

Academic Self-Handicapping: What We Know, What More There is to Learn

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Some students put off studying until the last minute, fool around the night before a test, and otherwise reduce effort so that if their subsequent performance is low, these circumstances will be seen as the cause rather than lack of ability. These strategies are called self-handicapping because they often undermine performance. In this paper, we begin with a definition of academic self-handicapping. Next, we review our research in which we used achievement goal theory as a framework for examining academic handicapping among elementary and middle school students. We discuss the implications of the recent conceptualization of approach and avoidance components of performance goals for handicapping. We conclude with a consideration of some potentially fruitful future directions for research on academic self-handicapping, focusing particularly on individual differences in handicapping, contextual influences, and the methods used to study handicapping.

KEY WORDS: self-handicapping; achievement goals; classroom processes; motivation.

INTRODUCTION

“I could have aced the test, but I put off studying until the last minute.” “I could have gotten a good grade in this course, but I spent a lot of time with my friends this semester.” The struggle to escape looking stupid predisposes some students to engage in avoidance strategies such as these that will deflect attention away from their ability should poor performance occur

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(Covington, 1992). Unfortunately, these strategies are also likely to undermine performance. Thus they are called *self-handicapping*.

In this article, we begin with a review of some of the research on self-handicapping, in general, with the goal of understanding how self-handicapping is defined. In this section, we focus primarily on a consideration of whether self-handicapping is guided by approach or avoidance motives. Next, we focus on self-handicapping in academic settings and offer a more thorough review of our own research, which has been conducted using an achievement goal theory framework. Finally, we discuss the implications of this research, both for educators and for researchers interested in examining additional questions related to students' use of self-handicapping strategies in school.

DEFINING SELF-HANDICAPPING

Self-handicapping has been defined in a variety of ways by researchers, but most agree that it involves creating impediments to successful performance on tasks that the individual considers important (e.g., Covington, 1992; Rhodewalt, 1994; Tice, 1991). Such impediments to performance can be the result of action (e.g., getting drunk the night before an exam) or inaction (failing to study for the exam). Self-handicapping involves behavior (or lack of behavior) that occurs prior to or simultaneously with the achievement activity, not after the activity has occurred.

A wide variety of behaviors and dispositions have been suggested as examples of self-handicapping, including procrastination, lack of effort or practice, illness, shyness, excuses, moodiness, drug or alcohol use, lack of sleep, and overinvolvement with friends or activities (see Higgins *et al.*, 1990, pp. 100, 101 for a table summarizing those studies). Some of these, such as shyness and moodiness, are less active forms of handicapping, and may be less intentional than others, such as procrastination or drug use. Because we believe that handicapping is purposeful, we tend to focus more on active forms of handicapping. Although self-handicapping is closely related to attributions, there are important distinctions. Because self-handicapping is a proactive strategy that occurs before actual performance on the achievement activity, it provides the *basis* for an attribution; it is not the attribution itself. For example, saying that you did not do well because you were tired is an attribution, whereas deliberately staying up late in order to use lack of sleep as an excuse in case you should do poorly is a self-handicapping strategy. Students may make attributions that are private and not meant to influence others' judgments of their ability in any way. Studies in which researchers ask students if they would attribute success or failure to different

outcomes based on whether they were explaining the results to adults or peers have more in common with handicapping studies (e.g., Juvonen and Murdock, 1993). Such attributions are similar to handicapping because both represent strategic attempts to influence others' perceptions regarding the causes of poor performance. They differ in that handicapping involves behavior, aimed at avoiding the appearance of incompetence that *precedes* and can undermine performance. Self-handicapping is an a priori strategy, not simply a post hoc excuse.

Is Self-Handicapping a Presentation or Self-Delusional Strategy?

There is evidence that handicapping serves as both a means of protecting one's own self-esteem as well as a presentation strategy aimed at manipulating others' perceptions. Some research suggests that students who are concerned with protecting self-esteem withhold effort on a task when there is no opportunity to "save face" with a nonability explanation for poor performance (Thompson *et al.*, 1995). In addition, there is evidence that students with low self-esteem feel better about themselves after being told they performed poorly on an exam if they self-handicap than if they do not (Feick and Rhodewalt, 1997). Although there appear to be some esteem-protective effects of handicapping, there is also evidence that handicappers are not fooling themselves when they handicap. For example, self-handicappers tend to have lower self-esteem than nonhandicappers have (Covington, 1992; Eronen *et al.*, 1998; Ferrari, 1991). Covington (1992) reported that even when students had convinced others that their performance did not reflect lack of ability, they still described themselves in self-deprecatory terms such as "lazy" and "shiftless." These results have led a number of researchers to conclude that self-handicapping is primarily a self-presentation strategy designed to manipulate others' perceptions rather than one's own (e.g., Covington, 1992; Kolditz and Arkin, 1982; Strube, 1986). Unfortunately, although handicappers are often successful at diverting the attention of others away from their lack of ability, their handicapping often leads others to develop unfavorable perceptions of their nonability work and personal characteristics (Luginbuhl and Palmer, 1991; Rhodewalt *et al.*, 1995; Smith and Strube, 1991).

Is Self-Handicapping Guided by Approach or Avoidance Motives?

Although there is general agreement on the behaviors that constitute handicapping, there is less consensus regarding the purposes for engaging

in self-handicapping. Most researchers argue that self-handicapping represents a strategic attempt to create plausible explanations, other than lack of ability, should poor performance on an achievement task occur. For example, Berglas and Jones (1978), commonly regarded as the pioneers of self-handicapping research, define self-handicapping as “any action or choice of performance setting that enhances the opportunity to *externalize (or excuse) failure, thus enabling the individual to avoid or discount negative implications of a performance*” (p. 202, italics added). Similarly, Covington (1992) defines handicapping as “the creation of some impediment to one’s performance—either imagined or real—*so that the individual has a ready excuse for potential failure*” (p. 85, italics added). As these examples illustrate, some researchers have argued that handicapping is born out of a fear of failure and the motive to avoid the negative implications about ability that such failure represents. These definitions of handicapping suggest that self-handicapping is the behavioral manifestation of avoidance motives.

Other researchers, however, argue that self-handicapping strategies are used for different reasons by different people. These scholars suggest that self-handicapping can serve as both an esteem-protective strategy or an esteem-augmenting strategy (e.g., Feick and Rhodewalt, 1997). For example, Tice (1991) presented evidence suggesting that whereas college students with low self-esteem primarily handicapped when they feared they might fail at a self-relevant task, high self-esteem individuals tended to handicap more when they had the opportunity to succeed at the same task. When people with low self-esteem were confronted with an achievement situation in which they expected to fail, they took steps to protect their self-esteem by withdrawing effort, thereby creating an explanation other than lack of ability for the failure (i.e., lack of effort). People with high self-esteem, in contrast, tended to handicap more when told that they could stand out as exceptionally able if they performed well at the task. By handicapping in such situations, high self-esteem individuals had an opportunity to demonstrate superior ability because they would have to overcome the self-imposed handicap in order to succeed. These researchers suggest that in such cases, handicapping may be directed by approach motives because individuals are motivated by the pride that accompanies success at a difficult task. Tice, for example, interpreted these results as indicative of the esteem-protective function of handicapping for low self-esteem individuals and the esteem-augmenting function of handicapping for high self-esteem individuals. According to this interpretation, self-handicapping strategies have as their source avoidance motives for low self-esteem individuals but approach motives for high self-esteem individuals.

Although it is possible that self-handicapping is guided by avoidance motives for some people and approach motives for others, there is another plausible explanation for the results of research suggesting individual

differences in attempts to augment or protect self-esteem through the use of self-handicapping strategies: Self-handicapping may *always* be a manifestation of avoidance motives. Regardless of one's level of self-esteem, we believe that the primary motive for engaging in handicapping is a fear of failure and a fear of appearing stupid or less able than individuals believe they are, or than they want to appear to others. For low self-esteem individuals, failure is defined as performing poorly in achievement situations and as often doing worse than others. For high self-esteem individuals, the fear of performing poorly on a task or of doing worse than others may not be salient. But individuals with high self-esteem do not think of themselves as average or "pretty good"; they think of themselves as higher than average or even as exceptional. When confronted with an opportunity to live up to this self-perception by achieving at exceptional levels, some may fear that they will not live up to such lofty standards. For these individuals, failure is defined as not succeeding, as not being exceptional, and it is the fear of failure, thusly defined, that leads to handicapping.

The extant literature is not yet definitive enough for us to determine whether all self-handicapping behavior is directed by avoidance motives. Clearly, additional research is needed. We favor this interpretation over the esteem-enhancing hypothesis because we are not persuaded that people, even those with high self-esteem, would intentionally undermine their own chances for success (through handicapping) for the chance of succeeding despite the handicap. In the Tice (1991) study, for example, participants were told that "[T]his test helps us to identify people who are exceptional in this area. This is a very difficult test; only a few people do well" (p. 713). This should be enough incentive to induce pride among those participants who did well on the task; the additional burden of self-handicaps should not be necessary to augment self-esteem. Rather, we believe that these pretask instructions may have been enough to induce the fear that some would not achieve at the high standard that they had convinced themselves and others that they could achieve. Such a fear would induce self-handicapping.

We find support for our belief in a very interesting study by Tice and Baumeister (1990). They found that participants with high self-esteem did *not* handicap for an upcoming achievement task after being told that they performed very well on a prior task, but that they *did* handicap when they were not given performance feedback on the prior task. They argued that high self-esteem participants handicapped only when they did not know how well they had performed on the initial task because the purpose of their handicapping was "for the sake of attributional benefits" (Tice and Baumeister, 1990, p. 451). In other words, high self-esteem people handicapped to appear especially smart. We have a somewhat different interpretation. If, as Tice and Baumeister posit, people with high self-esteem self-handicap to appear particularly able, one would expect individuals with

high self-esteem to have handicapped *more* after an initial success. In the Tice and Baumeister study, people with high self-esteem had already proven that they could accomplish the task without handicapping. The only way to have enhanced ability perceptions even more would have been to self-handicap on the next trial. Instead, high self-esteem individuals did not handicap after an initial success, but did handicap when they were not told how well they did on the first trial. We believe this occurred because after an initial success, the fear of not performing well was removed, and there was no need to handicap. But when performance on the initial task was unknown, these high self-esteem individuals feared that they may not do as well as they had hoped on the next trial, and the motive to self-handicap was in place.

Others who argue that handicapping has enhancing effects for some individuals point to evidence that self-esteem increases for handicappers who perform well on achievement tasks (e.g., Feick and Rhodewalt, 1997). Although we do not doubt that doing well despite self-imposed handicaps will make some people feel particularly good about themselves, we are not convinced that such post hoc reactions to success are adequate to explain the a priori reasons that individuals engage in handicapping. Rather, as just explained, we believe that fear of appearing less able than they believe they are, or than they want to appear to others, is the motivating force behind handicapping behavior.

Self-handicapping probably does not represent a fear of failure, and self-handicappers are not primarily concerned with avoiding failure (Riggs, 1992). In fact, their handicapping behavior often increases the likelihood of failure. Rather, handicappers are concerned with how they would *appear* to others if they perform poorly, however they define “poorly.” For handicappers, it is not failure that produces shame, but the reaction of others to that failure. Others may infer that a lack of ability causes failure, and it is this inference that holds the potential to produce shame and direct handicapping behavior. Therefore, although handicapping behavior appears most often guided by peoples’ perceptions that the probability of failure in an upcoming achievement task is high, the actual motivation for handicapping appears to involve both a poor performance outcome expectation *and* a desire to avoid ability attributions as the explanation for that outcome. Stated simply, handicappers appear to be at least as concerned with how they appear to others as they are with how well they actually perform.

Correlates of Self Handicapping

Self-handicapping research has revealed a variety of affective, cognitive, and behavioral correlates of handicapping as well as a variety of personality

characteristics associated with the use of self-handicapping strategies. For example, a number of studies have demonstrated that self-handicappers experience a smaller decline in self-esteem after failure than do non-self-handicappers (e.g., Feick and Rhodewalt, 1997; Rhodewalt and Hill, 1995; Rhodewalt *et al.*, 1991). Some research also suggests that when people succeed despite self-handicapping, they experience a boost in self-esteem (Feick and Rhodewalt, 1997). There is also evidence that self-handicappers tend to discount ability attributions as explanations for failure, and that they augment ability attributions to explain success (Feick and Rhodewalt, 1997; Tice, 1991). Garcia (1995) argued that self-handicapping is a method for regulating affective responses to failure, and there is evidence that self-handicappers experience a smaller decline in positive affect after failure than nonhandicappers do (Drexler *et al.*, 1995).

Most of the research examining performance outcomes associated with handicapping has found that self-handicappers perform worse than non-self-handicappers do. Indeed, some have argued (and demonstrated) that self-handicapping is part of a vicious cycle in which handicapping leads to lower achievement, thereby creating a greater need to handicap (Garcia, 1995; Zuckerman *et al.*, 1998). For example, self-handicapping has been linked to increased withdrawal and negative coping strategies, as well as to poorer study habits. Moreover, self-handicapping was found to predict, and be predicted by, poor adjustment over time, providing evidence of a negative cycle of behavior (Zuckerman *et al.*, 1998).

Self-handicapping is associated with a variety of personality characteristics and beliefs, such as low feelings of self-determination (Knee and Zuckerman, 1998), a belief in innate ability (Rhodewalt, 1994), and feelings of self-consciousness (Shepperd and Arkin, 1989). Self-handicappers also appear to be particularly concerned about the differentiation of ability and effort (e.g., Berglas, 1985; Covington, 1992). In short, when individuals are concerned with how they appear to others (self-consciousness), believe that ability is an innate characteristic, and are aware that greater effort implies less ability, they are more likely to self-handicap. Self-handicapping is a motivational strategy some people use to deflect attributions away from lack of ability. Unfortunately, such strategies appear to carry social and performance costs, particularly over time.

ACADEMIC SELF-HANDICAPPING

In describing student motivation, educational psychologists tend to talk about “approach” behaviors such as effort, persistence, engagement, choice, and performance. Until recently, there has been less discussion of “avoidant”

behaviors such as purposefully withdrawing effort, resisting seeking help in the classroom when it is needed, avoiding risk-taking, and giving up when faced with a challenge. However, there are exceptions. For example, Dweck (Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Elliott and Dweck, 1988) has investigated beliefs and goals associated with patterns of “learned helplessness.” In addition, Newman and his colleagues (e.g., Newman, 1990; Newman and Goldin, 1990) and Ryan and her colleagues (e.g., Ryan, Pintrich, and Midgley, 2001) have examined the determinants and consequences of avoiding seeking help in the classroom when needed. Jagacinski and Nicholls (1990) have also looked at self-reported willingness to reduce effort. Self-handicapping strategies are just another example of avoidant behaviors.

Self-handicapping behavior can occur in virtually any situation that involves ability-diagnostic activity. Schools and classrooms provide excellent real-world contexts for examining self-handicapping behavior because, in such academic settings, students are continually confronted with tasks and situations in which information about their ability and intelligence is on public display. In addition, students’ performance on these tasks has consequences for relevant outcomes (e.g., their grades, chances of matriculation, future college and job prospects). The presence of teachers and peers in these achievement situations allows for frequent opportunities to manipulate the perceptions of others, a primary goal of self-handicappers. Also, schools provide an opportunity to examine both the self-handicapping dispositions of individuals and the possible contextual influences on self-handicapping behavior.

There is a limited body of research focusing specifically on *academic* self-handicapping in naturalistic, rather than laboratory, settings. Feick and Rhodewalt (1997) found that college students who claimed more potential excuses, such as lack of sleep or studying the wrong material (“claimed handicaps”) immediately prior to taking an exam, discounted ability attributions if they did poorly on the exam and augmented ability attributions if they performed well. Whether such excuses actually represent self-handicapping is not clear because the researchers did not assess whether students actually engaged in the excuse-providing behavior or, if they did, whether they did so to have an excuse should they perform poorly in the exam. Lack of sleep can either be a valid excuse for poor performance or, if students intentionally stay up late to use lack of sleep as an explanation for poor performance, a self-handicapping strategy. Using similar procedures and a sample of college students, Rhodewalt and Hill (1995) found similar results for men, but not for women.

Some studies of self-handicapping in school have used measures that assessed general tendencies, such as procrastination, without focusing specifically on the academic domain (e.g., Zuckerman *et al.*, 1998). For example,

the Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS; Jones and Rhodewalt, 1982) includes items such as “I tend to put things off to the last minute.” Some scales designed specifically to assess academic self-handicapping, such as that used by Garcia (1995), include questions about such behaviors as procrastinating in class, but do not include the reason for the procrastination (i.e., boredom, laziness, or to deflect attention away from ability should poor performance occur). With a sample of college students, Garcia (1995) found that self-handicappers had relatively low levels of intrinsic goals, rehearsal strategies, and time-management strategies. Murray and Warden (1992) created a survey measure of self-handicapping to focus specifically on academic self-handicapping. This was an adaptation of the SHS measure by Jones and Rhodewalt. Murray and Warden did not include sample items in their report, so it is difficult to determine whether their items tapped all of the elements of academic self-handicapping. They found that self-handicappers studied as many hours a day, but for fewer days, as did nonhandicappers. They also found that handicappers performed more poorly on the exam and, even after controlling for actual scores on the exam, expected to perform more poorly and perceived themselves to have performed more poorly than non-handicappers did. In addition, the researchers found that handicappers were more likely to attribute their performance to luck, less to effort, and less to internal causes than to those controlled by others.

In a longitudinal study of self-handicapping (assessed with the Jones and Rhodewalt SHS measure), coping strategies, and academic performance among college students, self-handicappers were found to use coping strategies focused on withdrawal (e.g., denial, behavioral and mental disengagement) and negative self-focus (e.g., self-blame; Zuckerman *et al.*, 1998). In addition, self-handicappers performed more poorly academically, had worse study habits, and had relatively low self-esteem compared to students lower in self-handicapping. The longitudinal data reported in this study suggests that self-handicapping and low achievement become entangled in a self-perpetuating cycle over time.

Findings from research suggest that academic self-handicapping is an anticipatory, self-regulatory mechanism for coping with expected poor performance on academic tasks (Covington, 1992; Garcia, 1995). Moreover, the bulk of this research suggests that handicapping is associated with low academic achievement, mental and behavioral withdrawal from school work, a pessimistic perception of academic performance, and perhaps depressed levels of self-esteem. Most of the research on academic self-handicapping has been performed with college samples. In the next section, we examine the association between self-handicapping and motivation variables, specifically focusing on achievement goals. We focus particularly on our own research conducted with students in K-12 settings.

Research Examining Academic Self-Handicapping and Personal Achievement Goals

We use goal orientation theory as the lens through which we examine academic self-handicapping. Goal orientation theory is concerned with the meaning and purpose of achievement to the individual. A comparison is often made between the goal to develop ability (a personal task goal) and the goal to demonstrate ability or to hide the demonstration of lack of ability (a personal performance goal; Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Maehr, 1989; Nicholls, 1989). Recently, several researchers have divided performance goals into two components: performance-approach and performance-avoid goals (Elliot and Harackiewicz, 1996; Middleton and Midgley, 1997; Skaalvik, 1997). Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) pointed out that this distinction, which was an integral part of classic motivational theory (Atkinson, 1957; McClelland, 1951), has been neglected by goal theorists. Researchers incorporating this distinction into their studies have found that the approach and avoidance dimensions of performance goals not only differ in the strength of their relations to outcomes, but also are not always related significantly to the same outcomes. Although the consequences of pursuing different personal achievement goals have often been examined, it is important to note that students sometimes pursue multiple goals simultaneously (Ainley, 1993; Meece and Holt, 1993; Pintrich, 1999; Urdan, 1994; Wolters *et al.*, 1996). Therefore, when examining the relationship between personal achievement-performance goals and self-handicapping, multiple goal profiles should be considered as well (Pintrich, 1999).

Goal theorists also consider the influence of the learning context (Ames, 1992; Maehr and Midgley, 1996). For example, in some classrooms ability differences among students may be particularly salient. In contrast, some classrooms may place a greater emphasis on individual development and mastery. The goal-related practices and messages present in learning contexts, such as classrooms, create *goal structures*. In a classroom where a task goal structure predominates, understanding schoolwork is emphasized, mistakes are seen as part of the learning process, effort and improvement are valued, and all students are given work that is challenging and creative. In contrast, in a classroom where a performance goal structure predominates, students' abilities and performance are frequently compared, students compete with each other, and the importance of grades and test scores is discussed frequently. When this is the case, students' awareness of how others perceive their ability is a central concern, and strategies to appear able, or at least to avoid appearing unable, are likely to be used (Covington, 1992).

We have conducted four studies over the last 5 years examining the relations among goals, goal structures, self-handicapping as a self-protective

strategy, and several other variables (i.e., ethnicity, gender, achievement, perceived ability). Our studies have been based on the premise that an orientation to demonstrating ability (a personal performance-approach goal orientation) or an orientation to hiding the demonstration of lack of ability (a personal performance-avoid goal) is associated positively with handicapping, whereas an orientation to developing ability (a personal task goal orientation) is associated negatively with handicapping. Similarly, we have assumed that perceiving an emphasis on performance goals in the learning environment (a performance goal structure) is associated positively with handicapping, and that perceiving an emphasis on task goals in the learning environment (a task goal structure) is associated negatively with handicapping. The logic behind these assumptions is intuitive: When students are concerned about appearing able or about avoiding looking unable—because of personal performance goal orientations, perceived performance goal structures, or both—they are more inclined to engage in self-handicapping, a strategy designed to hide a lack of ability from others. Because we conceptualized and assessed self-handicapping primarily as a set of avoidance behaviors, we suspected that handicapping would be more strongly associated with performance-avoid goals than with performance-approach goals in the study that separated those two dimensions. However, we also suspected that any goal orientation that was focused on how one appears to others, such as performance-approach goals, would be positively associated with self-handicapping. Previous research has demonstrated the existence of such an association (e.g., Rhodewalt, 1994).

Task goals and goal structures, in contrast, should minimize the need for handicapping because handicapping undermines learning and development, the defining characteristics of task goals. Moreover, some have argued that task goals and task goal structures reduce the importance of self-perceptions and self-consciousness in achievement situations, thereby reducing the need to protect self-image through the use of handicapping strategies (Maehr and Kaplan, 2000).

We have used essentially the same measure of handicapping, with some revisions over time, across all four studies. This measure assesses the self-protective component of handicapping. When developing this measure, we made a concerted effort to incorporate the various elements of self-handicapping, distinguishing it from attributions while focusing on the academic domain. We developed a paper-and-pencil instrument with items designed to tap both the handicapping behaviors as well as the reasons students engaged in them. For example, one item is “Some students purposely don’t try hard in school so that if they don’t do well, they can say it’s because they didn’t try. How true is this for you?” This item includes the behavior (effort withdrawal), the reason (to use effort withdrawal as an excuse), and the a

Table I. Self-Handicapping Items Used in Revised Scale Created by Midgley, Urdan, and Their Colleagues

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1. Some students put off doing their school work until the last minute so that if they don't do well on their work they can say that is the reason. How true is this of you?
 2. Some students let their friends keep them from paying attention in class or from doing their homework. Then if they don't do as well as they had hoped, they can say friends kept them from working. How true is this of you?
 3. Some students purposely don't try hard in school so that if they don't do well, they can say it is because they didn't try. How true is this of you?
 4. Some students purposely get involved in lots of activities. Then if they don't do as well on their school work as they hoped, they can say it is because they are involved with other things. How true is this of you?
 5. Some students fool around the night before a test so that if they don't do well they can say that is the reason. How true is this of you?
 6. Some students look for reasons to keep them from studying (not feeling well, having to help their parents, taking care of a brother or sister, etc.). Then if they don't do well on their schoolwork, they can say this is the reason. How true is this of you?
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priori timing of the strategy (reduced effort *before* low academic achievement rather than an excuse made up after low achievement occurs). All of the items in the self-handicapping scale, particularly the 6-item version used in the last three studies, have the same features. These items are presented in Table I.

In our first study of self-handicapping (Midgley and Urdan, 1995), we examined the relations among self-handicapping, gender, personal achievement goals (task and performance), extrinsic motivation, self-perceptions (self-efficacy, self-consciousness, self-worth), social variables (positive and negative orientation of friends toward academic achievement, adult approval seeking), and school goal structure (task and performance). In a sample of 256 eighth graders, we found that handicapping was positively related to a perceived performance goal structure in the school, extrinsic motivation, seeking approval from adults and from friends who had negative attitudes about academic achievement, and self-consciousness. It was negatively correlated with academic achievement and overall self-worth. In a regression model, however, only grade point average (GPA; a negative predictor), extrinsic motivation, and seeking approval from friends who had negative views about academic achievement were significant predictors of handicapping. In this first, exploratory study of academic self-handicapping among middle school students, we found preliminary support for the hypothesis that the perceived school goal structure was related to handicapping, but we were surprised to find no significant relations between handicapping and personal task or performance goals.

In our second study, we were able to improve our handicapping scale and focus more specifically on the relation between handicapping and personal goals (Midgley *et al.*, 1996). This study of academic handicapping

included a different sample of eighth graders ($N = 112$), roughly evenly divided by ethnicity (African American and European American). A central aim of this study was to examine potential ethnic differences in the relations among handicapping, achievement, goals, self-esteem, and attitudes about the value of education. We found that although there was no main effect of ethnicity on self-handicapping, there were two significant interactions involving ethnicity. First, we found that there was a positive relationship between performance goals (called ego goals in the study) and handicapping for African American students but not for European American students. We used Steele's (Steele, 1992; Steele and Aronson, 1995) theory of stereotype threat to interpret this interaction. Accordingly, we suggested that when African American students are concerned with appearing academically able (a performance goal orientation), the threat of fulfilling a negative stereotype about African American's low academic ability is activated and there is a greater need to avoid appearing academically unable than there is for European American students, who have no such stereotype. This time, we used a measure that divided self-esteem into a positive and a negative (self-deprecation) component. Self-deprecation was positively correlated with handicapping, but this relationship was not significant when examined in a regression model. There was no relationship between positive self-esteem and handicapping. Once again, GPA was a significant, negative predictor of handicapping.

Although our second study provided a clearer picture of the relationship between personal goals and handicapping, we did not examine classroom goal structures. In our third study (Urduan *et al.*, 1998), we focused primarily on the relation between classroom goal structures and handicapping. Using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Bryk and Raudenbush, 1992), we found that fifth grade students reported using handicapping more in some classrooms than in others. After finding that boys in our sample handicapped more than girls, that low achievers handicapped more than high achievers, and that students with lower perceptions of their academic competence handicapped more than those with higher perceived competence, we examined whether classroom task and performance goal structures explained any of the between-classroom variance in handicapping. Using both student reports of the classroom goal structures and teachers' reports of their approaches to teaching that reflected task or performance goals, we found that performance goal structure variables (both teacher- and student-reported) predicted handicapping in the classroom, whereas the task goal structure (both teacher- and student-reported) did not.

Our most recent study (Midgley and Urduan, in press) was conducted with three purposes in mind. First, we wanted to take advantage of the recent development in the field dividing personal performance goals into

approach and avoidance components. Because handicapping is essentially an avoidance strategy, we hypothesized that performance-avoid goals would predict handicapping more strongly than would performance-approach goals. Second, we wanted to examine whether personal goals and classroom goal structures predicted handicapping independently when included in the same regression model. And third, following the lead of Pintrich (1999), we wanted to examine whether students with different profiles of multiple goals differed in their reported use of academic self-handicapping. Pintrich (1999) divided students into four groups based on a median split of their scores on scales assessing personal task and performance goals. He then compared students who were high in both goals, low in both goals, high in task and low in performance goals, and low in task and high in performance goals. On a number of outcomes, including self-handicapping, he found that the high task/high performance group and the high task/low performance group did not differ significantly from one another, and that these two groups were associated with more positive outcomes compared to the other two groups. He concluded that “a high approach performance goal, when coupled with a high mastery (task) goal does not have to have a dampening effect on the general positive effect of a high mastery (task) goal” (p. 20). We wanted to replicate Pintrich’s study by examining the combined effects of performance-approach and task goals. We also wanted to extend Pintrich’s study by including the avoidance component of performance goals in our study and examining the joint effects of task and performance-avoid goals. In our earlier studies, we had not yet developed a scale to assess the avoidance component of performance goals.

We conducted our study with a sample of 484 seventh grade students. These were the same students who were included in our third study as fifth graders. As predicted, we found that personal performance-avoid—but not performance-approach—goals predicted the use of self-handicapping strategies. In addition, we found that when both personal performance-avoid goals and the perceived classroom performance goal structure were examined simultaneously, both emerged as significant predictors of handicapping. Unlike previous studies, we found that both personal task goals and the perceived classroom task goal structures were significant, negative predictors of handicapping. In the multiple goals portion of the study, we found that when students were relatively high in their personal performance-avoid goal orientation, they were more likely to use self-handicapping strategies regardless of their level of personal task goal orientation. However, when low in performance-avoid goals, students were less likely to handicap if high in task goal orientation than if they were low in their task goal pursuit. Our results suggest that when considering the joint effects of multiple goals, task and performance-approach goals are not significant influences on handicapping when students are high in their performance-avoid goal orientation.

Summary

In our four studies of academic self-handicapping, we were able to develop a measure of academic self-handicapping that contained the relevant elements of handicapping (purposeful, a priori efforts to manipulate others' perceptions away from attributions to low ability) for use with late elementary and middle school students. Our studies produced some consistent results and some mixed results. For example, self-handicapping was negatively related to achievement (as measured by grades) in all four studies. In addition, girls reported engaging in less handicapping than did boys in three of the four studies, with no gender difference in the fourth study. Regarding the relationship between achievement goals and handicapping, we found that although task goals and task goal structures were not predictive of handicapping in the first three studies, both emerged as significant predictors in our most recent study. More research is needed to determine the association between handicapping and task goals.

The results of our research examining the association of handicapping with performance goals revealed a complicated pattern of relations. We found that personal performance goals and performance goal structures were positively related to handicapping to various degrees in all four studies. In our most recent study, the separation of personal performance goals into approach and avoidance dimensions suggested that it is the avoidance dimension of performance goals that most strongly predicts handicapping. In contrast, we found no association between self-handicapping and personal performance-approach goals in three of our four studies, and a positive association only for African American students in the fourth. These results suggest that handicapping is related to avoidance motives (i.e., wanting to avoid appearing stupid) and not to approach motives. Before reaching that conclusion, however, we must note that our measure of self-handicapping focused on esteem protection rather than on esteem augmentation. Although we do not examine handicapping as a self-enhancing strategy, it is possible that performance-approach goals activate self-enhancing handicapping and performance-avoid goals activate self-protective handicapping (e.g., Tice, 1991). This is an empirical question that has yet to be examined in classroom settings. Some have suggested that perceived competence, rather than being a moderator between goals and outcomes, serves rather as an antecedent to goals (Elliot, 1997). Thus it may be that those who are high in perceived competence are oriented to performance goals and would tend to use handicapping to enhance self-worth, and those who are low in perceived competence are oriented to performance-avoid goals and would tend to use handicapping to protect self worth. Although we doubt that approach motives drive self-handicapping, it is a question that deserves further examination.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although the research on academic self-handicapping has improved educational psychologists understanding of the nature and consequences of these strategies, a number of important questions remain. Most of the research examining self-handicapping, particularly academic self-handicapping, indicates that it is primarily a self-defeating behavior engaged in by students who still care about school but are low achievers and lack confidence in their academic abilities. Moreover, handicapping may be part of a cycle of academic underachievement and effort withdrawal that can undermine long-term academic performance (Covington, 1992; Garcia, 1995; Zuckerman *et al.*, 1998). Even if handicappers are able to successfully manipulate the perceptions of others away from low ability attributions, they may not be able to avoid forming negative beliefs about themselves, including the perceptions that they are lazy and dishonest (Covington, 1992). Because self-handicapping has such potentially negative consequences for both motivation and performance, it is important to understand differences in handicapping among students, the features of the learning environment that encourage and discourage its use, and the best methodology for examining handicapping.

Individual Differences in Handicapping

In a number of studies, self-handicapping has been conceptualized as an individual difference variable. The Self-Handicapping Scale developed by Jones and Rhodewalt (1982) is a general, domain-free measure of handicapping thought to assess a stable handicapping trait. In our own research, we have generally taken a more contextual view of handicapping, but we have examined whether certain student characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, gender, age) are related to handicapping. Although we have found few main effects, we have found some interesting interactions that suggest that self-handicapping may operate differently, or may be induced by different factors, for different students. For example, we found that personal performance goals were more strongly predictive of handicapping for African American than for European American students (Midgley *et al.*, 1996). Similarly, in one of our studies, we found that GPA was a stronger negative predictor of handicapping for girls than for boys (Midgley and Urdan, 1995). Others have found greater evidence of handicapping among older (sixth graders) than among younger (third graders) students (Kimble *et al.*, 1998). In addition, a number of studies have found that men and boys are more likely to engage in self-handicapping than are women and girls (Dietrich, 1995; Kimble *et al.*, 1998; Shepperd and Arkin, 1989).

Although we have just begun to examine differences in handicapping among students, there are several possible explanations for why the relationship between achievement goals and handicapping may differ by student ethnicity, gender, and age. For example, ethnic groups may differ in the degree to which they value outperforming others (a performance goal orientation). Some ethnic groups may feel comfortable in competitive academic situations. For these groups, performance goals may not be as strongly related to handicapping as they are for other ethnic or cultural groups, where competition among peers is less comfortable. As Steele (1992, Steele and Aronson, 1995) argued, comparative evaluations sometimes mean different things to members of different ethnic or gender groups. Whereas the members of one group may view such situations as opportunities to demonstrate their ability, members of another group may perceive a strong threat to self-esteem associated with negative group stereotypes. It is this latter group that may be more inclined to self-handicap when placed in academic situations that stress social comparison (Midgley *et al.*, 1996). To reduce handicapping, we need to better understand and recognize those situations that encourage handicapping for different groups of students. This will involve including other ethnic groups, besides African Americans and European Americans, in studies of self-handicapping.

It is also important to examine handicapping longitudinally to determine whether handicapping is more common at different life stages. Self-handicapping involves a complex cognitive process. Individuals must be aware that (a) performance in an achievement situation can reveal information about ability; (b) more effort suggests less ability; and (c) it is possible to manipulate others' perceptions of one's ability by decreasing effort. Even simpler cognitive processes, such as recognizing that increased effort suggests less ability, may not be common until late childhood (Nicholls and Miller, 1984), suggesting that handicapping may not occur much before early adolescence. Research has demonstrated that early adolescence is a time of heightened self-consciousness and concern regarding how one appears to others, particularly to peers. Because academic self-handicapping involves a concern with not appearing stupid, early adolescence may be a period of increased self-handicapping. In addition, the relationship between performance goals and handicapping may be particularly strong at early adolescence. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies that assess self-handicapping at different life stages may reveal interesting differences in self-handicapping, and in the relation between handicapping and other variables.

Longitudinal methods of examining handicapping are also needed to reveal the malleability of handicapping across time and situations. Most of the research on academic handicapping has measured handicapping at a single point in time. This method may provide a static snapshot of handicapping that

presumes stability in handicapping tendencies. If handicapping is a dynamic process related to contextual factors, longitudinal methods are needed to determine changes in handicapping. Examining handicapping over time would also allow researchers to disentangle the individual and contextual determinants of these strategies. Longitudinal studies of academic self-handicapping, over time and across contexts (i.e., when children change classrooms or schools), would allow researchers to examine the stability of handicapping tendencies while more precisely isolating the influence of different contexts on handicapping behavior.

The Role of the Achievement Context in Handicapping

Perhaps the most important direction for future research on academic handicapping is to examine how the learning environment encourages or discourages students from handicapping. In our studies, we have found evidence that when teachers make it obvious which students are doing well in class, display the work of high achievers as a model for others, and otherwise make ability differences among students a salient feature of the learning environment, students are more likely to handicap (Midgley and Urdan, in press; Urdan *et al.*, 1998). There is also some indication that an emphasis at the school level on performance goals is associated with a greater use of handicapping, although this finding has not yet been replicated and was not very powerful (Midgley and Urdan, 1995). Although it makes sense that a contextual emphasis on appearing more able than others would promote handicapping, and our results confirm this, there is much that psychologists still do not know about which specific features of the achievement context promote handicapping. Are some instructional practices more likely to encourage handicapping than others? If so, what are they? Are some instructional practices more likely to encourage self-handicapping designed to augment, rather than protect, self-esteem? Can a school-wide emphasis on performance goals be negated by minimizing the performance goal emphasis at the classroom level? Because classrooms and schools usually contain both task and performance goal messages, how do these multiple-goal messages affect handicapping behavior? What is the mechanism through which performance goal structures are interpreted and internalized by students, thereby promoting self-handicapping? And, given that there is evidence that students differ in their interpretation of the goal-related messages present in the classroom (Meece, 1991; Urdan *et al.*, 1999), how might the relations between goal structures and handicapping vary for different students?

Although the evidence linking performance goal structures to handicapping is fairly strong, there is, as yet, no clear picture of the relation between

handicapping and task goal structures. Goal theorists have often suggested that a greater emphasis on task goals in the classroom will facilitate motivation and performance (Ames, 1992; Midgley, 1993). If there is an emphasis on understanding, improvement, and mastery, students should be more focused on the task than on appearing able. In our first study, we found a significant negative correlation between a school task goal structure and handicapping, but this relationship was not significant in a multiple regression model (Midgley and Urdan, 1995). In our third study, we found no significant relationship between a classroom task goal structure and handicapping (Urdan *et al.*, 1998). In our recent study (Midgley and Urdan, in press), the negative relationship between the perceived classroom task goal structure and handicapping was significant. Additional research is needed to better understand the connection between handicapping and task goal structures.

The results of our research examining the associations between handicapping and goal structures (as well as personal goal orientations) suggests that these associations may depend primarily on whether the goals represent approach or avoidance motives. Elliot (1997) has argued that task goals are driven by approach motives, performance-avoid goals are directed by avoidance motivation, and performance-approach goals are influenced by both approach and avoidance motivation. If this is true, one might expect that avoidance behaviors, such as self-handicapping, would be less strongly related to task goals or task goal structures than to performance-avoidance goals. The influence of performance goal structures on handicapping may occur primarily through avoidance than through approach avenues. Students in classrooms where performance goal messages are salient can interpret those as approach messages (e.g., "I need to try harder so that I can become one of the top students in the class") or as avoidance message (e.g., "There are a lot of opportunities to look stupid in this class"). It may only be the latter interpretation that promotes handicapping, at least esteem-protective handicapping. Although this hypothesis has not yet been tested, the results from our most recent study suggest that it is performance-avoid, and not performance-approach, goals that predict handicapping.

In order to provide helpful information to educators about effective ways to reduce handicapping behavior in schools and classrooms, it is important to augment our understanding of the process by which contextual features influence handicapping. Members of our research team have now developed scales that distinguish between the avoidance and approach dimensions of the performance goal structure in classrooms and will be able to examine these contextual influences on handicapping with greater precision (Middleton *et al.*, 2000).

There is also a need to better understand the potential effects of other contextual factors, besides features of the classroom and school environment,

on academic self-handicapping. One context in which students may develop self-handicapping tendencies is in the home. How might parents influence the handicapping behaviors of their children? Just as teachers and schools can create environments where ability is salient and self-worth is threatened, parents can create either risky or safe environments through their responses to their children's successes and failures and the messages they send about the purposes of achievement (Nelson *et al.*, 2000). Another context that may influence handicapping, particularly during adolescence, is the peer context. There is evidence that students are particularly concerned about how they look to their peers (e.g., Berndt, 1979; Coleman, 1961), and that they may try to present themselves differently to peers than to adults (Juvonen and Murdock, 1993). Specifically, students may be even less inclined to appear as though they tried hard on an academic activity to peers than to teachers. This suggests that students may be more likely to handicap when being judged by peers than when being judged by adults. A more thorough understanding of handicapping may be gained if we examine its occurrence in various contexts, including school, home, and peer contexts.

Methods of Studying Handicapping

To date, the only methods that have been used to measure academic self-handicapping in the classroom have been paper-and-pencil surveys. Although a variety of behavioral measures of handicapping have been employed in laboratory studies (e.g., observing how long participants practice before engaging in a task, whether they select difficult or distracting conditions in which to complete a task, etc.), such methods have not been employed in the field. To more fully understand the nature of academic self-handicapping, it may be important to increase the variety of methods researchers use to study the phenomenon.

A combination of methods, including classroom observations, surveys, and interviews with students, may help researchers better understand both the precursors of academic handicapping as well as the processes through which contextual features of the learning environment facilitate or inhibit handicapping. For example, surveys could be used to determine which students in a given classroom handicap most. Next, interviews could be conducted with high and low handicappers to compare their perspectives of the instructional methods or academic tasks assigned in the classroom. These interviews would provide insights regarding the thought processes behind some students' decision to handicap. Similarly, in a recent study, surveys were used to identify differences across classrooms in student-reported handicapping, and then classroom observations were conducted to compare practices in classrooms higher and lower in the reported use of handicapping (Turner *et al.*, 2000).

Of course, often it may not be possible to observe self-handicapping strategies. Many handicapping strategies are employed outside of the classroom (e.g., getting drunk the night before a test, becoming involved in too many activities). In addition, many behaviors that look like handicapping may not be. For example, students who put off doing their classwork until the last minute may not be handicapping. Rather, they may simply be bored, disorganized, or easily distracted. In addition, teachers who wish to reduce handicapping in the classroom need not wait for signs of handicapping before reducing those practices likely to promote handicapping. Nevertheless, to develop a more complete understanding of handicapping in academic settings, particularly if the handicapping strategies are used unconsciously, researchers may need to supplement survey methods with observational and experimental methods in the naturalistic settings of classrooms and schools.

We hope that other educational psychologists will examine the role that handicapping plays in students' academic lives. The consequences of handicapping are profound. Students who handicap are still connected with school enough to care about how others perceive their academic ability. Because handicapping is part of a cycle of reduced academic effort and lower achievement in school, it may represent early stages of disengagement and withdrawal from school. If researchers and educators can better identify the factors that reduce or promote handicapping, strategies for breaking this cycle of academic withdrawal can be developed.

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