

Motivating minds

People procrastinate when asked to think in the abstract

To some there is nothing so urgent that it cannot be postponed in favor of a cup of tea. Such procrastination is a mystery to psychologists, who wonder why people would sabotage themselves in this way. A team of researchers led by Sean McCrea of the University of Konstanz, in Germany, reckon they have found a piece of the puzzle. People act in a timely way when given concrete tasks but dawdle when they view them in abstract terms.

Dr McCrea and his colleagues conducted three separate studies. First they recruited 34 students who were offered €2.50 (\$3.30) for completing a questionnaire within the subsequent three weeks. Half of the students were then sent an email asking them to write a couple of sentences on how they might go about various activities, such as opening a bank account or keeping a diary. The others were asked to write about why someone might want to open a bank account or keep a diary.

For their second study, Dr McCrea and his colleagues recruited 50 students, who were offered the same sums and times as the first lot. Half of these students were asked to provide examples of members of a group, for example, naming any type of bird. The task was inverted for the other students, who were asked to name a category to which birds belong.

Finally the researchers asked 51 students, who were again offered cash and given a deadline, to examine a copy of "La Parade" by Georges Seurat, a 19th-century French artist. Half were given information about pointillism, the technique Seurat used to create the impression of solid colours from small dots of paint. The others were told that the painting was an example of neo-impressionism in which the artist had used color to evoke harmony and emotion. Both groups were then asked to rate the importance of color in 13 other works of art.

As the team report in *Psychological Science*, in all three studies, those who were presented with concrete tasks and information responded more promptly than did those who were asked to think in an abstract way. Moreover, almost all the students who had been prompted to think in concrete terms completed their tasks by the deadline while up to 56% of students asked to think in abstract terms failed to respond at all.

Theories abound for why people procrastinate. Some psychologists think that those who delay completing tasks do so because they have low confidence that they will succeed in that task. Perhaps procrastinators are perfectionists or they may just be depressed. Others believe they are impulsive and lack self-control. Earlier research has shown that people defer tasks that are unappealing, difficult or expensive, which is no great surprise. Dr McCrea and his colleagues, however, are the first to show that the way in which a task is presented also influences when it gets done.

Those seeking to cajole a colleague, friend or spouse into action might ponder the finding, though perhaps not for too long. It might be better to offer a procrastinator a concrete choice—Lapsang Souchong or Darjeeling?—rather than asking him just what sort of a person it is who would drink tea when time is of the essence.

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