



Letter to the Editor

The relationship between self-esteem and self-worth protection strategies in university students



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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem is one of the variables that are most frequently linked to the adoption of self-protection strategies. However, the nature of this relationship continues to be controversial. The present study examines the relationship between self-esteem and the use of behavioral and claimed self-handicapping, as well as of defensive pessimism, and their relationship with gender in university students. A total of 1031 university students took part in the study. For women, polynomial regression analysis demonstrated a negative linear relationship of claimed self-handicapping and a tendency toward a quadratic relationship in the case of behavioral self-handicapping, as well as a mainly quadratic relationship in the use of defensive pessimism. For men, a negative linear relationship was found in all cases. The theoretical and psychoeducational implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Assuming Covington's (1992) approach that states that humans need to preserve positive self-appraisal, fear of failure drives some students to prioritize the protection of their personal competence. From this perspective, self-handicapping and defensive pessimism can be considered to be two possible strategies that students can adopt to address potential threats to their self-worth.

Self-handicapping is a proactive attempt to protect an individual's self-worth through the deliberate creation of obstacles, real or imaginary, which, although they hinder or impede the individual's successful performance, provide a convincing alibi in the face of a possible poor performance (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985).

Another strategy involving an anticipatory maneuver in the face of possible negative outcomes is *defensive pessimism*. In this case, despite having a previous history of success, the individual sets excessively low achievement expectations for the tasks, accurately predicting how failure will be triggered. However, the low expectations serve as a

stimulus to increase the individual's effort to prevent the negative prediction from occurring (Norem, 2002).

Although it cannot be denied that through the student's prism, self-handicapping and defensive pessimism are self-defense mechanisms that are established in response to the fear of failure; one of the most controversial issues regarding the adoption of these strategies lies in their role in self-esteem.

With regard to self-handicapping, its relationship with self-esteem is unclear. Some studies conclude that people with high self-esteem are more likely to self-handicap (Kim, Lee, & Hong, 2012; Tice & Baumeister, 1990), other investigations argue otherwise (Coudeville, Gernigon, & Martin Ginis, 2011; Finez & Sherman, 2012); however, others (e.g., Rhodewalt & Hill, 1995) consider self-esteem to be a variable that is relatively independent of self-handicapping.

Within the academic context, several authors seem to endorse the second position (Eronen, Nurmi, & Salmela-Aro, 1998; Pulford, Johnson, & Awaida, 2005; Rodríguez, Cabanach, Valle, Núñez, & González-Pienda, 2004). Thus, Valle, Cabanach, Rodríguez, Núñez, and González-Pienda (2005) suggest the possibility that students with low self-esteem have a greater need to protect themselves from the emotional consequences of failure. However, they also admit that it is plausible that students with high self-esteem have more to lose in achievement contexts and, consequently, more to protect. Somewhat in keeping with this approach, it is postulated that individuals with low self-esteem use self-handicapping for self-protection and that individuals with high self-esteem use self-handicapping for self-enhancement (Tice, 1991).

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One of the most important contributions of this research is the differentiation between behavioral and claimed self-handicapping, insofar as some individuals verbalize the existence of impediments that inhibit achievement (claimed self-handicapping), whereas others engage in actions that are incompatible with good achievement (behavioral self-handicapping). This distinction is important because behavioral self-handicapping constitutes a more maladaptive mechanism than claimed self-handicapping. Thus, whereas the former always implies self-sabotaging activities (e.g., partying the night before an exam), claimed self-handicapping (e.g., claiming anxiety before a test) does not necessarily compromise the individual's performance (Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991).

Some research linking these two types of self-handicapping with self-esteem has been developed in competitive sports, where it has been suggested that low self-esteem would favor claimed self-handicapping (Coudevylle, Martin Ginis, & Famose, 2008; Martin & Brawley, 2002). The recent work of Tandler, Schwinger, Kaminski, and Stiensmeier-Pelster (2014) is, to date, the only study dealing with this issue in academic environments, although only partially, because self-esteem is considered to be a mediator between self-affirmation and claimed self-handicapping.

Research into the role of self-esteem in the function of defensive pessimism is also scarce. Most investigations have examined this topic comparing the levels of self-esteem of defensive pessimists with those of individuals who use other strategies. Thus, whereas some studies (e.g., Eronen et al., 1998; Norem, 2002) argue that defensive pessimists make lower self-appraisals than strategic optimists, Rodríguez et al. (2004) found no significant differences between the self-esteem levels reported by defensive pessimistic university students and those who did not resort to this strategy. However, Norem and Burdovic (2007) have shown a significant long-term increase in the self-esteem of defensive pessimists, indicating the possibility that defensive pessimists' self-esteem has high levels of fluctuation, as suggested in other studies (A. J. Martin, Marsh, & Debus, 2001; Yamawaki, Tschanz, & Feick, 2004).

In short, the few available precedents do not offer a clear stance on the link between self-esteem and self-protection strategies. In this sense, not only is the sign (positive or negative) of this association debatable but the fact that preliminary research has not determined the type of relationship is also debatable (i.e., linear, quadratic). Thus, several studies have established the existence of a relationship between self-esteem and self-protective strategies by means of bivariate correlations (e.g., Coudevylle et al., 2008; Martin & Brawley, 2002). In others, self-handicapping and defensive pessimism are independent variables (Eronen et al., 1998; Rodríguez et al., 2004). The studies analyzing self-esteem as a categorical variable (e.g., Finez & Sherman, 2012; Tandler et al., 2014; Tice & Baumeister, 1990) only establish two levels of self-esteem (high vs. low). Hence, it could be of interest to consider more than two levels of self-esteem (e.g., as a continuous variable) to observe its specific relationship with self-protective strategies.

To our knowledge, this study is the first to propose this type of analysis, considering the two types of self-handicapping mechanisms and defensive pessimism. In particular, we intend to examine whether the level of self-esteem is associated with a differential use of behavioral and claimed self-handicapping, as well as of defensive pessimism, in the university context and the nature of these relationships (linear, quadratic, etc.). According to some of the above-mentioned studies, we expect that the lower the students' level of self-esteem, the greater their use of the three strategies.

For this purpose, the effect of gender will be controlled. There is abundant literature describing self-handicapping, particularly behavioral self-handicapping, as a predominantly male strategy (e.g., McCrea, Hirt, & Milner, 2008). In contrast, in the case of defensive pessimism, the few antecedents analyzing this topic seem to indicate that women are more prone to its use (Lim, 2009). However, we have no knowledge of previous research providing information on gender differences in terms of the type of relationship between self-esteem and self-

protective strategies. In view of these data, we are inclined to consider that gender could significantly influence the results of the investigation.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were university students who were enrolled in Educational Sciences (Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education, Social Education, and Speech Therapy) and Health Sciences (Nursing, Physiotherapy, and Podiatry). Random cluster sampling was carried out, considering each class-group of students as a cluster, following the organization established by the centers. After excluding 56 cases with missing values, the sample was composed of 1031 students (58.22% of the total of enrolled students) aged between 18 and 53 years ($M = 21.36$, $SD = 3.80$). Women comprised 86.3% of the participants. With regard to the students' career, 69.93% were enrolled in Educational Sciences, and the remaining 30.07% were enrolled in Health Sciences.

2.2. Measurement instruments

2.2.1. Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965)

This 10-item instrument (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself") has shown adequate internal consistency in previous research (e.g., Vázquez, Jiménez, & Vázquez-Morejón, 2004), with a reliability of $\alpha = .88$, which was obtained from the data in our study. Participants responded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging between 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 5 (*strongly agree*).

2.2.2. Self-handicapping scale (A. J. Martin, 1998)

This scale differentiates between active and claimed self-handicapping. Several previous studies with university students (e.g., A. J. Martin, 1998; Martin et al., 2001) guarantee the reliability of this instrument. The structure factor obtained from our research data allow us to differentiate two factors: *claimed self-handicapping* (16 items; e.g., "I tend not to study very hard before exams so I have an excuse if I don't do as well as I hoped") and *behavioral self-handicapping* (9 items, e.g., "When an exam or assignment is coming up, I am inclined to tell others that I'm more anxious than I really am, so if I don't do as well as I hoped, they will think that is the reason"). The two factors explain 42.18% of the total variance. Two of the 27 items that composed the original instrument were excluded because they had factor loadings below .40. The reliability indices ranged between $\alpha = .91$ (claimed self-handicapping) and $\alpha = .84$ (behavioral self-handicapping), with an internal consistency of $\alpha = .92$ for the entire scale. The participants' responses were rated on a Likert scale ranging between 1 (*never*) and 5 (*always*).

2.2.3. Defensive pessimism questionnaire (Norem, 2002)

This 12-item instrument (e.g., "Considering what can go wrong helps me to prepare") had an internal consistency of $\alpha = .89$, in accordance with previous studies (Norem, 2009). The participants' responses were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*).

2.3. Procedure

The data were collected at the centers in which the participants were enrolled, specifically, in their own classrooms, and during the academic schedule. The participants were instructed about how to fill in the questionnaires, and they were urged to focus exclusively on the academic facet when reading the items. We emphasized the importance of responding sincerely to all of the issues raised. The subjects were also informed of the voluntariness and anonymity of their participation in the study, guaranteeing the confidentiality of the results.

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