SELF-FOCUS, GENDER, AND HABITUAL SELF-HANDICAPPING: DO THEY MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN BEHAVIORAL SELF-HANDICAPPING?

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This experiment examined the effects of public self-focus on individuals' behavioral self-handicapping tendencies. When faced with a threatening evaluation, a person may choose to self-handicap behaviorally. Men, more than women, and trait self-handicappers have been shown to self-handicap behaviorally. How do situational factors such as self-focus interface with these personal characteristics to affect such actions? Self-focus of attention was expected to make the self-evaluation implications of an upcoming performance more salient and to cause the self-focused performer to self-handicap behaviorally. Persons who were low or high in habitual self-handicapping were presented with an important intellectual evaluation and were allowed to practice for the upcoming test. Results showed that men self-handicap more by practicing less when they are self-focused, but women do not self-handicap under self-focus and self-handicapping instruction conditions. The implications of these findings for understanding the antecedent conditions of self-handicapping are discussed in the context of other recent work.

Practically everyone is motivated to maintain a positive self-evaluation (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986;
Greenwald & Breckler, 1985; Steele, 1988, 1990; Tesser, 1986, 1988; Whitehead & Smith, 1986). Many people try to attain and maintain a positive self-evaluation by performing the best they can. But when individuals are faced with the prospect of being unable to succeed, many people engage in behavioral self-handicapping to salvage their positive self-evaluation (Hirt, McCrea, & Kimble, 2000; Jones & Berglas, 1978).

Self-handicapping involves the purposeful creation of a disadvantage for oneself prior to task performance. The hindrance to good performance created allows the performer to escape the attribution that he or she does not have the ability to perform well (Kelley, 1972). If the performer fails in the subsequent evaluation situation, he or she could say, “If I hadn’t had this disadvantage, I would have done well.” If the performer succeeds, he or she could say, “I must really be capable if I did that well despite the handicap.” Self-handicapping helps individuals to maintain positive self-evaluations and to avoid disconfirmation of desired self-conceptions.

SELF-FOCUS AND SELF-EVALUATION

The primary situational variable we examined in this study was self-focus. Self-focus was originally described in psychological literature as objective self-awareness (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Objective self-awareness or self-focus occurs whenever one’s attention is directed toward oneself rather than toward the environment. Subjective self-awareness or other-focus occurs whenever one’s attention is directed away from oneself toward other people, objects, events, or activities in one’s environment. If the individual is self-focused, he or she should more readily perceive the self-evaluation implications of the performance evaluation (Carver, 1979; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Gibbons, 1990). Gibbons states that when one becomes self-focused by environmental conditions, self-schema are activated and self-evaluation is likely. Both Duval and Wicklund and Gibbons indicate that self-focused individuals typically act in a manner consistent with their most established or habitual standards. If the performer is made more self-aware by being in front of a real or implied audience (Duval & Wicklund), by being in front of a mirror (Carver & Scheier, 1978) or by writing short stories about him/herself (Fenigstein & Levine, 1984), he or she should be more attuned to the self-evaluation threat and should self-handicap more. If this logic is correct, a means of enhancing the self-evaluative implications of one’s performance would be to place participants in conditions of self-focus.

Before anyone manipulated self-focus and examined its effects on self-handicapping, one study (Shepperd & Arkin, 1989) looked at the effects of individual differences in self-consciousness on self-handicapping behavior. Individuals who score high in public self-consciousness are chronically attentive to themselves (i.e., they are self-focused much of the time), especially on matters
related to how others evaluate them (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). Buss (1980) pointed out that the trait, self-consciousness, has many of the same effects as the temporary state, self-focus or self-awareness. Based on the Kolditz and Arkin (1982) argument that self-handicapping is primarily in the service of self-presentational concerns, Shepperd and Arkin argued that people who are high in public self-consciousness should self-handicap more than do people low in public self-consciousness. Indeed, their study showed that high public self-conscious people were most likely to self-handicap (by choosing more interfering music before a test of academic success), but only when the test was described as important. Because they are more attuned to self-presentational concerns, we believe that an important part of high public self-conscious individuals’ self-evaluation is how others evaluate them. We expected that induced public self-focus (using a one-way mirror with an observer’s silhouette behind it) would affect self-handicapping in the same way that public self-consciousness does. Several studies and reviews over the last 25 years have indicated that self-focus or self-awareness increases self-evaluation with salient standards (Carver, 1975, 2003; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Duval & Silvia, 2002; Scheier & Carver, 1983; Silvia, 2002a, 2002b). Increased self-evaluation was expected to accentuate individuals’ self-handicapping.

Hirt et al. (2000) studied the effect of self-focus of attention by having participants complete sentences starting with “I am” and to rate themselves on a personality questionnaire with a camera recording them in a small room. In the other-focus condition, there was no camera pointed at participants as they read about another person to form an impression and rated him/her on the same personality questionnaire as was used in the self-focus condition. Both self-focus and other-focus participants then practiced for an upcoming culture-fair intelligence test under Practice Matters (self-handicapping) conditions or Practice Doesn’t Matter (no self-handicapping) conditions. Only males in the self-focus condition self-handicapped by practicing less. Habitual or trait self-handicapping, as measured by the Self-handicapping Scale (SHS; Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982), was unrelated to self-handicapping behavior by men or women. Regression analyses showed that the self-handicapping behavior by men was mediated by a Concern with Failure factor, self-report items such as “I expect to do poorly on this test” completed right before practice and the test. This result that men in the self-focus condition who were concerned with failing were most likely to self-handicap behaviorally supports the idea that self-focus fosters behavioral self-handicapping by increasing the self-evaluation threat in such test or evaluation situations.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AND SELF-HANDICAPPING

A benefit of using a situational manipulation of self-focus (rather than
individual differences in self-consciousness is that it allows us to examine the role of other individual difference variables known to affect self-handicapping. Indeed, there appear to be some people who are much more inclined to use self-handicapping than are others. Interestingly, the self-handicapping literature has been successful in identifying several individual difference variables that influence the use of self-handicapping. For instance, the SHS developed by Jones and Rhodewalt (1982) is an individual difference measure designed to identify those who are habitual self-handicappers. The SHS has proven successful at predicting which individuals are most likely to self-handicap (Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991; Rhodewalt, Morf, Hazlett, & Fairfield, 1991; Rhodewalt, Saltzman & Wittmer, 1984; Strube, 1986; Strube & Roemmele, 1985). However, in the Hirt, McCrea, and Kimble (2000) study men, not just high SHS men, self-handicapped under self-focus conditions. Thus, in the present study, we examined the effect of situationally induced self-focus on high and low trait self-handicappers.

A second interesting individual difference factor has been gender. Numerous studies (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Harris & Snyder, 1986; Hirt et al., 1991; Kimble, Kimble, & Croy, 1998; Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986; Shepperd & Arkin, 1989) have demonstrated that males are more likely to self-handicap than are women, although these gender differences appear to emerge only with regard to behavioral self-handicapping. It should be noted that gender differences in behavioral self-handicapping in the Hirt et al. (1991) study were limited to high self-handicappers; only male high self-handicappers self-handicapped more than others did. Many explanations have been offered for this gender difference in behavioral self-handicapping (see Hirt et al., 1991, for a more detailed discussion of this issue). However, for purposes of the present discussion, we will focus on Shepperd and Arkin’s explanation that, compared with women, men appear to act as if performance evaluations on the intellectual tasks commonly used are more relevant to their self-evaluations.

Given this logic, we used the behavioral self-handicap of effort withdrawal in the present experiment. Borrowing a paradigm used by Smith, Snyder, and Handelsman (1982) and Hirt et al. (1991), participants were assigned to either a practice matters or practice doesn’t matter condition. In the practice matters condition, participants were told that their test scores would be affected by the amount of practice they had (i.e., practice improves test scores); in this condition, low amounts of practice are indicative of self-handicapping. In the practice doesn’t matter condition, participants were told that amount of practice would not affect their test scores; this condition serves as a baseline for comparison with the practice matters conditions.

Within each of the practice conditions, we manipulated self-focus. We expected that participants in the self-focus condition would be more likely to
self-handicap than would participants in the other-focus condition. In addition, we examined the effects of sex and level of trait self-handicapping (SHS) to see if these participant characteristics interacted with the manipulated variables. For instance, it might be the case that the effects of induced self-focus might work for everyone, for high self-handicappers only, for males only, or for high self-handicapping males only. Alternatively, the effects of self-focus might be more broad and might override any of these individual difference variables. Thus, the present study should provide insight into the interaction of situational and individual difference variables on behavioral self-handicapping.

**METHOD**

**PARTICIPANTS**

Ninety-one (42 male, 49 female) introductory psychology students at the University of Dayton participated individually in the study as partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Participants' level of self-handicapping was determined on the basis of the short-form Self-Handicapping Scale (Strube, 1986) administered during a mass testing at the beginning of the semester. Strube developed a 10-item scale, which had higher internal consistency (α = .70) than did the original scale, from Jones and Rhodewalt's (1982) 25-item measure. All 10 items (with minor rewording) are among the 25 items in the longer measure and are answered on a 1 to 6 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) scale. Strube reported the following statistics for women (M = 33.15, SD = 7.50, N = 82) and for men (M = 32.99, SD = 6.93, N = 86) on the short SHS. Only one item, “I always try to do my best, no matter what,” was recoded and the other nine (e.g., “I tend to make excuses when I do something wrong”) were added directly so that higher scores represent more self-handicapping. Participants were identified as either low or high self-handicappers on the basis of a median split. Participants were recruited from the large mass testing pool and were randomly assigned to the focus conditions and the practice conditions. Data from all participants who participated in the individual sessions were included in the analyses.

**PROCEDURE**

Upon arrival, each participant was seated in a small cubicle. Self-focus participants were facing a large one-way mirror through which they could see the experimenter’s silhouette as the experimenter observed them before and during activities. Self-focus participants were told that the mirror was a one-way mirror and that the experimenter would be observing them during the study. Other-focus participants did an external focus activity - writing a story about Abraham
Lincoln from a list of words - while the mirror was completely covered (cf. Fenigstein & Levine, 1984).

From this point, the experiment followed the procedure used by Hirt et al. (1991) except that there were no self-reported handicapping conditions. Participants were introduced to the Alternations Test, a test designed to measure individual differences in Integrative Orientation (cf. Trope & Brickman, 1975). Integrative Orientation (IO) is described as a new psychological variable that has been shown to be a consistent predictor of future success in academics and in the workplace. These instructions were designed to ensure that the relevance of the performance to self-evaluation (task importance) would be high for all participants.

The Alternations Test consisted of a series of arithmetic problems that required a unique problem-solving procedure. The Alternations Test problems use a format consisting of two lines with 3 numbers and operator signs of plus, minus, and parentheses; for example, (9-5)+4 with (7+4)-6 on the second line. Participants were told that to complete these problems, they needed to first solve the top line of the two (using the appropriate operations of addition and subtraction). Then they were to solve the bottom line of the pair. The catch was that they were not to write down either answer, but were to remember both answers. If the top solution was larger than the bottom solution, they were to subtract the bottom from the top and write down the final solution. If the top solution of a particular equation pair was smaller than the bottom one, they were to add the two solutions and write down the final solution.

Participants were also informed that they would be allowed to practice alternations problems as much as they liked before being asked to complete the actual Alternations Test. At this point, participants were given different instructions about the effects of practice on test performance. Half of the participants were told that amount of practice mattered in affecting the test's assessment of their true ability (self-handicapping condition); specifically, the instructions stated that people who have not had much practice with these types of problems when they take this test tend to get a score that is significantly below their true level of ability. The other half of the participants were told that practice did not matter (no self-handicapping control condition); in this condition, the instructions stated that the Alternations Test is designed in such a way that regardless of the amount of practice a person has had, his or her score on the test is an accurate measure of the person's level of integrative orientation. Participants in both groups were then given the opportunity to practice as much as they would like before actually taking the test.

The two primary dependent measures were the number of problems practiced and the time spent practicing. By practicing less, participants would be creating a motivated disadvantage in the self-handicapping condition. A postpractice
instructions, prepractice item was included that assessed how well the participants expected to do on the upcoming test. All participants were then debriefed, thanked, given participation credit, and excused.

**DESIGN**

The design was a 2 (level of habitual self-handicapping — low vs. high) X 2 (sex — male vs. female) X 2 (self-focus condition — self-focus vs. other-focus) X 2 (instructions about practice — practice matters vs. practice doesn’t matter) between-subjects factorial design.

**RESULTS**

**EXPECTATIONS ABOUT TASK PERFORMANCE**

On the expectation measure right before practice, we obtained a significant main effect for sex, $F(1,80)=5.77$, $p<.02$. Males indicated that they expected to do better on the upcoming test than did females. This result indicates that males were more confident about their performance on the task. No other significant effects were obtained on this measure.

**BEHAVIORAL SELF-HANDICAPPING**

Following the Hirt et al. (1991) procedure, we combined the time spent practicing and the number of problems practiced measures because they were so highly correlated, $r(91)=+.90$. The mean and standard deviation for the time measure in seconds were 524.24 and 409.96 and the mean and standard deviation for the number of problems measure were 31.32 and 28.74. This combined measure was obtained by adding the z-scores for time and the z-scores for number of problems practiced. The 91 participants were distributed nearly equally over the eight cells with three conditions containing observations from 10 participants, five conditions having 12 participants, and one condition having 13.

A 2 (level of self-handicapping) X 2 (sex) X 2 (self-focus) X 2 (instructions about practice) ANOVA was performed on the combined practice measure. This analysis revealed a significant Self-Focus main effect, $F(1, 75)=6.02$, $p<.02$. Overall, participants in the Self-Focus condition practiced longer on more problems than did participants in the Other-Focus condition. In addition, this analysis revealed a significant Sex by Self-Focus by Practice interaction, $F(1, 75) = 4.19$, $p<.05$.

In order to interpret this three-way interaction, separate simple effects analyses were conducted in the Self-Focus conditions and Other-Focus conditions. There were no significant sex, practice, or sex by practice effects within the Other-Focus conditions (all $Fs < 1$, ns). In the Self-Focus conditions, the simple effects analysis indicated a significant Sex by Practice interaction, $F(1,42)=7.12$, $p<.02$. 
Overall, the results show that only the men self-handicapped in the Practice Matters (Self-Handicapping) condition. In fact, women worked harder in the Practice Matters (Self-Handicapping) conditions than in the Practice Doesn’t Matter (No Self-Handicapping) conditions, whereas men did the opposite. Thus, again in this study, it is only men who show any evidence of behavioral self-handicapping; however, men self-handicapped only under conditions of self-focus. In contrast to their male counterparts, women under conditions of self-focus reacted more adaptively by practicing more when practice made a difference. These data are illustrated in Table 1.

### TABLE 1

**MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND NS ON THE COMBINED EFFORT MEASURE AS A FUNCTION OF FOCUS, PRACTICE INSTRUCTIONS, AND SEX OF PARTICIPANTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Focus</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice Matters (S-H condition)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice Doesn’t Matter (No S-H condition)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other-Focus</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice Matters (S-H condition)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice Doesn’t Matter (no S-H condition)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-0.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The astute reader may note that we did not obtain any significant effects of level of habitual self-handicapping. Indeed, this finding appears in stark contrast to the results of Hirt et al. (1991), who obtained a Self-Handicapping X Sex X Practice interaction on their combined practice measure. However, one might argue what effects the self-focus manipulation would have on individual differences in habitual self-handicapping. Perhaps the self-focus manipulation may override any individual differences that might exist between males, nullifying any effects of the self-handicapping scale variable. Indeed, our results provide suggestive evidence for this argument. A marginally significant four-way interaction (Self-Handicapping Scale X Sex X Self-Focus X Practice) was obtained, $F(1,75)=3.45$, $p=.067$. To explore the nature of this interaction and to clarify interpretation, we calculated difference scores between Practice Matters (Self-Handicapping) conditions and Practice Doesn’t Matter (No Self-Handicapping) conditions. Table 2 displays these data.

The pattern of results indicates that in the Other-Focus conditions, high self-handicapping males behaviorally self-handicapped and low self-handicapping males did not in the Practice Matters (Self-Handicapping) condition, replicating Hirt et al. (1991). However, in the Self-Focus conditions, all men, not just high self-handicapping men, behaviorally self-handicapped. Thus, it appears that the
self-focus manipulation was able to override the individual differences between high and low self-handicapping males (evidenced in the Other-Focus conditions), leading all males in the Self-Focus condition to behaviorally self-handicap (by withdrawing practice effort).

**TABLE 2**

**MEAN DIFFERENCE SCORES BETWEEN PRACTICE CONDITIONS AS A FUNCTION OF GENDER, SELF-FOCUS, AND TRAIT SELF-HANDICAPPING LEVEL (SHS)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Low Self-Handicappers</th>
<th>High Self-Handicappers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-focus</td>
<td>Other-focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-1.837</td>
<td>1.281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.617</td>
<td>-0.789</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Negative scores indicate less practice in Practice Matters conditions; that is, self-handicapping behavior.

It could be that we had too few participants to have enough power to analyze the data in a 4-way ANOVA and that is why we did not find the usual interaction between gender and low and high SHS scores. The results just cited indicate that in the Other-Focus conditions, the usual interaction between gender and SHS scores does occur; but in the Self-focus conditions, the SHS variable has no effect. We do not believe that inadequate power accounts for the difference between self-focus and other-focus conditions.

**DISCUSSION**

Our results indicate that males’ tendency to self-handicap behaviorally is accentuated by self-focus. That is, under self-focus all males, not just the habitual self-handicappers, practiced less in order to create a self-handicap. Thus, the present results suggest that if any male (regardless of his level of trait self-handicapping) is threatened and made self-attentive, he will be likely to self-handicap. Women practiced more under self-focus and practice matters instructions than under practice doesn’t matter instructions. Self-focus accentuated men’s tendency to self-handicap behaviorally and women’s tendency not to self-handicap. Self-focus had an overriding effect over self-reported, habitual self-handicapping, as indicated by short SHS scores, among men.

Recall that the Hirt et al. (1991) results showed that only high self-handicapping males practiced less when practice mattered. When we examined the other-focus conditions in the present study, the same pattern of results occurred. That is, only habitual self-handicapping males self-handicapped in the
other-focus conditions. But when self-attentiveness was increased in the self-focus conditions, all males practiced less when practice mattered. Therefore, when self-evaluation implications are made more salient by self-focus, men who do not ordinarily use behavioral self-handicapping strategies did so.

In addition, our results add to the growing literature demonstrating that women do not engage in behavioral self-handicapping. In the present study, women did not behaviorally self-handicap under either self-focus or other-focus conditions. Thus, even when the self-evaluative implications were made salient to women, they (unlike the men) did not respond by self-handicapping. As we remarked in the introduction, although several explanations for this sex difference have been offered (see Hirt et al., 1991; Hirt et al., 2000; Kimble & Hirt, 1993), the reasons underlying this effect remain unclear. Among the suggested reasons for the gender difference is that men are more threatened by possible failure than women are (Hirt et al., 2000), that men are more sensitive to competitive situations than women are (Burke, 1989; Kimble & Bryant, 2002), that men are more attuned to the implications of ability and effort for performance and women are more aware of the performance outcomes (Hirt, McCrea, & Boris, 2003; Luginbuhl & Palmer, 1991), and men believe that ability is fixed and women believe that ability can be enhanced (Rhodewalt, 1994). This result may suggest that performing well may be more important to women than is protecting a positive self-evaluation.

The present results (using a manipulation of state self-focus) are quite consistent with Shepperd and Arkin's (1989) findings using a measure of trait self-focus, public self-consciousness. They found that high public self-conscious participants self-handicapped before an important evaluation. Although they did not find an interaction with sex of subject, they did obtain a main effect for sex, indicating that men self-handicapped more than women did, regardless of evaluation importance. Hence, high public self-conscious men were most likely to self-handicap in their study, just as self-focused men were most likely to self-handicap in our study. Thus, it appears that heightened self-focus, as a result of individual differences or experimental induction, increases the salience of self-evaluation and promotes the use of behavioral self-handicapping.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE ANTECEDENTS OF SELF-HANDICAPPING**

These results are important for several reasons. First, this study adds to the literature by identifying another situational factor that encourages the use of self-handicapping. The literature has focused primarily on two situational factors - noncontingent success feedback and task importance – that have been shown to increase self-handicapping. Indeed, we believe that both of these factors increase the evaluative threat, either by increasing uncertainty about one’s ability to maintain a high level of performance and/or by rendering the evaluation more
important and critical to one's self-concept. Thus, we believe that any factor that increases the evaluative threat (or the salience of the evaluative threat) should therefore increase the incidence of self-handicapping. Consistent with this logic, we found that self-focus, a manipulation shown to increase the salience of self-evaluation, led males to self-handicap more. Hirt et al. (2000), in fact, found that concern with failure on the upcoming performance was the mediating factor that led to more self-handicapping by males under their self-focus conditions. Moreover, we suspect that other manipulations that increase the evaluative threat (e.g., competition, recent failure in some other self-relevant domain) should likewise increase the incidence of self-handicapping behavior.

Second, results of our study attest to the need to consider the interaction of situational and individual difference factors in affecting self-handicapping behavior. Several studies have investigated either situational or individual difference factors, but few have examined possible interactions between these two sets of factors. In the present study, we found that our situational manipulation of self-focus had effects on males but not on females. Moreover, it appears that (at least for males) situationally induced self-focus overrides individual differences in habitual self-handicapping, suggesting that under high evaluative pressure low and high trait self-handicapping males are inclined to self-handicap in the service of self-protection. We suspect that there are many situations in which a situational factor may overwhelm any individual differences that exist in self-handicapping proclivities, implying that the situational factor plays a central role in promoting self-handicapping behavior. Conversely, there may be individual difference factors (e.g., individual differences in intuitive theories about ability (Rhodewalt, 1994)) that encourage self-handicapping in the absence of conducive situational factors. However, such knowledge should facilitate the development of better models of self-handicapping behavior. It is our belief that taking an interactionist point of view toward understanding the antecedent conditions promoting self-handicapping behavior will be a fruitful approach. We hope that this paper will encourage additional research along these lines.

**REFERENCES**


