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## Self-esteem and perfectionism versus procrastination Samoocena i perfekcjonizm a odkładanie pracy na później

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to examine whether levels of self-esteem and perfectionism are related to passive and active work postponement. The study was conducted among 325 young adults (219 females and 106 males). The following tools were used: the New Active Procrastination Scale (NAPS), the General Procrastination Scale (GPS), the Polish Questionnaire of Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism (KPAD), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES). The results indicate that active procrastination is negatively related to self-esteem and maladaptive perfectionism, and positively related to adaptive perfectionism. Passive procrastination positively correlates with self-esteem and maladaptive perfectionism, and negatively with adaptive perfectionism. The obtained data deepen the knowledge on the determinants of procrastination, which is worth considering from two perspectives - positive and negative.

**Keywords:** active procrastination, passive procrastination, adaptive perfectionism, maladaptive perfectionism, self-esteem

**Abstrakt:** Celem badań było sprawdzenie czy poziom samooceny i perfekcjonizmu pozostaje w związku z biernym i aktywnym odkładaniem pracy na później. Badanie zostało przeprowadzone wśród 325 młodych dorosłych (219 kobiet i 106 mężczyzn). Wykorzystano następujące narzędzia: Nową Skalę Prokrastynacji Aktywnej, Skalę Prokrastynacji Ogólnej, Polski Kwestionariusz Perfekcjonizmu Adaptacyjnego i Dezadaptacyjnego (KPAD), Skalę Samooceny Rosenberga (SES). Otrzymane wyniki wskazują, że aktywne odkładanie pracy na później pozostaje w ujemnej relacji z samooceną i perfekcjonizmem dezadaptacyjnym, a w dodatniej z perfekcjonizmem adaptacyjnym. Biernie odkładanie pracy na później dodatnio koreluje z samooceną i perfekcjonizmem dezadaptacyjnym, ujemnie z perfekcjonizmem adaptacyjnym. Otrzymane dane pogłębiają wiedzę na temat uwarunkowań prokrastynacji, którą warto rozpatrywać z dwóch perspektyw – pozytywnej i negatywnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** aktywne odkładanie pracy na później, biernie odkładanie pracy na później, adaptacyjny perfekcjonizm, dezadaptacyjny perfekcjonizm, samoocena

### Introduction

The phenomenon of procrastination gained the status of a scientific concept relatively late. First attempts to study putting work off were made in 1971 by Ringenbach and the problem was presented in more detail in 1992 by Milgram (Steel, 2007). In 2016, Frode Svartdal and a team of eight researchers investigated a group of 2893 respondents and

published data describing the scale of procrastination in six European countries (i.e., Norway, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Poland and Italy). It turned out that Poles had the strongest tendency to put work off. Like Italians, they showed a greater susceptibility to various temptations. Moreover, the Polish respondents also expressed significantly less willingness to use time planning tools (e.g. calendars) compared to the remaining participants.

In this context, conducting research to understand the determinants of this phenomenon becomes an important issue from both a scientific and practical point of view. Although the causes of procrastination can be subjective (Brando-Garrido, Montes-Hidalgo, Limonero, Gómez-Romero, & Tomás-Sábado, 2020) and contextual (Codina, Castillo, Pestana, & Balaguer, 2020; Lipińska-Grobelny & Michałowska, 2018), this paper chooses to shift the focus to dispositional variables, i.e., level of self-esteem and perfectionism. Indeed, a review of literature shows that the most commonly cited causes of procrastination include interference with self-control, perfectionism and low self-esteem, as well as awareness of low self-efficacy (self-discipline), (Steel, 2007). What is new and original in the presented research results is the distinction between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism and, above all, the positive and negative aspects of procrastination. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to verify which level of self-esteem and type of perfectionism promote active procrastination (positive approach) and which ones determine passive procrastination (negative approach).

### 1. Putting Work Off - An Outline Of Issues

The term 'procrastination' is derived from the Latin word '*procrastinatio*' (i.e. 'postponement, delay') and means 'putting off until tomorrow' (Latin '*pro*' - 'forward', *crastinate* - 'tomorrow'). There are many definitions of this phenomenon and a review of these was undertaken by Jorg, Potok, and Krajewska, (2016), who analysed about 50 scientific publications devoted to the mentioned problem and compiled differences in approaches and division criteria. Three important characteristics of putting off work emerge from the above comparison - voluntary nature, concreteness referring to behaviour linked with task completion, and intentionality. Initially, procrastination was considered only in negative terms. However, in 1995, Ferrari, Johnson, and McCown pointed out that there was a specific type of procrastination which served as an action strategy for people who needed strong stimulation; it provided them with the right level of arousal and motivation, leading to effective action.

With reference to the above position, this paper assumes that procrastination should be analysed from two perspectives - active (positive) and passive (negative). Passive postponement of work is consistent with the common understanding of the phenomenon. It is often accompanied by the fear of failure or not having enough competence to cope with

a specific task. Therefore, it can be said that passive procrastination is a sort of failure avoidance strategy. Putting work off can always be explained by not having enough time, and not by the lack of professional competence. People who are characterised by passive procrastination not only put off tasks that test their abilities and skills, but also reckon with the opinion of those around them. Active procrastination, on the other hand, refers to a situation of consciously deciding to postpone a task until a certain point in the future. This is because active procrastinators feel they have control over their time and can manage it effectively. The pressure of a looming deadline not only does not disorganize them, but it also actually motivates them to be more effective. When they are unexpectedly given additional tasks to complete, they are able to judge which ones to do first. They act more spontaneously than people who are characterised by passively putting things off. Starting work shortly before the end of a deadline makes the task challenging for them and helps them avoid routine (Chu & Choi, 2005).

## 2. Determinants Of Putting Work Off

Causes of procrastination may be subjective (Brando-Garrido et al., 2020) as well as contextual (Codina et al., 2020; Lipińska-Grobelny & Michałowska, 2018). Disruptions in the process of self-control, perfectionism, low self-esteem, and awareness of low efficacy in the context of self-regulation and rebelliousness are considered to be the most commonly cited internal conditions (Steel, 2007). Situational factors include a high level of task difficulty and the lack of deadlines for completion. This trend includes views on the changing specificity of human life, technological progress accompanied by the need to cope with an increasing number of tasks, but also distractors or changes in the area of work and organizational climate (Lipińska-Grobelny & Michałowska, 2018).

With regard to the dispositional variables, there are specific indications that self-esteem and perfectionism are important correlates of work postponement (Steel, 2007). Firstly, M. Rosenberg's world-renowned concept of self-esteem and, secondly, the construct of perfectionism, which includes positive and negative aspects, were used to conceptualise the variables. According to Rosenberg, each person presents different attitudes towards the objects that surround them, which include their own *Self*. Positive self-esteem is thus a global evaluation of oneself, representing a positive attitude toward own *Self*. High self-esteem does not mean that a person believes to be better than others, only that he or she is good enough. Low self-esteem means a lack of satisfaction with own *Self*, even rejecting it. Attention should be paid to the strongly subjective nature of the construct, which is based solely on self-perception and self-evaluation of one's worth. As far as perfectionism is concerned, the assumption of the existence of at least two types of this phenomenon emerged in the late 1970s. The forerunner in differentiating perfectionism was D. Hamachek, who described two

types of perfectionists, i.e., healthy and unhealthy. Since then, the two-dimensional approach has become the dominant one, accompanied by a variety of terminology (positive versus negative, healthy versus unhealthy, adaptive versus maladaptive perfectionism). The latter, referring to Higgins' *Self* discrepancy theory, was adopted in a tool prepared by K. Szczucka (2010), which was used in the presented research. Adaptive perfectionism involves setting attainable goals. People accept that they may make mistakes or fail. They never lose flexibility in action, which allows them to constantly develop and achieve their goals. They function properly in social relationships, are open and ready to experience positive emotions. On the other hand, maladaptive perfectionism refers to the fear of failure and evaluation of one's actions by others. People set exorbitant goals that they are unable to achieve. They are accompanied by a constant conviction of insufficient skills and resources. This has a negative impact on their effectiveness in action. As a result, they feel a constant need to refine what they are currently doing and yet never feel satisfied with it. Furthermore, maladaptive perfectionists have a rigid and chronic discrepancy between the real *Self* and the ideal *Self*; adaptive perfectionists are characterised by the flexible acceptance of this discrepancy, and non-perfectionists are not expected to experience such a discrepancy at all.

### 3. Research Issues

Following the model presented by Lazarus and Folkman in 1987, it is assumed that cognitive processes underlie procrastination. A person with low self-esteem comes to a conclusion that their resources are insufficient to solve a given problem, which results in postponing the task. Numerous studies in the last 20 years support a negative relationship between procrastination and self-esteem (e.g. Babu, Chandra, Vanishree, & Amritha, 2019; Dike & Emmanuel, 2019; Yang, Liu, Ding, Hong, & Jiang, 2021) and a positive relationship with perfectionism (Sherry, Stoeber, & Ramasubbu, 2016; Sirois, Molnar, & Hirsch, 2017; Smith, Sherry, Saklofske, & Mushqaush, 2017). However, the results obtained by Wazid, Ghazi and Gupta (2016) were the most important source of inspiration for the study. Data obtained from 100 students (50 females and 50 males) confirmed a negative correlation of self-esteem with procrastination, a positive correlation with adaptive perfectionism, and no relationship of procrastination with maladaptive perfectionism. In addition, men had higher levels of procrastination and perfectionism compared to women.

Given the magnitude of procrastination in Poland (Svartdal et al., 2016), a decision was made to test whether such important dispositional variables as self-esteem and perfectionism determine procrastination, distinguishing perfectionism into adaptive and maladaptive, and above all, considering procrastination in positive and negative terms. The study was conducted in a group of young adults, in whom a higher proportion of procrastinators is evident (Paszowska-Rogacz & Poraj, 2017; Steel, 2007). Considering the

lack of distinction between active and passive procrastination in the analyses presented earlier, four main research questions were formulated:

1. Is there a relationship between self-esteem and 1.1. active procrastination, 1.2. passive procrastination?
2. Is there a relationship between adaptive perfectionism and 2.1. active procrastination, 2.2. passive procrastination?
3. Is there a relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and 3.1. active procrastination, 3.2. passive procrastination?
4. Which dispositional variables ultimately determine 4.1. active procrastination, 4.2. passive procrastination?

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Individuals Examined

A total of 325 young adults from across Poland aged 18-32 years ( $M = 21.63$ ,  $SD = 2.38$ ) participated in the study. The investigated group comprised 219 women aged 18-32 ( $M = 21.63$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ) and 106 men aged 19-29 ( $M = 21.62$ ,  $SD = 2.47$ ). The respondents had secondary education and were pursuing their studies at different universities. The research was conducted online. The entire procedure was worked out in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, which means that the subjects were informed about the voluntary participation in the study. They were given information about the purpose and procedure of the research and were assured of anonymity as well as of the fact that the results would be used for scientific purposes only. The respondents were provided with a link that enabled them to read information about the entire study. Then they proceeded to complete personal information and four questionnaires given in a specific order to control for common method bias, starting with the New Active Procrastination Scale, followed by the Polish Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism Questionnaire, then the General Procrastination Scale, and finally the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

### 4.2. Research Tools

When investigating answers to the research questions formulated, paper-and-pencil tools with proven and very satisfactory psychometric properties were used.

The New Active Procrastination Scale (NAPS) by Choi and Moran was used to describe active procrastination. Translation and preliminary psychometric development were conducted by Wróbel and Bartosiewicz (2011). By filling out a 16-item questionnaire, respondents determined their attitude towards each item using a 7-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7). The value of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  in own research studies reached 0.82.

Another questionnaire to measure the intensity of passive procrastination was the General Procrastination Scale (GPS) by Lay. Translation and preliminary psychometric development were conducted by Wróbel and Bartosiewicz (2011). The questionnaire consisted of 20 statements and a 5-point response scale (from 1 - 'completely uncharacteristic' to 5 - 'completely characteristic'). The value of *Cronbach's alpha* in own research studies at 0.88 indicated high reliability of the tool.

The Polish Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism Questionnaire (KPAD) was prepared and developed psychometrically by Szczucka (2010). The whole questionnaire was composed of 35 statements, of which 22 formed the scale of maladaptive perfectionism and 13 formed the scale of adaptive perfectionism. Respondents referred to each statement based on a 7-point response scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7). *Cronbach's alpha* for maladaptive perfectionism reached 0.95, while for adaptive perfectionism it was 0.91, which confirmed the high reliability of the tool.

The last applied research tool was the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES). It is one of the most popular methods to measure global self-esteem. An adaptation of the SES scale was made by Łaguna, Lachowicz-Tabaczek, and Dzwonkowska (2007). The tool consisted of 10 statements to which respondents referred on a 4-point scale (1 - 'strongly agree' to 4 - 'strongly disagree'). *Cronbach's alpha* in own research studies also reached a high value of 0.91.

## 5. Results

All calculations were performed in IBM SPSS Statistics version 25. The number of subjects and the central limit theorem allowed parametric tests to be used. Gender did not differentiate results for active procrastination ( $t(323) = -0.12, p = 0.91$ ), passive procrastination ( $t(323) = -0.11, p = 0.92$ ), self-esteem ( $t(323) = 0.89, p = 0.37$ ), adaptive perfectionism ( $t(323) = -0.58, p = 0.56$ ), and maladaptive perfectionism ( $t(323) = 0.3, p = 0.76$ ).

The presentation of results will begin with descriptive statistics. The mean active procrastination score that the respondents obtained was 63.98 with a standard deviation of 16.04 ( $Min = 30, Max = 110$ ). The mean score for passive procrastination was 76.73 with a standard deviation of 14.34 ( $Min = 42, Max = 110$ ). The following results were obtained for the two types of perfectionism - 86.91 ( $SD = 29.57$ ) for the maladaptive form and 63.21 ( $SD = 14.64$ ) for the adaptive form. The maximum value on the maladaptive perfectionism scale was 154 and the minimum value was 26. Similarly, these values for the adaptive perfectionism scale were equal to 91 and 19, respectively. As for the mean score on the SES scale, it oscillated around a value of 21.69 with a standard deviation of 7.38 ( $Min = 10, Max = 40$ ), (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of investigated variables

VARIABLES	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Active procrastination	325	30	110	63.98	16.04
Passive procrastination	325	42	110	76.73	14.34
Maladaptive perfectionism	325	26	154	86.91	29.57
Adaptive perfectionism	325	19	91	63.21	14.64
Self-esteem	325	10	40	21.69	7.38

In seeking answers to the first three research questions: 1. *Is there a relationship between self-esteem and 1.1. active procrastination, 1.2. passive procrastination?* 2. *Is there a relationship between adaptive perfectionism and 2.1. active procrastination, 2.2. passive procrastination?* 3. *Is there a relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and 3.1. active procrastination, 3.2. passive procrastination?* Pearson's *r* correlation test was applied (see Table 2).

Table 2. Relationships of active and passive procrastination with maladaptive perfectionism, adaptive perfectionism, and self-esteem

VARIABLES		Active procrastination	Passive procrastination
Maladaptive perfectionism	<i>r Pearson</i>	-0.41	0.23
	<i>Significance</i>	<0.001	<0.001
Adaptive perfectionism	<i>r Pearson</i>	0.11	-0.34
	<i>Significance</i>	0.048	<0.001
Self-esteem	<i>r Pearson</i>	-0.34	0.27
	<i>Significance</i>	<0.001	<0.001

All correlations between self-esteem and active and passive procrastination were found to be statistically significant. High self-esteem moderately weakened active procrastination ( $r = -0.34$   $p < 0.001$ ) and strengthened passive procrastination ( $r = 0.27$   $p < 0.001$ ). Maladaptive perfectionism had a strong negative relationship with active procrastination ( $r = -0.41$   $p < 0.001$ ) and a positive relationship with passive procrastination ( $r = 0.23$   $p < 0.001$ ). Conversely, adaptive perfectionism correlated positively with active procrastination ( $r = 0.11$   $p = 0.048$ ) and negatively with passive procrastination ( $r = -0.34$   $p < 0.001$ ).

A response to the fourth research question: *Which dispositional variables ultimately determine 4.1. active procrastination, 4.2. passive procrastination?* was provided by a multiple regression analysis (by enter method), (see Tables 3 and 4).

In the first model, the dependent variable was active procrastination and its determinants were self-esteem and perfectionism ( $F(3,321) = 24.63, p < 0.001$ ). The model was well adjusted to the data and explained 18% of the variation in active procrastination. Based on regression coefficients, the significant explanatory variables were maladaptive perfectionism ( $\beta = -0.43$ ) and adaptive perfectionism ( $\beta = 0.14$ ). Standardized  $\beta$  coefficients indicate that the weaker the maladaptive perfectionism and the stronger the adaptive perfectionism, the stronger the active procrastination (see Table 3).

Table 3. Multiple regression coefficients – enter method, dependent variable – active procrastination

Determinants of active procrastination	$\beta$	$t$	Adjusted $R^2$	$F(3,321)$
Maladaptive perfectionism	-0.43	-5.31***	0.18	24.63***
Adaptive perfectionism	0.14	2.54*		
Self-esteem	0.005	0.07		

Explanations: \*Sig. < 0.05, \*\*\*Sig. < 0.001

Another regression model, which verified the role of self-esteem and perfectionism in shaping passive procrastination, was also adjusted to the data ( $F(3,321) = 24.03, p < 0.001$ ). It explained 18% of the variation in the dependent variable. Self-esteem again proved to be a statistically insignificant explanatory variable. Adaptive perfectionism ( $\beta = -0.37$ ) and maladaptive perfectionism ( $\beta = 0.28$ ) remained the determinants of passive procrastination in the model. The weaker the adaptive perfectionism and the stronger the maladaptive perfectionism, the stronger the passive procrastination (see Table 4).

Table 4. Multiple regression coefficients – enter method, dependent variable – passive procrastination

Determinants of passive procrastination	$\beta$	$t$	Adjusted $R^2$	$F(3,321)$
Maladaptive perfectionism	0.28	3.48**	0.18	24.03***
Adaptive perfectionism	-0.37	-6.58***		
Self-esteem	-0.03	-0.36		

Explanations: \*\*Sig. < 0.01, \*\*\*Sig. < 0.001



## 6. Discussion

Researchers are unsure whether the phenomenon of procrastination is on the rise in society or whether people are just being bolder in admitting to it. Its nature is certainly worth exploring. Therefore, the purpose of the analyses performed was to verify which level of self-esteem and type of perfectionism promote active procrastination (positive approach) and which ones determine passive procrastination (negative approach). Studies carried out in the last 20 years support a negative relationship between procrastination and self-esteem (e.g. Babu et al., 2019; Dike & Emmanuel, 2019; Hernández, Cueto, Shardin-Flores, & Luy-Montejo, 2020; Yang et al., 2021) and a positive relationship with perfectionism (Sherry et al., 2016; Sirois et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2017). Additionally, Wazid et al. (2016) found a positive correlation of procrastination with adaptive perfectionism and higher scores in work postponement and perfectionism for men. Nevertheless, the cited findings describe procrastination holistically, without differentiating into active and passive forms.

The research results presented in this publication deepen the subject of work postponement determinants by introducing two perspectives on procrastination, but also by distinguishing between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. Accordingly, four research questions were formulated and positively verified. First, the authors found that self-esteem correlated negatively with active procrastination and positively with passive procrastination (response to question 1.1.-1.2.). This contradicts the conclusions reached by Babu et al. (2019), Dike and Emmanuel (2019) or Hernández et al. (2020) showing individuals with higher levels of self-esteem to be more persistent and active in taking particular actions. It also contradicts Kuhl's action control theory. According to this concept, people who have many doubts about their own skills and competences, demonstrate lower motivation for action, thus postpone the moment of its completion. In our research people with high self-esteem is less persistent and active, preferring passive procrastination. In attempting to explain the result obtained, we would like to refer to the work by Lambird and Mann (2007). The authors challenge the popular view of the exclusively positive role of high self-esteem by citing data that high scores on self-evaluation can be self-detrimental and menacing. The answer should be sought in the heterogeneity of self-esteem. Therefore, people with high self-esteem have been reported to show poor self-regulation, especially in response to ego-threatening feedback. Certainly, the obtained results are interesting, although they require further analysis with the participation of people representing various age groups, since it cannot be excluded that the confirmed relationships concern only young adults. Moreover, it is worth remembering that high self-esteem has different "faces", it is neither entirely positive nor entirely negative. Its role in active and passive procrastination may change in different social and professional contexts.

Secondly, active procrastination correlates negatively with maladaptive perfectionism and positively with adaptive perfectionism. In contrast, passive procrastination correlates positively with maladaptive perfectionism and negatively with adaptive perfectionism (responses to questions 2.1-2.2 and 3.1.-3.2). These results are consistent with the cited characteristics of adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism (Szczycka, 2010). Setting attainable goals, which are flexibly modified to suit the situation, is the starting point for adaptive perfectionists. They are characterised by high intrinsic motivation, which directly impacts the decision to take action and active procrastination. Maladaptive perfectionists, on the other hand, are full of fears and anxieties. They are accompanied by a constant conviction of insufficient skills and resources. This has a negative impact on their efficiency and the constant postponement of work without a deadline (passive procrastination).

Finally, the significance of individual dispositional variables in predicting active and passive procrastination was tested (response to questions 4.1-4.2). It turned out that the most important determinants of active and passive procrastination are maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism. Strong maladaptive perfectionism attenuates active procrastination (positive approach), while strong adaptive perfectionism weakens passive procrastination (negative approach). Thus, perfectionistic pursuits can be judged not only negatively, but also positively, as long as the perfectionist is able to concentrate on getting the job done as well as possible instead of being afraid of making a mistake or focus attention on the effects rather than on not getting something done as intended.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that learning about the causes and effects of procrastination provides many clues as regards how to manage people with a tendency to put off tasks. Procrastination is particularly problematic in the work environment since timely completion of certain tasks is required in most professions. Evidence suggests that procrastination and poor performance go hand in hand, as procrastinators are more likely to miss deadlines, make more mistakes and work slower than non-procrastinators when completing tasks with a set deadline (Tibbett & Ferrari, 2015).

## Conclusions

Procrastination has always accompanied people – like *fides et ratio*. Because of its prevalence and complexity, it is worth learning about its nature, determinants, and consequences. In this case, the dispositional variables behind active and passive procrastination were sought. It turns out that self-esteem in young adults determines active procrastination negatively and passive procrastination positively. In the regression model – in contrast – its role is reduced significantly by strong relationships with adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. Weak maladaptive perfectionism is most important for active procrastination, whereas weak adaptive perfectionism is the most important in case of

passive procrastination. Women and men did not differ in their levels of procrastination, self-esteem, and perfectionism. Continuing research with a more age-diverse group is a good alternative to enrich the knowledge about postponing work in active (positive) and passive (negative) terms.

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