A Profile of the College Self-Handicapper

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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this correlational study is to explore new and to verify previously found relationships among self-handicapping, personality, and psychological factors – in an attempt to develop a more complete profile of the college self-handicapper. Specifically, it was predicted that self-handicapping would be negatively related to openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, psychological well being, presence of purpose and meaning in life, optimism, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and satisfaction with life. It was further hypothesized that self-handicapping would be positively related to neuroticism, search for meaning in life, and fear of negative evaluation. As predicted, it was found that self-handicapping was significantly correlated with all but one of the hypothesized personality and psychological factors. These findings, as initial steps toward compiling the profile of the college self-handicapper, are discussed in terms of future research and therapeutic intervention.

F A C U L T Y M E N T O R

Carolyn Bennett Murray, Professor
Department of Psychology

Carolyn B. Murray, Professor of Psychology, received her PhD from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She has published numerous journal articles and book chapters and was awarded a four-year grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) to conduct a pioneer longitudinal study of the socialization processes of African American families and their children. Professor Murray has received the Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research and UCR’s Distinguished Teaching Award, as well as the Association of Black Psychologists’ Distinguished Psychologist Award. She writes of Marc, “In 2005, I began to mentor Marc, fostering his passion for research by supporting him in his numerous academic pursuits. I am looking forward to working with him as a doctoral student.”

A U T H O R

Marc D. Kinon
Psychology

Marc D. Kinon met his faculty mentor, Professor Carolyn B. Murray, when he participated in UCR’s Summer Research Internship Program. Subsequently, his passion for research and related knowledge led him to complete graduate courses as an undergraduate, conduct additional studies, and complete an honors thesis. He has submitted one manuscript for publication, has another manuscript in progress, and has presented at numerous professional conferences. In addition to excelling academically, Marc has also contributed to his community by being a resident advisor, supplemental instruction leader, peer health educator, biofeedback technician, ASUCR senator, vice president of Sigma Phi Epsilon Beta Gamma, and founder of the Coalition of Students in Support of Orphans. After graduation, Marc will continue to work in Dr. Murray’s laboratory as a Social/Personality Psychology doctoral student.
High school dropout rates are soaring, underachievement is rampant, and many students who go on to college barely make the grade (Greene, 2002). While the reasons for this situation are complicated and multifaceted, ranging from a “lack of family values” to inadequate schools, many students appear to contribute to their own failure by behaving in ways that undermine their academic achievement (Murray & Warden, 1992; Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998). Known as “self-handicapping” strategies, this pattern of self-defeating behavior leads to a vicious cycle of chronic underachievement.

The act of self-handicapping usually occurs when one is uncertain about his or her ability to succeed or when one fears the perceived implications of anticipated failure (Leary & Shepperd, 1986). Self-handicapping can be defined as creating or claiming an impediment to one’s performance, which can be cited as an excuse for failure (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985; Berglas & Jones, 1978). Therefore, this behavior increases one’s opportunity to externalize failure and to internalize success (Berglas & Jones, 1978). Gaining the ability to externalize failure and to internalize success serves to protect one from the implications of failure and other threats to one’s self and social esteem (Leary & Shepperd, 1986; Snyder & Smith, 1982), reinforcing one’s tendency to self-sabotage academic success. Consequently, it is important to uncover who is most likely to self-handicap and further explore their personality traits and psychological tendencies.

**Personality and Psychological Correlates**

In regards to personality traits one study reported that self-handicapping is negatively related to conscientiousness, with the facet of self-discipline being most significant. This same study also indicated that self-handicapping is positively related to neuroticism (Ross, Canada, & Rausch, 2002), with the facet of depression being the most significant. Another study found that self-handicapping is correlated positively with higher levels of sensitivity to evaluation (Weary & Williams, 1990). Berglas and Jones (1978) have suggested that individuals who self-handicap have a higher degree of uncertainty (Warden, 1987). Self-handicappers have also consistently exhibited self-defeating behavior (Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991) and have been found to possess fragile self-images, low self-esteem (Pulford, Johnson, & Awaida, 2005), and low self-efficacy (Martin, & Brawley, 2002).

The present research study, in addition to the above personality and psychological correlates, investigates the relationship between a person’s tendency to use self-handicapping strategies and whether he or she has achieved purpose in life. Since purposeful living is equated with authentic living and well-being, it is predicted that individuals who employ self-handicapping strategies will be less likely to report they have achieved purpose in life, and less psychologically healthy, than non-self-handicappers.

The purpose of the present study is to clarify the profile of the average college self-handicapper. This is done in an attempt to inform future research, and to suggest probable ways to reduce the tendency to self-handicap.

**Hypotheses.**

Based, in part, on the findings of previous studies it was hypothesized that the tendency to self-handicap would be negatively related to the following personality traits and psychological factors: openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, psychological well-being, optimism, self-efficacy, self-esteem, presence of meaning in life, and satisfaction with life. It was also hypothesized that self-handicapping would be positively related to neuroticism, search for meaning in life, and fear of negative evaluation.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Four hundred introductory psychology students (135 males and 265 females) from a southern California university participated in the study for course credit. Participates were sampled from an ethnically diverse population: 7% African American, 38% Asian American, 16.3% Caucasian, 25% Hispanic/Latino, 8.5% mixed, and 5.2% other. The average age was 19.2 (σ = 1.6).

The 2000 United States Census Bureau data report revealed that the ethnic composition of this sample does not match the ethnic composition of the United States. Although, the diverse ethnic make up of the sample is not typical, previous research has shown that Asians and Latinos have the same self-handicapping tendencies as...
To this point, self-handicapping tendencies seem universal and, therefore, the differing ethnic ratios should not substantially affect the results.

Measures

Constructs of interest were measured using a series of objective scales and subscales with strong psychometric properties. Constructs included: presence and search for meaning in life (Meaning in Life Questionnaire; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), purpose in life (Purpose in Life Test; Crumbaugh, 1968), psychological well-being (Psychological Well-Being Scale; Ryff, 1989), optimism (Life Orientation Test; Scheier & Carver, 1985), self-efficacy (College Self-Efficacy Inventory; Solberg, O’Brien, Villarreal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993 & Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale; Schwartzter & Jerusalem, 1995), self-handicapping (Self-Handicapping Scale; Rhodewalt, 1990), personality (The Big Five Inventory; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991, as cited in John, & Srivastava, 1999), self-esteem (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; Rosenberg, 1965, as cited in Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991), satisfaction with life (Satisfaction with Life Scale; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and fear of negative evaluation (Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale; Leary, 1983, as cited in Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991).

Procedure

To minimize the potential of sequence and order effects the on-line packet of questionnaires was counterbalanced. The questionnaire packet took approximately 1 hour to complete.

Results

Given that there was no significant difference found between males (M = 2.49) and females (M = 2.50) with regards to their tendency to self-handicap (t = -.168, p = .866), the analyses were conducted using the entire sample. The significance level was set at p = .05. This is the standard significance level observed by most research psychologists. Due to the fact that a large number of correlations were examined, a Bonferroni’s adjustment (p < .0007) was conducted in order to reduce that probability of finding significant correlations based on chance.

A series of zero-order correlations examined relationships among self-handicapping (SH), openness to new experiences (BFI-O), conscientiousness (BFI-C), extraversion (BFI-E), agreeableness (BFI-A), neuroticism (BFI-N), autonomy (PWB-A), positive relations with others (PWB-PR), self-acceptance (PWB-SA), environmental mastery (PWB-EM), purpose in life index A (PWB-PIL), personal growth (PWB-PG), presence of meaning in life (MLQ-P), purpose in life index B (PILT), optimism (LOT), college self-efficacy (CSE), generalized self-efficacy (GSE), self-esteem (RSES), satisfaction with life (SWLS), search for meaning in life (MLQ-S), and fear of negative evaluation (BFNE).

As predicted, self-handicapping was negatively related to openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, agreeableness (see Table 1), autonomy, positive relations with others, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, purpose in life (index A), personal growth (see Table 2), presence of meaning in life, purpose in life (index B), optimism, college self-efficacy, generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem, and satisfaction with life (see Table 3). Also as predicted, self-handicapping was positively related to neuroticism (see Table 1), search for meaning in life, and fear of negative evaluation (see Table 4). Tables 1-4 present intercorrelations and highlight significant predicted correlates of self-handicapping. Conventionally, high correlations range from ±.5 to ±1, medium to high correlations range from ±.3 to ±.49, low to medium correlations range from ±.1 to ±.29, and low correlations range from > 0 to ±.09. In this study, most correlations were medium to high in their predicted direction.

Discussion

This study contributed to the profile of the college self-handicapper by adding new significant associations. For example, the college self-handicapper tends to be less open to new experiences, less agreeable, and less psychologically healthy. He or she also tends to be less optimistic and tends to lack satisfaction with life. Furthermore, the college self-handicapper tends to search for meaning in his or her life and tends to fear negative evaluation.

In addition to revealing new personality and psychological correlates of self-handicapping, this study confirmed past research findings. For example, other studies have found, and this study has supported, a positive relationship between self-handicapping and lower self-esteem (e.g., Pulford, Johnson, & Awaida, 2005), lower self-efficacy (e.g., Martin, & Brawley, 2002), lower conscientiousness, and higher neuroticism.
A PROFILE OF THE COLLEGE SELF-HANDICAPPER

Marc D. Kinon

From the results of this study’s correlational analyses, a profile of the college self-handicapper can start to be compiled. Given what we have learned from the correlates of self-handicapping it would be practical to examine the developmental and causal mechanisms that explain the existence of these relationships. Finding the developmental and causal mechanisms that explain the existence of these relationships will be valuable to the synthesis of an efficacious and informed therapeutic intervention.

Table 1: InterCorrelates and Significant Correlations between Self-Handicapping (SH) and the Big Five Inventory (BFI) Personality Traits

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<td>4. BFI-E</td>
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<td>5. BFI-A</td>
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*Note: N = 400, SH = Self-Handicapping Scale; BFI-O = Openness subscale; BFI-C = Conscientiousness subscale; BFI-E = Extraversion subscale; BFI-A = Agreeableness subscale; BFI-N = Neuroticism subscale.

Table 3: InterCorrelates and Negative Correlates of Self-Handicapping (SH)

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*Note: N = 400, SH = Self-Handicapping Scale; MLQ-P = Meaning in Life Questionnaire-Positive subscale; PPLT = Purpose in Life Test; LOT = Life Orientation Test; GSE = General Self-Efficacy Scale; RSES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale.

Table 4: InterCorrelates and Positive Correlates of Self-Handicapping (SH)

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<td>3. BNE</td>
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*Note: N = 400, SH = Self-Handicapping Scale; MLQ-S = Meaning in Life Questionnaire-Search subscale; BNE = Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale.

U C R U N D E R G R A D U A T E R E S E A R C H J O U R N A L
REFERENCES


