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Self-handicapping Variables and Students’ Performance

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to see if students do better in General Psychology classes when they are aware of certain Social Psychology variables that might negatively influence their performance. In this research two of my general psychology classes, during fall 2008 semester, were provided information about such social psychology variables as self-handicapping behaviors, self-serving bias, attitudes, and fundamental attribution error and two were not given this information. The average grade in the group that had the self-handicapping information was 78.91 and the average grade in the group that did not have the self-handicapping information was 65.76. Differences between these means were not found to be significant.
Self-handicapping Variables and Students’ Performance

Self-handicapping is a social psychology variable that might take many forms. According to Aronson, Wilson, and Akert (2007), self-handicapping behaviors are strategies used by people to create obstacles and excuses for themselves so that, if they do poorly on a task, they can avoid blaming themselves. Thompson (2004) says self-handicapping refers to the practice of certain individuals to voluntarily claim a handicap when future outcomes are uncertain and when no external reason is available for poor performance. Thompson (1994) also uses the term self-worth protection to describe voluntary self-handicapping behaviors adopted by certain students in achievement situations to prevent damage to self-esteem. According to Thompson (2004), a characteristic of self-worth protective students is that they perform poorly when they anticipate that poor performance is likely to reveal low ability, yet perform well in situations that involve little threat to self-worth. He found self-worth protection to be an outcome of choking under pressure that is fuelled by evaluative threat. Examples of behaviors to forebode failure and damage to self-esteem include prevarication, withdrawal of effort, low goal setting, and last minute study. Feick and Rhodewalt (1997) say self-handicaps constitute attempts to select or create settings for performance that make feedback ambiguous. These preemptory attempts serve to control the self-esteem implications of anticipated failure by establishing causes for failure that are not related to ones ability. Rhodewalt and Hill (1995) state that self-handicappers, through their statements and acts, proactively arrange circumstances so that failing performances will not be interpreted in ways that threaten their self-esteem.
A person who is self-handicapping may be described as claiming emotional upset prior to an exam, illness, intentionally sustaining an injury prior to a tennis match, test anxiety, financial worries, having a late night (Thompson, 2004), and an athlete’s failure to practice for a game (Rhodewalt & Hill, 1995). Such claims serve to blur the link between poor performance and low ability. When a student’s claims to have been too emotionally upset to study for exam, in the event that the student fails the exam, it is difficult to question his or her ability because of the plausible self-handicapping cause but in the event of success, the students ability is augmented. However, several studies provide evidence that self-handicapping is primarily used in the service of self-protection instead of self-enhancement (Rhodewalt & Hill, 1995). According to Smith (2002), self-handicapping is a common behavior of less successful students and previous research by Feick and Rhodewalt (1997) found self-handicappers claimed more excuses prior to a test. It is possible that alerting teachers and students to principles of self-handicapping, self-serving bias, and other social psychology principles may lessen their occurrence (Smith, 2005). The purpose of this research is to see if students do better in General Psychology classes when they are aware of certain Social Psychology principles that might negatively influence their performance. The principle variables included in this study are self-handicapping, self-serving bias, attitude, self-fulfilling prophecy and perception of faculty member. The hypothesis for this study is that students who are made aware that certain self-handicapping principles may negatively influence their class performance will have higher grades than students who are alerted to such influences.
Method

Subjects

The initial sample consisted of 37 students. Seven members of the sample did not complete the course so final data are based on 30 subjects. All the students were taking a general psychology course at Bainbridge College during fall semester of 2008.

Materials

The materials included a video titled Group Influence from Insight Media and a power point handout that described social psychology variables that might negatively influence students’ performance. The video provides information about several social psychology variables related to group dynamics such as conformity, compliance, obedience, prejudice and aggression. The handout consisted of descriptions and examples of self-handicapping, self-serving bias, attitude, self-fulfilling prophecy, and perception of faculty member.

Procedure

At the beginning of each semester, students in my psychology classes are asked to sign an informed consent form that permits me to collect research data during the semester. At the beginning fall semester 2008, 79 students in four general psychology classes signed consent forms. This activity began with showing the Group Influence video in four general psychology classes. Three of the classes, after watching the video, were asked to write a paragraph that described the content of the video. After the fourth class watched the video, they were given copies of the Social Psychology Variables that might Negatively Influence Students’ Performance handout. The professor in the class discussed each item on the handout and the students were then asked to list things they
could do to limit the possible negative influences of these variables on their class performance. On the days of the research, 37 students were present. Fifteen of these students were in the class that was provided the power point handout, making them aware of social psychology factors that might negatively influence their learning and performance; and were asked to write a list of they could do to limit these negative influences.

Results

A list of things students identified they could do to limit the negative influences of certain variables are attached to the back of this paper. Three of the students who received the self-handicapping information on the handout stopped attending class so their data are not included in the results. The average grade in the group of students who received the handout and worked on identifying things they could to limit negative influences on class performance was 78.917 with a standard deviation of 9.5. The scores ranged from 68 to 94. Table 1.1 attached to this paper provides a list of course averages. The average in the other group was 65.763 with a standard deviation of 20.04 but these statistics are based on data from only eight students. Differences between the means were not significant (t=.11, df=29, p>.10). The range in this group was 24 to 83. Sixty-four percent of the students in this group dropped, withdrew, or just stopped attending class. Only 13% of the group that worked on the self-handicapping exercised stopped attending class.
Conclusion

The hypothesis that students’ grades are better when they have information about the negative influence of self-handicapping and other social psychology variables was not supported. A surprising finding was the percentages of students who dropped the classes that were not given the self-handicapping information. A criticism of this study is that it started out as a class activity instead of a controlled research project. A more detailed experimental study with controls and a larger sample might yield different results. Future research could also include objective measures of self-handicapping. Even though 64% of the students, who were not given the self-handicapping information dropped, withdrew or stopped attending class, the reasons for the students not attending class are not known.
References


Insight Media (video, copyright date not provided). Group influence, 2162 Broadway, New Your, NY 10024-0621.


Table 1.1 Pretests and Final Exams and Course Averages

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Things Students said they could do to Limit Influence of Self-Handicapping

Self-Handicapping

1. Do not wait until last minute to study for an exam
2. Do not stay out late the night before an exam
3. Keep studying even though you think you are not going to pass
4. Put more effort on task
5. Give more time to preparation for task
6. Do not use drugs and alcohol
7. Do not party the night before an exam
8. Do not make excuses
9. Avoid all night activities before an exam
10. Tell the truth
11. Try your best
12. Avoid cramming
13. Take responsibility for your own actions
14. Develop a schedule for studying
15. Study so you are prepared for the test
16. Accept responsibility for your performance, whether good or bad
17. Direct efforts to task at hand

Self-Serving Bias

18. Work to improve self-esteem
19. Continue to strive to make good grades, even if previous failure
20. Be prepared so failure is less likely
21. Realize that all people have times and/or areas of failure
22. Take credit only when due
23. Accept failure and do better
24. Do not blame others for your mistakes
25. Do not blame your failures on external events
26. Do not give up hope
27. Raise self-esteem
28. Do not try to save face by worrying about what people think
29. Take responsibility, not only for your successes but your failures as well
30. Do not always value other peoples opinion of yourself

Attitude
31. Control attitudes and the way you express them
32. Do not blame others for your mistakes
33. Do not think negatively
34. Be positive and have a positive attitude
35. Be positive about everything you do, even those you hate
36. Have understanding for others and show respect for others
37. Be open minded and discuss things in a respectful way
38. Do not judge a person based on physical appearance
39. Try to have a positive attitude towards the topic
40. Be more conscious of your attitude
41. Have a positive attitude
42. Do not take bad attitude out on the teacher
43. Associate with positive people with good attitudes
44. Do not allow others to influence your behavior or attitude
45. Make conscious effort to be aware of your attitude
46. Think before you act

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy
47. Do not let expectations affect your behavior
48. Do not think you will fail; do your best and accept responsibility
49. Examine your own prejudices and be aware of them
50. Do not make rash judgments based on first impressions
51. Have and open mind
52. Give people a chance to express who they are
53. Do not have ready made opinion of someone
54. Do not create perceptions that are asking too much
55. Do make expectations that you yourself would not do
56. Although you criticize a person, try to help him or her
57. Although certain expectations are made about you, set your own goal to better yourself

Perception of Faculty Member
58. Think positive
59. Do not discriminate
60. Do not judge based on appearance
61. Do not be prejudice in a classroom because everyone is different and will have different views and opinions
62. Have an open mind when it comes to certain topics in the classroom

63. Do not judge a person based on how they think about a topic

64. Have positive feelings about faculty

65. Go with what you believe even though the faculty member has different beliefs

66. Do not base your perceptions on race, dress, or personalities

67. Rely on more than the disposition of the faculty member when explaining their behavior

68. Keep an open mind about the subject; you might end up liking it

69. Do not listen to what others say about the teacher

70. Work to overcome race and ethnic differences

71. Accept that others may be different and avoid stereotyping another because of differences

72. Be open to get to know a person before judging their personality

73. Remember your actions and attitudes are not dependent on another person