishes after the main family dinner of the day served in this instance in the evening can be regarded as procrastination. What are some casual procrastileisure options? Watch TV for a while? Go for a walk? Take a nap? Read a newspaper? Check the social media? Given that washing a big load of dishes (even when aided by a mechanical washer) may be an unpleasant chore, these options can be appealing to many people. Certain serious and project-based leisure activities that can be pursued on a full stomach might also offer themselves as procrastileisure in this scenario. From the standpoint of PEA this engenders cross-domainal thoughts that span leisure and non-work obligation.

As another example consider writing a report as part of the job of being a manager at a business firm. This project is extensive enough to require that some work be done on it at home outside official office hours. All the procrastileisure options mentioned in the preceding paragraph are also possibilities manifested here as PEA between work and leisure. Still, the formidable nature of the report – eg, its significance, length, complexity – could endow it with a priority capable of even overriding many non-work obligations and surely most, if not all, of would be procrastileisure. In other words, procrastination is sometimes out of the question, however appealing the leisure options or demanding the obligations in the non-work domain.

Conclusions

The psychology of procrastination stresses its antecedents and the personally harmful consequences of putting off important obligations until later. Missed in this research orientation are the agreeable or positive consequences of procrastination evident in the procrastinated options. These options are the casual, serious, or project-based leisure activities that are easily available at the time.

Endnote

[1]Estimates of the proportion of serious leisure participants to those going in for the casual variety run between 20 and 40 percent (Stebbins, 2017, p. 57).

References

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