

## Academic procrastination: the understanding of pedagogy undergraduates about postponing their activities

### ARTICLE

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1

### Abstract

Academic procrastination is a common phenomenon among university students that refers to the voluntary delay or postponement of activities, even if such an attitude causes greater difficulties in the long term. The present study aims to investigate how Pedagogy students understand the concept of academic procrastination, considering the process of this phenomenon from the perspective of historical and dialectical materialism. This is a qualitative study, involving four students from the Pedagogy course at a public university in the capital of Paraíba. The results show that the students investigated understand academic procrastination as an intentional postponement of time management of their activities, with the negative consequences that the action provides. It was concluded that research on the topic is still incipient from the perspective of historical-dialectical materialism in the Brazilian context, requiring further exploration by researchers, with possible impacts on understanding the phenomenon and developing interventions with higher education students.

**Keywords:** Academic procrastination. University students. Historical-dialectical materialism.

### Procrastinação acadêmica: a compreensão de graduandos de pedagogia acerca do adiamento de suas atividades

### Resumo

Procrastinação acadêmica é um fenômeno comum entre os alunos universitários, que se refere ao atraso ou adiamento voluntário de atividades, mesmo que tal atitude cause dificuldades maiores a longo prazo. O presente estudo objetiva investigar como os estudantes de Pedagogia compreendem o conceito de procrastinação acadêmica, considerando o processo deste fenômeno sob a perspectiva do materialismo histórico e dialético. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, envolvendo quatro alunos do curso de Pedagogia de uma universidade pública da capital paraibana. Os resultados mostram que os alunos investigados compreendem a procrastinação acadêmica como um adiamento proposital da gestão de tempo de suas atividades, com as consequências negativas que ação proporciona. Concluiu-se que a pesquisa sobre a temática ainda é incipiente na perspectiva do materialismo histórico-dialético no contexto brasileiro necessitando de maior exploração por parte

dos pesquisadores, com possíveis impactos para a compreensão do fenômeno e desenvolvimento de intervenções com estudantes do ensino superior.

**Palavras-chave:** Procrastinação acadêmica. Estudantes universitários. Materialismo histórico-dialético.

## 1 Introduction

2

The human struggle against deadlines is a battle that spans the centuries. In 800 BC, the Greek poet Hesiod already understood the importance of not "putting off work until tomorrow or the day after". Among Egyptian and Roman civilizations, this behaviour was not seen as something negative, but rather as a useful and wise postponement, especially when it came to making important decisions (Steel, 2007).

However, the negative connotation seems to have emerged in the 18th century, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, especially in Western societies focused on competition and success, operating under the pressure of time and production (Steel, 2007; Enumo; Kerbauy, 1999; Beswick; Rothblum; Mann, 1988).

In these contexts, procrastinators have come to be labeled with unflattering adjectives, often associated with a lack of ambition, laziness or indolence (Kerbauy, 2001; 1997). Certain characteristics of certain societies and situations seem to encourage the practice of procrastination (Enumo; Kerbauy, 1999; Burka; Yuen, 1991), especially those which impose on the individual the incessant search for perfection and the continuous delivery of successful results (Burka; Yuen; Martins, 1991). Thus, the individual is continually confronted with high standards of performance, widely publicized in the media, rooted in cultural beliefs that are often unattainable (Burka; Yuen; Martins, 1991).

In modern times, with modernism driven by social and technological progress, a new perspective of connection between cultures and nations has emerged, paving the way for the era of globalization. Paradoxically, however, this interconnectivity also gives rise to a phenomenon that challenges this agility: procrastination.

Procrastination is a widespread phenomenon that affects many people, with estimates pointing to an incidence of up to 20% of the world's population (Steel, 2007). As such, this behavior has attracted the attention of researchers due to its prevalence in everyday lives. As it manifests itself in a variety of circumstances, it often becomes a recurring pattern in the lives of certain individuals.

Despite the existence of numerous studies on procrastination, there is still no consensus on its definition. The etymology of the word "procrastination" sheds light on its meaning. With ancient roots dating back to the Latin "*pro crastinus*", "*pro*" suggests "in favor of" and "*crastinus*" means "of tomorrow" (Steel, 2007). Various synonyms such as "postpone", "prolong", "delay", "linger", "space out" and "defer" are used to express this concept (Ferreira, 2015). In simple terms, procrastinating implies putting off an action that could have been carried out at the present moment (Burka; Yuen; Martins, 1991).

In this scenario, the meaning of procrastination can vary between different authors. The most widely accepted definition is that proposed by Steel (2007), who describes procrastination as the voluntary and irrational postponement of a planned action. In other words, it is the act of deliberately postponing, of one's own volition and without the interference of external factors, the start or completion of a task that one genuinely intended to carry out, even though one is aware that this attitude will result in negative consequences, whether from an emotional or performance point of view.

According to Schouwenburg (2004), procrastination is generally characterized by the postponement of one task in favour of another of lesser importance, often accompanied by feelings of discomfort resulting from this behaviour.

Hagbin (2015) identifies six constituent elements of procrastination: (1) Delay; (2) Intention; (3) Irrationality; (4) Negative psychological effects; (5) Negative performance; and (6) Type of task. The author distinguishes procrastination as an isolated behavior and as a personality trait. Procrastinatory behavior exclusively involves unnecessarily delaying a task that one intends to perform. On the other hand, as a personality trait, the phenomenon manifests itself as a repetitive pattern of

habitually and continuously putting off tasks, usually irrationally and accompanied by negative feelings, which can result in poor performance or personal dissatisfaction with the results obtained.

It's important to note that procrastination behavior can appear in young people or adults, regardless of their professional success, covering both successful and unemployed professionals. Furthermore, it can manifest itself in a variety of contexts, including school, the workplace or even domestic settings (Burka; Yuen; Martins, 1991). This means that procrastination can present itself in different ways and with different intensities in each area of a person's life.

One of the most significant challenges in the academic environment is related to time management and academic activities (Almeida, 2019). In relation to activities in Higher Education, academic tasks become more complex, comprehensive and require a higher level of autonomy and critical thinking to complete. As Oliveira *et al.* (2016) point out, effective time management requires the development of various skills, such as the ability to set goals and priorities, draw up action plans, create to-do lists, deal with unforeseen events and meet deadlines.

Within the academic context, a widely studied challenge is effective time management, with academic procrastination being a highly relevant research topic (Gareau *et al.*, 2019; Palo *et al.*, 2017; Patrzek *et al.*, 2015). Academic procrastination involves a gap between the intention to study and the actual practice of studying, including the habit of postponing the start or completion of learning-related tasks to the detriment of lower priority activities (Schouwenburg, 2004; Milgram; Mey-Tal; Levison, 1998). This practice mainly involves postponing study commitments, such as daily revision or preparing for assessments (Beswick; Rothblum; Mann, 1988; Solomon; Rothblum, 1984).

A study by Vieira-Santos and Malaquias (2022) found that the international literature on academic procrastination is extensive, with a total of 980 articles on the subject identified in international journals. These studies explore the correlation between academic procrastination and a wide range of variables: (a) psychological,

such as personality traits (Ljubin-Golub; Petričević; Rovan, 2019; Moslemi; Ghomi; Mohammadi, 2020), anxiety in relation to assessments (Furlan; Ferrero; Gallart, 2014), perfectionism (Odaci; Kaya, 2019) and self-efficacy (Graff, 2019; Guo *et al.*, 2019); (b) academic, such as grades (Gareau *et al.*, 2019) and learning self-regulation skills (González-Brignardello; Sánchez-Elvira-Paniagua, 2013; Loeffler *et al.*, 2019; Palo *et al.*, 2017); (c) sociodemographic and family factors, such as gender (Dominguez-Lara; Prada-Chapoñan; Moreta-Herrera, 2019) and parenting style (Batool, 2020; Khalid *et al.*, 2019); and (d) use of the internet and electronic devices (Aznar-Díaz *et al.*, 2020; Hayat *et al.*, 2020).

In Brazil, studies related to procrastination are still in their infancy. In this scenario, academic procrastination is an area of study that is still less explored. In September of this year, a search was conducted in the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SCIELO) databases, using the descriptor "academic procrastination". Approximately 17 articles relevant to this topic were identified, 12 of which were published in Psychology journals, 3 in Education, 1 in Administration and 1 in Philosophy.

In addition, we searched the database of theses and dissertations of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), using the same descriptor, and found 19 works related to this theme, 16 of which were the result of master's research and 3 professional master's studies. These studies address procrastination in different contexts, adopting multidisciplinary perspectives that include Psychology, Education, Administration, Medical Sciences and Accounting Sciences.

Although there is a considerable amount of national literature dedicated to understanding procrastination, there is a significant gap in qualitative research that focuses specifically on how this phenomenon manifests itself in Brazilian university students. Thus, when analyzing the abstracts of all the master's and doctoral productions in the CAPES thesis catalog, it was found that, of the 19 productions found, 15 adopted quantitative approaches and 4 used qualitative methods.

Collecting qualitative data is a procedure that requires great rigor on the part of the researcher, since the observation of the phenomenon is intrinsically linked to the historical and personal background of the person carrying out the observation (Malheiros, 2011).

While the literature seeks to understand the determinants of behavior or the variables that influence it, the act of procrastinating has been approached in various ways, such as a personality trait or a failure in self-regulation. However, the search for a purely quantitative or phenomenological description tends to neglect the influences of variables external to the individual, such as their environment, culture and history, which may be closely related to procrastination behavior.

In view of the above, the main objective of this study is to investigate how Pedagogy students understand the concept of academic procrastination. This research adopts a qualitative perspective and uses historical-dialectical materialism as its theoretical-methodological approach. This method allows us to analyze issues of reality, establishing connections with the dynamics of the social totality in which the students are inserted. In this way, we seek to understand concrete reality in its movements, determinations and contradictions.

Materialism considers that human beings are not passive actors in the phenomena of nature; on the contrary, they construct their own history, they are inserted in a real world, "in which things, relationships, are seen as products of social man" (Cury, 1986, p. 25). In addition, materialism, as a dialectic, sees contradictions as the driving force behind history, understanding that history is essentially a struggle between antagonistic forces. According to the Marxist understanding, conducting research implies analyzing matter in its multiple dimensions, highlighting its contradictions, the laws that shape the phenomenon under study and the dialectical implication between phenomenon and essence (Moura *et al.*, 2023).

For Lessa and Tonet (2011), historical-dialectical materialism conceives the world of men as a synthesis that transcends the mere dichotomy between idea and matter, seeing it as an overcoming of these concepts. In line with this view, Triviños



(2015) points out that historical-dialectical materialism is one of the most original ideas in the field of theories of knowledge, since it places social practice as a fundamental criterion for determining truth.

Considering the objective of this work, the empirical research was carried out at a public university located in the capital of Paraíba, João Pessoa. To collect the data, a questionnaire was administered, addressing the social profile of the students, with the central question being: What is academic procrastination?

The study began with an initial sample of 30 students; however, only four participants met the criteria established for inclusion in the study. Thus, the cohort of interest in this study consisted of four students enrolled in the Pedagogy course, comprising one male and three females. All participants were invited to volunteer to take part in the study and to give their informed consent in accordance with the ethical principles established by the Code of Ethics and Resolution 466/12 (Brazil, 2012).

Next, the theoretical approach to the phenomenon of academic procrastination will be presented, followed by the presentation of the results and discussions derived from the research conducted, culminating in the final considerations of this study.

## 2 Defining academic procrastination

The career of a university student is a continuous process of development that takes place in a unique and challenging context: the academic environment. In this scenario, university dynamics require the completion of multiple tasks in a limited space of time, putting the student's time management skills to the test. Procrastinating behavior in this context can have serious implications, affecting class attendance, the consistency of study habits and the student's learning process.

Academic procrastination is characterized by the tendency to unnecessarily postpone study-related activities, such as preparing for exams, writing assignments and reading texts (Kerbauy, 1997; Geara; Filho; Teixeira, 2017). Research indicates that academic procrastination affects a substantial proportion of university students,

reaching up to 95% of the student population (O'Brien, 2002). This tendency follows a normal distribution among students (Mccown; Johnson; Petzel, 1989).

In Brazil, a survey found that 65% of university students admit to procrastinating at least once a week (Sampaio; Bariani, 2011). In addition, evidence indicates that around half of university students procrastinate in a problematic way, which results in psychological discomfort and negative impacts on their performance (Solomon; Rothblum, 1984).

In an additional study conducted by Geara, Filho and Teixeira (2017), it was found that 82.6% of participants (n = 499) admitted to procrastinating on academic tasks on a regular basis. The analysis also shed light on which academic tasks were most susceptible to procrastination. Studying led the way with a rate of 40.3%, followed by doing assignments, mentioned by 25.1% of the students, while 23.6% said they procrastinated more often when doing exercises. A smaller proportion (11%) indicated that the task of preparing for exams was the one that was most affected by procrastination.

Solomon and Rothblum (1984) argue that academic procrastination goes beyond simple inefficiency in time management and lack of study skills. It is linked to a complex set of factors, including anxiety triggered by assessment situations, difficulties in decision-making, aversion to certain tasks and the incessant search for perfection in academic performance.

The reasons that lead students to procrastinate are varied and can be influenced by the characteristics of the task or the teacher, a lack of motivation, difficulty or aversion to the activity in question, the adoption of inadequate study habits or even the fear of not achieving success. It is important to note that students who procrastinate frequently tend to differ from those who manage to self-regulate their learning effectively and completely. This suggests that academic procrastination may be a symptom of difficulties in the process of self-regulating learning (Monteiro, 2009; Costa, 2007; Steel, 2007; Schouwenburg, 2004; Wolters, 2003).



Indeed, academic procrastination triggers a series of problems and adverse implications, both on an individual and collective level. These implications include reduced performance, worsening stress levels and a pronounced negative impact on the physical and mental health of those involved, as well as representing a waste of valuable resources and talents (Hailikari, Katajavuorini; Asikainen, 2021; Klingsieck, 2013).

It is therefore imperative that this phenomenon is thoroughly studied and understood in its various manifestations, in order to enable the creation and implementation of effective strategies to overcome it (Kennedy; Tuckman, 2013; Senecal; Koestner; Vallerand, 1995). This is a crucial challenge to ensure not only student success, but also the efficiency and excellence of the academic environment as a whole.

### 3 Exploring the research field of academic procrastination

Based on the previous reflections on academic procrastination and the lack of qualitative research on the subject, an investigation was carried out at a public university located in João Pessoa, with the participation of four students enrolled in the Pedagogy course. Although 30 students were invited, only four met the criteria for taking part in the research.

It is important to note that, in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in Resolution 466/2012, all the identities of the students mentioned in this study, as well as that of the university, have been protected in order to preserve the privacy of those involved.

To conduct the data collection at the university, we obtained permission from the professor responsible for the subject. After obtaining consent, the administrators invited the students to take part in the study, guaranteeing that their answers would remain confidential. All the participants who agreed to take part in the study signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF). The questionnaires were administered in approximately 15 minutes, in a collective environment, but individually.

In order to understand the reasons behind procrastination, the participants were asked to fill in an initial questionnaire with information about their sociodemographic profile and then answer the following question: "What is procrastination?"

All the students involved in this research are studying Pedagogy. Of the students interviewed, three were female and one male. It should be noted that, in order to preserve their privacy, it was decided to replace their names with codes (A1, A2, A3 and A4). This measure aims to guarantee the confidentiality of the information provided, ensuring that their personal details are not identified or revealed publicly.

**Table 1** - Characteristics of students in relation to their academic activities

STUDENT	GENDER	AGE	HOURS OF STUDY PER DAY	DOES THE TEACHER INFLUENCE YOUR PROCRASTINATION?
A1	F	20	3	Yes
A2	F	19	2	No
A3	F	24	3	Yes
A4	M	24	4	No

Source: authors

Analysis of Table 1 reveals that they devote an average of three hours a day to studying. In addition, it was observed that they share opinions on the influence of teachers on academic procrastination. For Jiménez (2000) and Touron (1984), it is important to consider various factors that affect academic performance, which cannot be reduced to a single definition, since its interpretation varies according to the point of view adopted. Among the relevant factors are educational dynamics, the individual characteristics of teachers, student-teacher interaction, the family environment and the infrastructure of the learning environment.

When asked about the meaning of procrastination, students A1 and A2 pointed out its relationship with time management. A1 defines academic procrastination as "*the lack of time management, doing the activity at another time, not knowing how to organize the activities in time*". For his part, A2 describes procrastination as "*putting*

*things off. The act of taking something not very seriously or not complying with the activities that are imposed".*

The way in which an individual manages time to complete a task is a crucial aspect in the analysis of procrastination, going beyond the simple postponement of the task itself (Gouveia *et al.*, 2014). The results obtained from these interviewees corroborate research by Kerbauy (1999), who observed various patterns of procrastination behavior in university students, all intrinsically related to the time variable. These patterns include: defining the task with the belief that there is little time to carry it out; specifying the task, opting to postpone it temporarily; assuming that a new deadline will be given or that another opportunity will arise to complete it; starting the task, followed by interrupting and postponing its completion; or procrastinating the start of the task, while overestimating the time available to carry it out.

According to A3, academic procrastination is related to the feeling of "*disappointment and too much work at short notice*". Adherence to procrastinatory behaviors in the academic context can increase the likelihood of experiencing negative emotional states, such as anxiety in the face of assessments, high levels of stress, feelings of exhaustion and decreased interest in activities (Lonka *et al.*, 2014; Rabin; Fogel; Nutter-Upham, 2011).

A4 defined academic procrastination as intentional procrastination. According to him, the phenomenon means "*stopping doing something important to do some leisure activity. Having fun instead of studying. Leaving responsibility aside. Giving up doing/studying for an exam to do some hobby*". From this perspective, for Costa (2007), academic procrastination for this university student can be conceptualized as the intentional postponement of tasks considered to be unstimulating, despite the negative consequences or damage that this action can cause.

## 4 Conclusions

Academic procrastination is a widespread phenomenon that has a significant impact not only on individual student performance, but also on higher education

institutions. Given this reality, it is imperative to devote efforts to studying it, in order to understand the phenomenon in its relationship with the totality, that is, with the historical reality that explains it.

The aim of this study was to investigate how Pedagogy students at a public university in the capital of Paraíba understand the concept of academic procrastination. The results show that the students have an understanding of the phenomenon of academic procrastination, recognizing the negative consequences it can have on student performance. This relationship was evidenced through the qualitative experiences reported by the participants.

In this sense, this study makes a significant contribution to research on procrastination in two theoretical areas. Firstly, it reinforces previous studies by confirming the detrimental influence of procrastination on academic performance. Secondly, it highlights the relevance of applying the theory of historical-dialectical materialism to explain it.

From a practical point of view, the findings of this research can provide valuable input for the study of procrastination in higher education and its impact on teaching issues in undergraduate courses. Attention needs to be paid to the causes that lead students to have a low sense of self-efficacy, i.e. they have a negative view of their ability to successfully carry out a specific activity. These students are more prone to procrastination and may therefore face challenges in their academic performance.

It is therefore recommended that this study be replicated in other higher education institutions, both public and private, and in different courses, in order to verify whether the variables examined here exert a similar influence on student performance in different contexts. In addition, future studies could investigate the relationship between time spent studying and academic procrastination. Likewise, it is recommended to incorporate the method of historical-dialectical materialism, in order to explore the practical conditions of the students investigated and identify the academic activities that are most frequently postponed. This methodological approach,

in different courses, represents a promising approach to overcome empirical evidence and seek the essence of the phenomenon, making it possible to overcome procrastination in students' academic performance.

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13

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19

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