

Academic Self-Handicapping and its Correlates in Early Adolescence

Tehniyat Naveed & Jennifer Henderlong Corpus
Reed College

PRESENT STUDY

- Schooling contexts emphasize social comparison between adolescents, which can lead to immense psychological and social stress.
- Some students cope with this stress by adopting **self-handicapping (SH) strategies** whereby they obscure the relationship between their actual performance and inferred ability in order to provide an excuse for poor performance (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).
- Very limited research has examined **SH** in younger students (for exceptions see Kimble et al., 1998; Rappo et al., 2017).
- The present study focused on examining the characteristics and predictors of SH in a sample of early adolescents (5th-8th graders) using qualitative and quantitative methodology.
- Specifically, the three research questions asked were:
 - Are there gender, age, and achievement differences in SH among early adolescents?
 - Do theory of intelligence (TOI) and school anxiety predict academic SH in early adolescence?
 - How do students who engage in high levels of SH experience school?

HYPOTHESES

- Higher levels of SH for:
 - Boys versus Girls
 - Older (7th/8th grade) versus Younger (5th/6th grade) students
 - Lower performing students
- Entity (fixed) TOI and school anxiety → Higher levels of SH

METHODS

- Participants for this study were drawn from a pre-existing dataset (Corpus et al., 2016), which included children from two K-8 parochial schools.

To address Research Questions 1 and 2 (Quantitative):

- Survey data from 149 5th to 8th graders were used for this research, which included students' gender, age, GPA, school-related anxiety (Miserandino, 1996), TOI (Dweck, 1999), and SH (Urduan et al., 1998).

To address Research Question 3 (Qualitative):

- Interview transcripts were available for 35 students, which focused on students' academic self-perceptions and school-related anxieties.
- Teachers' narrative report-card comments were available for 54 students, which were coded to capture teachers' perceptions of students' preparation for class, academic performance, classroom participation, and personality attributes.
- Students were divided into high vs. low SH at the median and their results on the coding schemes were compared.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES

Research Question 1: Gender, Age, and Achievement Differences

- There were no gender differences in SH.
- Older students reported more SH ($M = 1.47$) than younger students ($M = 1.27$), $F(1, 141) = 7.87, p < .01, \eta^2 = .53$.
- The expected negative correlation between SH and GPA was found ($r = -.21, p < .05$), with GPA explaining 4.2% of the variance in self-handicapping

Research Question 2: TOI and Anxiety as Predictors of SH

- There was no relationship between TOI and SH ($r = .05, ns$).
- As predicted, there was a positive relationship between anxiety and SH ($r = .16, p < .05$).

Table 1 presents the correlations among all study variables.

Mean, standard deviation and Pearson's Correlation Matrix for Measured Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	-					
2. Gender	-0.01	-				
3. GPA	-0.11	-0.19*	-			
4. Anxiety	-0.18*	-0.03	-0.11	-		
5. Theory of intelligence	-0.28*	-0.11	-0.18	0.23*	-	
6. Self-handicapping	0.22*	0.09	-0.21*	0.16*	0.05	-
Mean	.49	.44	3.14	2.01	2.45	1.39
SD	.50	.50	0.70	1	1.10	0.49

Note. * $p < 0.05$

QUALITATIVE ANALYSES

Research Question 3: How High SH Students Experience School

- Thematic analysis was used to code and interpret teacher comments and students' interview responses.
- Coding was done while blind to SH scores.
- Figure 1 presents the key differences between students high versus low in SH that emerged from the thematic analysis.



Presented at the 2019 biennial meeting of the Society for the Study of Human Development. Please direct correspondence to henderj@reed.edu.

Student Interview Data

Self-Perceptions

Putting in High Effort:
"I work real hard"
High SH (29%) < Low SH (73%)
 $\chi^2(1, N = 25) = 4.81, p = .03$.

Grades-Oriented:
"I try to get the best grades I can and that's kind of it"
High SH (7%) < Low SH (63%)
 $\chi^2(1, N = 25) = 4.96, p = .03$.

Interpersonal Comparisons:
"I'm kind of average"
High SH (0) < Low SH (36%)
 $\chi^2(1, N = 25) = 0.06, p = .01$.

School-Related Anxieties

Anxious About Ability to Demonstrate Knowledge:
"I'll be nervous for a test I didn't study for because I won't really know anything"
High SH (50%) > Low SH (9%)
 $\chi^2(1, N = 25) = 4.74, p = .03$

Teacher Comments

High Performance:
"X is a top-level student!"
High SH (15%) < Low SH (55%)
 $\chi^2(1, N = 40) = 703, p = .01$.

DISCUSSION

- Self-Handicapping (SH) was more common among 7th/8th graders versus 5th/6th graders, and among lower performing versus higher performing students.
- High SH students described themselves in ways that conveyed their lack of interest and effort regarding their schoolwork. These self-presentations are in line with what is known about SH (Covington, 1984).
- Teachers perceived high SH students as exhibiting weaker academic performance than low SH students.
- Perhaps the most notable finding of the current study is the positive relationship between academic SH and school-related anxiety, reflected in both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Students appear to engage in SH, at least in part, because they are afraid of not being able to master the material.

REFERENCES

- Corpus, J. H., Worrington, S. V., & Haimovitz, K. (2016). Creating rich portraits: A mixed methods approach to understanding profiles of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. *The Elementary School Journal*, 116, 365-390.
- Covington, M. V. (1984). The self-worth theory of achievement motivation: Findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal*, 85(1), 5-20.
- Dweck, C. S. (1995). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1991). *Social cognition, 2nd ed.* New York, NY, England: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Kimble, C. E., Kimble, E. A., & Croy, N. A. (1998). Development of self-handicapping tendencies. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 138(4), 524-534.
- Miserandino, M. (1996). Children who do well in school: Individual differences in perceived competence and autonomy in above-average children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 88, 203-214.
- Rappo, G., Alesi, M., & Peppi, A. (2017). The effects of school anxiety on self-esteem and self-handicapping in pupils attending primary school. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 14(4), 465-476.
- Urduan, T., Midgley, C., & Anderson, E. M. (1998). The role of classroom goal structure in students' use of self-handicapping strategies. *American Educational Research Journal*, 35(1), 101-122.