Academic Self-Handicapping and Achievement Goals: A Further Examination

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This study extends previous research on the relations among students’ personal achievement goals, perceptions of the classroom goal structure, and reports of the use of self-handicapping strategies. Surveys, specific to the math domain, were given to 484 7th-grade students in nine middle schools. Personal performance-avoid goals positively predicted handicapping, whereas personal performance-approach goals did not. Personal task goals negatively predicted handicapping. Perceptions of a performance goal structure positively predicted handicapping, and perceptions of a task goal structure negatively predicted handicapping, independent of personal goals. Median splits used to examine multiple goal profiles revealed that students high in performance-avoid goals used handicapping more than did those low in performance-avoid goals regardless of the level of task goals. Students low in performance-avoid goals and high in task goals handicapped less than those low in both goals. Level of performance-approach goals had little effect on the relation between task goals and handicapping.

“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 (Covington, 1992) predisposes some students to engage in strategies such as these that will deflect attention away from their ability should poor performance occur. Unfortunately, these strategies also are likely to undermine performance. Thus they are called self-handicapping.

Much of the earlier research on the use of handicapping strategies was

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conducted by personality theorists and often in laboratory settings (see Hig- 
gins, Snyder, & Berglas, 1990, pp. 100–102 for a table summarizing these 
studies and the strategies that have been examined). Only recently has the 
study of handicapping been extended into the academic domain. Prior to the 
current study, we conducted three studies of the reported use of handicapping 
by students, with three different samples (Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 
1996; Midgley & Urdan, 1995; Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998). We 
used goal orientation theory as the lens through which to 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 hide the demonstration of lack of ability (a personal 
performance goal) (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Maehr, 1989; Nicholls, 1989).

The goal structure in the learning environment is also integral to goal 
orientation theory. Classrooms and schools, through their policies and prac-
tices, can emphasize mastery, effort, improvement, and intellectual develop-
ment (a task goal structure) and/or relative ability and competition among 
students (a performance goal structure) (Ames, 1984; Midgley, 1993; Urdan, 
1994). In a classroom where a performance goal structure predominates, 
teachers frequently compare students’ abilities and performance, students 
compete with each other and are recognized for their performance relative 
to others, and the importance of grades and test scores is discussed fre-
quently. 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). Our studies 
have been based on the premise that an orientation to demonstrating ability 
(a personal performance goal orientation) and/or the perception that the 
learning environment emphasizes relative ability and competition among stu-
dents (a performance goal structure) is associated with a greater reported 
use of strategies to deflect attention away from ability as a reason for low 
performance, should it occur (self-handicapping).

Our first study (Midgley & Urdan, 1995) was conducted with a sample 
of 8th-grade students attending two middle schools in a working-class com-
unity. In this study, personal task goals, personal performance goals, and 
perceptions of an emphasis on task goals in the school were unrelated to 
reports of handicapping, whereas perceptions of an emphasis on performance 
goals in the school were positively related to handicapping. It should be 
noted that both the handicapping scale and the scales assessing achievement 
goals were refined and improved after this study was conducted. The second 
study (Midgley et al., 1996) was conducted with a different sample of 8th-
grade students attending one middle school in an ethnically diverse working 
class community. Personal performance goals were positively related to the 
reported use of handicapping, whereas personal task goals were unrelated
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