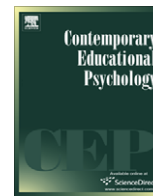




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Contemporary Educational Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cedpsych

Fear of failure, 2 × 2 achievement goal and self-handicapping: An examination of the hierarchical model of achievement motivation in physical education [☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 3 July 2009

Keywords:

Avoidance strategy
 Achievement motivation
 Self-protection
 Competence

ABSTRACT

In this study, the hierarchical model of achievement motivation [Elliot, A. J. (1997). Integrating the “classic” and “contemporary” approaches to achievement motivation: A hierarchical model of approach and avoidance achievement motivation. In P. Pintrich & M. Maehr (Eds.), *Advances in motivation and achievement* (Vol. 10, pp. 143–179). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press] is used to investigate the motivational mechanism behind the relationship between fear of failure and self-handicapping adoption. A cross-sectional design was employed. The participants were 691 college students enrolled in physical education in Taiwan. Students completed the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PEAI-S; Conroy, D. E., Willow, J. P., & Metzler, J. N. (2002). Multidimensional measurement of fear of failure: The performance failure appraisal inventory. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14, 76–90), the Chinese 2 × 2 Achievement Goal Questionnaire for Physical Education (CAGQ-PE; Chen, L. H. (2007). *Construct validity of Chinese 2 × 2 achievement goal questionnaire in physical education: Evidence from collectivistic culture*. Paper presented at the 5th conference of the Asian South Pacific Association of Sport Psychology. Bangkok, Thailand) and the Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS; Wu, C. H., Wang, C. H., & Lin, Y. C. (2004). The exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis of self-handicap scale for sport. *Journal of Higher Education in Physical Education*, 6(1), 139–148). Structural equation modeling was conducted. Generally, the results showed that mastery-avoidance and performance-avoidance goals partially mediated the relationship between fear of failure and self-handicapping. The results are discussed in terms of the hierarchical model of achievement motivation, and its implications for physical education are also highlighted.

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1. Introduction

In achievement settings such as physical education classes, the maladaptive behavior of self-handicapping can sometimes be observed. At times, students may claim that they are ill or may provide some unfounded excuse just before executing a challenging task. At other times, they might reduce their effort on purpose in a competitive achievement setting to mask their possible incompetence. Although self-handicapping may protect self-worth in the short term, research indicates that it has high long-term costs for the individual (Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005). Zuckerman and Tsai's longitudinal studies found that self-handicapping led to worse health and well-

being, lower competence satisfaction, lower intrinsic motivation, more frequent negative moods and symptoms, and higher self-reported use of various substances. Given the wide range of negative effects associated with self-handicapping, it behooves researchers to better investigate why self-handicapping occurs. Therefore, the main aim of current study was to investigate the motivational antecedents of self-handicapping in physical education classes.

In the current study, we have adopted the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot, 1997, 1999, 2006; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Thrash, 1999) to account for the motivational process that triggers self-handicapping in Physical Education (PE). Past research suggests that PE is an ideal setting for examining the link between achievement motivation and self-handicapping among students (see Ommundsen, 2001) given that PE lessons often require students to overtly display their physical abilities. Therefore, incompetence can potentially be readily observed by others in such a setting. As such, in PE classes, students might be highly motivated to adopt self-handicapping to prevent themselves from being perceived unfavorably in public (Chen et al., 2008).

[☆] An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the 47th Annual Meeting of the Society for Taiwanese Psychological Association, Taipei, Taiwan, October 2008. The first author is grateful to Professor Likang Chi's inspiration when he took the course of Advance in Sport Motivation taught by him.

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1.1. Theoretical rationale

Berglas and Jones (1978) defined self-handicapping as the action of claiming or creating obstacles to account for poor performance. An individual embraces self-handicapping strategies to protect his or her self-worth or competent image in public. Self-handicappers believe that such acts can mask the relationship between performance and evaluation should they fail to perform (Siegel, Scillitoe, & Parks-Yancy, 2005). Thus, through self-handicapping, personal self-worth can be protected. In a way, the use of self-handicapping alleviates the threat to the self in the short run (Urda & Midgley, 2001).

According to the definition of self-handicapping, it can be argued that the major antecedent of self-handicapping is fear of failure. This is because fear of failure, defined as the dispositional tendency to avoid situations with possible negative outcomes due to the risk of feeling ashamed of failure, whether it is real or putative (Elliot & Thrash, 2004), will lead an individual to adopt a self-handicapping strategy to avoid a decrease in personal self-worth. It is logical to expect and find a positive relationship between fear of failure and self-handicapping. In fact, Elliot and Church (2003) previously reported a positive relationship between fear of failure and self-handicapping. However, for psychologists, the important issues are these: How does fear of failure influence self-handicapping, and what is the mechanism behind the negative impact of fear of failure on self-handicapping?

Based on the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot, 1997), achievement goals can be regarded as playing a crucial role in the mechanism behind the negative impact of fear of failure on self-handicapping. In the hierarchical model of achievement motivation, Elliot (1997) integrated the class motives (e.g., need for achievement and fear of failure) and the contemporary approach–avoidance achievement goal perspective. The motives in Elliot's model represent an individual difference in affective dispositions that derives energy to drive people's actions in the general achievement setting. The goal provides the direction (either approach or avoidance) that complements the motives that account for the individual's intention in a specific condition. Finally, the behavior is performed in response to the goals adopted (Fryer & Elliot, 2007). Briefly, the motive exerts its influence on the achievement-relevant outcomes through the achievement goal, and the achievement goal is expected to account for achievement-related behavior more directly than the distal motives (Conroy & Elliot, 2004). Thus, the hierarchical model describes an achievement-striving process that stems from individual differences to the goals adopted and the end states in the achievement situation. According to the hierarchical model, fear of failure is regarded as a motive, while self-handicapping represents achievement behavior, and thus, the mechanism that links fear of failure and self-handicapping is the achievement goal.

However, different kinds of achievement goals may play different roles in the relationship between fear of failure and self-handicapping. Achievement goals, which are defined as “the purposes for engaging in competence-relevant behavior” (Moller & Elliot, 2006, p. 308), are primarily focused on how an individual's competence is defined by differentiating mastery and performance goals. Individuals who endorse mastery goals evaluate their competence according to an absolute or intrapersonal standard. On the contrary, those who subscribe to performance goals focus on attaining a normative standard (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Pintrich, 2000). Elliot and Church (1997) integrated the valence of competence into the achievement goal to represent the approach and avoidance tendencies. They proposed the trichotomous model; this model crosses the two aspects of competence, distinguishing between the mastery (approach) goal (MAp, focused on attaining intrapersonal or task-based competence), performance–approach

goal (PAp, focused on attaining normative competence), and performance–avoidance goal (PAv, focused on attaining normative incompetence). Recently, Elliot and McGregor (2001) also differentiated the mastery goal into approach and avoidance forms and proposed the mastery–avoidance goal (MAV, focused on attaining intrapersonal or task-based incompetence), forming a 2×2 achievement goal framework. Previous empirical research had documented that the achievement goals in the framework have different patterns of antecedents and consequences, providing support for the utilization of the 2×2 framework over the dichotomous and trichotomous models (for a review, see Moller and Elliot (2006); see also Roberts, Treasure and Conroy (2007)).

Accordingly, based on the hierarchical model, the current study aims to examine the possible links between fear of failure and self-handicapping by means of the four achievement goals. First, in order to protect self-worth, fear of failure orients individuals either to not performing worse than their peers or to not doing worse than they have in the past (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Thrash, 2004). Therefore, it is likely that fear of failure would prompt an individual to adopt negative goal forms such as PAv and MAV because fear of failure orients people to negative and undesirable possibilities (Conroy & Elliot, 2004; Elliot & Church, 1997). Furthermore, some individuals might seek achievement as a result of wanting to avoid failure (Elliot & Church, 1997); hence, fear of failure is also expected to be positively related with PAp. Finally, MAP would be unrelated to fear of failure because of its purely appetitive nature. These hypothesized relationships between fear of failure and the four achievement goals have been discussed and demonstrated in several studies within the 2×2 achievement goal framework (e.g., Conroy, 2004; Conroy & Elliot, 2004; Conroy, Elliot, & Hofer, 2003a; Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

Further, regarding the relationships between the four achievement goals and self-handicapping, we expected that MAP and PAp would negatively associate with self-handicapping since MAP pertains to an absolute/intrapersonal competence that may reduce the need for a self-protection process. On the other hand, PAp concentrates on pursuing achievement, which requires that an individual not do anything to potentially impede his or her performance, such as self-handicapping behaviors (Elliot, Cury, Fryer, & Huguet, 2006). Thus, we expected that self-handicapping would be triggered by avoidance of achieving normative incompetence, which is the core consideration of PAv, and that self-handicapping may serve as a channel to release the individual's evaluation threats. These hypotheses have been supported by previous studies (Elliot et al., 2006; Midgley & Urda, 2001; Ommundsen, 2004). However, it is difficult to make a hypothesis on the relationship between MAV and self-handicapping because MAV contains both a positive definition and a negative valence of competence. Based on the findings that self-handicapping is motivated by avoidance motivation (Elliot & Church, 2003; Rhodewalt & Vohs, 2005) and MAV is associated with avoidance of help seeking and executive help seeking (Karabenick, 2003, 2004), we predicted that MAV would be positively linked to self-handicapping. Urda, Ryan, Anderman, and Gheen (2003) indicated that these two behaviors are conceptually similar to self-handicapping.

1.2. The present study

Based on the prior work discussed above, it is interesting to examine this relationship in Taiwanese students because of the significant cultural differences between Eastern and Western cultures (McCarthy, 2005). It has been suggested that individuals from the East are more sensitive to negative self-relevant information. Socialization processes in Eastern cultures emphasize the importance of not making mistakes or not losing for establishing a positive view of the self, while Western cultures construct the positive

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