

The worker scale: Developing a measure to explain gender differences in behavioral self-handicapping

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Abstract

Research has consistently found that men engage in more behavioral self-handicapping than do women. We first review evidence suggesting that these gender differences result from women placing more importance on displaying effort than do men. We then present the results of two studies seeking to develop measures of beliefs about effort that might explain these gender differences in behavioral self-handicapping. Women, across a wide range of measures, placed more importance on effort than did men. However, only a new measure of more personalized effort beliefs, dubbed the Worker scale, uniquely explained gender differences in dispositional tendency to behaviorally self-handicap. The Worker scale also predicted academic performance, consistent with the notion that these effort beliefs would predict engagement in actual behavioral self-handicaps that undermine performance.

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1. Introduction

Self-handicapping involves the creation or claiming of obstacles to successful performance, in the hopes that any subsequent failure can be blamed on the handicap (Jones & Berglas, 1978). For example, individuals have been shown to take drugs or alcohol (Berglas & Jones, 1978), withhold practice effort (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1983), or claim handicaps such as stress (Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991) or bad mood (Rosenfarb & Aron, 1992) prior to important tests. The more active forms of self-handicapping such as effort withdrawal or drug use have been referred to as behavioral or acquired handicaps, whereas claims of the presence of an obstacle such as stress or bad mood have been referred to as claimed or self-reported handicaps (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985; Leary & Shepperd, 1986). This theoretical distinction is important, in that behavioral

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self-handicaps are generally more observable, controllable, and likely to be directly related to performance than are claimed handicaps (Hirt et al., 1991; Leary & Shepperd, 1986). With regard to performance, recent evidence increasingly has shown that behavioral self-handicaps, in particular reduced study effort, impair academic performance in the long term (McCrea & Hirt, 2001; Murray & Warden, 1992; Urdan, 2004; Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998).

This theoretical distinction is also critical with regard to several individual differences that exist in self-handicapping behavior. Jones and Rhodewalt (1982) developed the self-handicapping scale (SHS) to measure the tendency to engage in self-handicapping and excuse-making more generally. A number of studies have demonstrated the predictive validity of the scale (see Rhodewalt, 1990 for a review). Recently, McCrea, Hirt, and Hendrix (2006) factor analyzed the SHS, showing that the scale is comprised of two subscales corresponding to the distinction between claimed and behavioral self-handicapping (see Appendix). These subscales were specifically predictive of corresponding forms of self-handicapping. For example, use of claims of stress as a handicap were predicted only by the claimed subscale of the SHS, whereas use of reduced practice effort as a handicap was predicted only by the behavioral subscale of the SHS. The prediction of these self-handicapping behaviors was also improved when using the corresponding SHS subscale rather than the complete 25-item scale. Furthermore, the behavioral subscale was more predictive of lower academic performance than was the claimed subscale (McCrea et al., 2006).

One of the most consistent individual differences found in the self-handicapping literature is that men are more likely than women to engage in behavioral forms of self-handicapping, whereas both men and women are equally likely to engage in claimed self-handicapping (see Harris & Snyder, 1986; Hirt et al., 1991; McCrea, Hirt, & Milner, *in press*; Rhodewalt, 1990). Similarly, men tend to score higher on the behavioral subscale of the SHS, whereas women tend to score higher on the claimed subscale of the SHS (McCrea et al., 2006). To date, an explanation for these findings has not been forthcoming. Previous research has largely examined possible reasons why men would be more motivated to self-handicap than women, either because of differences in the importance of the task domain (Dietrich, 1995; Hirt, 1993; Kimble, Funk, & DaPolito, 1990), differences in the attributions made after self-handicapping by the self or others (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Hirt, McCrea, & Boris, 2003) or differences in level of concern about managing public impressions of their ability (see Hirt, McCrea, & Kimble, 2000; Rhodewalt, 1990; Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986; Snyder, Ford, & Hunt, 1985). The present work takes a different approach to explaining this finding. Specifically, we suggest that women view certain types of self-handicapping behavior more negatively than do men, and that they therefore choose to self-handicap in other ways (see also Harris & Snyder, 1986; Hirt et al., 1991). We first review prior research which supports this view.

1.1. Evidence supporting the role of effort beliefs in gender differences in self-handicapping

Earlier work on the gender difference in behavioral self-handicapping largely focused on the idea that men experience more evaluative threat and thus have greater motivation to self-handicap. For example, based on the finding that self-handicapping is at least partly motivated by impression management concerns (Kolditz & Arkin, 1982), Hirt et al. (2000) examined whether increasing the evaluative threat of a performance via public self-focus would increase behavioral self-handicapping among men and women. Although men responded to public self-focus with increased behavioral self-handicapping, women did not. In contrast, women as well as men demonstrate increased claimed self-handicapping when placed under conditions of public self-focus (Koch, Hirt, & McCrea, 2003). Furthermore, studies examining behavioral self-handicapping in less stereotypically masculine domains have also observed the same gender difference (Dietrich, 1995; Hirt, 1993). Thus, the gender difference in self-handicapping appears to be related to the characteristics of the handicap rather than differences in the motivation to protect the self.

Similar conclusions are drawn from a recent study on observer reactions to behavioral self-handicapping (Hirt et al., 2003). One could argue that women do not expect the same attributional benefits of self-handicapping in terms of observer reactions, compared to men. Indeed, the failure of women tends to be attributed to lack of ability, whereas the failure of men tends to be attributed to lack of effort (Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, & Enna, 1978; Swim & Sanna, 1996). Women may therefore have less to gain from a self-handicapping strategy. To test this possibility, Hirt et al. (2003) examined whether observers would be more critical of a woman who

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