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# **Determinants of Self-Handicapping: Task Importance and the Effects of Preexisting Handicaps on Self-Generated Handicaps**

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*In an effort to uncover some of the determinants of self-handicapping, male and female introductory psychology students chose to listen to either facilitating or interfering music prior to taking a test described either as a valid or an invalid predictor of academic success. In addition, half of the subjects were led to believe that a preexisting distracter, or handicap, was already present in the environment whereas the remainder were not. Results revealed that self-handicapping occurred in anticipation of an important task, but only when there was no preexisting handicap. Attributions for success and failure revealed a clear self-serving bias, replicating earlier work. The results are discussed in terms of the attributional and practical utility of convenient excuses versus self-generated self-handicaps.*

Self-handicapping is the use of attributional principles to manage one's image concerning the presence or absence of ability (e.g., Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985; Jones & Berglas, 1978). The term refers to an individual's attempt to reduce a threat to esteem by actively seeking or creating inhibitory conditions that interfere with performance and, thus, provide a persuasive causal explanation for potential failure (or set the stage for the individual to accept personal credit for success). In the typical study the subject is presented with an opportunity to embrace a handicap (by selecting it, creating it, or emphasizing its influence). Although presumably set in place for some other reason, the handicap, nevertheless, appears to sabotage the forthcoming performance and therefore provides a useful external explanation for a failure that would otherwise be interpreted as reflecting the individual's own inadequacy.

In the past decade a number of studies have investigated the conditions precipitating self-handicapping. Several individual-difference variables, including sex (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Rhodewalt & Davidson, 1984; Shepperd & Arkin, in press; Shepperd, Miller, & Arkin, 1986), public self-consciousness

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(Shepperd & Arkin, in press), social anxiety (Shepperd et al., 1986), uncertain self-esteem (Harris & Snyder, 1986), test anxiety (Harris, Snyder, Higgins, & Schrag, 1986; Smith, Snyder, & Handelsman, 1982), and covert self-esteem (Harris et al., 1986), have been incorporated into studies and found to moderate the tendency to self-handicap. In addition, experimental inductions of non-contingent (i.e., unanticipated and incomprehensible) success feedback (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Kolditz & Arkin, 1982; Tucker, Vulchinich, & Sobell, 1981), public performance circumstances (Kolditz & Arkin, 1982; Shepperd et al., 1986), and task importance (Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer, 1984; Shepperd & Arkin, 1987) have been investigated also with an eye toward defining the boundary conditions of self-handicapping and demonstrating its specific motivational basis.

One boundary condition to handicapping would seem to be obvious; yet no experiment to date has incorporated this feature into its design. When a handicap preexists, and provides a persuasive explanation for failure, then the selection or creation of a self-generated self-handicap would be gratuitous. Indeed it has been suggested that the most subtle form of handicapping might be the selection of environments in which handicaps already exist (see Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985), precluding the necessity of creating one's own.

The selection or creation of a self-handicap is a risky affair, fraught with the danger of being revealed as a fraud or of embarrassment and self-consciousness should one have to defend or explain one's strategic behavior (e.g., Shepperd et al., 1986). Further, with self-generated handicaps there is no guarantee that others will find one's handicap persuasive and therefore discount lack of ability as the most compelling explanation for failure, should it occur. Consequently, the presence of a convenient, preexisting handicap (that is consensually defined as persuasive) should be welcomed by those individuals predisposed to select or fashion their own handicaps.

Although the presence or absence of a preexisting environmental handicap should influence the tendency to self-handicap, the extent of that influence likely depends in part on the nature of the task. Previous research has demonstrated that self-handicapping occurs only in anticipation of tasks that are presented as diagnostic of a valued characteristic, such as intelligence (Shepperd & Arkin, 1987). Thus, if a task is presented as important, and no impediment preexists, then the tendency to self-handicap should be high. On the other hand, if a preexisting environmental impediment does exist—or the task is presented as invalid or unimportant—the motivation to self-handicap should be low.

Previous research, stemming from a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985; Brodt & Zimbardo, 1981; Frankel & Snyder, 1978; Snyder, Smoller, Strenta, & Frankel, 1981), has found that individuals respond to preexisting environmental handicaps with increased energy. Ordinarily, the preexisting environmental handicap is brought to the attention of the subject by the experimenter, and in most studies this occurs in the presence of other

subjects or experimental assistants. Consequently, such preexisting environmental handicaps are consensual by definition. Therefore, the presence of the handicap provides an excuse for failure, should it occur, permitting individuals to devote their undivided attention and effort toward performing well. When performing in the presence of a preexisting handicap, there is no need to withhold effort, because the handicap serves as a persuasive reason for the poor outcome. In short, then, a preexisting handicap frees the individual to exert increased effort.

In contrast, the withdrawal of effort constitutes a handicap itself, and might tend to accompany a self-generated self-handicap. By withdrawing effort, or appearing to do so, an individual can provide an additional means of making the causes of failure ambiguous. Minimally, an obvious increase in effort would tend to undermine the effectiveness of self-generated self-handicaps (especially when the handicap is marginally persuasive). Consequently, it seems likely that individuals choosing to self-generate self-handicaps would expend no more, and perhaps less, effort on a task. To assess this ancillary hypothesis, measures of hypothetical attributional accounts for success and failure were included in the present study.

In summary, it was predicted that individuals should be inclined to self-handicap only in the absence of a preexisting handicap and that the extent of their handicapping also should be moderated by the way the task is characterized. Specifically, an important task should elicit greater self-handicapping than an irrelevant task. Finally, it was predicted that an increase in effort might accompany the preexisting handicap, but that this would not occur when the handicap was self-generated.

## METHOD

*Subjects.* Subjects were 52 male and 49 female introductory psychology students at the University of Missouri who received extra credit for their participation. Data from 4 subjects (2 male, 2 female) were excluded because of a failure to follow instructions or because of prior knowledge of the method and purpose of the experiment.

*Procedure.* On arriving for the experiment, subjects were greeted by the experimenter and seated at a table on which a cassette recorder and tray holding five cassettes had been placed. The cassettes were arrayed from right to left beginning with one cassette marked with two red labels (scored as 5 on a 5-step scale), one with one red label, followed by one with no label, one with one green label, and one with two green labels (scored as 1 on a 5-step scale). In a paradigm used in previous research (Rhodewalt & Davidson, 1984; Shepperd et al., 1986), subjects were instructed that they were participating in an experiment investigating the effect of music on performance on an intellectual test. An elaborate cover story noted the study of "mood-music" by marketing researchers in settings such as supermarkets, elevators, and car dealerships, and that the

present study was focused on investigating the effects of music on test taking and performance on intellectual tasks.

Subjects were told that a cassette marked with a red label would inhibit performance on the upcoming test, whereas a cassette marked with a green label would enhance performance. Further, it was explained that the music on a cassette marked with two red labels inhibited performance more than that on a cassette marked with one red label and that the music on a cassette marked with two green labels had been found to enhance performance more than that on a cassette marked with only one green label. The unmarked cassette, it was explained, had been shown to neither enhance nor obstruct test performance, but was included in the selection set to serve as a standard against which the effects of the remaining cassettes could be compared. It was emphasized that the experimenters had no investment in subjects' choosing one versus another tape, as data would have to be collected on individuals listening to each of the five music options.

After subjects signed a consent form, half were told that the test they were taking was a reliable and valid predictor of college and career success (high task importance), whereas half were told that the test was a new test that had yet to be validated or shown useful for any predictive purposes (low task importance). This information was embedded in a brief description of the particulars of the test and an elaborate description of the purposes of the study. Fully crossed with the task-importance induction, half of the subjects were randomly assigned to either a *handicap-present* condition or a *handicap-absent* condition. Subjects in the handicap-present condition were told that the experiment was also investigating dichotic listening and that subjects would hear a high-pitched intermittent ringing noise transmitted through the left earphone whereas the music they selected would be transmitted through the right earphone. The ringing was described as a little like a telephone ringing and had been demonstrated in previous research to disrupt performance on intellectual tasks. Finally, subjects in the handicap-present condition were informed that the purpose of the study was to determine whether the inhibiting music would compound the detrimental effect of the ringing noise and whether the facilitating music would cancel out the detrimental effect of the ringing noise. Subjects in the handicap-absent condition were told nothing of the dichotic-listening task.

All subjects were shown three sample items (one easy and two difficult items modeled on items from the Diagnostic Spatial Relations Aptitude Test; Bennett, Seashore, & Weeman, 1972) and told they would complete a test composed of similar items.

Subjects were told that they would have 10 minutes to complete the DSRAT. A test booklet and computer answer sheet were then provided, and subjects were asked to write their names at the top of their answer sheets. Next, subjects were requested to don the headphones and instructed to select the cassette they wished to listen to while taking the test. After the subject had made a selection, the experimenter placed the cassette in the recorder and attempted to start it. In

all conditions the cassette player did not work. The experimenter tested the cassette player, turning it off and on, inspecting the cord, and then transferring the plug to another wall socket. Finally, the experimenter announced the problem and explained that the experiment would have to be canceled. Then, as if acting on a second thought, the experimenter stated that if the subject would complete the postexperimental questionnaire (PEQ), some of the data would be useful and experimental credit would be granted as though the subject had completed the experiment entirely. The experimenter also stated that some of the questions might not make sense because the subject did not take the DSRAT. However, the experimenter requested that the subject respond as though he or she had taken the DSRAT. After completing the PEQ item by item, subjects were thoroughly debriefed.

*Postexperiment questionnaire.* Two dichotomous manipulation check items assessed whether subjects understood the meaning of the red and green labels on the cassettes. The remaining items were 5-point Likert-type items anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*. Four of these items assessed the extent to which subjects would attribute a successful performance (had they achieved it) separately to luck, effort, task difficulty, and ability; four additional items assessed the extent to which subjects would attribute a poor performance on the DSRAT separately to luck, effort, task difficulty, and ability. Three final items measured the importance subjects placed on their performance on the DSRAT, the extent to which subjects perceived the test as a valid predictor of college and career success, and the extent to which subjects believed that performing well on the DSRAT corresponded to doing well in school.

## RESULTS

Preliminary data analyses included sex of the experimenter (one male experimenter, two female experimenters) as an independent variable. No main effects or interactions approached significance for the sex of experimenter variable; consequently, subsequent analyses were pooled across it. All analyses reported below were conducted using a 2 (high vs. low task importance)  $\times$  2 (handicap present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (male vs. female) unequal-n, unweighted means analysis of variance (ANOVA).

*Manipulation checks.* Subjects were more likely to believe the DSRAT was a valid predictor of success if they were in the high ( $M = 3.17$ ) than if they were in the low importance ( $M = 2.34$ ) condition,  $F(1, 88) = 12.42, p < .0007$ . In addition, subjects in the high ( $M = 3.00$ ) rather than the low importance ( $M = 3.56$ ) condition viewed performing well on the DSRAT as corresponding more closely to success in school,  $F(1, 88) = 3.72, p = .05$ .<sup>1</sup> Finally, subjects in the high importance condition ( $M = 3.7$ ) were more likely to indicate that it was important to do well on the DSRAT than subjects in the low importance condition ( $M = 3.06$ ),  $F(1, 89) = 9.51, p < .003$ . Taken together, the responses to these three manipulation items indicate that the task importance induction was successful.

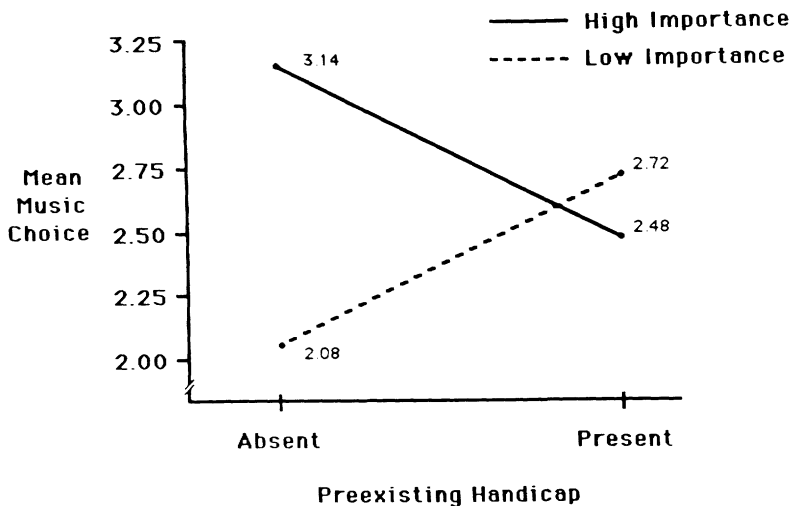


Figure 1 Mean music choice for task importance by handicap present/absent. High scores indicate greater self-handicapping. The neutral point is represented by 3.00.

All subjects correctly identified the difference between tapes with red labels and tapes with green labels on the dichotomous measures provided.

*Music choice.* Analysis of variance revealed the predicted interaction between task importance and handicap presence,  $F(1, 89) = 3.71, p = .05$ . As can be seen in Figure 1, individuals receiving high importance instructions were more likely to handicap their performance in anticipation of taking a test, as found before (Shepperd & Arkin, in press), but in the present study this occurred only when no other handicap was present,  $t(45) = 2.19, p < .05$ . No other significant main effects or interactions emerged for the music choice measure.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the common finding in previous research that men tend to handicap more than women (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Rhodewalt & Davidson, 1984; Shepperd & Arkin, in press) failed to emerge,  $F(1, 89) = 1.70$ .

*Attributions.* For each subject, an internal attribution score (attributions due to ability and effort) and an external attribution score (attributions due to task difficulty and luck) were derived separately for the hypothetical success and for the hypothetical failure. Within-subjects analyses (separately for success and failure attributions) using type of attribution (internal vs. external) as the within-subjects variable were conducted. Concerning success, a significant main effect emerged for type of attribution,  $F(1, 89) = 58.42, p < .0001$ ; subjects were more likely to make internal ( $M = 3.34$ ) than external ( $M = 2.51$ ) attributions for

TABLE 1 Means for the Within-Subjects Analysis of Type of Attributions for Success and Failure on the Diagnostic Spatial Relations Aptitude Test

	<i>Ability</i>	<i>Effort</i>	<i>Task Difficulty</i>	<i>Luck</i>
Attributions for success*	3.14 <sup>a</sup> (97)	3.53 <sup>b</sup> (97)	2.66 <sup>c</sup> (97)	2.35 <sup>d</sup> (97)
Attributions for failure	2.11 <sup>a</sup> (97)	2.84 <sup>b</sup> (97)	3.11 <sup>b</sup> (97)	2.22 <sup>a</sup> (97)

*Note:* Cell *N* in parentheses. Higher numbers indicate greater agreement with a particular attribution as the cause of the hypothetical performance outcome. Means that do not share a common superscript, within rows, are reliably different by Duncan's New Multiple Range Test (Howell, 1982) at  $p < .01$ .

\*Means with superscripts *c* and *d* differ at  $p < .05$ .

a potential success. In contrast, attributions for failure showed that subjects tended to attribute a potential poor performance on the DSRAT to external ( $M = 2.66$ ) rather than to internal ( $M = 2.48$ ) causes,  $F(1, 89) = 3.19, p < .077$ . Both effects are consistent with the literature on the pervasive self-serving bias in causal attribution (e.g., Weary & Arkin, 1981).

Further analyses examining the four attribution elements separately revealed significant differences for the specific types of attributions made for success,  $F(3, 267) = 31.26, p < .0001$ . As can be seen in the top row of Table 1, subjects attributed a successful performance on the DSRAT mostly to the effort they would have expended. In addition to the significant main effect for type of attribution, a significant handicap present/absent by attribution interaction emerged,  $F(3, 267) = 2.92, p < .034$ . There was a nonsignificant trend for subjects to report that their effort and good fortune would play a greater role when a handicap was present rather than absent, whereas subjects saw task difficulty and ability as significantly more important when a handicap was absent rather than present (see Table 2). No other main effects or interactions were significant for the items addressing attributions for a successful performance.

Significant differences between the specific attributions for failure also emerged,  $F(3, 267) = 24.21, p < .0001$ . Task difficulty was the predominant attribution for a poor performance (see bottom row of Table 1). No interaction of handicap presence or absence and attribution type emerged for hypothetical failure.<sup>3</sup>

## DISCUSSION

The goal of the self-handicapper is to discount ability as a determinant of poor performance (and to augment ability as a determinant of good perfor-

TABLE 2 Means for the Within-Subjects Analysis of Type of Attributions for Success by Handicap Present/Absent

	<i>Ability</i>	<i>Effort</i>	<i>Task Difficulty</i>	<i>Luck</i>
Handicap present	3.02 <sup>c</sup> (97)	3.60 <sup>a</sup> (97)	2.42 <sup>d</sup> (97)	2.42 <sup>d</sup> (97)
Handicap absent	3.28 <sup>b</sup> (97)	3.45 <sup>ab</sup> (97)	2.91 <sup>c</sup> (97)	2.28 <sup>d</sup> (97)

*Note:* Cell *N* in parentheses. Higher numbers indicate greater agreement with a particular attribution as the cause of the hypothetical performance outcome. Means that do not share a common superscript (within rows and columns) are reliably different by Duncan's New Multiple Range Test (Howell, 1982) at  $p < .05$ .

mance). Several self-handicapping strategies have been investigated, and the evidence seems clear that people use attributional principles, through the vehicle of self-handicapping, to regulate their image (see Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985). However, self-handicapping is a potentially costly means of reducing a threat to esteem. One must run the risk of embarrassment or being detected as a fraud in using self-handicapping, and the most persuasive of handicaps would actually interfere with performance and tend to diminish an individual's tangible outcomes in everyday experience.

The present study showed that subjects were disinclined to add to their disadvantaged position, via self-handicapping, when a preexisting handicap was already in place. Previous research has found repeatedly that individuals are likely to assert some personal circumstance such as physical symptoms (Smith, Snyder, & Perkins, 1983; Snyder & Smith, 1982), social anxiety (Snyder & Smith, 1986; Snyder, Smith, Augelli, & Ingram, 1985), despondent mood (Baumgardner, Lake, & Arkin, 1985), or traumatic childhood events (DeGree & Snyder, 1985) as preemptive excuses for poor performance whenever the experimenter made clear that it was widely acknowledged as a handicap to performance. In short, their disability—perceived, real, or self-presentational—provided a convenient way to obscure the link between performance and evaluation (at least in the case of potential failure) without at the same time increasing the actual probability of failure.

None of these previous studies went the step further to investigate whether those who could not emphasize their disability would self-handicap if permitted and whether those who were encouraged to emphasize their disability would shun further self-handicapping opportunities. The present study addresses this gap in the literature by showing that further self-generated self-handicaps are avoided when convenient handicaps already exist. Additional research is needed to determine whether this finding can be generalized to individuals who are chronically handicapped by some personal disability.

The attributional utility of convenient preexisting handicaps is accompanied by a measure of practical utility. In several studies, with a variety of theoretical orientations, it has been found that effort (and even performance) increases when individuals are confronted with what would seem to be difficult, if not impossible, performance standards or circumstances (e.g., Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985; Brodt & Zimbardo, 1981; Frankel & Snyder, 1978; Snyder et al., 1981). In the present study subjects' attributions for hypothetical success suggested they may have been prepared to expend more effort when there was a preexisting handicap in place than when there was not.

In contrast, the nonsignificant tendency of subjects to report diminished effort when no preexisting handicap existed suggests that self-handicapping and withdrawal of effort may occasionally be associated, at least mildly. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that self-handicapping and effort expenditure might be positively associated under certain circumstances. Indeed, when (a) a self-handicap is consensually agreed to be a persuasive cause of failure and (b) the handicap seems unintentional, unavoidable, or a necessary evil (i.e., not strategic), then individuals might even self-handicap in order to set the stage for a safe environment in which to expend heroic effort.

It was particularly intriguing that subjects' ability and effort attributions for hypothetical success tended to vary inversely. Subjects' estimates of their effort were high when a preexisting handicap was present, and they indicated they would attribute a success less to ability when their effort was high than when their effort was lower (i.e., in the handicap-absent condition). This Heiderian attributional logic (1958) has been supported time and again empirically (see Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985). However, it is surprising that success achieved in spite of the preexisting handicap would not confer greater attributional advantage concerning the presence of ability.

This ancillary finding in the attribution measures suggests that there may be an ironic, and insidious, disadvantage associated with preexisting handicaps. If one approaches a preexisting handicap with increased vigor, then any success achieved might be less likely to be attributed to oneself (as reflecting the presence of ability), even though it occurred in spite of the interfering handicap. Consequently, individuals with chronic personal handicaps, and those who expend a great deal of effort only when preexisting handicaps are present, may suffer from a chronic sense of uncertainty concerning their true abilities.

We should hasten to note that the attributions collected in the present study were not the major focus of the investigation and that they constituted only hypothetical assessments of what might have occurred had subjects completed the task. All the inferences drawn here about attributional correlates of self-generated and preexisting handicaps should be treated as highly speculative.

By way of summary, we have noted both similarities and dissimilarities between preexisting, convenient excuses for subpar performance and self-generated self-handicaps that interfere with performance. Further research on the ways that individuals use both preexisting and self-generated handicaps to

cope with threats to their identity, and the interpersonal and cognitive consequence of these coping strategies clearly would be useful.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Data from one subject are missing because of her failure to supply answers to all items on the postexperiment questionnaire.

<sup>2</sup>Examination of the mean scores for the main dependent measure reveals that, even in the high importance/handicap absent condition, subjects' choices do not substantially exceed the neutral point of 3.00. It might seem that subjects in this condition were opting for performance circumstances that were diagnostic of their ability (i.e., neutral) rather than choosing to handicap their performance. However, fewer than 5% of *all* the subjects participating in this experiment chose to listen to neutral music (i.e., a score of 3 on the 5-point scale). The balance chose either facilitating or debilitating music. This undermines the argument that subjects were seeking diagnostic information by choosing a neutral performance setting in which to take the test. From a relative rather than absolute standpoint, all subjects chose on average to facilitate their performance (by choosing a facilitating tape). The notable exception was the group predicted to handicap (those without a preexisting handicap who anticipated taking an important test).

To subjects, it seems, boosting one's performance by choosing facilitating performance conditions is normative. Consequently, designating 3.00 as the scale midpoint seems arbitrary. Further, a self-handicapping score that exceeds the scale midpoint only slightly is consistent with data from the original demonstration of self-handicapping (Berglas & Jones, 1978; p. 414, column 7).

<sup>3</sup>There was an unexpected and inexplicable sex  $\times$  task importance  $\times$  interaction,  $F(3, 267) = 3.55, p < .02$ , but the Newman-Keuls post hoc analysis revealed no significant effects.

It is important to note that the means for all the attribution items for failure outcomes were below the middle or neutral response of 3.00. This suggests that subjects were unwilling to speculate about either internal or external causes of a prospective poor performance. Given the college student sample and a task involving intellectual ability, the prospect of failure may have been sufficiently remote that subjects were unwilling to supply a meaningful causal analysis of failure.

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