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Jessica M. McKinney
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Kyle D. Maxwell
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Richard L. Metzger
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

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Self-Handicapping Mediates between Impulsiveness and Self-Discipline

Jessica M. McKinney

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Kyle D. Maxwell

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Richard L. Metzger

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Abstract

Self-handicapping, while not a very acknowledged tendency, is very prevalent today. Especially among students of any grade level, the behavior prevents many from reaching their full potential. The purpose of this experiment was to see how Self-handicapping mediated between Impulsiveness and Self-discipline which can later be used by teachers to help students with this phenomenon. A short survey was given to psychology undergraduate students at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga whose age ranged from 18-44 and were predominantly Caucasian. Self-handicapping was found to mediate between Impulsiveness and Self-discipline ($r = .512$) compared to Impulsiveness and Self-discipline ($r = .288$) without using self-handicapping as a mediator. The implications that can be taken from this study include using the results in an educational setting to pinpoint self-handicapping tendencies. Despite limitations in the study, it was conducted in an environment that was cohesive to the environment in which it would be applied.

Keywords: self-handicapping, impulsiveness, self-discipline, mediate

Introduction

For the past twenty years, self-handicapping has been a prevalent topic for psychological research. Self-handicapping, in an academic setting, includes activities such as procrastination, partying the night before a test, or even something menial to distract oneself. The mental process behind these actions is a basic need to protect one's self esteem. Participating in these activities, specifically around something like a test, allows the student to blame their poor performance on the activity, versus their own abilities (Johnson & Bloom, 1995). In essence, self-handicapping is a behavior designed to limit oneself in order to displace blame of failure.

Self-Handicapping in Personality

Although self-handicapping has been defined, not much research has been done over how self-handicapping can be determined by certain personality traits. Some of the first research that relates to self-handicapping and personality traits are studies based on procrastination (a subgroup of self-handicapping) and personality traits such as when Johnson and Bloom (1995) looked at procrastination and each facet of the Five Factor Model, a scale examining five major personality traits (Costa & McCrea, 1992). The Five Factor Model, or FFM for short, is further described under the materials section. Johnson and Bloom found

that Conscientiousness and Neuroticism were correlated with procrastination negatively and positively (respectively). Johnson and Bloom's study indicated people who "drag their feet", so to speak, tended to lack self-discipline (subsumed under Conscientiousness) and were impulsive (subsumed under Neuroticism). Schouwenburg and Lay (1995) and later on Watson (2001) supported this study by finding Neuroticism and Conscientiousness were correlated to procrastination positively and negatively, respectively. Ross, Canada, and Rausch (2002) were some of the first people to correlate self-handicapping to the Five Factor Model and found neuroticism and conscientiousness were positively and negatively correlated, respectively, to self-handicapping.

Impulsiveness and Self-discipline

The two subsets of the Five Factor Model, impulsiveness and self-discipline, are rarely ever intensely studied in self-handicapping and personality correlations. Impulsiveness describes a specific type of behavior that falls under Neuroticism in the Five Factor Model of Personality and is associated with behaviors such as hitting the snooze button the morning of an important meeting, eating a piece of cake while on a diet, or smoking a cigarette while trying to quit (Nordgren, van der Pligt, & Harrevel, 2007). Preference of acting on the feelings of the moment is one of the greatest indicators of impulsivity, such as

sensation seeking. Impulsive behavior is also very important in the diagnostic functions of the fourth edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (Whiteside & Lynam, 2001).

Self-discipline is a subcategory, as defined by the Five Factor Model, of Conscientiousness and is defined by Duckworth and Seligman (2006) formally as the ability to suppress immediately gratifying responses in the service of a higher goal. Some examples provided by Duckworth and Seligman (2006) are paying attention to the teacher rather than daydreaming, choosing homework over more enjoyable activities, and persisting on long term assignments despite boredom and frustration.

Other links between Neuroticism and Conscientiousness have been found. The imposter phenomenon is a similar motivational disposition, like self-handicapping. Ross et al. (2000) defined the imposter phenomenon as a mental state that occurs when persons who have achieved some level of success feel as if they are fakes or imposters. The study found that the imposter phenomenon is positively correlated with Neuroticism, and negatively correlated with Conscientiousness (Ross, Stewart, Mugge, & Fultz, 2001). The previous research done concerning the imposter phenomenon, as well as other five factor related studies, led to the development of the current research.

Current Research

Previous research has said self-handicapping acts as a mediator between neuroticism and conscientiousness, two of the five factors in the big five model of personality (Ross et al., 2002). The current research attempted to support that self-handicapping acts as a mediator between Impulsiveness and Self-discipline. Assigning variable roles in this study is difficult, as the three variables being measured all act on each other equally. Technically, self-handicapping would be considered the independent variable, while impulsiveness and self-discipline would act as dependent variables. If Self-handicapping serves as a mediator, impulsiveness will predict self-handicapping which will then in turn predict self-discipline, and will cause a higher correlation rather than just impulsiveness predicting self-discipline. Impulsiveness and self-discipline were chosen because they are labeled as subcategories of neuroticism and conscientiousness, they play opposing roles when compared, and also because they were the most physical of the subcategories in neuroticism and conscientiousness. Other categories, such as depression, are almost exclusively mental processes. Impulsiveness

and self-discipline can be measured in physical reactions. It is hypothesized that self-handicapping will serve as a mediator between impulsiveness and self-discipline.

Method

Participants

One hundred twenty-eight undergraduate students from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga who are enrolled in Introductory Psychology courses were recruited to participate in the study. Participants were primarily freshman and ranged in age from 18 – 22 years old. Demographic data was taken with the survey, but very few completed that part of the survey, no significant differences were found based on demographics, and was thrown out.

Materials

The materials that were used in the study will include the IPIP-NEO and the Self-Handicapping Scale.

IPIP-NEO (International personality Item pool representation of the NEO PI-R™).

The shortened version of IPIP-NEO was administered and consists of 41-items (Costa & McCrae, 1992). For the purpose of this study only the 18-items measuring Neuroticism and Conscientiousness will be used so the items dealing with impulsiveness and self-discipline can be examined. Higher scores on corresponding questions indicate higher levels of Neuroticism or Conscientiousness (Buchanan, 2001). The reliability of both Neuroticism (Impulsiveness) and Conscientiousness (Self-discipline) questions were $\alpha = 0.83$ and 0.84 , respectively. These reliabilities are based on the shortened version of the scale.

Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS). The Self-Handicapping Scale is a 25-item that measured how students create obstacles to achieve well academically (Rhodewalt, 1990). Various self-handicapping situations will be provided, and students will indicated their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert Scale (0-disagree very much – 5 agree very much). The reliability of this scale was $\alpha = 0.79$.

Procedure

Each participant was given a packet containing both the shortened IPIP and the SHS during a single session that will last 15-30 minutes. Participants will be either read or asked to read the informed consent form, and to sign it and hand it back before filling out the

surveys. Participants will be told to respond honestly to each question and that all of their answers and information will remain anonymous. They will be given extra credit for completion of the questionnaire, depending on the professor.

Results

Correlations between Impulsiveness, Self-discipline, and Self-handicapping were computed. Impulsiveness and Self-discipline were significantly correlated ($r = .288$, $p = .001$). Linear regression yielded an ANOVA score of $F(1,121) = 10.961$, $p < .001$. When computed using Kenny's method of mediation and Self-handicapping acting as the mediator between the first two variables, the Pearson's r was raised to $.512$, proving to be more significant than just the correlation between impulsiveness and self-discipline (Kenny, 2009). Linear regression also showed this to be true, yielding an ANOVA score of $F(2,113) = 20.032$, $p < .001$. When compared, neither sex, race, nor age provided a significant difference on the outcome of the study.

Discussion

In previous studies, behaviors, such as procrastination, have been found to mediate between Neuroticism and Conscientiousness. In this study, Self-handicapping was examined to see if it would also act as the mediator between the sub groups Impulsiveness and Self-discipline. It was found Self-handicapping did mediate between Impulsiveness and Self-discipline.

These findings support the research conducted by Ross et al. (2002) when they found the relationship between Neuroticism and Conscientiousness increased when Self-handicapping played a role as mediator. While there was a significant relationship between Neuroticism and Conscientiousness, when Self-handicapping acted as a mediator, the relationship increased in strength from $.288$ to $.512$.

The data was only cultivated from undergraduate students, limiting its generalization to the public, but these findings can be generalized to undergraduates because, based on the data that was received, sex, age, and gender did not have a significant effect on the outcome. However, this can change because not everyone who took the survey answered all of the demographics questions. The survey also was not as extensive as it could have been using the short form IPIP-NEO and instead the full form could have been used. The data was also only cultivated from undergraduate students, limiting

Despite these limitations, it can be used by teachers to see if their students have any of these personality characteristics so they can test for self-handicapping traits and help prevent these from happening.

Future research can look at different aspects of personality to see how it correlates with self-handicapping. Also, future researchers could look to see if culture plays a specific role in self-handicapping considering most European and Asian countries hold higher standards for education.

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