



Reducing the tendency to self-handicap: The effect of self-affirmation

Phyllis A. Siegel^{a,*}, Joanne Scillitoe^b, Rochelle Parks-Yancy^c

^a Rutgers Business School, Rutgers University, 94 Rockafeller Road, Piscataway, NJ 08854, USA

^b Michigan Technological University, USA

^c Texas Southern University, USA

Received 2 June 2004; revised 29 September 2004

Available online 8 February 2005

Abstract

Self-handicapping, the creating or claiming of obstacles to one's performance to influence explanations given for subsequent outcomes, has been shown to have a host of attitudinal and behavioral consequences. Given the wide ranging impact of self-handicapping, it is important to understand the conditions under which self-handicapping is more or less likely to occur. Accordingly, the present study tested the hypothesis that people will be less likely to engage in self-handicapping if they have previously engaged in self-affirmation. The results of this study found that self-affirmation was more effective in reducing self-handicapping behavior when individuals experienced non-contingent success than when they experience contingent success. Theoretical contributions to the self-handicapping and self-affirmation literatures are discussed, as are practical implications.

© 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The fact that individuals handicap their chances of success is not a new or rare phenomenon. As early as 1929, the renowned psychoanalyst Alfred Adler observed that patients seemingly engaged in self-defeating behavior (Higgins, 1990). Moreover, anecdotes abound in the popular press regarding “how smart people do dumb things” to undermine their performance effectiveness (Feinberg & Tarrant, 1995; Fisher, 1996). Self-handicapping is defined as the act of claiming or creating obstacles to influence the explanations given for subsequent outcomes (Berglas & Jones, 1978). According to Berglas and Jones (1978), an individual is motivated to self-handicap out of a desire to protect one's self-esteem. In the event that s/he performs poorly, the act of self-handicapping is expected to obscure the link

between performance and evaluation. As a result, observers cannot conclude that the poor performance is a direct result of the individual's lack of ability; instead, it appears that the handicap contributed to the negative outcome. By self-handicapping, the individual hopes to preserve the image of competence and self-worth in his/her eyes as well as in the eyes of others (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Tice & Baumeister, 1990). Thus, self-handicapping is posited to stave off the threat to the self that may arise as a result of poor performance.

Self-handicapping is intriguing for several reasons. First, those who engage in it are willing to call attention to, or place obstacles in the way of successful performance, in exchange for the opportunity to protect their ego from the esteem-threatening implications of failure. Second, self-handicapping has been shown to have a variety of behavioral and attitudinal consequences. For example, self-handicapping may enhance or deflate task performance (e.g., Frankel & Snyder, 1978; Leary & Shepperd, 1986; Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986). In addition, self-handicapping may lead to more or less favorable

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 732 445 6987.

E-mail address: psiegel@rci.rutgers.edu (P.A. Siegel).

¹ The authors thank Steve Spencer, Joel Brockner, Batia Wiesenfeld, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

judgments of the parties who engage in it (e.g., Luginbuhl & Palmer, 1991). Moreover, Greenberg (1996) found that claiming a handicap negatively affected the evaluations of the self-handicapper if observers perceived that they were adversely affected by such behavior. More recently, Siegel and Brockner (2005) found that the claiming of handicaps by organizational leaders had a negative effect on firm value and, under some conditions, the leaders' own compensation.

Given the wide-ranging implications associated with the phenomenon, it behooves researchers to better understand the conditions under which self-handicapping is more or less likely to occur. Whereas a number of studies have sought to identify those factors that trigger self-handicapping behavior (e.g., Greenberg, 1985; Harris & Snyder, 1986; Tice & Baumeister, 1990), surprisingly little attention has focused on identifying those factors that *reduce* individuals' tendencies to self-handicap. In this regard, studies by Rhodewalt, Saltzman, and Wittmer (1984) and Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Paisley (1985) serve as noteworthy exceptions. Rhodewalt et al. (1984) found suggestive evidence that team membership may reduce an individual's tendency to self-handicap due to fear of group sanctions. In addition, Greenberg et al. (1985) found evidence that the presence of large monetary incentives diminished individuals' tendencies to engage in self-handicapping.

The present paper draws on a theoretically derived process, self-affirmation, in an attempt to delineate one of the factors that may help reduce individuals' tendencies to self-handicap. In so doing, we seek to make several important contributions. First, the application of self-affirmation theory to the self-handicapping literature may provide further evidence of the motivational basis for self-handicapping and shed light on its boundary conditions. Second, the exploration of self-affirmation in the context of self-handicapping is expected to extend our knowledge of self-affirmation theory and broaden the contexts in which the theory is applicable.

Self-affirmation theory

Self-affirmation theory suggests that individuals strive for self-integrity; that is, they are motivated to see themselves as "competent, good, coherent, unitary, stable, capable of free choice, capable of controlling important outcomes, and so on" (Steele, 1988, p. 262). Said differently, individuals desire both esteem (i.e., feeling good about oneself) and efficacy (i.e., feeling competent and capable of controlling important outcomes). Nevertheless, a variety of circumstances may arise that threaten the individual's self-integrity (Steele, 1988; Tesser & Cornell, 1991). It is this threat to self-integrity that influences individuals' attitudinal and behavioral reactions. For example, Steele and Liu (1983) used self-affirmation

theory to explain the effects of cognitive dissonance. Whereas Festinger (1957) posited that the inconsistency between behavior and attitude prompts individuals to change their attitude to be congruent with their behavior, Steele and Liu (1983) argued that it was not the inconsistency per se that led to attitude change, but rather the threat to the individual's self-integrity. In other words, the experienced disconnect between behavior and attitude caused the individual to feel less stable and coherent. Attitude change was thus in the service of restoring self-integrity. Similarly, whereas Seligman's (1975) learned helplessness theory proposed that individuals experienced negative emotion when they were exposed to uncontrollable events, Liu and Steele (1986) argued that it was the threatened self-integrity *elicited* by the experience of uncontrollability—and not the feeling of uncontrollability itself—which caused the negative emotion.

In addition, self-affirmation theory posits that negative reactions to threats to one's self-integrity may be eliminated by "affirming some other aspect of the self that reinforces overall self-adequacy...thus, in response to a particular threat, one has the option of leaving the threat unrationalized—that is, accepting the threat without countering it or its implications—and affirming some other important aspect of the self that reinforces overall self-adequacy" (Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993, p. 885). Indeed, the opportunity to self-affirm—even in a domain unrelated to the source of the specific threat and even without removing the threat itself—has been found to attenuate the negative effects associated with those factors believed to threaten self-integrity (e.g., Liu & Steele, 1986; Steele, 1988; Tesser & Cornell, 1991).

In the organizational domain, Wiesenfeld, Brockner, and Martin (1999) recently evaluated the role of self-affirmation in survivors' reactions to an organizational downsizing. Arguing that perceptions of procedural unfairness would threaten individuals' self-integrity and therefore, result in negative reactions to a downsizing (Tyler, DeGoey, & Smith, 1996), they found that individuals exposed to a procedurally unfair downsizing reacted less negatively when they were given an opportunity to self-affirm than when they were not, particularly among those whose attention was self-directed. Taken together, the results of various studies suggest that having an opportunity to engage in self-affirmation helps to reduce negative reactions to various sources of threat to self-integrity (cognitive inconsistency, uncontrollability, and unfair treatment).

Self-affirmation: A proposed determinant of self-handicapping

Given that an individual is theorized to claim or create handicaps to stave off negative ability attributions in the

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