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Contemporary
Educational
Psychology

Contemporary Educational Psychology 28 (2003) 1–36

www.elsevier.com/locate/cedpsych

Self-handicapping and defensive pessimism: A model of self-protection from a longitudinal perspective

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Abstract

This research places self-handicapping and defensive pessimism (comprising defensive expectations and reflectivity) into a single conceptual and analytic framework that models the full self-protective process across time. Data on two occasions collected during students' ($n = 328$) first two years at university show: performance orientation positively predicts self-handicapping, defensive expectations, and reflectivity; task-orientation negatively predicts self-handicapping and defensive expectations and positively predicts reflectivity; uncertain personal control positively predicts defensive expectations and reflectivity; and an external attributional orientation positively predicts self-handicapping and defensive expectations. Although both self-handicapping and defensive expectations negatively affect academic outcomes, the negative effects of self-handicapping were more marked. In contrast to these counter-productive strategies, reflectivity had positive effects on academic engagement.

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Keywords: Self-handicapping; Defensive pessimism; Motivation; Self-protection

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1. Introduction

Individuals can use a variety of strategies to deal with threats to their self-worth. Two such strategies—self-handicapping and defensive pessimism—have received little joint attention to date and their separate and combined effects are the focus of the present study. According to the self-worth theory of motivation (Covington, 1984, 1992, 1997), the need to protect one's self-worth arises primarily from a fear of failure and the implications this failure may have for one's private and public sense of ability and subsequent self-worth. Using this theory as a basis to guide hypotheses, a longitudinal model of the processes giving rise to and following from self-handicapping and defensive pessimism is examined. In testing this model, the study seeks to (a) explore the processes of defensive manoeuvring as they relate to self-handicapping and defensive pessimism, (b) clarify the factors giving rise to self-handicapping and defensive pessimism and the consequences that follow from them, (c) draw together self-handicapping and defensive pessimism under a common conceptual and empirical framework, and (d) add to the small body of research that assesses defensive manoeuvring in a longitudinal fashion.

A useful framework to guide the study of this process is one proposed by Buss and Cantor (1989). According to them, individuals' dispositions or characteristic orientations influence the strategies they use to negotiate demands in their environment, and these strategies in turn influence their behaviour within this environment. In contrast to the bulk of research that typically studies such processes from personality and social psychological perspectives, the present study evaluates the generalisability of this model in an educational context.

2. Self-worth motivation and strategies used to protect self-worth

2.1. Self-worth motivation

The importance of protecting one's self-worth from failure has been emphasized over the past two decades (Covington, 1984, 1992, 1997). Covington (1984, 1992) argues that failure holds implications for students' self-worth because failure is interpreted as being indicative of low ability and low ability is equated with a lack of self-worth. Thus, many students go to great lengths to avoid failure or to alter its meaning. Two strategies they can use to do this are self-handicapping and defensive pessimism. Self-handicappers alter the meaning of failure by deflecting its cause away from their ability and on to factors such as a lack of effort that are less likely to threaten their self-esteem. Defensive pessimists alter the meaning of failure by steeling themselves for failure and by setting lower and safer standards

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