

Self-Handicapping, Expected Evaluation, and Performance: Accentuating the Positive and Attenuating the Negative

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Three studies investigated the influence of social- and self-evaluative motives on self-handicapping and performance. In each study, efficacy expectancies were manipulated by varying the difficulty of a preliminary task, and social- and self-evaluation were manipulated orthogonally. In Study 1, participants who self-handicapped performed better than those who did not when a positive or negative evaluation was expected, in some conditions. In Study 2, we used a situationally imposed handicap and found that both social- and self-evaluation participants showed improved performance in the presence of the handicap. In Study 3, when a positive or negative evaluation was expected, high self-handicappers performed better after choosing to self-handicap, for both social- and self-evaluative motives. Little evidence of self-handicapping or effects on subsequent performance was found for low self-handicappers. No evidence was found for self-handicapping among participants who could not be evaluated. Discussion centers around motives to self-handicap and implications for subsequent performance. © 1995 Academic Press, Inc.

Self-handicaps are preemptively acquired or claimed impediments to successful performance that are designed to manipulate the attributional ambiguity of an

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evaluation. According to Berglas and Jones (1978), the self-handicapper is simultaneously taking advantage of the discounting and augmenting principles of attribution (Kelley, 1972). In the case of failure, it becomes difficult to question the person's ability because of the presence of an equally plausible performance-inhibiting cause, the handicap. In the case of success, attributions to the person's ability become augmented because the successful performance is perceived to have occurred despite the presence of the handicap. Self-handicapping strategies are therefore designed to reduce the responsibility for a potential failure and to enhance the responsibility for a potential success.

Support for the notion that people actively engage in self-handicapping has been obtained in several studies that have focused on the various strategies that may serve a self-handicapping function. For example, as self-handicapping strategies, participants have been shown to ingest purportedly performance-inhibiting drugs or alcohol (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Gibbons & Gaeddert, 1984; Tucker, Vuchinich, & Sobell, 1981), to decrease effort on or before performance (Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991; Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer, 1984; Snyder, Smoller, Strenta, & Frankel, 1981; Tice & Baumeister, 1990), to report the presence of physical or psychological symptoms before performance (Mayer-son & Rhodewalt, 1988; Smith, Snyder, & Perkins, 1983), and to perform under debilitating conditions, such as with distracting music (Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986; Rhodewalt, Morf, Hazlett, & Fairfield, 1991; Shepperd & Arkin, 1989; Tice, 1991).

SELF-HANDICAPPING AND PERFORMANCE: SOCIAL- VERSUS SELF-EVALUATION?

Although much is known about the various strategies that may be used to self-handicap, much less is

known about the motivational underpinnings, and about the performance consequences, of self-handicapping. One issue that is critical to a complete understanding of self-handicapping is whether people will choose to self-handicap in the service of either social- or self-evaluative motives, or both. Whether social- and/or self-evaluative concerns can influence a person's motivation has been a matter of considerable interest, and of some controversy, in both social and organizational psychology (e.g., see Baumeister, 1986; Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989; Greenwald & Breckler, 1985; Schlenker & Weigold, 1989, for reviews).

With regard to self-handicapping, for example, the Jones and Berglas (1978) and the Snyder and Smith (1982) formulations of self-handicapping assumed that self-handicapping is primarily motivated by a concern over self, rather than social, evaluation. Jones and Berglas observed that self-handicapping "is probably augmented by the presence of an audience, but we emphasize that the public value of the strategy is not its original impetus" (p. 202). In support of this, Berglas and Jones (1978) reported that participants self-handicapped by selecting what they believed to be performance-inhibiting drugs under private conditions, but that self-handicapping was not increased by the possibility of a public evaluation. Kolditz and Arkin (1982), however, argued that Berglas and Jones had not convincingly isolated social- from self-evaluative motives to self-handicap and reported that a concern over possible social evaluation (i.e., self-presentation) was a more potent motivator of self-handicapping than was a concern over possible self-evaluation.

Unfortunately, there have been few other attempts to differentiate the social- versus self-evaluative antecedents of self-handicapping (e.g., see Higgins, Snyder, & Berglas, 1990, for a review). Accordingly, the relative importance of social- and self-evaluative concerns in motivating self-handicapping remains obscure, and, in fact, what little research does exist is contradictory. Moreover, no study that has attempted to differentiate social- from self-evaluative motives to self-handicap also has attempted to examine the effects of self-handicapping on subsequent performance, which we describe below as the second goal of our research. In fact, studies that examine the effect of self-handicapping on performance are rare in general. Most studies end at the point at which the participants choose whether or not to self-handicap. Frankel and Snyder (1978); Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Paisley (1985); Harris and Snyder (1986); Rhodewalt and Davison (1986); and Snyder *et al.* (1981), are exceptions; however, even these studies have not examined the impact on performance of *both* social- and self-evaluative motives to self-handicap.

Despite the relative lack of empirical research on

these issues, there remains a strong theoretical focus on the evaluative motivations (social and/or self) that may underlie the use of self-handicapping strategies. For example, as Self (1990) points out, "when others will be evaluating an individual's performance, when the evaluation standards depend on the performance of another, or when they are quite high, self-handicapping has been shown to increase" (p. 38). Therefore, the first goal of our research was to provide a further test of whether either social- or self-evaluative motives, or both, can influence self-handicapping. Taken from Kolditz and Arkin's (1982) position, we might expect self-handicapping to occur only, or at least to occur more strongly, when a social evaluation is possible. In contrast, taken from Berglas and Jones' (1978) position, we might expect self-handicapping to occur only, or to be at least as strong as social-evaluative, under self-evaluative conditions. To address these questions, we employed a set of manipulations that have been shown to be effective in orthogonally inducing social-versus self-evaluation in other areas (e.g., Sanna & Pusecker, 1994; Szymanski & Harkins, 1987), but that had not as yet been used in the self-handicapping literature.

VALENCE OF EXPECTED EVALUATION, SELF-EFFICACY, AND SELF-HANDICAPPING

In addition to assessing social- and self-evaluative antecedents to self-handicapping, the second goal of our research was to examine the influence of expected positive versus negative evaluation (social and self) and self-efficacy on self-handicapping and performance. Although efficacy-related motives have not been examined directly with regard to self-handicapping, in our research on social facilitation and social loafing, we have shown that performance is affected by a person's efficacy beliefs and beliefs concerning valence of expected evaluation (Sanna, 1992; Sanna & Pusecker, 1994; Sanna & Shotland, 1990). Importantly, given past debates about the adequacy of methods used in prior self-handicapping research (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Kolditz & Arkin, 1982), we have also been able to effectively and orthogonally differentiate social- from self-evaluative sources of motivation (Sanna & Pusecker, 1994; see also Szymanski & Harkins, 1987).

Drawing from self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1986), participants' efficacy expectancies and outcome expectancies have been varied (Sanna, 1992; Sanna & Pusecker, 1994). According to self-efficacy theory, "efficacy expectancies" refer to a person's beliefs about whether a required behavior can be performed, whereas "outcome expectancies" refer to a person's beliefs about whether that behavior will lead to a given

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