Different perceptions of self-handicapping across college and work contexts

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Abstract

We investigated the effectiveness of self-handicapping as an impression management strategy in college and work contexts. In contrast to past research in which college students are both targets and perceivers, we tested whether target status and perceiver status moderate perceptions of self-handicappers. To this end, we manipulated whether the target was a college student or an adult worker, and we recruited as perceivers both college students (Study 1) and adult workers (Study 2). We additionally manipulated the target’s behavior (self-handicapping vs. control) and outcome (success vs. failure). The results revealed that self-handicapping protected a student target (but not a worker) from negative evaluations (e.g., ability attributions) in the eyes of college students, particularly males. However, adult workers consistently judged self-handicapping negatively.

Self-handicapping is a self-protective mechanism in which people seek or create obstacles that interfere with their performance (Berglas & Jones, 1978). This process seems counterintuitive at first because sabotaging one’s own performance is self-destructive rather than self-protective. However, the self-handicap is protective because subsequent failure can be attributed to the self-handicap rather than to the person’s ability (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985). Alternatively, if the person succeeds in spite of the self-handicap, that same obstacle enhances perceptions of the person’s ability given that he or she succeeded under conditions that should have promoted failure.

Self-handicapping can protect ability attributions made by both the self and others. Intrapsychically, Berglas and Jones (1978) argue that people are motivated to self-handicap to protect their self-esteem from a potential threat of failure by deflecting attributions for failure away from the self (also see McCrea & Hirt, 2001; Rhodewalt, Morf, Hazlett, & Fairfield, 1991). Interpersonally, Kolditz and Arkin (1982) emphasize that self-handicapping is a strategy to maintain a favorable impression of one’s ability in the eyes of others. There is evidence that self-handicapping serves both these self-protective (McCrea & Hirt, 2001) and impression management (Hirt, McCrea, & Boris, 2003) functions. In the present study, however, we focused solely on the impressions people form of self-handicappers and investigated whether self-handicapping is conducive to impression management. In particular, we were interested in whether self-handicappers in college and work contexts are perceived in the same way, and whether the perceiver’s status as a college student or adult worker influences these perceptions.

Two criteria for successful impression management in self-handicapping

The question of whether self-handicapping is an effective impression management strategy can be tested in two ways: interpersonal reactions (e.g., do you like the person?) and ability attributions (e.g., is the person skilled?). Using college students as both targets and perceivers, past research has demonstrated that self-handicapping can be an effective impression management strategy, especially for a male audience. In Hirt et al. (2003; Study 1), participants read a passage about a college student in which the target’s gender (male or female), behavior (self-handicapping or control), and exam grade (A or D) varied. Participants then evaluated the target on a number of dimensions (e.g., likability, desire to be friends, desire to be class project partners), which were combined to represent interpersonal evaluations of the target. In addition to assessing interpersonal reactions, participants reported how much of the target’s grade could be attributed to his or her ability.
Both interpersonal reactions and ability attributions were influenced by self-handicapping and participant gender (target gender, in contrast, was not important). For interpersonal reactions, men and women did not differ in their evaluation of the non–self-handicapping target whereas men evaluated the self-handicapper more positively than women. For ability attributions, participants attributed failure to ability significantly less in the self-handicapping condition than in the control condition, indicating that self-handicapping protected the target from negative ability evaluations after failure. There were no differences in attributions of success. Taken together, the authors conclude that self-handicapping is an effective impression management strategy, enhancing interpersonal reactions and protecting ability attributions, especially for a male audience.

However, Luginbuhl and Palmer (1991) found different results when they distinguished between two types of interpersonal reactions: general social interest (e.g., liking) versus collaborative interest (e.g., study partner) toward the target. Participants in their study expressed significantly less desire to collaborate with a self-handicapping target compared with a control target. In contrast, the target’s behavior did not affect perceivers’ overall liking for the target. We speculate that people may downplay the consequences of another person’s self-handicapping if that behavior does not affect their social relationship. When it comes to collaboration, however, another person’s self-handicapping may affect their own performance, so they may regard self-handicapping as a potential risk to themselves. Thus, self-handicapping may be harmful when collaboration is of interest, making it important to differentiate socializing from collaborating when examining self-handicapping as an impression management strategy. In the present research, we assessed three types of perceptions: (a) socialization interest; (b) collaboration interest; and (c) ability attributions.

**Perceptions of self-handicapping by gender and age**

The previous section identified type of relationship (social vs. collaborative) as one factor that moderates how positively people perceive self-handicappers. We additionally propose that there are contextual factors that determine whether perpetrators of self-handicapping “get away with” their behavior. As we will explain later, there is evidence that people who value effort and work ethic criticize self-handicappers and avoid self-handicapping themselves. We take this a step further and suggest that the age and work status of both the self-handicapper and the perceiver will determine the effectiveness of self-handicapping as an impression management strategy.

It is well established that men are more willing to engage in behavioral self-handicapping than women. Specifically, men self-handicap more when they are concerned about their performance, such as when they have recently failed in that performance domain (Brown & Kimble, 2009) or when they have succeeded in the past, but believe that they cannot replicate their success (Berglas & Jones, 1978). Even increasing self-focus, which usually primes impression management concerns, increases self-handicapping only in men (Hirt, McCrea, & Kimble, 2000; Kimble & Hirt, 2005).

The best explanation for this gender difference to date is that men and women tend to differ in their work ethic (i.e., belief about the importance of hard work and putting forth effort). Relative to men who tend to care more about competence and performance, women value effort and motivation more (Gaeddert, 1985; Sutherland & Veroff, 1985) and possess stronger work ethics (Martin & Kirkcaldy, 1998). To the extent that women value work ethic, they should not engage in self-handicapping (a behavior that violates work ethic). McCrea, Hirt, and Milner (2008) tested this idea and found that differences in work ethic did indeed mediate gender differences in behavioral self-handicapping. Work ethic also mediated the gender difference in evaluations of self-handicappers, such that women were more critical of self-handicappers to the extent that they valued effort. In other words, the extent to which people value hard work and effort predicts whether they will engage in self-handicapping and whether they will criticize other self-handicappers.

Importantly, gender is not the only predictor of work ethic. Researchers in organizational psychology have documented age differences in work attitudes and behavior (for a review, see Rhodes, 1983). Of particular interest, previous studies have observed a positive link between age and work ethic (Aldag & Brief, 1975, 1977; Cherrington, 1980; c.f. Wentworth & Chell, 1997). This link remains significant after controlling for sex, education, income, seniority, and occupational level (Cherrington, Conde, & England, 1979). We believe that, because of their different work ethics, young college students and working adults will differ in their perceptions of self-handicapping, much like male and female students do. It should be noted that the previously described gender differences in self-handicapping were all observed in college student samples.

Unfortunately, because age and work experience are inevitably confounded, it is not clear why the gender difference in work ethic exists. A recent meta-analysis found that conscientiousness, a trait representing self-discipline, organization, and deliberation, stays low through adolescence and the college period, but increases after age 20 (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). It may be that conscientiousness naturally increases with age, or perhaps increased conscientiousness results from more years of work experience.

The age difference in work ethic may also be influenced by different societal expectations for college students and working adults. Compared with colleges which promote the
individual’s education and development, the emphasis in the workplace is on whether employees are capable of completing projects skillfully and satisfying the employer’s needs. Put another way, success in college primarily impacts the individual and the definition of “success” may be personally determined, whereas success at work takes the form of objective accomplishments that are expected by others. Thus, college students can maintain a positive self-image by self-handicapping (which deflects failure from the self; Berglas & Jones, 1978), whereas adult workers may find that their future is quickly constrained by their objective performance (which self-handicapping sabotages). This shift in expectations from college to work may contribute to the increased work ethic and conscientiousness of adult workers.

Although the cause remains unknown, it is clear that older adults possess stronger work ethics than younger emerging adults (Aldag & Brief, 1975, 1977; Cherrington, 1980; Cherrington et al., 1979). As a result, we believe that college students and adult workers will differ in their perceptions of self-handicappers, much like men and women differ as a result of their different work ethics. Specifically, we predict that adult workers will be more critical than students when evaluating self-handicappers because this behavior violates work ethic. However, we also expect college students to be aware of the different societal expectations for themselves versus adult workers. To this end, we expect male students to have more lenient impressions of student self-handicappers when evaluating them on social dimensions (replicating past research; Hirt et al., 2003), yet college students should dislike self-handicappers when the perceivers are women, the dimension is collaborative, or the self-handicapper is an adult worker. To examine these hypotheses, we manipulated target status such that self-handicapping was committed by either a college student or an adult worker. Furthermore, we recruited college students (Study 1) and adult workers (Study 2) as perceivers.

**The present study**

To review, we investigated interpersonal reactions and ability attributions toward self-handicapping by differentiating three factors. First, we differentiated desire for socialization from desire for collaboration with a self-handicapper. Second, we differentiated student targets from adult worker targets. Third and most important, we recruited as perceivers both college students (Study 1) and adult workers (Study 2). To our knowledge, no studies on self-handicapping perceptions have examined the role of the target’s age and work status or recruited samples other than college students as perceivers. By these additions, we hoped to demonstrate that self-handicapping as an impression management strategy might be at least partially effective in the college context, but would not be in the work context.

**Study 1**

In Study 1, we investigated the effectiveness of self-handicapping as an impression management strategy by examining how the target’s status and the perceiver’s gender influence desire to socialize with the target, desire to collaborate with the target, and attributions about the target’s ability. Target gender was not manipulated because it did not affect perceptions of self-handicappers in the past (Hirt et al., 2003). It should be noted that perceivers in Study 1 were college students.

Following the framework of Hirt et al. (2003), participants read one of eight stories and answered questions about the target of the story. However, this study differed from Hirt et al. (2003) in two important ways. First, we made a distinction between socialization and collaboration (Luginbuhl & Palmer, 1991). Second, we manipulated the target’s status (student or worker). There were three hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1.** Male participants will express more socialization interest with a self-handicapping student than will female participants. However, male participants will no longer exhibit more socialization interest with self-handicappers than female participants when the self-handicapper is a worker.

**Hypothesis 2.** Desire for collaboration will decrease when the target self-handicaps or fails, regardless of target status and participant gender.

**Hypothesis 3.** Self-handicapping will protect ability attributions after failure when the target is a student, but not when the target is a worker.

**Method**

**Participants**

Undergraduate students \(N = 263, 52.9\% \text{ women}\) in introductory psychology classes at Northeastern University participated in the study for research credit. The mean age was 19.01 years (standard deviation \(SD = 1.49\)). Approximately, 64% of participants identified themselves as European American, 17% as Asian American, 6% as African American, 6% as Latino American, 2% as Native American, and 5% as other.

**Procedure**

An experimenter told the participants that the purpose of the study was to examine how people perceive others with a very limited amount of information. Participants’ task was to read a short story about a person named Chris and answer questions about him. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions (i.e., eight stories). Following debriefing, participants were thanked for their participation and dismissed.
Participants read a story about a man named Chris who was supposed to give an important presentation the next day. The status of Chris (college student or 30-year-old worker), his behavior (self-handicapping or control), and the outcome (success or failure) were manipulated in the passage. Similar to the story used by Hirt et al. (2003), Chris had finished making computer slides for his presentation and faced a decision of whether to socialize with friends or to continue preparing his presentation.

Behavior manipulation

In the self-handicapping condition, Chris decided to see his friends and did not return until 1:00 a.m. Chris went to bed without any further preparation. No additional details about his activities or level of preparation were provided. In the control condition, Chris stayed home to practice his presentation. Similar to Hirt et al. (2003), a friend called to complain about a professor (student condition) or a boss (worker condition), and Chris suggested that the friend should talk to the professor or boss about the problems. ¹ Chris’s level of preparation was not further specified.

Outcome manipulation

In the student condition, the passage ends with Chris giving the presentation and receiving a grade of either an A (success) or D (failure). In the adult worker condition, the passage ends with Chris giving the presentation, and his idea about a new product being either accepted (success) or rejected (failure). In total, there were eight experimental conditions, and the number of participants in each condition varied from 30 to 36.

Dependent measures

After reading the passage, participants rated how much they wanted to “get along” with Chris (socialization) and how much they wanted “Chris as a work partner” (collaboration) using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all to 7 = very much). Also, they rated how much they thought Chris’s ability affected his performance on the presentation (1 = not at all to 7 = very much).

Results

The present study had a 2 (target status) × 2 (behavior) × 2 (outcome) × 2 (participant gender) × 2 (relationship type) mixed-design. Given its complexity, we analyzed the data according to the hypotheses rather than probing all significant results.

Hypothesis 1. Male participants will express more socialization interest with a self-handicapping student than will female participants. However, male participants will no longer exhibit more socialization interest with self-handicappers than female participants when the self-handicapper is a worker.

We conducted a 2 (behavior) × 2 (participant gender) × 2 (target status) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on socialization interest. As expected, the three-way interaction was significant, F(1, 255) = 4.48, p = .04, η² = .02. To further understand the nature of the interaction, we conducted a 2 (behavior) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA per target status.

A 2 (behavior) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA for the student target revealed a significant main effect of participant gender, F(1, 125) = 10.01, p = .002, η² = .07, as well as a significant interaction between behavior and participant gender, F(1, 125) = 8.49, p = .004, η² = .06. Simple effects analyses revealed that male participants (M = 5.42, SD = 0.97) expressed more desire to socialize with a self-handicapping student than female participants did (M = 4.19, SD = 1.04), F(1, 125) = 16.94, p < .001, η² = .12. The simple effect of participant gender was not significant in the control condition, F = 0.04, p = .85. This finding is consistent with Hirt et al. (2003).

A 2 (behavior) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA performed on socialization interest for the worker target revealed no significant main effects or interaction, Fs < 0.04, ps > .84, implying that men did not have higher desire for socialization with the self-handicapping target than women did. To investigate whether these non-significant results were driven by a decrease in men’s desire to socialize with the self-handicapping worker or an increase in women’s desire, we conducted a 2 (target status) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA with only the self-handicapping condition included. The simple effect analyses in the self-handicapping condition revealed that men’s interest in socializing with the target in the self-handicapping condition was significantly reduced in the work setting (M = 4.48, SD = 1.66) compared with the college setting (M = 5.42, SD = 0.97), F(1, 124) = 7.94, p = .006, η² = .06. The simple effect of gender was not significant for women, F = 1.42, p = .24. Overall, men’s increased desire for socializing with a self-handicapper was present when the self-handicapper was a student, but not for a worker, supporting the hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2. Desire for collaboration will decrease when the target self-handicaps or fails, regardless of target status and participant gender.

¹We added this behavior to keep the story as similar to that of Hirt et al. (2003) as possible. Although the authors did not explain why they included this behavior in the control condition, we assumed its purpose was to have the target experience an interruption in the control condition that balanced the interruption the target experienced in the self-handicapping condition.
A 2 (target status) × 2 (behavior) × 2 (outcome) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA performed on collaboration interest revealed that only the main effects of behavior and outcome were significant, $F$s(1, 247) > 70.88, $p$s < .001, $\eta^2 > .22$ without any significant interactions, $F$s < 2.41, $p$s > .12. Regardless of target status, both men and women expressed lower collaboration interest when the target was in the self-handicapping ($M = 2.42, SD = 1.48$) or failure ($M = 2.95, SD = 1.84$) conditions compared with the control ($M = 4.90, SD = 1.65$) or success ($M = 4.43, SD = 1.87$) conditions. These results are consistent with Luginbuhl and Palmer (1991) and support the hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 3.** Self-handicapping will protect ability attributions after failure when the target is a student, but not when the target is a worker.

A 2 (behavior) × 2 (outcome) × 2 (target status) ANOVA performed on the extent to which participants believed the target’s ability was responsible for his performance revealed that there was a marginally significant three-way interaction, $F$(1, 255) = 2.94, $p$ = .09, $\eta^2 = .01$. We conducted a 2 (behavior) × 2 (outcome) ANOVA by target status to understand the nature of the interaction.

When the target was a student, the main effect of outcome was significant, $F$(1, 125) = 11.22, $p$ = .001, $\eta^2 = .08$, but it was qualified by the interaction, $F$(1, 125) = 5.06, $p$ = .03, $\eta^2 = .04$. The simple effect of behavior was not significant when the outcome was a success, $F$(1, 125) = 2.26, $p$ = .14, $\eta^2 = .02$. However, it was marginally significant when the outcome was a failure, $F$(1, 125) = 2.81, $p$ = .09, $\eta^2 = .02$. In other words, failure was attributed to ability less when the student target was in the self-handicapping condition ($M = 3.97, SD = 2.08$) than the control condition ($M = 4.63, SD = 1.22$), which is consistent with Hirt et al. (2003). However, when the target was a worker, only the main effect of outcome was significant, $F$(1, 130) = 9.25, $p$ = .003, $\eta^2 = .07$. Participants attributed success ($M = 5.03, SD = 1.35$) to ability more than failure ($M = 4.25, SD = 1.58$). These results indicate that self-handicapping is an effective impression management strategy to protect ability attributions following failure for students, but not for workers, supporting the hypothesis.

**Discussion**

Taken together, the results of Study 1 indicate that self-handicapping as an impression management tool is effective under quite restricted conditions. First, the audience should be male college students whose main interest is socializing with the self-handicapper. Second, the self-handicapper should be a student. In contrast, self-handicappers leave negative impressions when a working relationship is considered or when the target is an adult worker.

Although it was found that a self-handicapper’s status and the nature of the relationship play important roles in self-handicapping as an impression management strategy, there are two concerns that our data cannot properly resolve. First, given that the perceivers were college students, the target manipulation may have been about ingroup versus outgroup rather than student versus worker. Specifically, it is possible that student perceivers are generous to self-handicapping students not because they are students, but because they are ingroup members. We sought to resolve this issue in Study 2 by recruiting adult workers as participants.

Second, it is not clear whether the importance of the target’s performance is equivalent across the status manipulation. The student target’s class performance affects only himself, whereas the worker target’s work performance affects other colleagues and the company as a whole. This difference may be an alternative explanation for why the self-handicapping worker was evaluated more negatively than the student. In other words, negative evaluations of the self-handicapping worker may have come from the fact that self-handicapping affects people beyond the target. In Study 2, we revised the nature of the performance so it would always impact the target alone: the student’s presentation was for a one-year tuition scholarship whereas the worker’s presentation was for a promotion. In addition, we asked participants to judge the importance of the presentation so we could determine whether importance was also unintentionally varying across conditions.

**Study 2**

The goal and basic design of Study 2 were the same as Study 1 except that participants were adult workers. The recruitment of adult workers was important given the findings from Study 1. College students’ evaluations of self-handicapping significantly varied depending on whether self-handicapping was committed by a college student or an adult worker. Thus, it is reasonable to suspect that adult workers themselves may have different (more negative) attitudes toward self-handicapping. Furthermore, the positive association between age and work ethic (Aldag & Brief, 1975, 1977; Cherrington et al., 1979) supports this suspicion. There were three hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1.** Participants will have less desire to socialize with the target in the self-handicapping condition than the control condition, regardless of target status or participant gender.

**Hypothesis 2.** Both male and female participants will have low desire for collaboration when the target self-handicaps or fails.

**Hypothesis 3.** Self-handicapping will harm ability attributions, regardless of target status.
Method

Participants and procedure
Participants were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Originally, we collected 245 complete responses. However, the data were eliminated if participants reported being full-time college students, if the IP address indicated that the participant had already taken the survey, or if participants failed checks that assessed their attention to the stories (see later). As a result, 185 participants (59.5% female) remained in the analyses. Among those, 68% identified themselves as currently employed, 5% as retired, 11% as in between jobs, and 14% as homemakers; 2% did not answer. The mean age was 37.92 years (SD = 12.40).

Materials
The materials were almost identical to those in Study 1 with a few revisions. Participants read a story about a man named Chris who was supposed to give an important presentation the next day. The status of Chris (19-year-old college student or 30-year-old worker), his behavior (self-handicapping or control), and the outcome (success or failure) were manipulated in the passage. As in Study 1, after making computer slides for his presentation, Chris faced a decision of whether to socialize with friends or to continue preparing his presentation.

Behavior manipulation
In the self-handicapping condition, Chris decided to see his friends and did not return until 1:00 a.m. Chris went to bed without any further preparation. No additional details about his activities or level of preparation were provided. In the control condition, Chris stayed home to practice his presentation.

Outcome manipulation
In the student condition, Chris either received a one-year tuition scholarship (success) or not (failure). In the adult worker condition, Chris either got promoted (success) or not (failure).

Dependent variables
After reading the passage, participants rated how much they wanted “get along” with Chris (socialization) and how much they wanted “Chris as a work partner” (collaboration) using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all to 7 = very much). Also, they rated how much Chris’s ability affected his performance on the presentation using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all to 7 = very much).

Importance of presentation
Participants rated how important it was for Chris to perform well during his presentation and how important it was to get a one-year tuition scholarship (or getting a promotion) on a 7-point scale. The two responses were averaged to indicate the importance of presentation (α = .72). We assessed presentation importance to test whether it was confounded with participant status (e.g., if the presentation was seen as more important for the adult worker than for the college student).

Manipulation check
At the end of the survey, participants were asked to report their memory of Chris’s behavior (i.e., whether he practiced or went out) and the outcome (i.e., whether he succeeded or failed). As mentioned earlier, those who gave incorrect answers were removed from the analyses. As a result, the number of participants in each condition varied from 19 to 26.

Results
As a preliminary analysis, we examined whether the importance of presentation differed across target status. The results revealed that the importance was not significantly different whether the target was a student (M = 6.23, SD = 1.21) or a worker (M = 6.16, SD = 1.01), t(179) = 0.43, p = .67. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the importance of presentation was balanced across target status. As in Study 1, we analyzed the data according to the hypotheses.3

Hypothesis 1. Participants will have less desire to socialize with the target in the self-handicapping condition than the control condition, regardless of target status or participant gender.

We conducted a 2 (behavior) × 2 (participant gender) × 2 (target status) ANOVA on socialization interest. As expected, the main effect of behavior was significant, F(1, 176) = 65.08, p < .001, η² = .27. Regardless of target status, both men and women showed lower socialization interest when the target self-handicapped (M = 3.80, SD = 1.34) compared with when the target did not (M = 5.34, SD = 1.08), which supports the hypothesis.

3Participants varied in their employment status outside of working at Mturk. Given that Study 2 was designed to test the perspective of adult workers, we also conducted all analyses with unemployed (e.g., retired, homemaker) participants excluded. The results paralleled those reported and led to the same conclusions.

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Hypothesis 2. Both male and female participants will have low desire for collaboration when the target self-handicaps or fails.

A 2 (behavior) × 2 (outcome) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA performed on collaboration interest revealed significant main effects of behavior, *F*(1, 176) = 215.46, *p* < .001, η² = .55, outcome, *F*(1, 176) = 20.24, *p* < .001, η² = .10, and participant gender, *F*(1, 176) = 4.72, *p* = .03, η² = .03 without significant interactions, *Fs* < 2.21, *ps* > .14. That is, participants expressed lower desire for collaboration when the target was in the self-handicapping (*M* = 2.94, *SD* = 1.61) or failure (*M* = 4.05, *SD* = 2.00) conditions compared with the control (*M* = 5.82, *SD* = 1.17) or success (*M* = 4.84, *SD* = 1.95) conditions. Additionally, the main effect of gender reveals that women expressed more desire for collaboration overall than men (*M* = 4.55 for women; *M* = 4.11 for men⁴), but the non-significant interactions with gender indicate that men and women responded similarly to a target who had self-handicapped or failed. These results indicate that self-handicapping and failure tend to decrease collaboration desire in both men and women, and support the hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3. Self-handicapping will harm ability attributions, regardless of target status.

We conducted a 2 (behavior) × 2 (outcome) × 2 (target status) ANOVA on ability attributions. The results revealed that the main effect of outcome was significant, *F*(1, 177) = 19.61, *p* < .001, η² = .10, but was qualified by the behavior × outcome interaction, *F*(1, 177) = 7.65, *p* = .006, η² = .04. The simple effect of behavior was significant when the outcome was a success, *F*(1, 181) = 4.51, *p* = .04, η² = .02. Specifically, success was attributed to ability less when the target was in the self-handicapping condition (*M* = 5.11, *SD* = 1.35) than the control condition (*M* = 5.76, *SD* = 1.43). Furthermore, the simple effect of behavior was marginally significant when the outcome was a failure, *F*(1, 181) = 3.12, *p* = .08, η² = .02, such that failure was attributed to ability more when the target self-handicapped (*M* = 4.72, *SD* = 1.65) than did not (*M* = 4.18, *SD* = 1.45). In other words, self-handicapping hurt ability attributions whether the outcome was a success or failure, supporting the hypothesis.

Discussion

In general, self-handicapping does not appear to be a successful impression management strategy when the audience is adult workers. Self-handicapping decreased both socialization and collaboration interests in both men and women.

Furthermore, perceivers thought that ability played a more important role when the target succeeded without a self-handicap than with one; similarly, they saw ability as more responsible for failure when the target had previously self-handicapped than had not. We note that when college students were perceivers (Study 1), a self-handicapping student’s ability was blamed less for failure compared with a student who did not self-handicap. This difference in ability attributions implies that adult workers may believe that being able to prepare oneself for work without having to resort to self-sabotage is itself ability. Finally, the fact that adult workers’ perceptions of the self-handicapping worker were negative implies that the Study 1 results most likely resulted from the target’s status and not from the ingroup/outgroup dynamics.

General discussion

The goal of the present study was to investigate whether self-handicapping as an impression management strategy successfully serves its intended goal in both college and work settings. Past research on this topic has been conducted exclusively in the context of college (i.e., both targets and perceivers were college students). In the present study, however, we were interested in whether who commits and who evaluates self-handicapping behavior affect perceptions of self-handicapping. Specifically, we examined how a self-handicapping student and worker are evaluated by college students (Study 1) and adult workers (Study 2).

Our data replicated the findings from previous studies with college students as both targets and perceivers (Hirt et al., 2003; Luginbuhl & Palmer, 1991). We found that men expressed more interest in socializing with a self-handicapping student than did women. However, this gender difference disappeared when examining participants’ collaboration interest, such that both men and women expressed lower desire for collaboration with a self-handicapper compared with a non–self-handicapper. Also, replicating Hirt et al. (2003), failure was attributed to ability less when a student target self-handicapped than did not. In summary, self-handicapping in the college context serves its goal at least partially.

However, self-handicapping committed by adult workers leads to different perceptions by student perceivers. Male and female students did not differ in their desire to socialize or to collaborate with the self-handicapping worker. Instead, both of them expressed less desire to collaborate with a worker who failed or self-handicapped than a worker who succeeded or did not self-handicap. For ability attributions, there was no evidence that self-handicapping by an adult worker enhanced ability attributions following success or protected ability attributions following failure.

In contrast, adult workers as perceivers have globally negative perceptions of self-handicapping. Like college parents...
students, both male and female workers expressed less desire for collaboration with self-handicappers than non–self-handicappers, regardless of their status. Unlike college students, however, both male and female workers had less interest in socializing with self-handicappers than non–self-handicappers. In other words, adult workers did not even want to socialize with a self-handicapper. Furthermore, self-handicapping as an impression management strategy for protecting ability attributions completely backfired with an audience of adult workers. They attributed failure to ability more and success to ability less when a person self-handicapped. These findings show that self-handicapping not only fails to achieve its goals among adult workers, but leaves negative impressions of the self-handicapper’s ability.

The findings from the present study speak to the risk of generalization of psychological findings based on college samples (Peterson, 2001; Sears, 1986). According to previous studies that recruited college students as perceivers, it could be concluded that self-handicapping may be an effective strategy for managing positive impressions on others, especially for social relationships and ability attributions following failure (Hirt et al., 2003; Luginbuhl & Palmer, 1991). However, the present study shows that adult workers tend to be reluctant to socialize and collaborate with a self-handicapper. Also, they do not appreciate self-handicappers’ ability even when the outcome is a success and they blame self-handicappers’ ability for a failure, indicating that self-handicapping is simply not a good impression management strategy when the audience are adult workers. Given that the present study is the first to recruit adult workers in examining perceptions of self-handicapping, more research is encouraged.

There are a few limitations to note. First, we manipulated the target to be either a 19-year-old college student or a 30-year-old worker. Thus, it is not clear whether age or status produced our results. People may think that adults should not self-handicap, workers should not self-handicap, or both. Between ages 19 and 30, growing older and starting a career usually occur simultaneously, making it hard to tease them apart. However, this ambiguity can be resolved by disentangling the target’s age and status in future research.

Second, our data do not explain the gender and status differences in perceptions of self-handicapping. As previously mentioned, gender differences in work ethic have been found to mediate gender differences in self-handicapping as well as perceptions of self-handicapping (McCrea et al., 2008). Furthermore, a recent study found that women who do not value self-improvement self-handicap after failure, much like men (Brown, Park, & Folger, 2012). Thus, it is possible that women have higher work ethic than men in late adolescence (Martin & Kirkcaldy, 1998; McCrea et al., 2008), but the gender differences in work ethic become weaker as people age and pursue careers. It will be a meaningful research avenue to examine whether differences in work ethic mediate the perceiver status differences in perceptions of self-handicappers.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that college students and adult workers made opposite ability attributions for failure. Students saw failure as being caused by ability less when the target self-handicapped, whereas workers attributed failure to ability more when the target had self-handicapped. It is possible that students distinguish between ability and effort, so that lack of effort (i.e., self-handicapping) protects the self from negative evaluations of ability. However, adults who have more experience in work preparation may believe that it takes ability to manage one’s behavior and not to engage in self-handicapping. Future research is encouraged to investigate whether the concept of ability changes across life span.

In conclusion, self-handicapping as an impression management strategy is not as effective as originally theorized, especially in the workplace. People who self-handicapped in college and enjoyed the “benefit of doubt” it provided may be tempted to use the same strategy at work. However, they might experience a rude awakening as their coworkers may avoid working or socializing with them, viewing them as incompetent or immature. It seems that in the workplace, this old saying holds true: Excuses are easy to manufacture, but hard to sell.

References


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