



# Self-handicapping, perfectionism, locus of control and self-efficacy: A path model



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## ABSTRACT

Self-handicapping is a performance-debilitating characteristic, which in student populations has been consistently associated with negative outcomes such as academic underachievement and poor psychological adjustment. Perfectionism, locus of control, and self-efficacy have been linked with self-handicapping but have not been previously examined within one cohesive framework. This study, therefore, examined a model linking maladaptive perfectionism and external locus of control to self-handicapping, both directly and indirectly through their mediated effect on self-efficacy. Participants were 79 university students who completed an online survey comprising measures of perfectionism, locus of control, general self-efficacy, and self-handicapping. It was found that perfectionism and locus of control predicted self-handicapping; and perfectionism, but not external locus of control, predicted low self-efficacy. The mediation analyses found no support for self-efficacy as a mediator of the relationship between perfectionism, locus of control, and self-handicapping. These findings suggest that the interaction of maladaptive social cognitive constructs associated with self-handicapping requires further investigation.

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## 1. Introduction

Self-handicapping has been defined as the creation of impediments or disadvantages that jeopardise optimal performance at a task (Zuckermann & Tsai, 2005). Self-handicapping includes a broad range of behaviours, such as procrastination, substance use, overcommitting, lack of effort, and not taking the opportunity to practice (Baumeister, Hamilton, & Tice, 1985; Warner & Moore, 2004). In nonclinical populations, self-handicapping has been linked to a wide range of negative outcomes such as higher levels of anxiety and depression, and poor academic achievement (Kearns, Forbes, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008; Zuckermann, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998).

Concerns about other's perceptions of one's competence, as well as self-doubt, often result in self-handicapping (Arkin & Oleson, 1998). Self-handicapping enables the individual to externalise failure and protect self-worth by obscuring the relationship between competence and performance (Brown & Kimble, 2009). In the event of failure, ability attributions can be discounted as self-handicapping provides an external explanation for an individual's poor performance; conversely, success despite self-handicapping supports

personal perceptions of competence, potentially augmenting one's perceived self-worth (Martin & Brawley, 2002). Thus, self-handicapping behaviours have been described as effective self-protecting strategies that allow an individual to both preserve and project a positive self-image (Feick & Rhodewalt, 1997). Although handicapping may support self-esteem in the short-term by providing a plausible excuse for poor performance (Covington, 2000), chronic self-handicapping is fundamentally a maladaptive strategy characterised by task-avoidance, failure expectations, excuses, and external attributions that over time has significant negative effects on self-concept (Maata, Stattin, & Nurmi, 2002).

The social cognitive factors of perfectionism, locus of control, and self-efficacy have been identified, both conceptually and empirically, as important factors in self-handicapping. Limited attention, however, has been given in research to examining these constructs within one cohesive framework. The goal of this investigation was, therefore, to propose and test an integrated model linking of perfectionism, locus of control, self-efficacy, and self-handicapping.

### 1.1. Relationships among perfectionism, locus of control, self-efficacy, and self-handicapping

Perfectionism is the tendency to set excessively high standards of performance, combined with "selective attention to and

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overgeneralisation of failure, stringent self-evaluations, and all or none thinking, where only total success or total failure exist as outcomes" (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, p. 456). Adaptive perfectionism is associated with a realistic striving for high standards without psychological maladjustment or distress, whereas maladaptive or negative perfectionism is predominantly linked to unhealthy evaluative concerns, frequent doubts about actions, and preoccupation with avoiding mistakes (Suddarth & Slaney, 2001). Preoccupation with avoiding mistakes and uncertainty about one's own ability are likely to lead maladaptive perfectionists to intentionally compromise performance as a strategy to cope with fear of failure and associated negative interpersonal and intrapersonal evaluations (Pulford, Johnson, & Awaida, 2005); and not surprisingly, individuals who display high levels of maladaptive perfectionism have been found to be more likely to engage in self-handicapping behaviours (Sherry, Flett, & Hewitt, 2001).

Locus of control has also been found to be associated with self-handicapping. Locus of control refers to the extent to which individuals perceive they have control over events—individuals who have an internal locus of control are more likely to attribute outcomes to personal ability and self-initiated change, whereas those with an external locus are more likely to believe that outcomes are determined by outside sources and are beyond their control (Rotter, 1966). High self-handicappers have been found to attribute daily life events to external rather than internal factors, and to unstable rather than stable factors, and are much less likely to attribute achievement outcomes to their ability (Feick & Rhodewalt, 1997; Rhodewalt, 1990). Caution should be exercised, however, when drawing inferences from the locus of control and self-handicapping literature as empirical studies are relatively scarce and there has been some confusion between locus of control, a relatively stable disposition that affects the evaluation of an outcome before it has occurred, and casual attributions made after the event.

Bandura (1986, 1997) argues that self-efficacy plays a key role in motivation, expectations of future outcomes, affective states and, consequently, ability to perform a set task or activity—self-efficacy is defined as:

People's judgment of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance. It is not concerned with the skills that one has, but with the judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses (Bandura, 1986, p. 391).

Bandura suggested that in the presence of adequate levels of skills and motivation, self-efficacy would exert a positive influence on task initiation and persistence, whereas low self-efficacy could lead to task avoidance, disengagement, and other self-handicapping behaviours. This is supported by research findings showing an inverse correlation between self-efficacy and self-handicapping (Coudeville, Martin Ginis, & Famose, 2008; Martin & Brawley, 2002), and that college students with higher levels of self-efficacy for social or everyday tasks report less frequent self-handicapping behaviours such as procrastination (Haycock, McCarthy, & Skay, 1998; Wolters, 2003).

The potential of self-efficacy to mediate the effects of perfectionism and locus of control on self-handicapping has been suggested theoretically and empirically. A conceptual link between maladaptive perfectionism and self-efficacy was first proposed by Burns (1980) who posited that "the higher the standard of success, the less likely it is that a successful result will be perceived as a probable outcome" (Burns, 1980, p. 38), or in other words, perfectionists compromise their level of self-efficacy by setting unrealistic goals and expectations. Subsequently, a number of studies have reported a significant negative correlation between perfectionism

and self-efficacy (Martin, Flett, Hewitt, Krames, & Szanto, 1996; Mills & Blankstein, 2000). Other studies have indicated that self-efficacy plays a mediating role between perfectionism and self-handicapping (procrastination) in college students (Martin et al., 1996; Seo, 2008). Evidence also shows a correlation between external locus of control and lower self-efficacy (Roddenberry & Renk, 2010; Spector & O'Connell, 1994).

Very little research has been conducted exploring the relationship between locus of control and perfectionism. In an early study, Hewitt and Flett (1991) found a positive relationship between external locus of control and socially prescribed perfectionism. More recently, Periasamy and Ashby (2002) demonstrated that maladaptive perfectionists were characterised by a significantly higher external locus of control than both adaptive perfectionists and non-perfectionists.

## 1.2. The present study

Maladaptive perfectionism, external locus of control, and low self-efficacy have been identified, theoretically, and to some extent, empirically, as contributing to self-handicapping. Yet, no study to date has proposed and tested a model integrating these social cognitive constructs into one cohesive framework that conceptualises self-handicapping as the product of these underlying maladaptive cognitions. The aim of this study was, therefore, to examine a path model linking external locus of control and maladaptive perfectionism to self-handicapping, both directly and indirectly through the mediating influence of self-efficacy (Fig. 1).

We hypothesised that maladaptive perfectionism would be positively correlated with external locus of control; both maladaptive perfectionism and external locus of control would be positively correlated to self-handicapping and negatively correlated with self-efficacy; and self-efficacy would be negatively correlated with self-handicapping. Further, we hypothesised that the criteria for mediation would be met using Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach; specifically that maladaptive perfectionism and external locus of control would account for a significant proportion of variance in self-efficacy; maladaptive perfectionism and external locus of control would account for a significant proportion of variance in self-handicapping; self-efficacy would account for a significant proportion of variance in self-handicapping when controlling for perfectionism and locus of control; and the effect of perfectionism and external locus of control on self-handicapping would be reduced when controlling for self-efficacy, which would indicate the existence of an indirect path linking perfectionism and external locus of control to self-handicapping via self-efficacy.

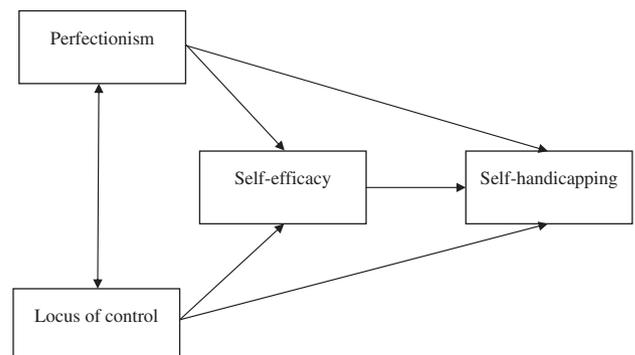


Fig. 1. Proposed path model of the relationships among perfectionism, locus of control, self-efficacy, and self-handicapping.

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