Perfectionism and self-handicapping in adult education

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Abstract

This study analyzes the relationship between perfectionism and self-handicapping at the level of university students. Maladaptive perfectionism deals with setting high standards, but view themselves as never seeming to meet their own high expectations (Pacht, 1984). Academic self-handicapping refers to the use of impediments to successful performance on academic tasks. Most researchers agree that the reason people self-handicap is to protect themselves from the negative implications of failure. There are no gender differences as regards the use of self-handicapping. The correlations among the variables revealed that, when the whole sample was considered, self-handicapping was positively related to perfectionism and negatively to academic achievement. This is in line with previous research (Hobden & Pliner, 1995; Sherry et al., 2001; Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998). The link between these two constructs is not unexpected since they both deal with people’s concerns about standards, levels of competence and how people are perceived by others.

Keywords: perfectionism; self-handicapping; academic achievement

1. Introduction

Because academia is one of the most competitive educational environment, with an explicitly rewards strategy and where performance depends on out-achieving others, students are likely to set very high standards to gain social approval.

Perfectionism is an essentially negative construct, involving setting excessively high standards of oneself or the others (Pacht, 1984; Shafran & Mansell, 2001). In addition, Frost et al. (1990) emphasized that these high standards
are accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations of one's own behavior, expressed in over concern for mistakes and uncertainty regarding actions and beliefs. Finally, perfectionists have been described to overemphasize order, organization, and neatness (Stöber, 1998).

Kerns et al. (2008) emphasized that at a sub-clinical level, people who are more perfectionistic have been shown to be less satisfied with their performance (Frost & Henderson, 1991), experience higher levels of stress (Flett, Parnes, & Hewitt, 2001), be prone to persistent worry and fear of failure (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Mosher, 1991; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990), and engage in self-handicapping behaviours (Frost et al., 1990; Hobden & Pliner, 1995; Sherry, Flett, & Hewitt, 2001).

Self-handicapping has also been associated with lower achievement (Garcia, 1995) and poor adjustment and academic underachievement (Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998) in non-clinical populations.

Self-handicapping means a self-destructive behaviour, used as an excuse for a potential failure or an anticipated low performance when doing a task. For example, if a student does not appropriately prepare for an exam, he/she anticipates a low mark, could start complaining about a physical symptom (pain) and/or psychological symptom (insomnia) which could explain the low performance at the test and without his self-esteem being affected in any way. It is like the person invents or pretends the existence of an external disturbing factor and then he makes an external connection for that failure and leave space for an internal connection in case of success (Berglas and Jones, 1978). If the person succeeds in getting a high mark, then he/she demonstrates himself/herself that he/she is smarter than he/she thought before, thus being successful again against illness or insomnia.

Although self-handicapping is a way of preserving one’s self-esteem, this behaviour represents a self-destructive mechanism because it encourages the lack of responsibility and effort, but also self-awareness. As a consequence, by using this strategy the person facilitates desirable attributions for success as well as for failure (Hirt, Deppe and Gordon, 1991).

Other authors consider that the use of self-handicapping has, first of all, the role of manipulating the perception of others on the person (a self-presentation strategy) and secondly of maintaining self-esteem in the case of a failure (Covington, 1992; Urdan, 2004).

The mechanisms of self-handicapping are: pro-active, premeditated or conditioned to act before the anxious event, activated by the importance/meaning that the person gives to the event (the more it is perceived as being important, the more anxious the event is and the more active becomes self-handicapping mechanism), in individuals with lack of confidence in their own abilities (Greenberg, 1985).

Ellis and Knaus (1977) have studied the predictors of self-handicapping in the academic field and they have noticed that the most powerful factors are the level of anxiety related to the task and lack of self-confidence. Moreover Hirt, Deppe and Gordon (1991) have noticed that men as well as women use self-handicapping strategies which are self-referential (verbal complaints regarding the appearance or the increase of physical symptoms (psychosomatic pains, sickness, dizziness etc.), or psychological (tiredness, insomnia, lack of concentration, sadness, anxiety panic attack, etc.) while men use self-handicapping actions as well (alcohol consumption, drugs consumption, strategic altruism, lack of punctuality, making a minimum effort by avoiding the practice opportunities) (Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Rhodewalt, Saltzman and Wittmer, 1984).

Kearns, Forbes, Gardiner and Marshall, (2008) have pointed out that the frequent use self-handicapping behaviours like: delaying, changing priorities (the individuals considers all the activities as being unimportant and leaves the important task for the last moment), over-responsibilisation, over-involvement and over-motivation. Urdan and Midgley (2001) add to this list the lack of seeking help (when they realize they cannot handle the situation), wasting time (although I have something important to learn, I watch TV or talk with friends on Facebook), they do not assume the risks and give up easily after the first challenges of the task. All these behaviours have negative effects on students because they set up difficult objectives and feel extremely disappointed and self-critical when they do not succeed in achieving the educational targets and this is because their lack of trust in themselves increases as well as their capacity of not letting themselves be distracted by these distracters and this way the need to save their self-esteem appears by strengthening their self-handicapping.

Other authors noticed with the help of student subjects that self-handicapping is connected with the low educational performance in very good individuals, even a tendency towards perfectionism (Frost Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate, 1990; Garcia, 1995; Hobden and Pliner, 1995; Sherry, Flett and Hewitt, 2001; Zuckerman, Kieffer and Knee, 1998). Delay is connected to a high level of depression and anxiety and a low self-esteem in clinic population.
as well as non-clinic population (Martin, Flett, Hewitt, Krames and Szanto, 1996). Additionally, Zuckerman et al. (1998) observed that people, who frequently use self-destructive mechanisms, show a low performance, inefficient style of learning and a lower self-esteem than the people who do not frequently use these mechanisms and Garcia (1995) pointed out the fact that self-destructive people have less essential objectives, poor revision strategies and less time management skills.

2. Present Study

2.1. Purpose of the study

The main aim of the study was to examine the interrelationships between self-handicapping, perfectionism and academic achievement. Based on previous research (Frost Marten, Lahart i Rosenblate, 1990; Garcia, 1995; Hobden i Pliner, 1995; Sherry, Flett i Hewitt, 2001; Zuckerman, Kieffer i Knee, 1998; Urdan & Midgley, 2001), we hypothesized that self-handicapping would be positively associated with perfectionism. In the same time, because the costs of self-handicapping include mental and behavioural withdrawal from school work, a pessimistic perception of academic performance and perhaps depressed levels of self-esteem (Elliot & Church, 2003; Martin, Marsh, Williamson, & Debus, 2003; Urdan & Midgley, 2001) we expected that self-handicapping would be negatively associated with academic achievement (Zuckerman et al., 1998).

As regards gender, we expected boys to engage in more self-handicapping strategies (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Urdan & Midgley, 2001; Urdan, 2004).

2.2. Participants

The participants included 136 junior and senior students from Psychology Faculty with approximately double numbers of girls (72%) than boys (28%). The age range was 20 years, 3 months to 16 years 4 months with a mean age of 23 years, 3 months. Grade point average in the last exams session was used as the indicator of academic achievement.

2.3. Measures

Participants were asked to respond to each item in the questionnaires in relation to the last exams session. Aside from the demographic data, items on all subscales were responded to using a six- and five-point Likert-type rating scale (0 = disagree very much to 5 = agree very much). To establish the validity of the scales used in the study, they were all submitted to principal component analysis with varimax rotation. Internal consistency reliability was tested using Cronbach’s a coefficient.

Perfectionism

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990) is a 35 item questionnaire designed to measure six subscales for a multidimensional assessment of perfectionism: Concern over Mistakes, Personal Standards, Parental Expectations, Parental Criticism, Doubts about actions and Organization.

Respondents indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with each statement on a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate a greater degree of perfectionism. The MPS demonstrated strong internal consistency (α = .91).

Self-handicapping

The Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS; Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer, 1984) consists of 25 items describing a range of self-handicapping behaviours and statements. Participants respond on a six point Likert scale (0 = disagree very much; 5 = agree very much). The full SHS showed moderate reliability (α = .68).

Academic achievement

Grade point average in the last exams session was used as the indicator of academic achievement. Grades were collected from the transcript of records. On the front page of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate their age and gender.
2.4. Results

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed in order to examine the bivariate relationships among the variables (see Table 1). As hypothesized, self-handicapping was positively correlated to perfectionism. Perfectionism and self-handicapping were also negatively correlated to academic achievement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-handicapping</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfectionism</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.48**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05; **p<.01.

This is in line with previous research (Hobden & Pliner, 1995; Sherry et al., 2001; Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998). The link between these two constructs is not unexpected since they both deal with people’s concerns about standards, levels of competence and how people are perceived by others.

3. Conclusion and discussions

The first objective of this study was to examine the association between self-handicapping, perfectionism and academic achievement. Consistent with the results of other studies, the use of self-handicapping strategies was found to be positively related to perfectionism (Frost Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990; Garcia, 1995; Hobden & Pliner, 1995; Sherry, Flett, & Hewitt, 2001; Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998; Urdan & Midgley, 2001) which means that students with unjustifiably high academic expectations tend to be overcommitting, taking on too much at once, feeling an intense anticipatory anxiety and fear of failure. All this complex context determine them to protect themselves by a series of self-handicapping behaviors, such as procrastination, depression, compulsive actions, dependency, alienation, inferiority, suspiciousness for which they will pay different types of prices: physical consequences (chronic pain, skin disease, premature aging etc.), psychic consequences (loneliness, shame, loss of self-respect, loss of energy, rage, bitterness, humiliation, guilt, helplessness, hopelessness, sadness etc.) and missing opportunities (expressing the self creatively, achieving a sense of inner peace, experiencing the full range of human emotions, developing friendship etc.). To minimize this price, these students use a lot of techniques: ignoring, joking, numbing, being chronically busy, nihilizing, adapting, fragmentizing their minds and bodies or embracing fatalistic conclusions (Cudney & Hardy, 1993).

On the other hand, the negative relation between self-handicapping and academic achievement found in many studies seems to be reciprocal. Several studies (Midgley & Urdan, 2001) show that students with lower grades use self-handicapping strategies more than do students with higher grades. In turn, low achievement leads to increased use of self-handicapping strategies, thus undermining further academic performance by poorer study habits (a low levels of intrinsic goals, poor rehearsal strategies and poor time management practices), psychological symptoms (anxiety, depression, low self-esteem) and behavioral difficulties (eating disorders and suicide risk).

In order to discuss about a self-destructive mechanism, it is necessary for this, somewhere in the timeline, to have helped the person to overcome a certain difficult situation (from an emotional or physical point of view) and which at the present times determines the person not to be able to make healthy choices. This means that a behavior which functioned as a coping mechanism at a certain time, ends up functioning as a defending mechanism at the present. When behavior makes fear and lack of comfort disappear from a certain situation (for example in childhood), this remains memorized as an efficient tool which can be used in other unpleasant situations (even if now the person is an adult and would have more resources available to cope with the situation). Moreover, the unpleasant situations have only certain common points and the self-defending reaction which lacks flexibility is many times considered inappropriate.

What is interesting is that this previous logic (conditioning) seems more powerful than the awareness of the fact that repetitive usage of the old solution does not simply work anymore.
As a result of this study, perfectionism is found to be negatively related to academic performance. Boice and Jones (1984) found evidence of links between perfectionism and writer’s block, and Phillips (1986) noted that perfectionists were more likely to experience essay-writing phobia. Sheppard and Arkin (1989) found that perfectionistic men self-handicapped when they feared they would not perform well on a measure of academic success.

No gender differences were found in this study in relation to the use of self-handicapping strategies. There has been some evidence of gender differences in self-handicapping (e.g. Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Berglas & Jones, 1978; Hirt, McCrea, & Boris, 2003; Midgley & Urdan, 1995), but these findings have not been consistently replicated.

In conclusion, perfectionism and self-handicapping are widely studied characteristics that can have a significant negative impact upon academic performance (Kearns, Forbes, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008).

References