



Internal and external aspects of self-handicapping reflect the distinction between motivations and behaviours: Evidence from the Self-handicapping Scale[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Self-handicapping is an extensively studied phenomenon that has important educational consequences. Much of its empirical study uses the Self-handicapping Scale (SHS) to assess self-handicapping as a single construct. The current study ($N = 484$ university students) tests whether a multifactorial solution to the SHS is more appropriate and meaningful. Parallel analysis and exploratory factor analysis of 242 responses to the SHS suggested two factors. Confirmatory factor analysis of this solution showed satisfactory fit in a second sample ($N = 242$; CFI = .909, RMSEA = .062). The factors were labelled 'Self-handicapping Internal' and 'Self-handicapping External'. These two factors reflect a distinction between cognitive/affective and behavioural components of the self-handicapping phenomenon. The factors showed a significantly different pattern of correlations with procrastination, self-esteem, conscientiousness and emotional stability. Collectively the two factors showed greater incremental prediction of academic achievement than a single SHS total score alone. Moreover, this prediction of achievement held after accounting for personality, providing some degree of evidence that self-handicapping is distinct from major personality domains. Results are discussed in terms of the additional substantive information gleaned from separating self-handicapping measures into multiple components.

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1. Introduction

Self-handicapping is an important phenomenon, most commonly assessed using the total score of the Self-handicapping Scale (SHS; Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982). However, theory suggests that self-handicapping is composed of multiple elements (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Jones & Berglas, 1978; Rhodewalt, 1990; Schwinger, Wirthwein, Lemmer, & Steinmayr, 2014). As such, we propose that modelling SHS items as multiple constructs is more appropriate. Using a large sample of university students, we test whether: (a) a multifactorial model of the SHS provides improved fit over its single-factor use (assessed via differences in Chi-square, CFI, and AIC); and (b) whether the factors of the SHS are substantively different (assessed by their correlations with related constructs such as Big-Five personality, procrastination, self-esteem, and academic achievement).

1.1. Introduction to self-handicapping

Self-handicapping is the phenomenon in which individuals will create obstacles for themselves prior to an ability-evaluating event. Such obstacles serve a dual purpose. In the event of a negative evaluation, obstacles

become an excuse or explanation for failure. In the event of a (usually surprising) positive evaluation, obstacles instead become conquered hurdles (Berglas & Jones, 1978). Importantly, obstacles are instigated before the evaluative event occurs. They are not post hoc attributions. When an a priori obstacle is available as an excuse, a reason for failure is more ambiguous. Because of this, negative feedback from the evaluative event is more easily rendered unjustified (Jones & Berglas, 1978).

1.2. Measuring self-handicapping

Self-handicapping has generally been measured in two ways (Urduan & Midgley, 2001). The first is through observing self-handicapping in evaluative settings (either naturally-occurring or experimentally-induced). The second approach uses self-report questionnaires to assess individual differences in self-handicapping tendencies or traits (Schwinger et al., 2014). The current study focuses solely on this second approach.

In a meta-analysis of self-handicapping and academic achievement, Schwinger et al. (2014) found that the detrimental effect of self-handicapping on academic achievement was significantly moderated by the instrument that had been used to assess self-handicapping. Effects were smaller when general trait measures of self-handicapping were used than when an academic-domain-specific measure was used, e.g. math self-handicapping for math achievement. Schwinger et al. argued that this was due to a "bandwidth-fidelity problem"

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(2014, p. 756). That is, more narrowly defined scales account for more variance in a situation-specific outcome than a broad scale like a general personality trait measure would. Although domain-specific measures are becoming more commonplace in empirical research, many researchers continue to use the SHS, a general ‘trait’ self-handicapping measure.

1.2.1. The Self-handicapping Scale

The 25-item SHS is the most widely used self-report measure of self-handicapping in psychological research. It was constructed to identify self-handicapping tendencies as a general trait (Rhodewalt, 1990). Although research to date suggests that the SHS may be factorially complex, there has been a lack of agreement about which factor structure best represents self-handicapping (as measured by the SHS). Both unidimensional and multifactorial structures have been found.

Strube (1986) suggested a one-factor 10-item scale based on a principal components analysis of an early 20-item SHS, but acknowledged “moderate heterogeneity” among the items (p. 218). Zuckerman, Kieffer, and Knee (1998) similarly suggested a one-factor 14-item solution based on exploratory factor analyses of the current 25-item SHS in two samples. Rhodewalt’s (1990) principal components analysis of the current SHS yielded two factors identified as “proclivity for excuse making” and “concern about effort or motivation” (p. 79). However, confirmatory factor analysis of this solution resulted in unsatisfactory fit indices in three separate samples (Martin & Brawley, 1999). McCrea, Hirt, Hendrix, Milner, and Steele (2008) also suggested a two-factor structure of the SHS. They labelled their factors ‘claimed’ and ‘behavioural’, differentiating between self-handicapping behaviours that actually took place (behavioural), and those that were only said to have taken place (claimed). Structural analyses of foreign-language translations of the SHS have also yielded both unidimensional (Akin, 2012) and two-factor structures (Kraiem & Bertsch, 2011).

Despite limited, and varying psychometric analyses of the SHS, and more recently, criticism of the SHS (Martin & Brawley, 1999; Schwinger et al., 2014), the SHS remains one of the more widely used self-report measures of self-handicapping. Both Strube’s (1986) 10-item shortened SHS and Rhodewalt’s (1990) 14-item shortened SHS are also commonly used instead of the full SHS (e.g. Martin, Marsh, & Debus, 2003; Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005).

Given the conflicting evidence about whether the SHS items represent multiple factors, the current study re-examines the factor structure of the SHS in a university sample. We advance on previous research in four primary ways. First, we use parallel analysis to test the likely number of factors in the SHS. Second, we use EFA to identify a solution and then CFA to test the fit of our data to such a solution (using separate screening and calibration samples). Third, we examine whether the different factors identified by structural analysis have substantively different meaning by testing their relationships with key variables conceptually related to self-handicapping. Fourth, we control for important covariates such as big five personality, self-esteem, and cognitive ability when assessing the relationship between the self-handicapping factors and academic achievement, and we use GPA based on university records (rather than student self-reported GPA). We thus have a compelling predictive model that eliminates major confounding variables. We outline the nomological network for self-handicapping in the paragraphs below, to justify our selection of key variables in the analyses.

1.3. Academic achievement

Self-handicapping is an important predictor of academic achievement and is common in student populations (Kearns, Forbes, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008). Self-handicapping predicts lower levels of academic achievement (Martin et al., 2003; Schwinger et al., 2014; Zuckerman et al., 1998). Sustained engagement in self-handicapping also results in long-term lowered academic achievement (Martin et al., 2003). We therefore expect that higher self-handicapping will predict lower achievement, and can test whether different factors of

self-handicapping show differential levels of deficit on students’ university grades. Moreover, we test the incremental validity of self-handicapping factors over-and-above well-known predictors of both self-handicapping and academic achievement, i.e., cognitive ability, personality, and self-esteem (Poropat, 2009; Rhodewalt, 1990).

1.4. Personality

Only four empirical studies have examined the relationship between self-handicapping and the five-factor model of personality (Bobo, Whitaker, & Strunk, 2013; Martin, Nejad, Colmar, & Liem, 2013; Ross, Canada, & Rausch, 2002; Strube, 1986). These few studies have shown that self-handicapping is associated with low conscientiousness and high neuroticism. Bobo et al. (2013) have proposed that self-handicapping is a “function” of personality (p. 619). They found that 25% of the variance in time-two self-handicapping scores was predicted by a time-one regression equation in which self-handicapping was predicted by conscientiousness and neuroticism. They concluded that their findings showed that choosing self-handicapping as a protective strategy was due to personality factors (that are fixed and stable) rather than transient or situational factors. Rhodewalt (1990) has similarly proposed that self-handicapping tendencies are trait-like. Ross et al. (2002) outline the positive relationships between self-handicapping and the facets of neuroticism, such as depression, self-consciousness and anxiety. They conclude that those who self-handicap are more sensitive to evaluation by others. Furthermore, Ross et al. (2002) claim that neuroticism shares a stronger relationship with self-handicapping than with procrastination. This may be due to the fact that procrastination is typically assessed as behaviour only, unlike neuroticism and self-handicapping which encompass affect and cognition. The current study examines the relationship between self-handicapping and big five personality to test whether self-handicapping is distinct from these broad personality traits. Moreover, we examine the effect of self-handicapping on achievement over and above personality. We are not aware of any other published works that examine this question of incremental validity of self-handicapping over personality.

1.5. Self-esteem

Self-esteem may: (a) cause self-handicapping, where people self-handicap to conceal underlying feelings of inferiority (Urda & Midgley, 2001); and/or (b) occur as an outcome of sustained self-handicapping (Zuckerman et al., 1998). A moderate to strong relationship between self-handicapping and self-esteem has been consistently observed in empirical studies (Rhodewalt, 1990; Strube, 1986; Zuckerman et al., 1998). We thus consider the relationship between self-handicapping factors and self-esteem.

1.6. Procrastination

Procrastination is a commonly observed self-handicapping behaviour (Steel, 2007). Observed or reported procrastination has often been used as a proxy for self-handicapping (Ferrari & Tice, 2000). However procrastination alone does not necessarily indicate the presence a self-handicapping motive. Procrastination that has no implication for failure on an evaluative task might be a product of laziness or disengagement. However, when procrastination does have an implication for failure it may indicate self-handicapping. Given this, measures of self-handicapping should positively correlate with measures of procrastination, but not to a degree that would suggest that they are the same construct.

1.7. Aims and hypotheses

There are two hypotheses in this study. First, the SHS will reflect multiple factors, potentially distinguishing between behavioural

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