

Gender Differences in Self-handicapping: The Role of Self-esteem and Fear of Negative Evaluation

Abstract

The subject of self-handicapping is highly significant issue particularly in the area of educational psychology because it serves to identify and anticipate negative behaviors of students. The current study examined the role of self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation in relation to gender differences in self-handicapping. 219 postgraduate university students; 102 males and 117 females with age range of 20-26 years old provided data on self-handicapping, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation. Analysis of gender differences showed that male reported high scores on self-handicapping, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation. Employing the correlation and Regression analysis, results indicated the positive relationship of self-handicapping with self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation. Computing Three-way ANOVA, findings demonstrated the main effects of gender, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation on self-handicapping. Results pertaining to gender differences combined with self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation further suggested the significant interaction effects on self-handicapping. The results implied that male students having high self-esteem and with higher fear of negative evaluation were more likely to be self-handicapped than female students with low self-esteem and fear of to negatively evaluated.

Key words: *Fear of failure, Gender, Self-handicapping, Self-esteem, University students*

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INTRODUCTION

When people come to this believe that they may fail in a particular task, they do start to produce hurdles and justifications to explain their failures. This concept is bedded as self-handicapping. Several situations can be evidenced to this concept from daily routine of one's life. For instance, if individuals expect their poor performance on tasks, they make causes like attending parties and spending time in other activities so that they could shift the actual cause from themselves in case of real failure (Ntoumanis, Taylor, & Standage, 2010).

Self-handicapping refers to the process where people refrain from attempts when anticipate a failure in the result of tasks. In this way they also protect their self-esteem (Kolditz & Arkin, 1982). Jones and Berglas first speculated the term self-handicapping, and explained self-handicapping as a process of hurdles arrogated by the people in expectation of failing task (Feick, & Rhodewalt, 1997). People do self-handicap just in the situation when believe they will fail. For instance, A student when expect that his performance will be bad in exam, then he/she might establish a reason for his/her potential failure by explaining his/her fellows that he/she was not well in the morning of the exam.

Self-handicapping is a very common behavior amongst people across the multi fields. In educational and organizational field, students and employees take part in self-handicapping to keep away them from feeling sorry and low if they are not doing best in classroom and in company respectively. Educational psychologists can understand the students' behaviors by examining what self-handicapping is and why students do it, and also can help students in knowing their problems in positive way (Elliot, & Church, 2003).

People move away from trials and produce abstractions in the way to achievements, and save feelings of self-images of abilities and competence. Two methods better explain the self-handicapping; behavioral and claimed self-handicaps. In behavioral handicapping, people in actually creates hurdles and problems to success (Leary, & Shepperd, 1986) such as drugs taking (Bordini, Tucker, Vuchinich, & Rudd, 1986), the choice of unrealistic tasks (Greenberg, 1985), and resistance to exercise efforts (Harris, & Snyder, 1986). In this method people make a goal more difficult for themselves in fear of not successfully attaining that goal. They explain the cause of failure in the obstacles rather than in their competencies. In claimed self-

handicapping, people come up with justifications for their potential failures, and complain for the causes of their failures. People simply report about an existence of hurdle such as by claiming that they were ill, or were very nervous (Smith, Snyder, & Handelsman, 1982).

The underlying causes for the use of self-handicapping are different among people (Rhodewalt, 1990). People's propensity to engage in self-handicapping is mainly to protect one's self-esteem. Self-handicapping can be considered as a mean of maintaining self-esteem, self-enhancement, and impression management. Empirical studies have focused on the outcomes of self-handicapping and have postulated that self-handicapping assist in keeping positive mood (Zuckerman, & Tsai, 2005), even after bad performance and failure (Drexler, Ahrens, Anthony; & Haaga, 1995). Therefore, self-handicapping can process the regulation of feelings in the course of preserving one's self-esteem (Garcia, 1995). Fear of negative evaluation which is more sensitive to dishonor and embarrassment towards failure (McGregor, & Elliot, 2005) prompts self-handicapping behavior (Chen, Chen, Lin, Kee, & Shui, 2009; Elliot, & Church, 2003; Ntoumanis, Taylor, & Standage, 2010).

Previous researches have explored a number of individual differences that determine self-handicapping. Factors like problems with one's self-esteem (Harris & Snyder, 1986), and fear of negative evaluation (Berglas & Jones, 1978) promote this behavior in individual when experience less competent of their ability to get success. Empirical studies have also identified a gender difference in this behavior. Men have been found higher in self-handicapping than women. Arkin and Oleson (1998) have reported that self-handicapping is more likely to be used by males and female alike, but are differ in use of behavioral self-handicapping. There are also some researches that provided no differences in the behavior of self-handicapping employed by both males and females (Rhodewalt & Hill, 1995), and some have revealed that females are more self-handicap than males (Feick, & Rhodewalt, 1997). A large number of researches have postulated that self-handicapping is more likely to be used by males than females (Harris & Snyder, 1986; Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991; McCrea, Hirt, 2001).

However, the explanation for gender differences is subtle yet (Arkin & Oleson, 1998; Rhodewalt, 1990). In Pakistan, men and women use self-handicapping and therefore, various explanations for these gender differences have been described repeatedly in the past, aiming at knowing the assumption that males are more

engaged in self-handicapping than females. One reason might be considered that women experience less threatened when expect potential failure (Harris, Snyder, Higgins, & Schrag, 1986). In other words women do not use self-handicapping even when are desired to show publically their abilities (Rhodewalt, 1990). Accord to this notion, women in Pakistan also is less likely to experience self-handicapping.

A second possible justification roots in the notion that men are more likely to have higher self-esteem than do women (Feingold, 1994; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999). Individuals with high self-esteem may involve in behavioral self-handicapping. However, both individuals who are high or low in self-esteem also demonstrate the increased self-handicapping behavior (McCrea & Hirt, 2001; Tice, 1991). A third reason lie in the fact that women do not give much importance to academics domain, thus don't do as behaviorally self-handicap (Swim & Sanna, 1996). However, research to date has examined that men are more behaviorally handicap than women (Kimble, Funk, & DaPolito, 1990), and this is the reason that women use claimed handicapping even in the academic domain (Hirt et al., 1991; Rhodewalt, 1990).

Taking a considerable account in the explanation of self-handicapping, the present research looked into the factors that ascertain self-handicapping in academic domain. Although a great number of researches has demonstrated the explanations for self-handicapping, but still to date, there is a paucity of empirical proves to interpret these justifications. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to provide an evidence for intriguing gender difference in self-handicapping, and to rule out the influence of two individual differences out of several factors in terms of self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A sample of 219 bilingual postgraduate students studying in semester system from Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan participated voluntarily in this study. The mean age of participants was 22.57(3.72) with a range of 20-26 years. Sample size was determined using Raosoft online sample size calculator. All the participants were approached at the campus from the three departments of faculty of social sciences; psychology, sociology, and philosophy using convenience sampling

technique. Among them 102 were male and 117 were female; 137 were urban and 82 students were rural.

Measures

The following original measures were used to achieve the objectives of present study.

Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS)

Self-Handicapping Scale is designed to identify people likely to self-handicap and engage in other excuse-making behavior. The scale used in this study is adapted by Martin (1998) from the original scale of Midgley et al., (1996). Adapted version has 11 items that are responded to using a 7-point Likert-type rating scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree). High scores on items reveal greater tendency towards self-handicapping. Alpha reliability coefficient is .92.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RES)

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg 1965) is a 10-item scale to measure global self-esteem. Items were designed on Guttman scale presented with four response choices indicated as strongly agree to strongly disagree. The higher scores show the higher level of self-esteem.

It is a highly reliable measure with an alpha coefficient of 0.85.

Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)

Fear of negative evaluation was measure using the subscale of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). It is a 33-item self-reported questionnaire (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Subscale of fear of negative evaluation comprises of eight items. It is a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* (scale point 1) to *strongly disagree* (scale point 5) the middle point being neutral (scale point 3). To obtain a total score, two items are reverse scored. Higher scores show the higher level of fear of negative evaluation. The complete version of FLCAS has the split-half reliability of 0.88.

Procedure

The participants in their classrooms were given a set of questionnaires measuring

their self-handicapping, level of self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation along with a demographic variable sheet. The participation of the students was entirely voluntarily after obtaining their consent to participate. They were instructed how to fill the questionnaires, and were assured about the confidentiality of their responses. They were requested to answer every item as truly as they could. They were also allowed to ask questions in case of any ambiguity in the questionnaire items. The data was then statistically analyzed using SPSS-17.

RESULTS

To compare the gender differences in all study variables, independent sample t-test was computed (1). To analyze the objectives, zero-order correlation was measured to see the relationship among variables (Table 2). Multiple regression analysis was done by using the standard or simultaneous regression analyses to check the dependency of self-handicapping upon self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation (Table 3). The effect of gender along with two independent variables of self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation was also computed through three-way ANOVA using 2(Gender; male & female) $\times$ 2(Self-esteem; low & high) $\times$ 2(Fear of negative evaluation; low & high) (Table 4).

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and t-values for the Scores of Self-handicapping, Self-esteem, and Fear of Negative Evaluation

Scales	Male Students (N=102)		Female Students (N=117)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Self-handicapping	41.33	9.41	35.16	10.02	2.34	0.01*
Self-esteem	32.76	7.66	29.61	6.01	-1.99	0.04*
Fear of negative evaluation	98.47	12.28	79.69	13.07	3.18	0.00**

df. = 217, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 2: *Descriptive Data and Correlation Matrix for the Scores of Self-handicapping, Self-esteem, and Fear of Negative Evaluation*

	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Self-Handicapping	52.54	4.61	-	.61*	.73***
2. Self-Esteem	30.01	3.71		-	-.63**
3. Fear of Negative Evaluation	109.02	14.3			-

* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 2 shows the mean, SD, and correlations for the scores of self-handicapping, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation. Results indicate that self-handicapping is significantly positively related with self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation. Findings further reveal a negative relationship between self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation.

Table 3: *Standard Regression Model showing impact of Self-esteem and Fear of negative evaluation on Behavior of Self-handicapping*

Predictors	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p
(Constant)	5243.50	182.56		2.15	.032
Self-esteem	.511	.037	.751	3.63	.042*
Fear of Negative Evaluation	.712	.043	.601	4.82	.000***

$R^2 = 0.71$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.44$, ($F(2, 216) = 33.27$, $p \leq 0.001$)

*** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$

The value of $R^2 = 0.71$ presented in Table 3 indicates that dependent variable of self-handicapping is 71% explained by both independent variables of self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation. A significant F -value for the standard regression model ($F(2, 216) = 33.27$, $p \leq 0.001$) also demonstrate that model predicts the outcome variable significantly well. Examination of t -values also is indicating that independent variables are significantly contributing in the prediction of dependent variable.

Table 4: Three-way ANOVA of Participants' 2(Gender; male & female) $\times$ 2(self-esteem; low & high) $\times$ 2(fear of negative evaluation; low & high) for their Scores on Self-handicapping behavior

Source Main Effect	F	p	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power
Gender	14.12	.000	.863	.731
Self-esteem	8.579	.022	.493	.463
Fear of Negative Evaluation	11.39	.046	.644	.594
	5.376	.611	.018	.107
Interaction				
Gender * Self-esteem	21.83	.000	.672	.747
Gender * Negative Evaluation	7.439	.016	.584	.479
Self-esteem * Negative Evaluation	4.271	.026	.369	.252
Gender * Self-esteem* Negative Evaluation				

Results in Table 4 are showing the main and interaction effects of gender, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation. Examining the eta, observed and F-values, it is demonstrated that three variables are significant predictors of self-handicapping when are entered independently in the model of analyses. Interaction effect of all three variables is also significant except one of them when gender is combined with self-esteem.

DISCUSSION

In this study, a review of the literature related to self-handicapping aroused the need of exploring the gender differences in self-handicapping in relation with the role of individual's self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation. Results indicated the significant gender differences in terms of self-handicapping, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation. Male students were found with higher self-handicapping, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation as compared to female students (Table 1). Thus it was assumed that both individual factors might serve as the root cause of these gender differences. Findings suggested that self-handicapping is significantly positively correlated with self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation (Table 2).

These findings implies that when individuals experience high level of self-esteem and high level of fear to be negatively evaluated, are more likely to self-handicap as well.

Several previous researches are in consistent with the present findings. Rhodewalt and Fairfield (1991) reported that usually individual tend to handicapping just for the sake of their high self-esteem because in this way they can reduce the burden of expected failure. In a further study, Martin Seligman and colleagues also provided the evidences for how self-esteem remains intact when participants do self-handicapping. They explained in their experimental findings that people due to their high self-esteem engaged in self-handicapping, and this also create a positive effect on participants. The reason might be the way they attributed their failure to an external factor, thus they remained safe from shame as they did not internalize the failure.

In spite of two distinctive forms of self-handicapping, it is vital to look into the gender differences in self-handicapping. Hirt, Deppe, and Gordon (1991) examined the students' preferences for both types of self-handicapping prior to their exams they reported that both gender were found engaged in claimed self-handicapping, but behavior handicapping was found in men only. Though the present study has not used these two types of handicapping but here it is considerable to understand the gender differences. Many investigations into the tendency of self-handicapping have demonstrated the findings that are in line with the findings of present study.

Present study is also in line with other many researches in presenting the findings that men do more self-handicapping as compared to women. Such as Hirt et al., (1991) have found that men are more likely to be self-handicapped than women. Therefore, the overall direction of findings strongly proposed that women generally do not use self-handicapping. Rhodewalt (1990) also in the review of literature posited and admitted that this gender difference is the most popular and consistent finding in the literature of self-handicapping.

It was also found in the present study that behavior of self-handicapping is regressed upon self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation. Results in Table 3 showed that level of self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation are the significant positive predictors of self-handicapping among students. These findings suggested that students having high level of self-esteem and having greater fear for their negative

evaluation are more prone to apt self-handicapping. These findings are also in tune with the findings of Elliot & McGregor (2001) who reported that when students have fears that they might be failed in a given task, and don't have confidence in their abilities, then set performance goals in the classroom which in turn resulted into adopting the self-handicapping.

Rhodewalt & Vohs (2005) also described that a student with the strong belief of not having abilities, may take his exams or class test with a non-serious attitude, and thus try to avoid hard work due to the expected failure. To avoid the embarrassment of being unsuccessful, the student goes wrong to enough preparation for his exam. In this way he may not get the permanent ease, but he may depict his uncertain abilities that ultimately result in greater self-handicapping.

When data was subjected to the three-way analyses to see the main and interaction effects of gender, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation on self-handicapping, the findings revealed the significant effects of gender, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation. However the results for interaction of variables showed that gender was insignificant when was grouped with self-esteem, but was significant when was interacted with fear of negative evaluation. It means there is no difference in men and women with different levels of self-esteem in self-handicapping. Furthermore, the interaction of self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation was found significant. The overall findings suggested the significant main and interaction effects of all three variables that is adequate to state that self-handicapping is significantly positively explained by gender, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation.

LIMITATIONS & SUGGESTIONS

Over all findings presented that self-handicapping behavior facilitates people to externalize failures by allowing justifications for failings. The present study have explored the role of only two variables of self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation, so the more avenues are opened to research out in future. Study has discussed the findings based on data collected only from university students, therefore these findings cannot be generalized to the students of other educational set up such as schools or colleges where the academic environment could be different from that of universities. A comparison of this kind would be a more significant addition in the literature of self-handicapping.

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