



Structure of academic self-handicapping – Global or domain-specific construct? ☆

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ABSTRACT

Given the well-documented negative effects of academic self-handicapping, researchers should be able to (a) draw valid conclusions about the nature and magnitude of these maladaptive effects, and (b) create efficient intervention procedures that help reduce self-handicapping. To accomplish these goals, reliable knowledge about the structure of academic self-handicapping is needed. In this article, I therefore analyzed the domain specificity of academic self-handicapping by assessing the use of handicapping strategies across different school subjects in two samples of German high school students. In Studies 1 and 2, confirmatory factor analyses revealed better fit indices for domain-specific compared to domain-general models. Moreover, the subject-specific handicapping factors were differentially related to students' subject-specific self-concept, interest, and achievement. I conclude that academic self-handicapping should be seen from a domain-specific perspective yielding important implications for educational practitioners.

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1. Introduction

Students are confronted with numerous challenging tasks which they sometimes fail to accomplish. Such failures and setbacks can lead to feelings of incompetence and worthlessness, and might thus be experienced as a threat to one's self-esteem. Self-esteem threats need to be regulated, and so researchers have defined a variety of strategies people can use in this regard (e.g., Tesser, Crepez, Collins, Cornell, & Beach, 2000). In the academic context, a common self-esteem regulation strategy refers to self-handicapping, which is defined "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). Examples of academic self-handicapping include procrastinating, effort withdrawal, and claiming test anxiety or illness (Urduan & Midgley, 2001).

There is substantial agreement in the literature that academic self-handicapping has negative effects on important educational processes and outcomes, such as motivation and achievement (e.g., Martin, Marsh, & Debus, 2001; Urduan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998; Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998). Revealing the circumstances under which self-handicapping occurs can thus be considered an essential research task. In this regard, it is important to examine if academic self-handicapping represents a global or domain-specific construct. Specifically, does self-handicapping strategies occur only within certain domains (e.g., Math) or does self-handicapping spread across all school-related activities and

subjects? This question appears highly relevant for two reasons. First, valid conclusions about the significance and magnitude of relations to important consequences of self-handicapping can only be drawn from an adequate level of specificity. If self-handicapping in Math is negatively associated with performance, but unrelated to performance in other subjects, a domain-general analysis of the relation between self-handicapping and performance would produce biased results. Second, in order to develop efficient intervention procedures against self-handicapping, it appears crucial to know where to start. On the one hand, if academic self-handicapping is domain-specific, one would start with bolstering domain-related aspects (e.g., classroom climate and specific self-evaluations) whereby the main focus may differ depending on the particular school subject considered. On the other hand, if self-handicapping behaviors are shown to be domain-general, it might be more promising to focus the intervention on individual student traits which are highly stable across different contexts and situations. Such traits would reflect any kind of predisposition for low, unstable, and/or fragile self-esteem (e.g., neuroticism, depression, and contingent self-esteem). Given the practical relevance of this topic, I herein seek to examine the domain specificity of academic self-handicapping by conducting confirmatory factor analyses of adolescent high-school students' self-handicapping across different school subjects. Moreover, I consider divergent validity issues by examining concurrent correlations to domain-specific interest, self-concept, and achievement.

1.1. The nature of self-handicapping

Self-handicapping is used prior to an achievement situation in order to reduce self-esteem threat that has been elicited by the fear of failing

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in the respective situation. The postulated protective function of self-handicapping on self-esteem takes advantage of discounting and augmentation principles of attribution (Kelley, 1971). In the event of failure, the presence of an impediment offers individuals the opportunity to shift attributions for poor performance from low ability (e.g., “I failed the exam because I’m stupid”) to the handicap (e.g., “I failed the exam because I didn’t sleep well last night”). By this means, ability as a causal attribution will be discounted and one’s image of competence as well as one’s self-esteem will be buffered. Altogether, the construct of self-handicapping comprises three aspects; namely, the handicap (e.g., effort withdrawal), the reason (to use effort withdrawal as an excuse), and the a priori timing of the strategy (reduced effort *before* low academic achievement rather than an excuse made up after low achievement occurs). Obviously, the first aspect makes self-handicapping similar to other avoidance-related motives and behaviors, such as test anxiety, avoidance of help-seeking, or work avoidance (defined as avoiding demanding achievement situations to minimize expended effort; see Dowson & McInerney, 2003). However, none of these constructs includes the second and third aspect of self-handicapping stated above. Self-handicapping hence is differentiated from other constructs because it reflects a purposeful behavior intended to manipulate the attribution of failure before failure has occurred. Moreover, in contrast to self-serving attributions after failure, self-handicapping is executed *before* a threatened situation. It is an a priori strategy, not simply a post hoc excuse.

An important distinction is drawn in the literature between behavioral and claimed self-handicapping (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985). Behavioral self-handicapping implies an active acquisition of an impediment, such as drug abuse (Berglas & Jones, 1978), or decrease in practice (Deppe & Harackiewicz, 1996). In contrast, claimed self-handicappers only report to have obstacles. For example, they claim test anxiety (Smith, Snyder, & Handelsman, 1982), physical symptoms (Smith, Snyder, & Perkins, 1983), or bad mood (Baumgardner, Lake, & Arkin, 1985). These two self-handicapping modes differ from one another in terms of cost–benefit analysis (Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991). On the one hand, behavioral handicaps are more credible because they are more convincingly tied to performance than are claimed ones. For the same reason, however, behavioral handicaps are more costly. On the other hand, claimed handicaps, such as reported test anxiety, serve as an excuse for failure but do not necessarily decrease one’s chances of being successful (Hirt et al., 1991; Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005). The present study focuses exclusively on behavioral self-handicapping because this form of self-handicapping has more maladaptive effects on students’ achievement. In fact, several studies have reported fairly large correlations between behavioral self-handicapping and achievement of, for instance, $r = -.40$ (Midgley & Urdan, 2001), $r = -.38$ (Gadbois & Sturgeon, 2011), $r = -.33$ (Shih, 2005), and $r = -.38$ (Midgley & Urdan, 1995). In contrast, claimed self-handicapping has shown quite lower associations with achievement of, for example, $r = .07$ (McCrea, Hirt, Hendrix, Milner, & Steele, 2008). Due to these findings, I think that behavioral self-handicapping deserves more attention in gathering information about adequate intervention procedures. Moreover, the Academic Self-handicapping Scale (Urden et al., 1998; Schwinger & Stiensmeier-Pelster, 2012), which was chosen as measurement instrument in this study, includes only items designed to measure behavioral self-handicapping.

1.2. Global and domain-specific academic self-handicapping

Academic self-handicapping has been widely studied in college and university students. These studies have measured self-handicapping almost exclusively as a global construct, without referencing specific subjects or domains (e.g., Elliot & Church, 2003; Martin et al., 2001; Thomas & Gadbois, 2007; see McCrea and Hirt (2001), for an exception). Fewer studies have been conducted on self-handicapping in samples of compulsory school students. However, the available findings are similar to those for older students because most studies have also relied on global measures of academic self-handicapping (e.g., Abar & Loken,

2010; Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urden, 1996). Five studies have focused on academic self-handicapping in a particular domain (Leondari & Gonida, 2007; Midgley & Urden, 2001; Schwinger & Stiensmeier-Pelster, 2011; Turner et al., 2002; Urden, 2004), but none of these have compared students’ self-handicapping across multiple domains. I know of only one study which addressed the issue of domain-specific self-handicapping. Green, Martin, and Marsh (2007) evaluated the domain-specificity of the Motivation and Engagement Scale (MES) across Mathematics, English, and Science. Self-handicapping was revealed to differ between domains with average intercorrelations around $r = .75$. However, the study by Green et al. (2007) focused on the evaluation of the overall structure of MES factors, so items were not presented separately for the eleven subscales but were interspersed through the instrument. As a consequence, results on the domain-specificity of self-handicapping might have been biased by responses to the other MES items. For example, if self-handicapping items in the questionnaire would have been positioned right after items for a clearly domain-specific construct (e.g., self-efficacy), participants could have been prompted toward stronger domain-specific associations. Moreover, Green et al. (2007) did not examine differential effects of self-handicapping on academic achievement, which is important for estimating the practical relevance of a domain-specific perspective. Furthermore, up until now, Green et al.’s (2007) findings have not been replicated in other educational systems and/or within different configurations of school subjects. It remains unknown, for instance, whether individuals tend to use self-handicapping strategies in Math, but not in German, or vice versa.

1.3. Why is academic self-handicapping supposed to differ between domains?

1.3.1. Domain-specificity of constructs related to academic self-handicapping

Beyond the results provided by Green et al. (2007), research on similar motivational and affective constructs can hint at whether academic self-handicapping is differentially pursued in certain domains or subjects at school. An inspection of the relevant literature indicates that most motivational and affective variables have been found to have domain-specific functionality. Here, I will briefly review evidence for the domain specificity of three well-established correlates of self-handicapping; namely, students’ intrinsic motivation (Midgley & Urden, 2001; Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005), self-concept (Thomas & Gadbois, 2007; Urden et al., 1998), and achievement goal orientations (Schwinger & Stiensmeier-Pelster, 2011; Urden & Midgley, 2001).

Several researchers have reported evidence for domain specificity in their studies on indicators of intrinsic motivation. Eccles et al. (1993) found that children’s subjective task values were differentiated across domains during the elementary school years. Gottfried, Fleming, and Gottfried (2001) obtained a linear decline in intrinsic motivation from the middle elementary through high school years, but the effects were different for particular subject areas (larger decline in Math compared to science and reading). Regarding the structure of academic self-concept, Marsh and Shavelson (1985) proposed a hierarchical model with a series of subject-specific first-order factors (i.e., Science, Biology, Computer Studies) and two higher-order factors, reflecting Math and verbal abilities. In further studies, Marsh (1992) demonstrated that the relations between self-concept and achievement were specific to particular subjects. Altogether, research on academic self-concept has revealed that performance in a specific subject is predicted more accurately when self-concept has been measured more specifically (see Marsh & Martin (2011), for a review). With respect to achievement goals, self-handicapping has been linked positively to performance–avoidance goals, but negatively to mastery goals (e.g., Elliot & Church, 2003; Midgley & Urden, 2001; Schwinger & Stiensmeier-Pelster, 2011). By means of confirmatory factor analysis, Bong (2001, 2009) revealed strong empirical support for the domain specificity of achievement goals because they were found to function differently in English,

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