



Self-compassion and self-protection strategies: The impact of self-compassion on the use of self-handicapping and sandbagging



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ABSTRACT

Self-compassion is a self-regulation strategy for countering negative self-directed feelings and emotions. High self-compassionate people treat themselves with kindness, care, and concern when facing negative life experience. The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of self-compassion on the use of two self-esteem protecting strategies, self-handicapping and sandbagging. Both strategies are conducive to maintaining or enhancing one's self-esteem by attributing failures in a way that serves as a protective mechanism to self-esteem, but the strategies must take performance loss or deterioration of social relations into account. High self-compassionate people were assumed to apply strategies associated with negative consequences less frequently, given their tendency to admit mistakes and not conceal their weaknesses. In the present study, 173 participants completed questionnaires that assessed self-compassion, self-esteem, self-handicapping, and sandbagging. Consistent with our hypotheses, negative correlations were found between self-compassion and self-handicapping as well as sandbagging. A hierarchical regression analysis also revealed that self-compassion significantly predicted the use of self-handicapping and sandbagging and confirmed that high self-compassionate people have less need to use these self-protecting strategies.

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1. Introduction

Self-compassion is a relatively new construct in the field of self-concept research. The construct was introduced by Neff (2003a) as an emotionally positive self-attitude that involves treating oneself with warmth and comprehension in problematic life situations. Neff (2009) also showed the importance of self-compassion for well-being, life satisfaction, and motivation in academic settings. The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of self-compassion on the use of the two self-esteem protecting strategies, self-handicapping and sandbagging. Below the concept of self-compassion, followed by the self-protecting strategies will be presented. Thereafter the potential impact of self-compassion on the use of self-handicapping and sandbagging will be discussed.

1.1. Self-compassion

Self-compassion was advanced by Neff (2003b) as a conceptualization of a healthy attitude and relationship to oneself. Self-compassion was defined by Neff (2003b) as “being touched by and open to one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from

it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness. Self-compassion also involves offering nonjudgmental understanding to one's pain, inadequacies, and failures, so that one's experience is seen as part of the larger human experience” (p. 86). Self-compassion within this context is composed of the following three bipolar qualities: self-kindness vs. self-judgment, common humanity vs. isolation, and mindfulness vs. overidentification.

According to Neff (2003b) the three qualities can be described as follows: Self-kindness refers to the ability to be caring and supportive to oneself when managing difficult life circumstances or personal failures and to avoid being overly self-critical. When people accept painful experiences with self-kindness, they are more apt to experience their pain rationally and calmly, rather than with self-criticism and frustration. Common humanity represents a world view characterized by the recognition that all humans are imperfect and vulnerable and that suffering is part of the universal human experience rather than a personal affliction. Such an acknowledgement of a common humanity enables people to be non-judgmental and understanding when encountering adverse situations. Mindfulness is a quality that refers to the ability to observe difficult feelings and events in the present moment without exaggerating, ignoring, or suppressing them. Neff (2003a, 2003b, 2009) demonstrated that the described bipolar qualities of

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self-compassion are highly intercorrelated and can be explained by a single overarching factor which she referred to as self-compassion (Neff, 2003a, 2003b, 2009).

A great deal of research shows that self-compassion is positively associated with desired outcomes and negatively related to undesired outcomes. For example, self-compassion is associated with numerous aspects of well-being, including higher levels of social connectedness and life satisfaction (Neff, 2009, 2011) as well as optimism and happiness (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007), lower levels of depression, anxiety and academic burn-out (Lee, 2013; Neff, 2003b; Neff, Hseih, & Dejiththirath, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007), and more positive relationship behavior and satisfaction in romantic relationships (Baker & McNulty, 2011; Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Furthermore, high self-compassionate people show more intrinsic motivation in academic settings, less fear of failure, and were more able to cope with and accept negative feedback (Neff et al., 2005). Self-compassion appeared to function as an “antidote” to ego threat (Neff, Kirkpatrick, et al., 2007), daily distress (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007), and self-criticism (Germer, 2009). Altogether, the research indicates that high self-compassionate people attempt to change circumstances that they can but accept those they cannot change.

1.2. Self-handicapping and sandbagging

According to Jones and Berglas (1978), self-handicaps are impediments to performance that people create (or claim) to protect their perceived competence which in turn maintains or enhances their self-esteem. These impediments constitute attempts by self-handicappers to select or create settings in which feedback on performance is ambiguous. If they fail, attribution to poor ability can be discounted because the impediment serves as a potential cause. In the unexpected event of success, self-handicappers' sense of competency is enhanced, because they displayed a good performance despite the handicap. Based on Leary and Shepperd (1986), handicapping behavior comprises two types: Behavioral handicaps and self-reported handicaps. Behavioral handicaps refer to actual behaviors that would impede a performance, for example, drug and alcohol consumption (Higgins & Harris, 1988), effort withdrawal or reduction (Rhodewalt & Fairfield, 1991) and decrease in practice (Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer, 1984). Self-reported handicaps, on the other hand, refer to claims of handicaps before a performance, for example, reporting high social anxiety (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). Uysal and Knee (2012) proposed a third form, trait self-handicapping, which assessed by the Self-Handicapping Scale (Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982). According to the scale items, trait self-handicapping reflects a more chronic and habitual self-handicapping.

Research has shown that only a moderate or occasional use of self-handicapping strategies will protect or enhance the self-esteem. A reduction of the pressure to succeed by a suitable self-handicapping strategy can help a person to work without anxiety on a task and thus have a positive impact on the performance and on the self-esteem (Deppe & Harackiewicz, 1996; Sanna & Mark, 1995). The excessive use of self-handicapping strategies, however, leads at least in the long term to more disadvantages than advantages. Self-handicapping behaviors, such as taking drugs or effort withdrawal, increase the risk of failure in achievement situations (Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998) and can also cause social problems. In this regard, Rhodewalt, Sanbonmatsu, Tschanz, Feick, and Waller (1995) showed that people claiming to have used self-handicapping strategies before working on a task in an experimental setting received less favorable feedback than people performing at the same level but who had not offered excuses.

Gibson and Sachau (2000) define sandbagging as “a self-presentational strategy involving the false prediction or feigned demonstration of inability” (p. 56). Research by Baumeister and colleagues (Baumeister, 1984; Baumeister, Hamilton, & Tice, 1985) suggests that one's expectations of success facilitate performance, whereas other people's expectations of success inhibit performance. People using the sandbagging strategy attempt to influence the expectations of others by creating artificially low expectations for their performance. Sandbagging thus offers the advantage of reducing the performance pressure and provides a low baseline for the assessment of one's subsequent performance through other people.

Sandbagging could protect and enhance self-esteem by lowering the performance pressure and by the perception of performance results that is much better than predicted by the performer and expected by the audience. In addition to these positive aspects, the application of the sandbagging strategy also has some negative effects. First, people classified as high sandbaggers have been shown to limit themselves to consider and explore their abilities (Gibson, 2007). Gibson showed that high sandbaggers attempt to avoid self-relevant information when it would be made public. This could hamper the accurate self-perception of one's strengths and weaknesses. Second, Gibson, Sachau, Doll, and Shumate (2002) showed that sandbaggers who predicted lower performance scores in a sports task performed worse in the actual competition, which suggests that predicting worse performance could in some cases also work as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finally, the use of the sandbagging strategy may also lead to the deterioration of social relationships, if evaluators, opponents, or the audience detect the deceptive intent of the claims of inability, low levels of training, or skill.

1.3. Self-compassion and self-enhancing strategies

An essential characteristic of self-compassionate people is attributing experiences primarily to themselves and comparing their abilities and achievements less with others in contrast to low self-compassionate people (Neff, 2011). Comparing with other people is also important for people using self-handicapping and sandbagging strategies. Clearly, though, people with high self-compassionate qualities tend to use these strategies less than people with low self-compassion qualities. Furthermore, individuals with high self-compassion spend less time defending their self-worth and more on gaining experience (Neff & Vonk, 2009), and high self-compassionate people are more willing to admit their own mistakes and hide their weaknesses from themselves and others less than low self-compassionate people (Neff, Rude, et al., 2007). Based on the reviewed findings, self-compassion should therefore be a negative predictor of both self-worth protecting strategies.

In review of the relevant literature, a clear difference emerges between self-handicapping and self-compassion behaviors and their respective outcomes. In this regard, Zuckerman et al. (1998) found that self-handicapping is related to self-focused rumination, self blame and the usage of coping strategies implying withdrawal, and negative focus. Further, Zuckerman and Tsai (2005) reported that self-handicapping results in a loss in competence satisfaction and in intrinsic motivation. In contrast, high self-compassion people exhibit more adaptive perceptions and behaviors. People with a high level of self-compassion have a greater ability to assess their own skills and greater knowledge about their own competences than people low in self-compassion. After failures, they also attempt to learn from their mistakes to improve their ability to face new challenges (Neff et al., 2005).

Numerous studies have also explored the relationship of self-compassion and sandbagging with goal orientation. For example, Gibson and Sachau (1997) found that prior to performance, high

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