



Prevention of self-handicapping – The protective function of mastery goals

Malte Schwinger^{*}, Joachim Stiensmeier-Pelster¹

Department of Psychology, University of Giessen, Otto-Behaghel-Str. 10F, 35394 Giessen, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on modern diathesis-stress theories which suggest a multiplicative approach to determine one's personal vulnerability status, we posit that the degree of an individual's vulnerability for using self-handicapping strategies in case of self-threatening events depends on the interaction between different vulnerability and protective factors. In this article, we assume that the pursuit of mastery goals buffers the relations between self-handicapping and two frequently cited determinants (low self-esteem, high performance-avoidance goals). In three studies with German high-school and college students, we found empirical evidence for the assumed moderator effect of mastery goals. In studies 1 and 3, performance-avoidance goals were remarkably lower associated with self-handicapping in the group of students highly endorsing mastery goals compared to students who proved to be less mastery oriented. In studies 2 and 3, moreover, individuals' self-esteem was less related to self-handicapping when students strongly emphasized mastery goals. We discuss several implications of these findings for both educational practice and future research on self-handicapping.

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1. Introduction

More than three decades ago, [Berglas and Jones \(1978; Jones & Berglas, 1978\)](#) introduced the self-handicapping phenomenon to the psychological literature. They defined it “as any action or choice of performance setting that enhances the opportunity to externalize (or excuse) failure and to internalize ... success” ([Berglas & Jones, 1978, p. 406](#)). Self-handicappers make use of [Kelley's discounting principle \(Kelley, 1971\)](#). It is used if one fails, as the present handicap discounts attributions to internal-stable factors like, for instance, a lack of intelligence. Instead, the failure is attributed to the handicap. On the other hand, if one surprisingly succeeds, attributions to internal-stable factors will be augmented, as the person obviously has been smart or powerful enough to overwhelm the handicap.

There is substantial agreement in the literature that self-handicapping displays negative effects on important educational processes and outcomes like motivation and achievement (e.g., [Martin, Marsh, & Debus, 2001; Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998](#)). These results point to the necessity to examine how students can be prevented from self-handicapping and how they might be encouraged to solve negative performance experiences and threats to their self-esteem in a less costly way. To date, however, only a few studies have been dedicated to this issue (e.g., [McCrea & Hirt, 2011; Siegel, Scillitoe, & Parks-Yancy, 2005](#)). Building on modern diathesis-stress conceptions emphasizing the interplay between different personal vulnerability and protective

factors ([Abela & Hankin, 2008; Scher, Ingram, & Segal, 2005](#)), the present article focuses on the endorsement of mastery achievement goals ([Dweck, 1986; Elliot, 2005](#)) as a promising prevention factor against self-handicapping.

1.1. Determinants of self-handicapping

Self-handicapping is expressed by a diverse range of behaviors like substance abuse ([Berglas & Jones, 1978; Schwinger, 2008; Tucker, Vuchinich, & Sobell, 1981](#)), effort reduction ([Deppe & Harackiewicz, 1996; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1983](#)), setting of unobtainable goals ([Greenberg, 1985](#)), or choice of debilitating performance settings ([Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986](#)). Regardless of the respective self-handicapping behavior, negative consequences like poor performance or loss of intrinsic motivation have been documented in several studies ([Elliot & Church, 2003; Martin et al., 2001; Thomas & Gadbois, 2007; Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998; Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005; Zuckerman et al., 1998](#)). Given the wide-ranging implications associated with this phenomenon, it appears to be a critical task for researchers to reveal the circumstances under which self-handicapping is more or less likely to occur. To begin with, self-handicapping represents a strategy to regulate one's self-esteem when someone is faced with a self-threatening situation. The perceived threat, in turn, can be elicited by both situational and personal factors. Indeed, a lot of research has been conducted to identify personal risk-factors of self-handicapping. [Elliot and Church \(2003\)](#), for instance, found the behavioral inhibition system (BIS; [Gray, 1990](#)) to be positively associated with self-handicapping. [Rhodewalt, Tragakis, and Finnerty \(2006\)](#) revealed narcissism to be related to self-handicapping behaviors. Moreover, several authors reported self-handicapping being

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 641 99 26 255.

E-mail addresses: malte.schwinger@psychol.uni-giessen.de (M. Schwinger), joachim.stiensmeier-pelster@psychol.uni-giessen.de (J. Stiensmeier-Pelster).

¹ Tel.: +49 641 99 26 251.

determined by participants' gender (Keller, 2002; McCrea, Hirt, & Milner, 2007).

The two mostly cited determinants of self-handicapping, however, refer to a person's level of self-esteem as well as to her pursuit of performance-avoidance goals (see Rhodewalt & Vohs, 2005, and Urdan & Midgley, 2001, for reviews). Regarding the first factor, it seems reasonable to assume that a person disposing of low self-esteem may experience self-esteem threats more often compared to a person possessing high self-esteem. Negative events, like a critical teacher feedback, are perceived differently by these two persons, with the first one being more at risk to experience a threat to her self-esteem (Rhodewalt & Vohs, 2005; Schwinger, 2008). In line with these assumptions, a number of studies revealed significantly negative correlations between self-esteem and self-handicapping (Coudeville, Ginis, & Famose, 2008; Pulford, Johnson, & Awaida, 2005; Rhodewalt, 1990; Schwinger & Stiensmeier-Pelster, *in press*; Zuckerman et al., 1998). Moreover, Zuckerman et al. (1998) pointed out that persons inclined to general low self-esteem may be prone to experience a vicious cycle. They start with reacting to self-esteem threats by self-handicapping. Unfortunately, however, self-handicapping leads to lower performance, which subsequently decreases one's self-esteem and therefore increases the probability to self-handicap again. Taken together, the empirical evidence suggests that low self-esteem individuals can cope significantly worse with self-threatening events – and thus self-handicap more frequently – compared to high self-esteem individuals (see also vanDellen, Campbell, Hoyle, & Bradfield, 2011, for a recent meta-analysis).

The second important personal determinant of self-handicapping is a performance-avoidance goal orientation. From the perspective of achievement goal theory, students can be differentiated according to their long-term goals they endorse in school. By definition, mastery goals orient students toward learning and the development of one's competencies, while performance goals orient them toward considering their ability and performance relative to others (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Nicholls, 1984). Performance goals can be further subdivided into performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals. Students endorsing performance-approach goals aim to demonstrate their higher abilities in comparison to their classmates, whereas students pursuing performance-avoidance goals strive to not perform worse than others (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Hulleman et al., 2010; Middleton & Midgley, 1997).² Performance-avoidance oriented students describe themselves as less capable and they seek to avoid other people becoming aware of it. When those students anticipate failing in an upcoming test, they will try to provide alternative explanations for their failure in order to prevent others from attributing their bad performance to lacking abilities (Spinath & Stiensmeier-Pelster, 2003). Self-handicapping appears to be perfectly suitable to achieve this goal. Thus, unsurprisingly, a performance-avoidance goal orientation has been shown to be associated with a higher use of self-handicapping strategies (Elliot & Church, 2003; Martin et al., 2001; Midgley & Urdan, 2001; Schwinger & Stiensmeier-Pelster, *in press*; Urdan, 2004).

Previous research on self-handicapping has especially focused on mastery (-approach) and performance-avoidance goals (e.g., Urdan & Midgley, 2001), which is why we suppose these two achievement goals to be of foremost interest to the present research. Nevertheless, since the different achievement goals have been found to be substantially inter-correlated (e.g., Elliot & Murayama, 2008; Wang, Biddle,

& Elliot, 2007), researchers may come to wrong conclusions if they consider the association between certain goals and outcomes without controlling for the effects of other achievement goal dimensions. Stated differently, results obtained for the relation of one particular achievement goal to cognition, affect, or behavior might be confounded by other types of goals. Findings of studies examining antecedents and consequences of multiple goal pursuit further support this line of reasoning (e.g., Barron & Harackiewicz, 2001; Senko & Harackiewicz, 2005). Therefore, in two of the three studies reported here we controlled for the effects of students' performance-approach goals.

1.2. Mastery goals diminish the effects of self-handicapping determinants

A rather simple method to prevent people from using self-handicapping strategies would be to “turn off” all the negative attitudes and self-perceptions that lead to self-esteem threats and subsequently elicit self-esteem maintenance mechanisms. For instance, high self-esteem (Martin et al., 2001), low performance-avoidance goal pursuit (Midgley & Urdan, 2001), low prevention regulatory focus (Leonardelli, Lakin, & Arkin, 2007), low entity views of intelligence (Rhodewalt, 1994), low uncertain personal control (Martin et al., 2001), and low fear of failure (Elliot & Church, 2003) have all been associated with a low amount of self-handicapping. As a consequence, it would be useful to bolster people's self-esteem, to lower their performance-avoidance goals, and so on. Such undertakings, however, are arduous and riddled with difficulties in order to produce the aspired effects. This holds true especially for self-esteem enhancement programs. For example, interventions aimed primarily at enhancing people's worthiness try to make them feel good about themselves regardless of their actual competencies. As research has shown, such programs produce no long-lasting positive results and may even have negative long-term consequences due to the failing balance between worthiness and perceived competencies (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Mruk, 2006). Another aspect which impedes direct self-esteem changes refers to most people's tendency to seek self-confirmatory performance feedback (Swann, 1990). This confirmation tendency becomes even stronger the more important the issue is for one's entire self-esteem (Swann & Pelham, 2002; Vonk, 2006).

Given the difficulties described above, it might make much more sense to search for a variable that helps to reduce self-handicapping even when all the negative risk-factors are still present. Stated differently, a variable is needed that diminishes the negative impact of the mentioned risk-factors on self-handicapping. In the present article, we examine a mastery goal orientation as a promising prevention factor against self-handicapping. We assume that mastery goals buffer the negative impact of the above mentioned attitudes on self-handicapping (Rothbaum, Morling, & Rusk, 2009). However, the absence of mastery goals is not supposed to boost the relationships between self-handicapping and its determinants in a maladaptive way.

The assumed buffering effect of mastery goals can be framed in terms of classical diathesis-stress theories stating that the risk to develop psychologically maladaptive attitudes or behaviors (e.g., depression, self-handicapping) depends on the interaction between the degree of one's personal vulnerability and the level of stress experienced (see Rothbaum et al., 2009, for a discussion of the similar etiologies of depression and self-handicapping). That is, people with low self-esteem are vulnerable to self-handicapping, and they choose handicapping behaviors in response to stressful events such as upcoming exams (Rhodewalt & Vohs, 2005). However, modern multiplicative approaches to diathesis-stress suggest that there are probably numerous factors that either increase or diminish the degree of one's personal vulnerability. Several studies in depression research have therefore adopted this multiplicative approach which posits that the interaction between vulnerability and/or protective factors ultimately determines one's vulnerability status (Abela & Hankin, 2008). For instance, a positive attributional style could protect low self-esteem individuals

² Elliot and McGregor (2001; see also Elliot & Murayama, 2008) extended the goal orientation framework to a 2×2 model by incorporating mastery-avoidance goals as a fourth dimension. According to them, mastery-avoidance oriented students aim to not perform worse than before. However, empirical evidence on the conceptual validity of the mastery-avoidance goal construct is still scarce (e.g., Moller & Elliot, 2006), so akin to recent achievement goal studies (e.g., Lau & Nie, 2008; Murayama & Elliot, 2009), we decided not to incorporate it in our research.

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