

She works hard for the money: Valuing effort underlies gender differences in behavioral self-handicapping [☆]

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Abstract

Research in the area of self-handicapping has consistently demonstrated a robust yet puzzling gender difference in the use of and evaluation of behavioral self-handicaps; women (1) are less likely to use these forms of handicaps, particularly those involving the actual or reported reduction of effort, and (2) evaluate the use of these handicaps by others more negatively than do men. The present research examines several possible explanations for these consistent gender differences and finds that the personal value placed on effort is an important mediator of these effects.

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Self-handicapping involves creating or claiming an obstacle prior to a performance in order to provide a viable excuse for possible failure (Jones & Berglas, 1978). In this manner, the individual can protect self-esteem and impressions of ability (McCrea & Hirt, 2001). Research has identified a wide range of behaviors individuals use in this manner, and numerous situational factors and individual differences that moderate self-handicapping. Some variables, such as increased task importance (Sheppard & Arkin, 1989), ego-relevance (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1983), and the presence of audiences (Hirt, McCrea, & Kimble, 2000) increase self-handicapping by making the performance more important and threatening to the individual. Others, such as having uncertain self-esteem (Harris & Snyder, 1986), or experiencing noncontingent success (Berglas & Jones, 1978) increase this behavior by leading the individual to feel less confident

of his or her ability to perform well. These findings fit well within self-handicapping theory. However, one of the most consistent individual differences in self-handicapping behavior has proven particularly difficult to explain. Research has repeatedly found a gender difference that men appear to self-handicap to a greater degree than do women, yet the reason for this difference remains elusive (Arkin & Oleson, 1998; Rhodewalt, 1990). The primary goal of the present research was to provide an explanation for this intriguing gender difference.

Researchers on self-handicapping have distinguished between claimed self-handicaps, in which the individual merely states that an obstacle to performance exists, and behavioral handicaps, in which the individual actually creates obstacles to performance (Leary & Shepperd, 1986). This distinction has proven critical in terms of the gender difference in self-handicapping. Hirt, Deppe, and Gordon (1991) made both types of handicaps available to participants prior to an exam in order to examine which would be preferred. Although both men and women engaged in claimed self-handicapping (i.e., reported stress), only men behaviorally handicapped (i.e., withdrew practice effort). Other research has supported this finding using other types

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of behavioral handicaps, including drug use (Berglas & Jones, 1978) and choice of performance setting (Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986). Indeed, many studies involving behavioral self-handicapping have included only male participants (e.g., Kolditz & Arkin, 1982; Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer, 1984). Of the studies that have directly compared behavioral self-handicapping among men and women, the vast majority (e.g., Berglas & Jones, 1978; Harris & Snyder, 1986; Hirt et al., 1991, 2000; Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986), conducted by a range of researchers and using a variety of methodologies, have found that only men behaviorally handicapped (for exceptions see Ferrari & Tice, 2000; Strube & Roemmele, 1985). On the other hand, nearly every study investigating claimed self-handicaps has found that they are used by women as well as men (Arkin & Oleson, 1998; Rhodewalt, 1990). Thus, the overall pattern of results strongly suggests that women do not usually behaviorally self-handicap. Indeed, in a review of these studies, Rhodewalt (1990) stated that this gender difference is one of “the most consistent findings” in the self-handicapping literature.

Explanations for the gender difference

Several explanations for the gender difference have been put forth in the past, focusing on the notion that men are in some way more motivated to self-handicap. However, to date, there has been a relative paucity of direct attempts to explore these possibilities, and studies conducted so far have only served to rule out possible explanations, rather than provide direct evidence for any particular explanation.

One possibility that has been considered is that women may be less threatened by task failure (Harris, Snyder, Higgins, & Schrag, 1986; Snyder, Ford, & Hunt, 1985) or that women may not be as apt to self-handicap when called upon to publicly display a desired ability (Rhodewalt, 1990). If this were true, women may not choose to engage in behavioral self-handicapping unless the threat to self-concept and/or public impression is increased (Hirt et al., 1991). A recent study (Hirt et al., 2000) tested this explanation by manipulating public self-focus via the presence of a camera and measured practice effort prior to a test of intelligence. Public self-focus did increase evaluative concern and uncertainty more for men than for women. However, whereas controlling for such concern completely explained the reduction in men’s practice effort in the public self-focus condition relative to a control condition, concern did not significantly predict women’s practice behavior. Furthermore, controlling for concern did not reduce the effects of gender on self-handicapping within the public self-focus condition. Hirt et al. (2000) also reported that gender differences in behavioral self-handicapping were not explained by participants’ rating of the importance of the performance. A subsequent replication of this study (Koch, Hirt, & McCrea, 2003) showed that increased public self-focus resulted in

increased claimed self-handicapping for both men and women, suggesting it is the type of handicap, not the level of threat to self or the presence of public scrutiny, that underlies this gender difference.

A second potential explanation stems from the fact that men tend to report higher self-esteem than do women (Feingold, 1994; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999). Perhaps those high in self-esteem are more prone to engage in behavioral self-handicapping because they have more to lose in performance situations. However, increased self-handicapping has been demonstrated both among those high (McCrea & Flamm, 2007; McCrea & Hirt, 2001; Tice, 1991), and low in self-esteem (Strube & Roemmele, 1985; Tice, 1991). Moreover, controlling for self-esteem does not appear to affect the gender difference (Harris & Snyder, 1986; McCrea & Flamm, 2007; McCrea & Hirt, 2001).

A third possibility is that women do not behaviorally self-handicap in the stereotypically masculine academic domain (cf., Swim & Sanna, 1996), because the importance of an academic performance is lower for women. Thus, this explanation argues that the locus of the effect resides in the performance domain being examined, and predicts that women would be more likely to behaviorally self-handicap in a performance domain in which they are expected to excel. However, research examining self-handicapping in the more stereotypically feminine domain of social interaction has still found that men behaviorally handicap more (Hirt, 1993; Kimble, Funk, & DaPolito, 1990). Moreover, it is the case that women make use of claimed handicaps even in the academic domain (Hirt et al., 1991; Koch et al., 2003; Rhodewalt, 1990). Thus, it is unlikely that gender differences are limited to the academic domain, although more research is required to definitively rule out this interpretation.

Given that self-handicapping is motivated in part by impression management concerns (cf., Kolditz & Arkin, 1982), we have also considered the possibility that women are not afforded the same attributional benefits for self-handicapping as are men. Past work has shown that failure by women is more likely to be attributed to lack of ability, whereas failure by men is attributed to lack of effort, at least for masculine tasks (Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, & Enna, 1978; Swim & Sanna, 1996). Therefore, it could be that women do not behaviorally handicap because they expect observers will blame their failures on lack of ability rather than lack of effort.

To test this possibility, Hirt, McCrea, and Boris (2003) conducted a study in which men and women read a short vignette about Chris, a student with an important upcoming test (see also Luginbuhl & Palmer, 1991). In these vignettes, the gender of the target (Chris) was varied. Chris was described as concerned about the test but was not prepared; his/her preparation the night before the exam was manipulated. Chris either went to a movie, staying out for the entire evening (foregoing the opportunity to study), or (s)he stayed home to study. Thus, in the movie

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