The Role of Threat and Uncertainty in Self-Handicapping and Overachievement

THESIS

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Abstract

Research on individuals who are unsure about their level of competence has revealed that self-doubt contributes to a concern for competence and a concern for appearing competent to others. Among the strategies that self-doubtful individuals might use to maintain an image of competence, the present research examines two in particular: self-handicapping and overachievement. Whereas self-handicapping involves creating obstacles to performance in order to provide a ready excuse for failure, overachievement involves exerting heroic amounts of effort in order to avoid failure or demonstrate success. Despite obvious differences between self-handicapping and overachievement, feelings of uncertainty about competence underlie both strategies. Previous research has targeted the motivational basis of self-handicapping and overachievement, but questions remain regarding why self-doubtful individuals adopt one strategy or the other and under what conditions these individuals will be compelled to employ such strategies. Four studies were conducted to explore conditions that predict self-handicapping overachievement. Specifically, the meaning of performance on a task and the difficulty of a task were expected to affect tendencies toward self-handicapping and overachievement. Results showed that self-doubtful individuals were more likely to self-handicap for a difficult task and overachieve for a less difficult one. However, self-handicapping and
overachievement behavior only emerged when the meaning of task performance sufficiently threatened the image of competence. The findings support the notion that feelings of uncertainty and threat motivate the use of self-handicapping and overachievement, with specific situational cues dictating strategy choice.
Dedicated to my loving girlfriend, Emma
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Competence is an integral part of the human experience. Beyond being simply one of many valuable attributes, competence relates to self-esteem, social status, and feelings of control, personal security, and mental health (Jones, 1989). As such, people strive both to feel competent and to convey an image of competence to others. Although actually being competent surely has its merits, for many individuals, appearing competent may be even more important. Self-presentational strategies, along with an implicit knowledge of attributional principles, afford such individuals the ability to protect the image of themselves as competent and intelligent people (Jones & Berglas, 1978). Jones and Berglas (1978) identified two seemingly opposed yet inevitably linked strategies people use to appear competent to others: self-handicapping and overachievement.

Self-Handicapping

The counterintuitive nature of self-handicapping has captivated researchers for decades (Arkin & Oleson, 1998). According to Jones and Berglas (1978), individuals will sometimes forgo success and create obstacles that interfere with their performance in order to maintain or enhance the image of competence. Although they originally discussed this behavior as a motivation underlying drug and alcohol use, Jones and Berglas later expanded their scope and renamed the phenomenon “self-handicapping.”
Berglas and Jones (1978) provided the first experimental demonstration of self-handicapping. Participants were asked to complete two intelligence tests. On the first test, half of participants received solvable problems while the other half of participants received unsolvable problems. Despite the extreme difficulty of the unsolvable problems, some participants were told that their answers were mostly correct. Prior to the second intelligence test, participants were given a choice between two bogus drugs, Actavil (a drug that would enhance performance) and Pandocrin (a drug that would inhibit performance). Participants who completed unsolvable problems but received success feedback were more likely to choose the performance-imparing drug than the performance-enhancing drug. The experience of noncontingent success feedback on the first test likely triggered incredible uncertainty in these individuals, leaving them unsure as to whether they could produce another successful performance. That uncertainty, when combined with the self-worth implications of the intelligence test, presented a treacherous decision: choose the performance-enhancing drug and risk a failure that could only be explained by having low intelligence, or choose the performance-inhibiting drug and risk a failure that could easily be explained by the influence of the drug.

For individuals motivated to avoid appearing incompetent, self-handicapping renders ambiguous the cause of failure. Although performance might normally indicate high or low ability, self-handicapping obscures the link between outcome and attribution, nullifying any meaning of the performance. For example, rather than studying on the night before an exam, the self-handicapper might instead spend time with friends or indulge in alcohol. Any measure of poor performance on the exam could normally be
explained by a lack of ability or a lack of effort. If the self-handicapper had studied properly before the exam, the lack of ability would be the only reasonable explanation for failure. Thus, self-handicapping reduces the likelihood of ability attributions in the face of failure and helps the individual maintain that treasured image of competence. At the same time, in the face of success, self-handicapping increases the likelihood of ability attributions. For example, the student who indulges in excessive alcohol use the night before an exam and still succeeds appears all the more capable and intelligent. Regardless of the outcome, self-handicapping ensures that the image of competence persists.

Although self-handicapping provides a ready excuse for failure, it also can dramatically increase the probability of failure. Such a pattern of behavior begs the question: what motivates this willing and active self-sabotage? According to Berglas and Jones (1978), the obsessive concern with an image of competence originates from a basic uncertainty about one’s level of competence. Both competent and incompetent individuals alike have little need for self-presentation; competent individuals can rely on successful performance to demonstrate their competence, and incompetent individuals should be rather certain of their low ability level and thus have no image to protect. The self-handicapper, on the other hand, has a “precarious and fragile, but not entirely negative self-concept” (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985, p. 179).

Jones and Berglas (1978) discussed two possible routes through which people could develop these concerns for competence and self-worth. First, they suggested that children might have trouble establishing some sense of being unconditionally valued and loved. These children would be confused about whether social reinforcements come from
adequate performance or from unconditional love and care. Second, noncontingent success experiences might result in an insecure self-concept. This insecurity derives from the person’s inability to know the basis for his or her success. According to this reasoning, the self-handicapper will be motivated to maintain an image of competence, but hesitant to put his or her ability to a clear test.

**Overachievement**

No matter the genesis, individuals with some amount of uncertainty regarding their competence have an inordinate concern with presenting an image of competence. However, self-handicapping serves as only one strategy that self-doubtful individuals might employ to preserve that image. Despite being so different behaviorally from self-handicapping, overachievement provides another route for maintaining an image of competence. As Jones and Berglas (1978) suggested, the self-handicapper and overachiever might similarly exaggerate the importance of competence and feel the need to protect the image of competence from diagnostic feedback. Despite sharing a fear that failure will implicate competence and an abnormal investment in the question of self-worth, the overachiever succeeds in avoiding failure through persistent effort, whereas the self-handicapper embraces failure as an alternative to self-implicating feedback.

Although self-handicapping has received considerable attention from researchers over the last 30 years, overachievement has gone relatively unnoticed. At a superficial level, overachievers appear to be doing well, bringing home sterling report cards and fulfilling their potential. Self-handicappers, however, tend to experience the opposite. As the squeaky wheel, the self-handicapper often gets all the grease. Some of this lack of
interest with overachievement likely stems from how the term has been defined colloquially: when performance (such as grade point average) exceeds an expected level of performance based on some other metric (such as SAT scores). Others tend to confuse overachievers with high achievers, individuals who reach similar levels of success and exert similar levels of effort, but without the same pattern of thoughts and feelings that characterize overachievement. Like self-handicappers, subjective overachievers worry about their competence and doubt their ability to succeed. To ensure a successful performance and not be judged as incompetent, the overachiever exerts heroic effort. However, this excessive effort renders the cause of success ambiguous, with both ability and effort being plausible explanations for the success. Failure may be avoided, but at the cost of perpetuating the uncertainty about one’s level of ability.

Much like with self-handicapping, the overt behavior of overachievement masks an even more intriguing motivational basis. According to a recently developed model of overachievement (Oleson, Poehlmann, Yost, Lynch, & Arkin, 2000), a high concern for performance, or belief that people judge self-worth by performance, and high self-doubt about one’s competence underlie subjective overachievement. Overachievers seek to maintain feelings of self-worth through successful performance; however, these individuals doubt whether their innate or essential ability alone will suffice to produce a successful outcome. In order to increase the probability of success, the overachiever exerts incredible effort. Afterwards, the overachiever cannot be sure if the success would have occurred without the heroic effort. Thus, the individual continues to experience the same self-doubt in the future.
Despite the increased chance of successful performance, subjective overachievement carries with it a subtly destructive phenomenology. Even though their self-presentational strategy requires extreme effort, overachievers report a strong dislike of hard work and effort (Poehlmann, 1994). After failure, overachievers report especially negative emotions, including depression and hopelessness. And after success, overachievers report less enjoyment than others and tend to attribute that success to luck. Furthermore, success paradoxically raises concerns for overachievers that others will discover their lack of ability. Thus, overachievers enact a strategy that, if successful, will only leave them dissatisfied and anxious.

*Self-Handicapping or Overachievement?*

Self-handicappers and overachievers share feelings of self-doubt and concerns with maintaining the image of competence; however, the self-presentational strategies these individuals use to manage such concerns differ dramatically. Self-handicappers will withdraw effort to avoid ability attributions after failure, whereas overachievers will exert incredible effort to avoid failure altogether. The question remains: why do some self-doubtful individuals choose to self-handicap and others choose to overachieve?

Lynch (1998) proposed that strategy choice might be based on how the individual expects competence to be judged. Specifically, believing that people judge competence more on innate ability may lead to self-handicapping and believing that people judge competence more on successful outcomes may lead to subjective overachievement. Across two studies, Lynch (1998) demonstrated that pattern of results. Participants were asked to complete practice problems before a test of a novel ability. Half of participants
were primed through a memorization task to experience feelings of self-doubt and the other half was left unprimed. Participants were also primed to be more concerned with either performance or ability. In the case of performance, participants generated reasons why high school GPA better predicts success in college than IQ. In the case of ability, participants generated reasons why IQ better predicts success.

Lynch (1998) found the predicted interaction of self-doubt and concern for performance or ability. Individuals with self-doubt and a concern for performance completed an average of 21 practice problems, whereas individuals with self-doubt and a concern for ability completed an average of nine practice problems. Individuals who did not receive the self-doubt prime completed about 11 practice problems regardless of concern. Although statistically significant results were found in only one of the two studies, the data do provide evidence that varying concerns for performance and ability might be at play in the choice to self-handicap or overachieve.

Other research has proposed that the choice between self-handicapping and overachievement stems less from chronic concerns for performance or ability and instead shifts more dynamically over time. In one study, Yost, Lichstein, Poehlmann, and Arkin (1995) found that individuals who scored higher on the Subjective Overachievement Scale (Oleson et al., 2000) were not automatically more likely to exert effort on a supposed test of social competency. After receiving success feedback, overachievers did behave as expected and requested more practice problems than non-overachievers. Without such feedback, overachievers actually requested fewer practice problems than non-overachievers. Yost et al. (1995) concluded from these findings that the same
individuals might engage in both self-handicapping and overachievement to protect their image of competence. Furthermore, Lichstein (1994) suggested that a previous successful performance might increase the expectation of future success, allowing the self-doubtful individual to exert extreme effort with less fear of suffering a crushing failure. Thus, the probability of achieving a successful outcome might indicate whether self-handicapping or overachievement should be adopted.

*The Influence of Threat*

Although the previous research on the motivational basis of self-handicapping and overachievement has done well to identify the individuals that employ these self-presentational strategies and the potential bases for doing so, less attention has been devoted to understanding the more proximal factors that compel such behavior. Self-doubtful individuals do exhibit self-handicapping and overachievement behavior, but not in every situation. Something specific to the situation must trigger strategy use. Research on rejection sensitivity (RS; Downey & Feldman, 1996) might provide useful insights for understanding this trigger. Rejection sensitivity involves an anxious expectation of rejection, readiness to perceive rejection, and subsequent behavioral overreaction. As such, Downey, Mougios, Ayduk, London, and Shoda (2004) consider RS to be part of the defensive motivational system (DMS; Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 1990), a part specifically designed to protect individuals from the sting of interpersonal rejection, not unlike how self-handicapping and overachievement protect individuals from appearing incompetent.
According to Downey et al. (2004), neurological and behavioral research implicates two primary affective-motivational systems, an appetitive system that responds to positive stimuli (i.e., rewards) and motivates approach behavior, and a defensive system that responds to negative stimuli (i.e., punishments, threat) and motivates avoidance behavior. Extending this model to emotions (Lang et al., 1990), human emotions can be viewed as action dispositions that organize behavior along this same appetitive-aversive dimension. Furthermore, when negative, highly arousing stimuli are encountered, the DMS activates to prepare for behaviors aimed at self-protection. Importantly, threats to this system can be either biological or socially learned.

Returning to rejection sensitivity, Downey et al. (2004) conceptualize RS as involving uncertainty about whether the individual will be accepted or rejected. Thus, for individuals high in RS, potential rejection situations “incorporate cognitive appraisals of threat under conditions of uncertainty—the specific conditions known to activate the DMS” (Downey et al., 2004, p. 669). At this point, the parallels between RS and self-handicapping and overachievement start to emerge. As it pertains to self-handicapping and overachievement, self-doubt provides the conditions of uncertainty, and individuals must then judge whether the task at hand poses a threat to the image of competence.

From this perspective, self-handicapping and overachievement, like rejection sensitivity, might be linked to the defensive motivational system. Critical to this conceptualization is the nature of the threat involved. Again, since self-doubtful individuals do not rely upon self-presentational strategies in all tasks, some specific set of conditions must lead to the perception of threat. An obvious element that should increase
threat is the presence of others. Not surprisingly, past research has demonstrated that the tendency to self-handicap increases in public situations as compared to private ones (e.g. Kolditz & Arkin, 1982). Beyond the public-private dimension, the literature on self-handicapping and overachievement speaks little to other circumstances that might trigger feelings of threat, or even an acknowledgement that individuals must feel threatened before they would consider adopting such costly behavioral strategies.

The search for additional factors that might promote threat requires some measure of creative problem-solving. If self-handicapping and overachievement do stem from a fear of being viewed as incompetent, then that desire itself suggests something about the conditions necessary to produce threat. Specifically, if self-doubtful individuals are more motivated to avoid appearing incompetent than to appear competent, then tasks that identify incompetent individuals should produce greater threat than tasks that identify competent individuals. Exploring this topic, Tice (1991) discovered that individuals high in self-esteem exerted less effort on a task that would only identify people with high ability; however, individuals low in self-esteem exerted less effort on a task that would only identify those with low ability. Since chronic self-handicappers tend to have lower self-esteem, normal patterns of self-handicapping might result only for tasks that indicate the deficiency of ability, suggesting that such tasks prove especially threatening to self-doubtful individuals.

The Present Studies

Despite the relative wealth of research on the strategies of self-handicapping and overachievement, the literature remains unclear on when self-doubtful individuals will
adopt these strategies and how they determine which strategy to pursue. The present
studies were designed to identify both conditions under which self-handicapping and
overachievement behavior emerge and conditions that motivate the choice of each
strategy. From a more theoretical standpoint, the research intended to explore self-
handicapping and overachievement as the potential products of uncertainty and threat.
Across four experiments, measures of self-doubt were used to assess uncertainty, and
several manipulations of the meaning of task performance were used to generate threat.
And, to examine whether the probability of success affects tendencies towards self-
handicapping and overachievement behavior, the difficulty of the experimental task was
varied. All experimental manipulations occurred under the guise of testing participants on
a novel ability, with effort on a practice test as the dependent variable of interest.

Study 1 provided an initial examination of how the meaning of task performance
and task difficulty affect self-handicapping and overachievement behavior. Study 2
attempted to discover conditions under which a success-meaningful task, a task that only
identifies individuals with high ability, might trigger the necessary threat to produce self-
handicapping and overachievement. Study 3 continued to explore the relationship
between the meaning of task performance and threat, this time changing the meaning of
performance on an originally threatening task in an attempt to reduce self-handicapping
and overachievement. Study 4 examined whether regulatory focus would affect the
experience of threat necessary to produce self-handicapping and overachievement.

For Study 1, it was predicted that individuals high in self-doubt would show
evidence of self-handicapping prior to a difficult task and overachievement prior to an
easy task. However, those strategies were predicted to be employed only under the threat of diagnostic failure. For Study 2, it was predicted that the previous patterns of self-handicapping and overachievement would occur under conditions of diagnostic success, but only when the task was particularly self-relevant, thereby increasing feelings of threat. For Study 3, it was predicted that establishing an identity of success or failure prior to the task would rob task performance of its meaning and threat, eliminating the need for self-handicapping and overachievement behavior. Finally, for Study 4, it was predicted that a prevention focus would sensitize individuals to the prospect of diagnostic failure and increase self-handicapping and overachievement, whereas a promotion focus would reduce the sensitivity to failure and decrease strategy use.
Chapter 2: Study 1

Participants completed practice analogy problems in preparation for a supposed standardized test of integrative orientation. Half of participants received a description of the test stating that the test could only identify those with high ability (success-meaningful) while the other half of participants received a description stating that the test could only identify those with low ability (failure-meaningful). Participants encountered two practice tests. On an initial practice test, participants were asked to complete ten either high or low difficulty analogy problems. During a second practice test, participants were given the opportunity to practice as many problems as desired before moving on to the final version of the test. Self-handicapping and overachievement behavior, viewed here as the withdrawal or enhanced exertion of effort, was measured based on the number of practice problems attempted prior to the final test. Since chronic feelings of self-doubt have been implicated in tendencies toward self-handicapping and overachievement (Oleson et al., 2000), participants completed a measure of self-doubt, as well as two measures regarding chronic concerns for performance and ability.

It was predicted that individuals higher in self-doubt would self-handicap and practice less for a high difficulty test, but overachieve and practice more for a low difficulty test. However, since diagnostic success should pose less threat to the doubtful
individual than diagnostic failure, this relationship between self-doubt and task difficulty should emerge more strongly in the failure-meaningful case. Individuals lower in self-doubt, however, should exhibit more adaptive preparation behavior (practicing more for a high difficulty test and practicing less for a low difficulty test). Success or failure-meaningful information about the test should have little to no effect on individuals low in self-doubt. As it pertains to concerns for performance and ability, it was predicted that individuals higher in self-doubt and concerns for performance would show evidence of overachievement and individuals higher in self-doubt and concern for ability would show evidence of self-handicapping.

Method

Participants

Participants were 197 Ohio State University undergraduate students (125 female), who completed the study in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to condition and tested in groups of one to six individuals.

Materials & Procedure

Verbal reasoning association test (VRAT). Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to collect norms for the Verbal Reasoning Association Test or VRAT, a test of integrative orientation. Details of the VRAT were borrowed from Kovacs (1990). Integrative orientation was described as a capacity associated with creative problem solving and the ability to process and integrate verbal information independent of one’s overall intellectual capacity. Participants were also told that people high in integrative orientation are better able to generate new information from previously known
information and to find new solutions to problems. Finally, participants were informed that the test can predict many differences in people's functioning, especially their ability to adapt to novel and changing situations and to learn from and use new information. This cover story was designed so that participants would view the experimental task as important, but would not simply rely on previous standardized test performance (on the SAT or ACT) in estimating their integrative orientation ability.

Participants were then told about their opportunity to practice before taking the final VRAT, a 10-minute timed test. Participants would complete two separate practice tests intended to help prepare them for the final test. Specifically, participants were told that, “just as athletes perform better after warming up, you should do better on this test if you practice and ‘warm up’ with the practice tests.” The two practice tests were framed as offering practice at different aspects of integrative orientation, with the final test involving a combination of the skills practiced on the two practice tests. Finally, participants were told that the practice problems would be similar to the final VRAT in terms of difficulty and type of problem.

*Meaning of task performance manipulation.* Participants were told that either success or failure would be the more meaningful outcome of the final VRAT. The manipulation was modeled after Tice (1991). Half of the participants were instructed that success would be the more meaningful outcome of the test. Specifically, those participants were told that based on how the VRAT is constructed and scored, 85% of individuals fail the test and 15% of individuals pass the test. Falling within the top 15% would indicate that one has high integrative orientation ability, but falling within the
bottom 85% only suggests that one does not have that high ability. Thus, the VRAT would not be informative about how low one’s ability is, effectively separating the high scoring individuals from the rest of the test-takers.

The remaining participants were instructed that failure would be the more meaningful outcome of the test. Specifically, those participants were told that based on how the VRAT is constructed and scored, 85% of individuals pass the test and 15% of individuals fail the test. Falling within the bottom 15% would indicate that one has low integrative orientation ability, but falling within the top 85% only suggests that one does not have low ability. Thus, the VRAT would not be informative about how high one’s ability is, effectively separating low scoring individuals from the rest of the test-takers.

**Task difficulty manipulation.** Participants were led to believe that the final VRAT would either be relatively high or low in difficulty. Specifically, during the initial practice test, participants were given high or low difficulty analogies. Analogy problems and their corresponding difficulty ratings were borrowed from Lynch (1998). All analogy problems are listed in Appendix A and Appendix B. High difficulty analogies included examples such as “dearth : paucity,” “expurgate : solecism,” and “travesty : ridicule.” Low difficulty analogies included examples such as “elm : tree,” “rain : storm,” and “read : book”. Participants received no feedback regarding their performance on these items.

**Measurement of chronic self-doubt.** Before beginning the practice tests, participants completed eight items, drawn from the subjective overachievement scale (Oleson et al., 2000), to assess their chronic feelings of self-doubt (see Appendix D). In previous research, this scale has demonstrated high internal consistency (α = .82) and
adequate test-retest reliability \((r = .68)\). Also, this scores on this scale of self-doubt have correlated with scale measures of self-esteem \((r = -.68)\), social anxiety \((r = .48)\), and self-handicapping \((r = .56)\) (Oleson et al., 2000). The items on the scale include the following: “When engaged in an important task, my thoughts turn to bad things that might happen,” “Avoiding failure has a greater emotional impact than achieving success,” “I often feel unsure of my abilities,” “I wonder if I have the ability to succeed at important activities,” “I wish I felt more certain of my strengths and weaknesses,” “As I begin an important activity, I feel confident in my ability,” “Sometimes I feel like I don't know why I succeeded at something,” and “As I begin an important activity, I feel confident in the likely outcome.” Participants responded using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Responses were summed to create the self-doubt score.

**Measurement of effort.** The second practice test allowed participants to practice as many problems as desired (up to 15) before continuing to the final test. The analogy problems given in the second practice test were a mixture of low difficulty, medium difficulty, and high difficulty analogies (see Appendix C). Reaction time measurements were used to judge whether a participant fully practiced a given item, with a threshold being set at three seconds to be counted as an attempted item. Effort then was measured by the number of fully practiced items during the second practice test.

**Other measurements.** Participants provided demographic information (e.g. gender, age) at the beginning of the experimental session. Prior to beginning the practice tests, participants completed two scales designed to assess chronic concerns for performance and ability (see Appendix E and F). Concerns for performance were
measured using a scale adapted from the concern for performance subscale of the subjective overachievement scale (Oleson et al., 2000). Since no similar scale for measuring concerns for ability existed, a scale was constructed using the concern for performance scale as a template. References in that scale to success or failure were replaced with notions of being good, talented, and having ability or being bad, lacking talent, and lacking ability. For both scales, participants responded using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), with responses summed to create total scores. At the end of the second practice test, participants were informed that there would be no final test and were carefully debriefed and dismissed.

Results and Discussion

In this sample, the self-doubt scale exhibited strong internal consistency (α = .83). The measure of effort (the number of problems attempted on the second practice test) was regressed onto self-doubt, task difficulty, and meaning of task performance. In this analysis, the interaction of self-doubt and task difficulty approached significance, $B = - .52, t (189) = -1.80, p = .07$. The three-way interaction between self-doubt, task difficulty, and meaning of task performance did not significantly predict effort, $B = .22, t (189) = 1.26, p = .21$. However, an analysis of only those individuals in the failure-meaningful condition revealed a significant interaction between self-doubt and task difficulty, $B = .30, t (96) = -2.30, p = .02$ (see Figure 1). An analysis of simple slopes revealed a significant effect of task difficulty for low self-doubters, $B = 1.59, t (96) = 2.27, p = .03$; however, task difficulty did not have a significant effect among high self-doubters, $B = -.77, t (96) = -1.03, p = .31$. Thus, individuals low in self-doubt exerted significantly more
effort for the high difficulty test than for the low difficulty test, but individuals high in self-doubt did not differ in their effort based on task difficulty. Further analysis of slopes revealed a significant effect of self-doubt for those in the high difficulty condition, $B = -.21$, $t (96) = -2.19$, $p = .03$; no significant effect emerged for those in the low difficulty condition. No significant interaction of self-doubt and difficulty emerged among participants in the success-meaningful condition, $B = -.08$, $t (93) = - .67$, $p = .50$.

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1.** Effort as a function of self-doubt and task difficulty in the failure-meaningful condition. Individuals low in self-doubt, defined as one standard deviation below the mean, practiced more for a high difficulty test and less for a low difficulty test. Individuals high in self-doubt did not differ significantly in practice problems attempted.

Additional analyses were conducted using the measures of concern for performance and concern for ability as predictors of effort. Both the concern for performance (9 items; $\alpha = .67$) and concern for ability (9 items; $\alpha = .57$) scales exhibited modest internal consistency. Regressing the measure of effort onto self-doubt, concern
for performance, and concern for ability resulted in a significant main effect of concern
for ability, such that as concerns for ability increased, effort decreased, $B = -.15$, $t (189) =
-2.12, p = .04$. No other significant main effects or interactions emerged. Another analysis
was conducted regressing effort onto only self-doubt and concern for ability. This
analysis again showed a main effect of concern for ability, $B = -.11$, $t (193) = -1.94, p =
.05$; however, this main effect was qualified by a marginally significant interaction of
self-doubt and concern for ability, $B = -.01$, $t (193) = -1.62, p = .11$ (see Figure 2). An
analysis of simple slopes showed a significant effect of concern for ability among high
self-doubters, such that high self-doubters exerted significantly less effort when high on
concern for ability, $B = -.21$, $t (193) = -2.30, p = .02$.

As in previous research, self-doubt contributed to self-handicapping and
overachievement behavior; however, people only adopted these behavioral strategies
under specific conditions. In this study, the failure-meaningful information about the test
provided the requisite threat that, when combined with feelings of uncertainty, motivated
individuals to obscure the meaning of their test outcome. These data also supported the
idea that self-doubtful individuals oscillate between self-handicapping and
overachievement as the situation dictates. As shown in the current study, task difficulty
presented an important cue as to whether one should withdraw or exert effort.
Specifically, a high difficulty task motivated the withdrawal of effort; a low difficulty
task motivated the exertion of extra effort. This pattern of behavior makes sense for the
self-doubtful individual, as excessive effort might not guarantee success on a difficult
task. In the absence of self-doubt and threat, people exhibited much more adaptive behavior, exerting more effort prior to a more difficult test.

![Graph showing effort as a function of self-doubt and concern for ability.](image)

Figure 2. Effort as a function of self-doubt and concern for ability. Individuals high in self-doubt practiced less when high in concern for ability.

Although intriguing, the findings regarding concern for ability are somewhat difficult to interpret. The fact that the scale demonstrated less than ideal reliability further complicates any interpretation of the results. Current theory (Lynch, 1998) suggests that concerns for performance motivate overachievement and concerns for ability motivate self-handicapping, but the best attempts to find support for that theory have only found evidence for the overachievement proposition. Disentangling concerns for performance from concerns for ability, at least in a questionnaire-based measure, is another challenge that faces the development of a concern for ability scale. One could imagine an orthogonal relationship between concerns for performance and ability, such that an
individual might be high in one concern and low in another; however, the two concerns are likely to be positively correlated. Since concern for ability has not been measured in any prior research, further examination of this scale must be done before it can be used to inform the self-handicapping and overachievement literature.

Overall, the current study supports an intriguing reconceptualization of the factors that motivate self-handicapping and overachievement, with feelings of threat and uncertainty moving to the forefront. Furthermore, the meaning of task performance appears crucial for understanding how individuals perceive threat. The threat of any potential outcome ultimately stems from what that outcome means for an individual’s image of competence. As such, it seems implausible that success-meaningful situations would never be capable of producing sufficient threat to observe self-handicapping and overachievement. For example, an extremely intelligent and accomplished high-school student might only have a 15% chance of being accepted to Harvard. At the same time, even though the odds of success are long, the student might feel well-matched to the task at hand. Therefore, despite the fact that only success (acceptance to Harvard) would be meaningful, the thought of being denied acceptance would be relatively threatening to that student. Study 2 was designed to explore this possibility, examining whether under special circumstances, success-meaningful conditions could be made to generate threat. It was predicted that applying additional identity implications to a success-meaningful outcome would increase the level of threat and lead to self-handicapping and overachievement behavior.
Chapter 3: Study 2

Study 2 extended the findings of Study 1, examining circumstances under which a success-meaningful task might be threatening enough to produce self-handicapping and overachievement. Instead of varying the meaning of task performance, all participants in Study 2 received the success-meaningful information about the test. In order to vary threat, half of participants were told that the task matched their identity, while the other half of participants were told that the task did not match their identity. Specifically, participants were either told that college students have the abilities to succeed on the test or that college students typically lack the necessary abilities. Even though only 15% of individuals pass the test, participants in the identity-match condition might feel as though success is more within their reach and more expected, increasing the self-relevance of their performance and the threat of a non-successful outcome. All other materials and procedures from Study 1 remained the same in Study 2, with the exception of adding a subjective measure of self-handicapping and overachievement.

It was once more predicted that individuals higher in self-doubt would self-handicap and practice less for a high difficulty test but overachieve and practice more for a low difficulty test. However, since standard success-meaningful conditions do not appear to produce sufficient threat, such a relationship between self-doubt and task
difficulty was expected to be evident only for participants who received the identity-match information about the task. As usual, individuals lower in self-doubt were expected to exhibit more adaptive preparation behavior and practice more for a high difficulty test and less for a low difficulty test, regardless of identity-match condition.

Method

Participants

Participants were 62 Ohio State University undergraduate students (47 female), who completed the study in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to condition and tested in groups of one to six individuals at a time.

Materials & Procedure

Verbal reasoning association test (VRAT). Participants received the same cover story regarding the VRAT as in Study 1. In Study 2, however, all participants were given the success-meaningful information from Study 1: 85% of individuals fail the test and 15% of individuals pass the test. Thus, the VRAT would only be informative about whether an individual had high integrative orientation ability, but would say nothing about whether an individual had low integrative orientation ability.

Identity-match manipulation. Participants were led to believe either that individuals with a similar identity (as college students) had the ability to succeed on the VRAT or did not have the ability to succeed. Specifically, half of participants were told that “previous research has shown that college students, as opposed to students that did not enroll in college, tend to have the necessary abilities to succeed on the test,” whereas the other half of participants were told that “previous research has shown that college
students tend to lack the abilities necessary to succeed on the test.” Despite, the fact that only 15% of individuals would succeed on the VRAT, participants in the identity-match condition were led to feel as though people like themselves were the ones who have succeeded in the past.

**Task difficulty manipulation.** Participants were again led to believe that the final VRAT would either be relatively high or low in difficulty. The manipulation of task difficulty was identical to that used in Study 1.

**Measurement of effort.** As in Study 1, effort was measured based on the number of analogy problems attempted on the second practice test. In addition, Study 2 included one item to assess a subjective sense of self-handicapping or overachievement on that practice test. Participants were asked, “How much did you feel you practiced for the VRAT test?” and responded with a 7-point scale ranging from much less than necessary to much more than necessary.

**Other measurements.** All other materials and procedures were identical to Study 1, including the measurement of self-doubt. Participants did not complete scales measuring concerns for performance or ability.

**Results and Discussion**

The self-doubt scale again showed strong internal consistency in this sample ($\alpha = .88$). The measure of effort was regressed onto self-doubt, task difficulty, and identity-match condition. No significant main effects or interactions were observed. Since it was predicted that self-handicapping and overachievement would only appear among those individuals with the added identity implications, another analysis was conducted by
regressing effort onto self-doubt and task difficulty in the identity-match and identity-mismatch conditions separately. No significant main effects or interactions were observed in either case, including the expected interaction between self-doubt and task difficulty in the identity-match condition, $B = -.02, t (26) = -.40, p = .69$. The one-item subjective measure of effort correlated significantly with the objective measure of effort, $r (60) = .33, p < .01$, so additional analyses were conducted using that measure. No significant effects were found using that measure as a dependent variable.

Although the identity-match manipulation represents only one attempt to amplify the threat of a success-meaningful task, the data suggest that success-meaningful tasks might never, or at least very rarely, generate the necessary threat to motivate self-handicapping and overachievement. Self-handicappers and overachievers seek to avoid diagnostic information about their competence; however, the impact of not achieving diagnostic success might be experienced differently than the impact of diagnostic failure. As might be expected, for self-doubtful individuals, a loss looms larger than a non-gain. In addition, drawing focus onto success as the diagnostic outcome allows self-doubtful individuals to avoid any identity implications of failure, much like the strategies of self-handicapping and overachievement accomplish. Together, Study 1 and Study 2 identified the requisite conditions of meaning and threat to produce self-handicapping and overachievement behavior. Among individuals high in self-doubt, failure-meaningful tasks motivated the use of self-handicapping and overachievement to protect the image of competence, with self-handicapping being adopted prior to difficult tasks and overachievement being adopted prior to easier tasks.

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Inducing self-handicapping and overachievement behavior informs the understanding of the factors that motivate these strategies; however, much can also be learned from discovering factors that reduce reliance on self-handicapping and overachievement among high self-doubters. If the meaning of performance on a task directly impacts the threat that it presents, one can imagine several ways in which the upcoming task might be stripped of its meaning to the individual. For example, if a student performs exceptionally well (or exceptionally poorly) on a final exam, a subsequent quiz or homework performance might seem unimportant and uninformative about one’s level of competence by comparison. Study 3 was designed to look at this possibility, examining how having success or failure from a previous performance fixed to one’s identity might alter the meaning of the experimental task and reduce self-handicapping and overachievement behavior.
Chapter 4: Study 3

Study 3 continued to expand on the basic findings of Study 1, examining how the experience of threat, and thus self-handicapping and overachievement, could be reduced through establishing an identity of success or failure prior to completing the VRAT. All participants in Study 3 received the failure-meaningful information about the test used in Study 1. In Study 3, however, participants were asked to write about a significant academic experience in their lives. Specifically, half of participants were asked to write about an academic success, and the other half of participants were asked to write about an academic failure. In either case, writing about such an experience should establish an identity of success or failure that would render the upcoming VRAT relatively unimportant by comparison. By providing a buffer against the meaning of performance on the task, the writing exercise should presumably ameliorate the threat and make unnecessary any use of self-handicapping and overachievement strategies. All other materials and procedures from Study 2 remained the same in Study 3.

Although individuals higher in self-doubt tend to withdraw or exert extra effort before a failure-meaningful test, it was predicted that after writing about a previous academic success or failure, individuals higher in self-doubt would not practice significantly more or less than individuals lower in self-doubt. Since writing about a
significant academic experience was expected to reduce the identity impact of the VRAT, no differences in effort were predicted between participants with a success-based identity and those with a failure-based identity. The identity manipulation was predicted to have little or no effect on individuals low in self-doubt.

Method

Participants

Participants were 79 Ohio State University undergraduate students (38 female), who completed the study in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to condition and tested in groups of one to six individuals at a time.

Materials & Procedure

Verbal reasoning association test (VRAT). Participants received the same cover story regarding the VRAT as in the previous studies. In Study 3, however, all participants were given the failure-meaningful information from Study 1: 85% of individuals pass the test and 15% of individuals fail the test. Thus, the VRAT would only be informative about whether an individual had low integrative orientation ability, but would say nothing about whether an individual had high ability.

Task difficulty manipulation. Participants were again led to believe that the final VRAT would either be relatively high or low in difficulty. The manipulation of task difficulty was identical to that used in the previous studies.

Identity manipulation. Immediately prior to the second practice test, participants were asked to write about a previous academic success or failure. Half of participants were asked to write about “an experience of academic success that has stuck with you
over the years.” The other half of participants were instructed to write about “an experience of academic failure that has stuck with you over the years.” This process was designed to create for the participant an identity of success or failure. Participants were asked to spend five minutes on this task.

**Other measurements.** All other materials and procedures, including the subjective effort measure and measurement of self-doubt, were identical to those in Study 2.

**Results and Discussion**

The measure of effort was regressed onto self-doubt, task difficulty, and buffer condition. In this analysis, all main effects, all two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction were significant predictors of effort. All effects were qualified by a marginally significant three-way interaction of self-doubt, task difficulty, and identity condition, $B = .48, t (71) = 1.93, p = .06$. An analysis of simple slopes showed that high levels of self-doubt were necessary to produce the significant effects of task difficulty ($B = -14.34, t (71) = -2.96, p < .01$), identity condition ($B = -14.66, t (71) = -3.32, p < .01$), and the interaction of difficulty and identity ($B = 9.03, t (71) = 3.07, p < .01$). Further probing that interaction revealed opposing significant effects of task difficulty for individuals with a success identity, $B = -5.31, t (71) = -2.38, p = .02$, and individuals with a failure identity, $B = 3.72, t (71) = 1.93, p = .06$ (see Figure 3). Among high self-doubters, a success identity led to less effort for a high difficulty test than a low difficulty one; however, a failure identity led to less effort for a low difficulty test than a high difficulty one.
Figure 3. Effort as a function of task difficulty and identity condition for individuals high in self-doubt. Individuals high in self-doubt, defined as one standard deviation above the mean, practiced more for a low difficulty test and less for a high difficulty test with a success-based identity, but practiced more for a high difficulty test and less for a low difficulty test with a failure-based identity.

Rather than exerting similar effects on self-handicapping and overachievement, success and failure identities led to dramatically different patterns of behavior among self-doubtful individuals. After writing about a previous failure, self-doubters showed rather adaptive behavior, exerting more effort for a high difficulty test and less effort for a low difficulty test. After writing about a previous success, however, self-doubters showed evidence of self-handicapping for the high difficulty test and overachieving for the low difficulty test. Although not predicted, this difference might fit well with previous research. Baumgardner, Lake, and Arkin (1985) suggest that public failure can spoil an individual’s public identity. Under such conditions, self-handicapping cannot effectively discount ability as an explanation failure. Recalling an episode of academic
failure likely created that spoiled identity, an identity not worth protecting with self-handicapping or overachievement. Writing about a previous success did quite the opposite, creating an identity that self-doubters felt compelled to protect.

Study 3 again revealed that what an outcome means for one’s image of competence affects tendencies towards self-handicapping and overachievement among individuals high in self-doubt. However, the meaning of task performance might not shift only with brief situational influences, such as a previous success or failure. More stable individual difference could affect how people perceive the meaning of performance on a task, and thus the experience of threat. For instance, regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) proposes that individuals might differ in their motivational regulation, either emphasizing desires and potential gains (promotion focus) or obligations and potential losses (prevention focus). Since regulatory focus has implications for how people view potential successes or failures, it stands to reason that regulatory focus could affect how people respond to success or failure-meaningful tasks. Study 4 was designed to look at the influence of meaning and threat from this perspective, manipulating regulatory focus in an attempt to change the standard responses to threatening conditions, reducing self-handicapping and overachievement when with a promotion focus and leaving such behavior stable when with a prevention focus.
Chapter 5: Study 4

Study 4 was designed to examine how regulatory focus might affect tendencies toward self-handicapping and overachievement. As in Study 3, all participants received failure-meaningful information about the VRAT. In Study 4, however, participants were primed with a regulatory focus manipulation. Specifically, half of participants were asked to write about a current hope or aspiration in their lives (promotion), and the other half of participants were asked to write about a current duty or obligation (prevention). While a promotion focus should make participants less sensitive to failure, a prevention focus should heighten the sensitivity to failure. This differential focus on failure should leave participants with a promotion focus less threatened and participants with a prevention focus more threatened. All other materials and procedures from the previous two studies remained the same in Study 4.

Since a promotion focus was expected to reduce the focus on failure, it was predicted that individuals higher in self-doubt who were primed with a promotion focus would show more adaptive practicing behavior. However, it was predicted that individuals higher in self-doubt who were primed with a prevention focus would show evidence of self-handicapping and overachievement, withdrawing effort for a high
difficulty test and exerting more effort for a low difficulty test. Regulatory focus was predicted to have little or no effect on individuals low in self-doubt.

Method

Participants

Participants were 105 Ohio State University undergraduate students (48 female), who completed the study in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to condition and tested in groups of one to six individuals at a time.

Materials & Procedure

Verbal reasoning association test (VRAT). Participants received the same cover story regarding the VRAT as in the previous studies. As in Study 3, all participants were given the failure-meaningful information: 85% of individuals pass the test; 15% of individuals fail.

Task difficulty manipulation. Participants were again led to believe that the final VRAT would either be relatively high or low in difficulty. The manipulation of task difficulty was identical to that used in the previous studies.

Regulatory focus manipulation. Immediately prior to the second practice test, participants were asked to write about one of their hopes and aspirations or one of their duties and obligations. This manipulation has been adapted from similar manipulations in Higgins (1998) and corresponds to items from the regulatory focus questionnaire (RFQ, Higgins et al., 2001). Participants in the promotion condition were asked to choose and write about one hope or aspiration in their life. Participants in the prevention condition
were asked to choose and write about one duty or obligation in their life. Participants were asked to write for five minutes.

Other measurements. All other procedures were identical to those in Study 3.

Results and Discussion

The measure of effort was regressed onto self-doubt, task difficulty, and regulatory focus condition. No significant main effects were observed; however, the three-way interaction between the variables of interest approached significance, $B = .32$, $t(97) = 1.61$, $p = .11$. An analysis of simple slopes revealed no statistically significant effects among individuals high or low in self-doubt; however, the interaction of task difficulty and regulatory focus showed evidence of a slight effect among high self-doubters, $B = 3.41$, $t(97) = 1.42$, $p = .16$ (see Figure 4). Probing that interaction uncovered a significant effect of task difficulty only among individuals with a prevention focus, $B = 5.78$, $t(97) = 3.40$, $p < .01$. Thus, individuals high in self-doubt with a prevention focus practiced more for the high difficulty test than the low difficulty test. Those with a promotion focus showed a similar but non-significant trend.

Contrary to predictions, self-doubtful individuals who were primed with prevention focus exerted more effort for the high difficulty test, the situation that would be expected to produce withdrawal of effort (self-handicapping) among self-doubters. At the same time, the promotion focus did appear to produce the expected effects, creating more adaptive practicing behavior in conditions that normally produce self-handicapping and overachievement. Still, the results for the prevention focus must be viewed as the most surprising. However, careful examination of the experimental manipulation reveals
a possible explanation for these results. The prevention focus manipulation required participants to reflect upon a current duty or obligation; in doing so, participants may have been primed to “do their duty” and prepare thoroughly for the upcoming test. Instead of being concerned with preventing self-relevant failure and damage to their image of competence, participants may have prioritized effort as the means to achieving favorable evaluation. That is, from that standpoint of self-presentational concerns, doing the “right thing” became more important than appearing competent.

Figure 4. Effort as a function of task difficulty and regulatory focus for individuals high in self-doubt. Individuals high in self-doubt, defined as one standard deviation above the mean, and primed with a prevention focus practiced more for a high difficulty test.

Although this manipulation of regulatory focus has been used widely in the past, and previous research has suggested a role of prevention focus in self-handicapping (Leonardelli, Lakin, & Arkin 2007), the present results might speak to the inherent
difficulty of defining regulatory focus. According to Summerville and Roese (2008), questions still remain regarding the construct of regulatory focus and its measurement. One view of regulatory focus emphasizes how individuals use self-guides for regulation, following either an ideal-self guide in the case of promotion focus or an ought-self guide in the case of prevention focus. Another view of regulatory focus emphasizes how individuals use certain reference points for regulation, concerning themselves with the presence or absence of gains in promotion focus or the presence or absence of losses in prevention focus. The two definitions have likewise given rise to distinct measures of regulatory focus: the regulatory focus questionnaire (RFQ, Higgins et al., 2001) and the general regulatory focus measure (GRFM, Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002). Assuming that prevention focus does underlie self-handicapping, it might be that self-guide prevention is not the type of prevention focus at play.
Chapter 6: General Discussion

The studies reported here were designed to examine the role of uncertainty and threat in self-handicapping and overachievement. More specifically, the studies addressed how the meaning of performance on a task relates to the feelings of threat that, when combined with uncertainty, predict self-handicapping and overachievement behavior. Additionally, the research sought to understand the circumstances under which individuals favor either self-handicapping or overachievement as the means to protecting their image of competence. Specific hypotheses were that the prospect of diagnostic failure, as opposed to diagnostic success, would generate the necessary threat to compel self-handicapping and overachievement, and self-handicapping would be used in response to high difficulty tasks while overachievement would be used in response to low difficulty tasks. However, conditions that would undermine the meaning of task performance were predicted to lessen threat and reduce the tendency toward self-handicapping and overachievement. Evidence in support of these hypotheses would broaden the understanding of the factors that motivate self-handicapping and overachievement.

Study 1 and 2 demonstrated that failure-meaningful tasks but not success-meaningful tasks were sufficiently threatening to motivate self-handicapping and
overachievement. Study 3 and 4, however, showed that the meaning of task performance could be affected subtly to reduce threat and decrease tendencies towards self-handicapping and overachievement. In Study 1, participants who were high in self-doubt and told that an upcoming test could only identify individuals low in ability showed evidence of self-handicapping (when the test would be more difficult) and overachievement (when the test would be less difficult). In Study 2, participants who were high in self-doubt and told that an upcoming test could only identify individuals high in ability showed no evidence of self-handicapping or overachievement, even when the test was made to be especially self-relevant.

In Study 3, when participants high in self-doubt established an identity of success prior to a failure-meaningful test, self-handicapping and overachievement were observed, but when individuals high in self-doubt established an identity of failure prior to that test, more adaptive practicing behavior occurred (practicing more for a high difficulty test and less for a low difficulty test). Study 4 examined how regulatory focus could affect self-handicapping and overachievement, finding that participants high in self-doubt exhibited more adaptive practicing behavior when with a promotion focus but exerted the highest levels of effort (prior to a high difficulty test) when with a prevention focus. The results of these four studies suggest that self-handicapping and overachievement will tend to occur when uncertain individuals experience direct threat to their image of competence. In addition, uncertain individuals respond to cues in their environment in deciding whether to adopt a strategy of self-handicapping or overachievement.
On the topic of when self-doubtful individuals will choose self-handicapping or overachievement, the present studies make sense of the results from Yost et al. (1995) and provide evidence in support of Lichstein (1994). Rather than fixating on one strategy, individuals concerned with protecting their image of competence appear to be adept at switching between self-handicapping and overachievement as the situation dictates. For instance, when facing a high difficulty task, one for which the heroic exertion of effort might not guarantee success, individuals high in self-doubt elect to self-handicap and withdraw effort. However, when facing a low difficulty task, overachievement becomes more likely to guarantee success and thus a better strategy to protect competence; self-handicapping becomes less ideal, as low effort might not be a plausible explanation for failure on an easy task.

Probability of success might be only one of several possible situational cues used to decide which strategy should be adopted. Another might be how individuals expect their competence to be evaluated. For example, Lynch (1998) showed that priming concern for performance along with self-doubt led to overachievement behavior. Concern for performance carries with it the implication that outcomes, and not ability, will be the measure of one’s competence. Under these circumstances, overachievement becomes the best strategy to maintain the image of competence. Although Lynch (1998) did not find a similar significant relationship between concern for ability and self-handicapping, it stands to reason that overwhelming concern for ability would make self-handicapping the best strategy. Study 1 provides some evidence to address this supposition, showing that individuals high in self-doubt and chronic concern for ability tend to withdraw effort.
Despite being a more chronic measure of concern for ability, one might expect that chronic concerns manifest themselves in the situation as cues for how to choose between self-handicapping and overachievement. The overall pattern of results also furthers the assertion of Jones and Berglas (1978) that self-handicappers and overachievers share similar motivations. In fact, the current studies suggest that self-handicappers and overachievers might be one and the same; self-doubtful individuals exhibited both behaviors as necessary. While chronic self-handicappers and overachievers surely do exist and cannot be diverted from their standard strategies, there might be more flexibility between those positions than previous researchers imagined.

Beyond discerning the factors that motivate self-doubtful individuals to choose either self-handicapping or overachievement, the current research speaks to the necessary conditions to produce any strategy use whatsoever. More specifically, the four studies chart a direct path between the meaning of task performance and self-handicapping and overachievement behavior. Tice (1991) showed that individuals with low self-esteem only withdrew effort for a task framed as failure-meaningful (one that would only identify individuals with low ability). In the present research, evidence of self-handicapping and overachievement only emerged under failure-meaningful conditions. Paradoxically, although the instructions of the failure-meaningful test indicated that most people would succeed on the test, individuals high in self-doubt were only compelled to protect their image of competence under these circumstances. However, as Study 3 showed, the meaning of task performance can be much more dynamic, as self-doubters interpreted the meaning of performance on the task in terms of their current identity.
Primed with an identity of failure, self-doubters no longer exhibited self-handicapping or overachievement in response to the failure-meaningful test. Discussing an academic failure made the upcoming test lose its meaning, and therefore, its motivational force.

The answer to the question of when self-doubtful individuals will use strategies such as self-handicapping or overachievement does not end with the discussion of the meaning of task performance. Rather, the meaning of task performance might fall into the broader category of threat. Without sufficient threat to the image of competence, self-doubtful individuals have no need to risk poor performance with the withdrawal of effort or exhaust themselves with the exertion of heroic effort. Viewed as a whole, the current research provides evidence that self-handicapping and overachievement behavior will only emerge under conditions of uncertainty and threat. Across all four studies, individuals low in self-doubt never displayed behavior indicative of self-handicapping and overachievement. Beyond that, individuals high in self-doubt only showed evidence of strategy use when under threat. As such, uncertainty and threat could be considered the motivational basis for self-handicapping and overachievement.

Discussing self-handicapping and overachievement as the product of uncertainty and threat allows for an integration of previous research and a simplification of the links between variables. Although the present research argues for this conceptualization of the factors that produce self-handicapping and overachievement, even the original research on self-handicapping (Jones & Berglas, 1978) would fit this model. Jones and Berglas (1978) induced self-handicapping with noncontingent success feedback, a clear manipulation of uncertainty. Despite struggling mightily on impossible problems,
participants were informed that they had performed well, leaving them entirely uncertain about their true ability. Like with the self-doubtful individuals in the current studies, that uncertainty left participants ripe to perceive threat in the following intelligence test. An uncertainty and threat model of self-handicapping and overachievement also explains the self-presentational nature of those strategies and why individuals sometimes adopt them more in public than private circumstances (e.g. Kolditz & Arkin, 1982). The presence of others provides the necessary threat to the image of competence to motivate self-protection through self-presentation.

In sum, the current studies provide evidence toward a revamped theoretical model of self-handicapping and overachievement, one based on uncertainty, threat, and situational cues. Uncertainty about competence must be present in some form, either chronic as in self-doubt or situational as with noncontingent feedback. Uncertain individuals then experience varying degrees of threat based on what specific outcomes will mean for their image of competence. Motivated to protect that image against the perceived threat, these individuals respond with self-handicapping or overachievement depending on aspects of their environment, such as the difficulty of the task or the basis for evaluation (either performance or ability). Further work must be done to better clarify the links between uncertainty and threat, but this research represents a promising beginning to a better understanding of self-handicapping and overachievement.

Conclusion

The present research demonstrated the role of threat and uncertainty in self-handicapping and overachievement. Specifically, the research explored how the meaning
of performance on a task relates to the feelings of threat that, when combined with uncertainty, trigger self-handicapping and overachievement behavior. Across four studies, individuals high in self-doubt showed evidence of self-handicapping and overachievement when the meaning of task performance threatened the image of competence. Self-doubtful individuals opted to self-handicap prior to a more difficult task and overachieve prior to a less difficult task. The present work suggests that a model of self-handicapping and overachievement that acknowledges the influence of both uncertainty and threat would enhance the understanding of the motivational basis underlying these unique self-protective strategies.
References


Appendix A: Low Difficulty Analogies

ELM : TREE
1) dollar : dime
2) currency : dime
3) map : leaves
4) oak : maple
5) dollar : money (correct answer)

READ : BOOK
1) taste : salty
2) movie : attend
3) sound : odor
4) listen : record (correct answer)
5) touch : paper

RAIN : STORM
1) wind : hurricane (correct answer)
2) hail : thunder
3) snow : freeze
4) clouds : sky
5) sun : warm

CHAIR : FURNITURE
1) tire : iron
2) tree : plant (correct answer)
3) food : meat
4) boat : float
5) transport : car

GUN : HOLSTER
1) shoe : soldier
2) sword : warrior
3) paper : pen
4) books : school bag (correct answer)
5) cannon : plunder

FOREST : DESERT
1) wig : coat
2) egg : hen
3) rain : drought (correct answer)
4) skin : scar
5) young : healthy

DOCTOR : DISEASE
1) miser : money
2) illness : prescription
3) sheriff : crime (correct answer)
4) theft : punishment
5) intern : hospital

CANOE : SHIP
1) pistol : cannon (correct answer)
2) canoe : paddle
3) oar : water
4) aft : stern
5) land : sea

LARGE : ENORMOUS
1) lion : tiger
2) warmth : frost
3) plump : fat (correct answer)
4) royal : regal
5) happy : solemn

POWERFUL : LARGE
1) muscle : boxer
2) same : alike
3) strength : exercise
4) weak : small (correct answer)
5) clipboard : stopwatch
Appendix B: High Difficulty Analogies

INTERRUPT : HECKLE
1) disrupt : intrude
2) tease : hector (correct answer)
3) maintain : uphold
4) condemn : implore
5) speech : performance

TILLER : SHIP
1) wheel : car (correct answer)
2) motor : truck
3) row : boat
4) kite : string
5) wing : plane

JUSTICE : SCALES
1) ruler : education
2) weather vane : cock
3) tree : farm
4) court : crime
5) pearl : credo

YOKE : OX
1) saddle : stallion
2) tether : cow
3) herd : sheep
4) brand : steer
5) harness : horse (correct answer)

EXPURGATE : SOLECISM
1) defoliate : leaves
2) cancel : checks
3) incest : family
4) apostasy : dogma
5) till : fields

DEARTH : PAUCITY
1) few : many
2) scarcity : shortage (correct answer)
3) shortage : plethora
4) empty : container
5) commodity : expectation

TRAVESTY : RIDICULE
1) reproduction : provoke
2) forgery : deceive (correct answer)
3) imitation : feign
4) treachery : reprieve
5) poetry : comprehend

TALKATIVE : RECLUSE
1) deadly : gun
2) orderly : desk
3) wicked : saint (correct answer)
4) fast : athlete
5) taciturn : surgeon

ALLAY : PAIN
1) damp : noise (correct answer)
2) create : noise
3) regain : consciousness
4) fray : edge
5) nerves : soothe

BAY : SEA
1) mountain : valley
2) plain : forest
3) peninsula : land (correct answer)
4) cape : reef
5) island : sound
Appendix C: Second Practice Test Analogies

LUTE : STRING
1) flute : treble
2) xylophone : percussion
3) drum : rhythm
4) violin : concert
5) piano : octave

MILK : SPOIL
1) metal : bend
2) water : filter
3) wood : rot (correct answer)
4) fish : swim
5) animal : rest

PROW : SHIP
1) snout : hog
2) nose : airplane (correct answer)
3) bird : beak
4) wheel : car
5) point : shaft

PAIL : WATER
1) milk : quart
2) eggs : dozen
3) gallon : container
4) river : ocean
5) shaker : salt (correct answer)

WATER : HYDRAULIC
1) energy : atomic
2) power : electric
3) gasoline : combustion
4) pressure : compress
5) air : pneumatic (correct answer)

ROOF : PITCH
1) triangle : side
2) basement : cement
3) mountain : grade (correct answer)
4) tree : sap
5) ceiling : rafter

MUNDANE : TEMPORAL
1) earthly : heavenly
2) celestial : starry
3) spiritual : cavalier
4) angelic : religious
5) ephemeral : eternal

MISER : STINGINESS
1) dilettante : skill
2) demagogue : passivity
3) tyrant : dignity
4) altruist : selflessness (correct answer)
5) miscreant : honesty

FEEL : TOUCH
1) tickle : hurt
2) see : look (correct answer)
3) sprint : lift
4) giggle : laugh
5) shed : grow

SENSATION : ANESTHETIC
1) breath : lung
2) drug : reaction
3) satisfaction : disappointment
4) poison : antidote (correct answer)
5) observation : sight
Appendix D: Self-Doubt Scale

1. When engaged in an important task, my thoughts turn to bad things that might happen.
2. Avoiding failure has a greater emotional impact than achieving success.
3. I often feel unsure of my abilities.
4. I wonder if I have the ability to succeed at important activities.
5. I wish I felt more certain of my strengths and weaknesses.
6. As I begin an important activity, I feel confident in my ability. (R)
7. Sometimes I feel like I don't know why I succeeded at something.
8. As I begin an important activity, I feel confident in the likely outcome. (R)
Appendix E: Concern for Performance Scale

1. It's important that I succeed in all that I do.
2. Failure has its advantages. (R)
3. Failure is unacceptable to me.
4. I avoid being too successful. (R)
5. For me, being successful isn't the best thing. (R)
6. In some situations I think it's better that I fail. (R)
7. I strive to be successful at all times.
8. I am more comfortable when I lose or do poorly. (R)
9. In some situations it is important that I not succeed. (R)
Appendix F: Concern for Ability Scale

1. It's important that I'm good at all that I do.
2. Being bad at something has its advantages. (R)
3. Appearing bad at something is unacceptable to me.
4. I try to avoid appearing too talented. (R)
5. For me, appearing naturally talented isn't the best thing. (R)
6. In some situations I think it's better that I have low ability. (R)
7. I strive to appear good at everything.
8. I am more comfortable when I am not good at something. (R)
9. In some situations it is important that I am not good at something. (R)