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Growth Motivation as a Moderator of Behavioral Self-Handicapping in Women

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ABSTRACT. Behavioral self-handicapping is a strategy used to protect attributions about ability. People behaviorally self-handicap by creating an obstacle to their success so failure is attributed to the obstacle instead of to their ability. Although past research has observed behavioral self-handicapping exclusively in men, the current research revealed a moderator of behavioral self-handicapping in women: growth motivation, which reflects the desire to develop one’s abilities and learn from failure. Participants (N = 100) completed a test purportedly predictive of successful careers and relationships, and some were given failure feedback about their performance. Participants could behaviorally self-handicap by choosing to complete another test in a performance-impairing environment. Although men self-handicapped more overall, women self-handicapped more after failure when they were low in growth motivation. These results highlight a novel moderator of behavioral self-handicapping in women.

Keywords: gender differences, growth motivation, self-evaluation, self-handicapping, sex differences

THE DESIRE TO PRESENT a favorable image of oneself is so strong that some people sabotage their own performance to do so (Jones & Berglas, 1978). This

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seems counterintuitive at first; how can sabotaging one’s performance make one look good? When people self-handicap, they create or claim an obstacle to their success in an attempt to control the attributions people make about their ability (Kolditz & Arkin, 1982). Specifically, if they fail or perform poorly when an obstacle is present, the failure can be attributed to the obstacle instead of to their own ability.

Self-handicapping can take two forms. Behavioral self-handicapping is when an individual actively creates an obstacle (e.g., insufficient preparation) to successful performance, whereas self-reported self-handicapping is when a person claims the existence of an obstacle (e.g., anxiety, lack of sleep; Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991). There are no gender differences in self-reported self-handicapping but men are more likely to behaviorally self-handicap than women (Hirt et al., 1991), an interesting finding to which we will return.

Although people differ in their propensity to self-handicap (Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer, 1984), self-handicapping is most commonly observed when the individual is highly uncertain or doubts his or her ability to perform well, such as following an unexplainable success or an unambiguous failure (e.g., Berglas & Jones, 1978; Brown & Kimble, 2009). Such concerns about failure increase behavioral self-handicapping in men and are heightened when the performance is public (Hirt, McCrea, & Kimble, 2000). In fact, the public nature of one’s performance is critical. Behavioral self-handicapping typically occurs when the person’s performance will be observed or known to others (e.g., Kolditz & Arkin, 1982), suggesting that it is primarily an impression management strategy to protect attributions about one’s ability. Specifically, the self-handicapper hopes that the audience will attribute poor performance to the obstacle instead of to his or her ability. Self-handicapping does seem to protect attributions perceivers make about the target’s ability; however, it does so at the expense of the general impression perceivers form of the target, as perceivers tend to evaluate self-handicappers more negatively on other dimensions (Luginbuhl & Palmer, 1991). Although self-handicapping is primarily a strategy to manipulate audience attributions, there is evidence that some chronic self-handicappers are also protecting their own ability attributions and self-esteem when they claim self-handicaps (McCrea & Hirt, 2001).

Behavioral self-handicapping clearly requires a trade-off between impression management and actual growth or improvement in one’s ability. Importantly, as mentioned previously, only men seem to engage in behavioral self-handicapping. That is, men who are concerned about their performance will actively create an obstacle or disadvantage to protect attributions about their ability. For example, they seek conditions that impair performance (e.g., performance-inhibiting drugs) or choose not to engage in activities that would benefit performance (e.g., practice; see Berglas & Jones, 1978; Brown & Kimble, 2009; Hirt et al., 2000; Kimble & Hirt, 2005). Women, on the other hand, do not create obstacles for their own performance, even when self-focus is high (Hirt et al., 2000).
One explanation for this gender difference in behavioral self-handicapping is effort valuation. Women value effort more than men, and this differential valuing of effort mediates gender differences in behavioral self-handicapping through reduced effort (McCrea, Hirt, & Milner, 2007). Specifically, because self-handicapping poses both costs to actual performance and benefits to impression management, the decision to self-handicap reflects the perception that the benefits outweigh the costs. The greater value women place on effort leads them to perceive behavioral self-handicapping as too risky because they value effort more than impression management (McCrea et al., 2007). As a consequence, women do not self-handicap by reducing effort. Men, on the other hand, do not possess the same concern and so they are willing to reduce effort to protect attributions about their ability.

Currently, effort valuation is the strongest individual difference that explains why women behaviorally self-handicap less than men. Relevant individual differences that could potentially predict self-handicapping, such as self-esteem (McCrea & Hirt, 2001) and performance concern (Hirt et al., 2000), are not related to behavioral self-handicapping in women. However, one factor that has not been explored is the extent to which women differ in growth motivation. People who are high in growth motivation want to develop their abilities by learning from experience and improving after failure (Bauer et al., 2008; Park, Bauer, & Arbuckle, 2009). When faced with failure, it is possible that women who are low in growth motivation will behavioral self-handicap. Whereas most women do not behaviorally self-handicap because they value effort over self-presentation (McCrea et al., 2007), women lacking growth motivation may face a different problem. For these women, failure does not reflect an opportunity to learn, but instead evokes self-presentational concerns. Thus, much like men, these women should prefer to protect their self-image by behaviorally self-handicapping. However, because men are already prone to behaviorally self-handicap for impression management, growth motivation is unlikely to predict behavioral self-handicapping in men.

The current study tested this prediction that growth motivation would moderate behavioral self-handicapping in women. We had the following hypotheses: a) Men would self-handicap more than women; b) men would self-handicap more in the failure condition than in the control condition; c) among women, growth motivation would interact with condition, such that women low in growth motivation would self-handicap more in the failure condition than in the control condition; and d) growth motivation and condition would not interact among men.

Method

Overview

Participants completed a test that supposedly measured an important skill called “Integrative Orientation” (e.g., Brown & Kimble, 2009; Hirt et al., 1991).
Some participants were given failure feedback about their performance, which has been found to increase self-handicapping in past research (Brown & Kimble, 2009). To measure self-handicapping, participants could choose to listen to audio CDs that either helped or hurt their performance while they completed a second test. Participants’ choice of audio CD served as the measure of self-handicapping, following past research that has used choice of a performance-impairing audio clip (e.g., Brown & Kimble, 2009) or drug (e.g., Berglas & Jones, 1978; Kolditz & Arkin, 1982) to measure self-handicapping. Lastly, we also measured participants’ level of growth motivation to assess whether it contributed to this choice.

Participants

Participants were 100 (48 women) undergraduate students who participated in exchange for course credit. They were recruited via an online experiment management system for psychology research at the University of Dayton. Data from an additional six participants were excluded because of experimenter error in administering the measures or failure to record participants’ CD choice.

Measures

Growth motivation. Growth motivation was measured with the 20-item Growth Motivation Index (GMI; Bauer et al., 2011). The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for the present sample was .68. This scale measures participants’ desire for growth and self-improvement, with items such as, “I seek new experiences as a way to grow personally rather than just to feel good,” “I actively seek new perspectives on how to live my life, even if these new perspectives mean I’ve been wrong,” and “I choose classes/tasks from which I can gain knowledge, even if I am not guaranteed a good outcome in the end.” Participants indicated how often they engaged in each behavior on a scale of 1 (never) to 7 (always).

Manipulation check. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree): “I did well on the first test”; “I did better than I expected to perform on the first test.” These two items served as manipulation checks to assess the effectiveness of the failure feedback.

Procedure

Participants completed the experiment individually and were randomly assigned to condition. Upon arriving, the experimenter (who was either a female
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or male research assistant) told participants that they would be completing tests of Integrative Orientation (IO), an important ability that predicts success in careers and relationships (e.g., Brown & Kimble, 2009; Hirt et al., 1991). To increase participants’ investment in the study, the experimenter said that students who performed exceptionally well on the tests would be contacted for further research on IO, a cover story that has been successful in previous studies (e.g., Brown & Kimble, 2009). Participants were told that they would take two tests to assess their verbal ability, which was described as one aspect of IO.

Next, all participants were given a ten-item analogy test which was described as the first assessment of IO. They were given 10 minutes to complete the test. Ten difficult problems and ten moderate problems were selected based on the results of a pilot study in which participants rated 39 analogy problems on a scale of 1 (very easy) to 7 (very difficult). Participants in the failure condition were given the ten most difficult problems so the subsequent failure feedback would be believable. Participants in the control condition were given ten moderate-level problems. We chose easier problems for the control condition because concern about failure predicts greater self-handicapping (Hirt et al., 2000), and it is possible that a difficult test could produce concern even in the absence of explicit failure feedback. Thus, moderate-level problems were used to prevent control participants from developing performance concerns.

After the first test, participants completed a packet of questionnaires that included the measure of growth motivation. Next, the experimenter told participants in the failure condition that they had answered only three of the ten problems on the first test of IO correctly and that 80% of people tested before them had scored higher. The experimenter also showed participants a graph to indicate their percentile ranking. Participants in the control condition did not receive feedback about their performance.

All participants were then told that the second test would assess listening comprehension and memory, which were described as important aspects of IO. The experimenter explained that participants would listen to a recording of a person giving a speech, after which their memory of the speech would be tested. All participants listened to a 3.5 minute speech on one of two topics (e.g., environmentalism) given by the same person. The topic of the speech did not affect self-handicapping and is not discussed further.

When the speech was finished, the experimenter returned (holding what appeared to be the second test) and explained that participants would take the second test while listening to a CD so we could study the effect of certain sounds. The experimenter said that some recordings are known to improve performance on the test while others impair performance. At this point, the experimenter pretended to be embarrassed, claiming that he or she forgot to check which condition the participant was supposed to be in. The experimenter added that, as a result, the participant could choose the condition and the experimenter would simply make a note of which one was chosen. Participants were then shown four CDs, two
with green stickers and two with pink stickers. They were told that the green sticker CDs were helpful to performance, with the one-sticker CD being somewhat helpful and the two-sticker CD being very helpful. The pink sticker CDs were described as making people perform worse, with the one-sticker CD having a somewhat negative effect and the two-sticker CD strongly hurting performance. Participants then chose which of the four CDs to listen to, after which the experimenter asked them to complete the manipulation check questionnaire. Lastly, participants were fully debriefed about the purpose of the experiment, the cover story, and the false feedback in the failure condition.

Results

Manipulation Check

Participants in the control condition ($M = 4.87, SD = 1.25$) agreed with the statement, “I did well on the first test,” more than participants in the failure condition ($M = 1.56, SD = .80$), $F(1,98) = 242.87, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 3.15$. Agreement with the statement, “I did better than I expected to perform on the first test,” was also greater in the control condition ($M = 4.04, SD = 1.37$) than in the failure condition ($M = 2.44, SD = 1.34$), $F(1,98) = 34.88, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.18$. In other words, participants in the failure condition felt they had performed worse than those in the control condition, indicating that the manipulation was successful.

Growth Motivation

We tested for gender differences in levels of growth motivation and found that men ($M = 97.65, SD = 12.39$) and women ($M = 97.77, SD = 9.48$) did not significantly differ in growth motivation, $t < 1, p > .90$.

Self-Handicapping

Participants’ CD choice was coded such that “4” represented a CD that would strongly hurt performance, “3” represented a CD that would slightly hurt performance, “2” represented a CD that would slightly help performance, and “1” represented a CD that would strongly help performance. In other words, larger scores indicate more self-handicapping.

First, we assessed the effect of gender and feedback on CD choice with a 2 (gender: men, women) × 2 (feedback: failure, control) ANOVA (see Table 1). There was a main effect of gender, $F(1,96) = 5.15, p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = .46$, with men ($M = 2.21, SD = 1.23$) self-handicapping more than women ($M = 1.71$,
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TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations for CD Choice, With Higher Scores Indicating More Self-Handicapping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell ns ranged from 23 to 27.

SD = .92). There was no effect of feedback or an interaction between feedback and gender, Fs < 1, ps > .50. Although the main effect of gender on self-handicapping was found as anticipated, we also expected a gender × feedback interaction, with men self-handicapping more in the failure than control condition and women showing no difference between the two conditions. However, this predicted interaction was not significant.

Second, we assessed the role of growth motivation in women’s self-handicapping by conducting separate regression analyses for men and women, regressing CD choice onto feedback (effects coded), growth motivation, and the interaction between feedback and growth motivation. For women, the expected interaction between growth motivation and feedback was significant, \( b = -.04, \beta = -4.13, t = 2.48, p < .05 \) (see Figure 1). Simple slope tests (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2010) revealed that the interaction was driven by the significant negative relation between growth motivation and self-handicapping in the failure condition, \( \beta = -.07, SE = .03, t = 2.71, p < .01 \). In other words, among women in the failure condition, self-handicapping increased as their growth motivation decreased (\( r = -.49, p < .05 \)). The simple slope in the control condition was not significant, \( p > .80 \). Lastly, the regression analyses for men did not reveal a significant interaction or significant main effects (\( ts < 1, ps > .50 \)).

Discussion

Past research has described behavioral self-handicapping as a phenomenon that occurs only in men. Behavioral self-handicapping can take many forms, such as seeking situations that impair one’s performance or by reducing effort (i.e., practice) when such effort can improve performance. When self-handicapping takes the form of reduced effort, the lack of behavioral self-handicapping in women can be explained by women valuing effort more than men (McCrea et al.,
However, the present study revealed that there are, in fact, some women who will behaviorally self-handicap. Specifically, women self-handicapped more after failure when they were low in growth motivation, an individual difference that represents a desire to pursue growth and challenge instead of simply trying to look or feel good (Bauer et al., 2011). Given that self-handicapping is a self-presentation strategy in which people sabotage their own performance to prevent negative attributions about their ability, it makes sense that women who do not value actual improvement over self-presentation (i.e., low growth motivation) would behaviorally self-handicap.

Given that level of growth motivation did not significantly differ between men and women, why was growth motivation related to self-handicapping in women but not men? At this time, there is no reliable explanation for why only men use performance-impairing situations (e.g., CDs, drugs) as a method of self-handicapping. It may be that men and women regard self-handicapping situations differently, such that the situations make self-presentational concerns salient to men but performance concerns salient to women. If men interpret the situation as one in which they must present themselves in the best light possible, then other concerns (even those related to growth) may become irrelevant. In contrast, if women are aware of both self-presentational and performance concerns, how they choose to balance those competing concerns may depend on individual differences such as growth motivation. Future research could test this possibility by
comparing the accessibility of self-presentational and performance motives in a self-handicapping situation to see if men and women differ in the accessibility of these competing motivations.

A possible limitation of the current study is the measure of growth motivation, which had a relatively low Cronbach’s alpha. Removing a single item from the GMI increases the alpha to .76, but excluding this item from the scale does not change the regression analyses with GMI and so all 20 items were included. Future research should continue to explore the psychometric properties of the GMI.

Unrelated to growth motivation, another important issue is the absence of an interaction between feedback and gender. Although men self-handicapped more than women, they did not self-handicap more after failure (contrary to past research; e.g., Brown & Kimble, 2009). The manipulation check affirmed that participants believed the failure feedback, so why did failure not produce greater self-handicapping in men? One possible cause is the way in which the measure of self-handicapping (CD choice) was presented. Specifically, the two CDs that participants could select to “hurt performance,” and thus to self-handicap, were labeled with and verbally described as having pink stickers. (The “performance enhancing” CDs had green stickers.) Given that both adults and children associate the color pink with femininity (Picariello, Greenberg, & Pillemer, 1990), it is possible that men did not want to select this option in front of the experimenter for fear of appearing less masculine. (Brown & Kimble, 2009, used red stickers to mark the handicap option.) This would mean that men were faced with competing self-presentational concerns. In other words, men in the failure condition may have wanted to self-handicap more, but self-presentational concerns about appearing feminine may have outweighed their desire to self-handicap. Future research could test this explanation by varying the color of the sticker for the handicap CD. If this explanation is correct, it introduces a potential self-handicapping intervention: If people believe self-handicapping will hurt rather than help their self-image, they will not self-handicap. Indeed, men self-handicap less in front of an audience that disapproves of self-handicapping (Brown & Kimble, 2009), suggesting that men only self-handicap when they think the self-presentational outcomes will be positive. Manipulating the self-presentational value of self-handicapping as a potential intervention is an intriguing possibility for future research.

In conclusion, the results of the present study raise interesting questions about when and why people self-handicap. Importantly, they also identify when women will behaviorally self-handicap. Specifically, although women generally do not behaviorally self-handicap, they do when they have little motivation to grow and improve their abilities. This is a notable contribution to the self-handicapping literature, as it shows moderation of the well-established gender difference and highlights an individual difference that influences the strategies people use when faced with threats to their self-image. People can pursue positive self-evaluations
in two ways: By protecting their self-image (e.g., self-handicapping, self-serving bias) or by seeking actual improvement and success (e.g., enhancing one’s abilities through practice; Park et al., 2009). The current research illustrates how people differ in their pursuit of positive self-evaluation and will hopefully stimulate additional research on self-handicapping, a classic trade-off between self-presentation and actual improvement.

AUTHOR NOTES

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