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## A cross-cultural study of predictors of self-handicapping in university students

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### Abstract

The influence of Perfectionism, Self-esteem and Self-efficacy on Self-handicapping in studying was investigated in relation to individualism and collectivism in students in the United Kingdom and Lebanon. One hundred and twenty eight participants (64 UK and 64 from Lebanon) completed the Individualism and Collectivism Scale; the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale; the Perfectionism Cognitions Inventory; the Self-handicapping Scale; the Generalised Self-efficacy Scale; and the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale. Results indicated that Lebanese students showed characteristics of both collectivist and individualist societies whereas the British students were more individualistic. Lebanese students tended to have higher scores on measures of Self-esteem and all forms of Perfectionism than British students, but similar scores on Self-handicapping and Self-efficacy. Regression analyses showed that Lebanese and British students with higher Self-esteem scores and fewer internal self-motivations to be perfect report Self-handicapping less often. British students who report Self-handicapping have lower Self-efficacy scores and higher Self-reliance scores than those who Self-handicap less often, and being female is associated with slightly higher Self-handicapping in the Lebanese. In conclusion, reported Self-orientated Perfectionism and Self-esteem were the major predictors of Self-handicapping in both cultures, and there were other minor differences, supporting the theory that self-handicapping is partly due to feelings of self-doubt.

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## 1. Introduction

At times, some people intentionally impede their own performance, if they feel uncertain of their ability to succeed and fear failure. This process of *self-handicapping*, recently reviewed by [Urdan and Midgley \(2001\)](#), involves strategies of externalization so that an individual can excuse failure and internalize (accept credit for) success. Thus a person's ability attributions can be protected and/or enhanced ([Hobden & Pliner, 1995](#)). It has been argued by [McCrea and Hirt \(2001\)](#) that the motivation for self-handicapping is primarily to protect self-esteem, by defending beliefs about domain specific abilities. There is a continuing debate as to whether self-handicapping strategies are primarily motivated by private esteem or public esteem. [Higgins, Snyder, and Berglas \(1990\)](#) suggested that self-handicappers are mostly concerned with safeguarding the self, and do this through the construction of obstacles to good performance. By comparison, [Kolditz and Arkin \(1982\)](#) suggested that self-handicapping occurs in order to manage impressions, and thus protect oneself from the judgment of others. It thus appears that there are two possible reasons why a person self-handicaps. It may be that people from collectivist societies self-handicap for different reasons than those from individualist societies. [Hofstede \(1980\)](#) stated that individualism is characteristic of most English speaking countries, while collectivism is most typical in Eastern countries. Behaviour within collectivist cultures is largely regulated by ingroup norms, whereas in individualist cultures behavior is more likely to be regulated by a person's own likes, dislikes, and cost-benefit analysis ([Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990](#)). Triandis et al. suggested that in collectivist cultures more emphasis is placed on ingroup fate, ingroup achievement, family integrity, obedience and security whilst in individualist cultures emphasis is placed on personal fate, personal achievement, pleasure and competition. Self-handicapping in collectivist societies might be motivated more by needs to protect public esteem (manage impressions), whereas in individualist societies it might result more from the necessity to protect private self-esteem. A cross-cultural investigation might shed light onto the sources of motivation to self-handicap.

Another factor that should be considered when studying the cross-cultural motives for self-handicapping is perfectionism. [Hobden and Pliner \(1995\)](#) suggested that self-orientated and socially-prescribed perfectionists might well self-handicap for different reasons as their perfectionistic tendencies are derived from two very different sources, the former being internal with the latter being external. Thus, perfectionism's influence on self-handicapping may differ in individualist and collectivist cultures and this will be examined. The concept has been identified as a multidimensional construct, both personal and social, consisting of Self-orientated Perfectionism, Socially-prescribed Perfectionism, and Other-orientated Perfectionism ([Hewitt & Flett, 1991](#)). Self-orientated perfectionists strive for high personal standards of perfection. Socially-prescribed perfectionists believe that other people, often parents, have very high standards and expectations of their performance ([Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990](#)), while Other-orientated perfectionists believe that other people around them should be perfect.

The majority of research on perfectionism has focused on predominantly Westernized samples or has simply not accounted for, or reported on, the sample's cultural identity. Research compar-

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