

Underachievers' Cognitive and Behavioral Strategies—Self-Handicapping at School

JARI-ERIK NURMI, TIINA ONATSU, AND TARJA HAAVISTO
University of Helsinki, Finland

The aim of the two studies was to examine whether underachievers apply a self-handicapping or learned helplessness strategy in achievement contexts. In Study 1, twenty-four 13- to 14-year-old underachievers and 24 of their matched-pair controls, and 24 achievers and 24 of their matched pairs controls were asked to fill in Rosenberg's Self-Esteem scale, the revised Beck's Depression Inventory, and various questionnaires measuring their cognitive and attributional strategies. The subjects were also rated by their teachers according to the strategies they used. In Study 2, sixteen low-achieving pupils, 20 vocational school pupils, and 21 senior high school pupils, aged between 14 and 19, filled in the same questionnaires. Both of these studies showed that underachievers seem to apply a self-handicapping strategy rather than learned helplessness: they showed lower self-esteem but higher levels of failure expectation and task-irrelevant behavior than the pupils in the control groups. No differences were found in causal attributions or depression. © 1995 Academic Press, Inc.

It has been suggested that academic underachievement may be related to the cognitive and attributional strategies young people apply at school (Jacobsen, Lowery, & DuCette, 1986; Diener & Dweck, 1978). These strategies has been described in terms of two major processes, cognitive planning and the evaluation of behavioral outcomes by means of causal attributions (Nurmi, Salmela-Aro, & Ruotsalainen, 1994). Both processes are important in differentiating successful and maladaptive behavior. In order to succeed in a task, a person has to set task-related goals and then to construct plans that lead to goal achievement. A further requirement for success in the long run is that individuals apply self-serving attributional bias (Zuckerman, 1979) to handle negative feedback related to temporary failure (Nurmi *et al.*, 1994).

In turn, underachievement can be expected to be related to the use of dysfunctional cognitive and attributional strategies. One example of such strategies is self-handicapping (Berglas & Jones, 1978). People using this

The preparation of this article was supported by a grant from the Social Science Research Council of Finland to Jari-Erik Nurmi. We are grateful to Jaana Juvonen, Pekka Niemi, and four anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft. We also thank Katariina Salmela-Aro who acted as a research assistant. Correspondence and reprint requests should be addressed to Jari-Erik Nurmi, Department of Psychology, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 4, 00014 Helsinki, Finland.

strategy have been shown typically to anticipate failure in a task and therefore to concentrate on creating behavioral excuses for it instead of formulating task-oriented plans. This is evidenced in a high level of task-irrelevant behavior in the task at hand, which reduces the chance of performing the task well. By creating obstacles to personal success to take the blame for anticipated failure, self-handicapping ensures that a person can apply self-serving causal attributions after failure (Berglas & Jones, 1978). It has also been suggested that self-handicapping is associated with relatively low self-esteem (Jones & Berglas, 1978; Rhodewalt, 1990).

Another example of dysfunctional strategies is learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Helpless individuals believe that they are not able to control their behavioral outcomes in achievement situations and therefore to anticipate failure and to be passive with respect to the formulation of task-oriented plans (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Diener & Dweck, 1978). Further, it seems typical of them that they do not use self-serving attributional bias as a buffer against failure information (Diener & Dweck, 1978). Learned helplessness has also been found to be associated with low self-esteem and a depressive mood (Rosenham & Seligman, 1984).

However, only a few studies have been carried out so far to investigate the extent to which underachievement at school is related to the application of these types of strategy. Moreover, the results of these studies are contradictory. Some suggest that underachievement is related to learned helplessness (e.g., Butkowsky & Willows, 1980), whereas others have reported underachievers show an attributional pattern that fits better with the self-handicapping strategy (Jacobsen *et al.*, 1986).

For this reason, we decided first to examine the extent to which underachievers at school apply dysfunctional cognitive and attributional strategies in achievement contexts. Second, we were interested in investigating whether the cognitive and attributional patterns found among the underachievers fit better with a self-handicapping strategy or with learned helplessness. It was expected that, if self-handicapping plays an important role in problem behavior in the school context, underachieving pupils should show a low level of self-esteem, a high level of failure expectation, and task-irrelevant behavior as opposed to task-oriented planning; they should also show the same level of self-serving attributional bias, helplessness, and depression as normal pupils. In turn, if underachievement is based on learned helplessness, underachievers should show a low level of self-esteem, high levels of failure expectation and helplessness beliefs, and a low level of task-irrelevant behavior, indicating passivity. They should also show a low level of self-serving attributional bias and a high level of depression.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات