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On being happy but fearing failure: The effects of mood on self-handicapping strategies

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Abstract

Does temporary mood influence people's tendency to engage in self-handicapping behaviors? Based on past research on self-handicapping and recent work on affect and social behaviors, this experiment predicted and found that positive mood significantly increased the tendency to engage in two kinds of self-handicapping strategies. Participants ($N = 94$) first received contingent or non-contingent positive feedback about performance on a task of 'cognitive abilities', and then underwent a positive, neutral, or negative mood induction using video films. Self-handicapping was assessed in terms of their subsequent preference for (a) drinking a performance-enhancing, or performance-inhibiting herbal tea, and (b) engaging or not engaging in performance-enhancing cognitive practice. As predicted, happy mood and non-contingent feedback significantly increased self-handicapping on both measures. The implications of these results for everyday performance tasks, and for recent affect-cognition theories, are discussed.

Keywords: Affect; Self-handicapping; Mood effects on self-handicapping

When the chess grand master Deschapelles began to doubt his ability, he paradoxically offered every opponent an extra pawn and an extra move. This apparently self-defeating behavior gave Deschapelles a plausible excuse for defeat and earned him extra credit when he won the match (Diggle, 1958). This self-protective mechanism known as self-handicapping was first investigated empirically by Jones and Berglas (1978). Self-handicapping occurs when individuals anticipate failure on a self-relevant task and create impediments to success. Deschapelles' unorthodox approach illustrates the most striking feature of self-handicapping—that it increases the self-handicapper's risk of failure. Why then might people self-handicap given the availability of alternative self-protective strategies such as self-affirmation and self-evaluation maintenance that do not entail self-sabotage (Hirt & McCrea, 2002; Steele, 1988; Tesser, 1988)? In addition to protecting the self from damaging attributions due to failure, we hypothesized that self-handicapping might serve a secondary purpose: to preserve a pleasant affective state. This study explored the influence of temporary mood states on people's tendency to engage in self-handicapping strategies.

Self- handicapping: a paradoxical strategy

There are two theoretical benefits particular to self-handicapping. First, self-handicappers are protected from failure by ascribing poor performance to factors other than lack of ability. Accordingly, Deschapelles in the above example attributed lost chess games to the advantages he allowed his opponent. Second, people who succeed despite their handicaps earn extra credit for their success. The chess commentator Diggle (1958) credited Deschapelles' enduring status as a grand master to his wins from a handicapped position. In terms of Kelley's (1973) attributional

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terminology, self-handicappers *discount* ability attributions for failure by blaming the self-handicap, but can *augment* ability attributions following success.

It seems fair to assume that self-handicappers expect to feel better after self-handicapping. Indeed, evidence suggests that self-handicapping may lead to more positive mood (e.g., McCrea & Hirt, 2001; but see Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005). Unlike earlier approaches that looked at the affective consequences of self-handicapping, we focus on mood as an antecedent influence on self-handicapping. Accordingly, this study extends the recent literature documenting mood effects on social judgments and behaviors to a new domain, strategic self-handicapping.

In their original study of self-handicapping, Jones and Berglas (1978) found that people selected a performance-inhibiting drug more often when they doubted their ability to succeed on an imminent task. In the present study we also manipulated performance anxiety by providing participants either with performance-consistent, contingent, or with performance-inconsistent, non-contingent, feedback on a test of cognitive abilities. Consistent with Jones and Berglas (1978) results, we expected that non-contingent feedback should increase performance anxiety and self-handicapping.

Mood effects on self-handicapping

Surprisingly, the influence of affect on self-handicapping received little attention to date, despite strong recent evidence that mood states do play an important role in how people attribute success and failure (Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 1994; Forgas, Bower, & Moylan, 1990; Sedikides, 1995). For example, Forgas et al. (1990; Forgas, 1994) found that happy persons tend to take credit (make more internal attributions) when doing well, but avoid self-blame when experiencing failure. In contrast, sad people took little credit for success, but blamed themselves when they did poorly (Forgas et al., 1990). Attributions for real-life relationship conflicts showed a similar mood-induced bias (Forgas, 1994). Building on these findings, we expected that mood states might also influence the adoption of behavioral handicaps when people face performance evaluation (Forgas, 1995).

For the purposes of this research, we define moods as "low-intensity, diffuse, and relatively enduring affective states without a salient antecedent cause and …little cognitive content" (Forgas, 1992) [p.230]. We are interested in moods rather than emotions here, as subconscious moods often have more uniform, enduring, and reliable consequences than do context-specific emotions (Forgas, 2006). Recent affect-cognition theories suggest two distinct psychological mechanisms that may explain mood effects on self-handicapping.

The mood as a resource theory suggests that happy people rely on positive moods as a resource to help them deal with aversive, but potentially useful negative feedback (Trope & Neter, 1994). However, when feedback is uninformative or unreliable, happy mood produces the opposite reaction, as people become protective of their positive moods (e.g., Aspinwall, 1998; Nygren, Isen, Taylor, & Dulin, 1996). Consistent with this reasoning, Trope, Ferguson, and Ragunanthan (2001) found that happy participants sought and accepted reliable feedback. However, happy participants who doubted that the feedback was reliable avoided negative feedback in an attempt to protect their positive mood state. Typically, self-handicapping occurs when people doubt their ability and the value of receiving further feedback is low (Jones & Berglas, 1978). Accordingly, in performance situations happy persons experiencing non-contingent (ie. unreliable) feedback should engage in more self-handicapping than do people in a negative mood (Aspinwall, 1998).

Happy people are also more likely to self-handicap because losses loom larger in their minds. Numerous studies suggest that happy people are especially loss averse when facing negative outcomes and are willing to pay more to insure against possible losses (Arkes, Herren, & Isen, 1986; Nygren et al., 1996). In a similar way, we expected greater self-handicapping by happy participants here to avoid the aversive consequences of expected negative feedback.

Aims and hypotheses

The present study was designed to demonstrate that mild mood states can influence strategic social behaviors like self-handicapping. According to previous research on self-handicapping and mood effects on social judgments and behaviors, we expected positive mood to increase self-handicapping behaviors. This hypothesis is consistent with past evidence showing that positive mood motivates self-protective attributions for success and failure (Forgas, 1994; Forgas et al., 1990), and promotes the avoidance of negative, uninformative feedback (Trope et al., 2001). Further we expected to replicate Jones and Berglas' (1978) finding that non-contingent feedback should increase the tendency to self-handicap.

Method

Overview, participants, and design

Ninety-four first-year psychology students at the University of New South Wales, Sydney (61 females and 33 males) participated in this study for course credit. Participants received either contingent or non-contingent positive feedback on an initial verbal abilities task. Next, they watched a brief mood induction video, and were then offered two opportunities to self-handicap before expecting to undertake a second verbal abilities task: (a) drink a *performance-enhancing* or a *performance-inhibiting* herbal tea, and (b) engage, or do not engage, in performance-relevant practice. The procedure concluded with a post-experimental questionnaire, designed to validate the mood induction,