Limitations on the Substitutability of Self-Protective Processes: Self-Handicapping is Not Reduced by Related-Domain Self-Affirmations

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Final version

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Abstract

Goal striving and achievement can be undermined when individuals have a competing desire to protect a cherished self-view. When individuals are more concerned with avoiding the negative implications of a likely failure than with self-improvement, they may ignore negative information or even go so far as to purposefully undermine their own performance. For example, self-handicapping involves creating or claiming obstacles to success in order to protect self-esteem in the event of task failure. One method to reduce such destructive behavior is to address self-protection concerns through other means. Notably, affirming overall self-integrity by drawing attention to other positive aspects of the self has been previously shown to reduce subsequent self-handicapping behavior. The present studies demonstrate however that these effects may not be as broad as previously assumed. Specifically, only self-affirmations in domains unrelated to the current threat seem to be effective in reducing self-handicapping. Self-affirmations related to the threatened domain may only serve to create a standard of comparison for the current performance, maintaining or even intensifying the existing threat. Thus, it appears that attempts to protect a specific self-conception can severely hamper goal striving and subsequent achievement. Implications for understanding the motivations underlying self-handicapping and for reducing this self-defeating behavior are discussed.

Keywords: self-handicapping, self-affirmation, motivation, achievement
Limitations on the Substitutability of Self-Protective Processes: Self-Handicapping is Not Reduced by Related-Domain Self-Affirmations

Functional goal striving involves selecting challenging but not impossible tasks, putting forth requisite effort, considering constructive feedback, and attempting to improve upon past mistakes. However, when individuals are more concerned with maintaining and protecting positive views of the self than with achieving, goal striving may become impaired. In this case, individuals may select non-diagnostic tasks (McClelland, 1987), ignore or discount negative feedback (Trope & Pomerantz, 1998), or even withdraw from the task altogether (Robins & Beer, 2001). Thus, the short-term pursuit of self-esteem represents a severe limitation on effective goal striving (Crocker & Park, 2004). One of the clearest examples of self-evaluation concerns undermining achievement and personal growth is self-handicapping.

Self-handicapping involves creating or claiming obstacles to success in order to protect self-esteem in the event of failure (Berglas & Jones, 1978). Individuals have been shown to engage in more behavioral forms of self-handicapping by withdrawing preparative effort (Hirt, McCrea, & Kimble, 2000), listening to distracting music (Shepperd & Arkin, 1989), or taking performance-inhibiting drugs (Berglas & Jones, 1978) prior to an important performance. Claimed self-handicaps include reported stress (Hendrix & Hirt, 2009) and anxiety (Smith, Snyder, & Handelsman, 1982). Self-handicapping is particularly likely among individuals feeling uncertain of their ability to perform well on an important task. Uncertainty resulting from the experience of noncontingent success (Berglas & Jones, 1978) or publicity of the performance (Hirt et al., 2000) have been shown to increase self-handicapping. There are also important individual differences in self-handicapping. For example, the Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS, Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982) measures chronic individual differences in the tendency to make excuses and engage in
self-handicapping behaviors. In addition, whereas men engage in both behavioral (e.g., withdrawing effort) and claimed (e.g., reported stress) forms of self-handicapping, women generally only engage in claimed self-handicapping (McCrea, Hirt, & Milner, 2008).

Although effective in protecting self-esteem in the short-term, self-handicapping undermines academic performance (McCrea & Hirt, 2001) and reduces effort on subsequent tasks (McCrea, 2008). Self-handicapping also predicts long-term decreases in self-esteem and intrinsic motivation, and long-term increases in reported negative mood, drug use, and visits to health care providers (Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998; Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005). Finally, observers are critical of self-handicapping behavior, indicating that they would not want a self-handicapper as a study partner, friend, or roommate (Hirt, McCrea, & Boris, 2003). Thus, self-handicapping can undermine intentional action in a number of direct (e.g., reduced motivation and effort) and indirect (e.g., low self-esteem, poor health behaviors, and negative social interactions) ways. It is therefore of considerable interest to find ways to reduce such behavior and free individuals of the constraints to goal striving and achievement imposed by these self-evaluative concerns.

**Substitutability of Self-Protection Processes**

According to self-affirmation theory (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988), individuals are concerned with maintaining overall self-integrity. The nature of a particular threat is not important so long as the individual can be reminded of other positive qualities that he or she possesses. In other words, threats to the self in a particular domain (e.g., academics) do not need to be addressed directly, but can be eliminated by affirming the self in an unrelated domain (e.g., moral integrity). For example, self-affirmations have been shown to reduce biased social comparison (Tesser & Cornell, 1991) and cognitive dissonance (Steele & Lui, 1983).
If self-handicapping behavior is motivated by self-protection concerns, then it should also be reduced by the opportunity to affirm the self. Indeed, a study by Siegel, Scillitoe, and Parks-Yancy (2005) demonstrated that individuals were less likely to self-handicap by selecting distracting music when they had previously had the opportunity to express an important value. But, are all types of self-affirmation equally effective in reducing self-handicapping? Other research suggests that they may not be. Self-handicapping is only reduced when the self-affirmation focuses on intrinsic, non-contingent aspects of self-worth, rather than extrinsic, contingent aspects of self-worth (Schimel, Arndt, Banko, & Cook, 2004). For example, completing intrinsic sentence stems such as “Being a ____ reflects my true ____” reduces self-handicapping attributions, whereas completing extrinsic sentence stems such as “If I perform at a high level in ____, then other people will____” does not (Schimel et al., 2004). The relatedness of the self-affirmation to the threatened domain may also moderate its effectiveness. Given that self-handicapping is motivated by the desire to protect a particular cherished self-image (McCrea & Hirt, 2001), one might predict that affirming the self within the threatened domain would be even more effective in reducing subsequent self-handicapping behavior. However, there is evidence that related-domain self-affirmations can actually backfire (Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995; Stone & Cooper, 2003). According to the Self-Standards Model of cognitive dissonance (SSM, Stone & Cooper, 2001, 2003), positive information about the self may not always serve to inspire, but instead can serve as a standard against which current behavior will be compared. As a result, the need to protect the self remains unchanged or even increases. According to the SSM, positive information about the self is particularly likely to serve as a standard of comparison when it is relevant to the current context. However, positive information about the self is likely to serve as a resource when it is irrelevant to the current context. Based on
this reasoning, attempts to restore self-integrity in a domain unrelated to a threatening performance should reduce subsequent self-handicapping. In contrast, attempts to restore self-integrity in a related domain should merely create a standard of comparison for performance, rendering individuals equally or perhaps even more uncertain of themselves. In this situation, self-handicapping is a likely response to protect the self. We conducted two studies to test this hypothesis.

**Study 1 – Considering Past Success in Related and Unrelated Domains**

Study 1 was intended to provide initial evidence for the notion that related-domain self-affirmations would be less effective than unrelated-domain self-affirmations in reducing self-handicapping behavior. We examined this question in the context of the behavioral self-handicap of effort withdrawal. We identified individuals likely to chronically self-handicap and make excuses using the Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS, Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982). To further increase the likelihood of self-handicapping, we presented individuals with noncontingent success on a prior test (cf., Berglas & Jones, 1978). Participants were then given the opportunity to practice prior to completing a test of intelligence. For half of the participants, inadequate practice was said to render the test results invalid, thus implying that withdrawing effort could serve to excuse poor performance. For the remaining participants, amount of practice was said to be unrelated to performance. Prior to the opportunity to practice, participants were assigned to one of three self-affirmation conditions. Individuals either considered a past success in an academic domain, a non-academic domain, or were placed into a control condition. Consistent with past work (Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991), we predicted that individuals scoring low on the SHS would practice more when practice was said to ensure a valid test result than when practice was said to be unrelated to performance, whereas individuals scoring high on the SHS would not practice more
when it was said to ensure a valid test result. We expected that this pattern would be found in the control condition, but would be further moderated by self-affirmation opportunity. Specifically, high SHS individuals were expected to practice more in the practice matters condition than in the practice does not matter condition when they had a chance to affirm the self in a domain unrelated to the test, but not when they had an opportunity to affirm the self in a domain related to the test.\(^1\)

**Method**

**Participants and Design**

Participants were 271 (126 male and 145 female) introductory psychology students at Indiana University. They were given credit toward their research participant requirement. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three (related-domain, unrelated-domain, or control) self-affirmation conditions, and one of two practice instruction (practice matters, practice does not matter) conditions. The study therefore had a 3 x 2 between-subjects design, with SHS scores allowed to vary.

**Materials and procedure**

**Self-handicapping scale.** Upon arrival to the laboratory, participants completed the SHS. To separate the completion of the scale from the remainder of the experiment, participants were told that the questionnaire was for a colleague at another university. The experimenter placed completed questionnaires in an envelope addressed to this colleague.

**Culture-fair intelligence test.** Participants were then told that the main experiment was designed to examine the validity of a nonverbal exam called the Culture-Fair Intelligence Test (CFIT, adapted from Cattell & Cattell, 1961). They were told that psychologists were interested in developing a test that measured people's true level of intelligence, uncontaminated by cultural-
bias, and that the CFIT was just such a task. They were then told that the researchers were interested in examining the relationship of this test to more traditional verbal measures of intelligence and how individual differences might relate to performance on these tests.

**Noncontingent success.** Participants were then told that they would first be taking a standard verbal intelligence test, supposedly called the Kansas Analogies Intelligence test. The analogy test was composed of 15 items selected to be rather difficult. All participants received the same noncontingent success feedback (see also Berglas & Jones, 1978). The feedback indicated that the participant had answered 12 out of 15 items correctly, placing him or her in the 90th percentile of all college students. The feedback also indicated that, because they had scored so well on the verbal test, the researchers expected them to score highly on the nonverbal exam as well. Participants were told that the researchers were interested in comparing their score on the two exams and finding out whether they could match these expectations.

**Affirmation manipulation.** Participants were told that at this point it was important to take a break between the two tests in order to “clear the mind.” Adapting a procedure used by Tesser and Cornell (1991), participants were asked to write an essay that was supposedly part of another research project. In actuality, the essay comprised the self-affirmation manipulation. In the no self-affirmation control condition, participants were asked to write an essay about what they had done the previous day. In the unrelated-domain self-affirmation condition, participants were asked to write about a time when they had outperformed a friend or relative on an important nonacademic task. In the related-domain self-affirmation condition, participants were asked to write about a time when they had outperformed a friend or relative on an important academic task. All participants were given seven minutes to complete this task.
**Practice instructions.** Having completed the essay, participants were introduced to the CFIT. Items were taken from the Conditions subtest (see Cattell & Cattell, 1961). These items require one to identify, out of five options, which arrangement of several figures preserves the same spatial relationships as found in the target. They were first given instructions indicating that practice was either helpful in achieving an accurate score (practice matters condition), or that practice did not impact performance on the exam (practice does not matter condition). In the practice matters condition, it was stressed that not practicing could lead one to have a score on the nonverbal test that was below one's true level of intelligence. In the practice does not matter condition, it was stressed that scores were unaffected by practice effort, and that the test would be accurate regardless of the amount of effort participants expended. Thus, reduced effort could only serve as an adequate excuse for poor performance in the practice matters condition, and the extent to which individuals failed to practice more in this condition than in the practice does not matter condition was indicative of self-handicapping (Hirt et al., 2000).

**Practice and actual exam.** Participants were told they would have 10 minutes to practice up to 25 items, after which they would have five minutes to complete 20 test items. Participants were told that they would have to start the five minute timer for the exam by pressing the space bar on the computer. When participants fully understood these directions, they were given paper-and-pencil versions of the practice exam and the actual exam. The experimenter reiterated the instructions and, unbeknownst to participants, started the computer timer for the practice session. When the participant hit the space bar, the timing for the practice session stopped, and the timing for the five-minute exam session began.

**Manipulation checks.** Following the exam, participants were asked to rate the importance of the exam. They indicated with what level of performance they would be happy, satisfied, and
unhappy using a ten-point scale (1 = top 10% of students and 10 = bottom 10% of students).
Lastly, participants were asked to recall the practice instructions, indicating how helpful practice was said to be on a five-point scale (1 = not at all and 5 = very much). Participants were then fully debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Overview

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the primary measures are presented in Table 1. We conducted regression analyses to utilize the continuous nature of the SHS. The continuous measure was mean-centered and effects coding used for categorical variables (Aiken & West, 1991). Two dummy variables were created for the self-affirmation manipulation, testing the unrelated-domain self-affirmation condition against the control condition and the related-domain self-affirmation condition against the control condition, respectively. The three items assessing importance of the performance on the exam were highly correlated (ranging from \( r = .41 \) to \( r = .64 \), \( ps < .001 \)); therefore, we summed the scores on these items to create a single index. In order to ensure that our effects did not simply reflect a lack of commitment to the task, this index was entered as a covariate in the first step of the regression model (see also McCrea, 2008). Gender, SHS scores, practice instruction, and self-affirmation condition variables were then entered into the model, followed by all two-way, three-way, and four-way interactions of these variables.

Manipulation Check

The regression model predicting recall of the practice instructions revealed only a main effect of practice instruction, \( \beta = .504, t = 9.25, p < .001 \). Participants told practice was important recalled that practice was said to be more helpful than did those told practice does not matter.

Practice Effort
Time ($M = 221.93$ sec, $SD = 146.24$) and number of practice items attempted ($M = 8.47$ problems, $SD = 6.89$) were highly correlated ($r = .68$) and therefore standardized and summed to form an index of practice effort. The final regression model is presented in Table 2. There was a significant effect of practice instruction, indicating that participants practiced more when told that practice mattered, thus confirming the effectiveness of this manipulation. This effect was qualified by a significant Related-Domain vs. Control Self-Affirmation x Practice Instruction interaction, see Figure 1. Individuals practiced significantly more when told practice mattered than when told practice did not matter in the control (simple-slope = .699, $t = 3.70$, $p < .001$) and unrelated self-affirmation conditions (simple-slope = .575, $t = 2.95$, $p < .01$), but not in the related self-affirmation condition (simple-slope = .100, $t < 1$, $p > .36$). Thus, self-affirmation in the same domain as the performance appeared to increase, rather than decrease, self-handicapping behavior.

The Unrelated-Domain vs. Control Self-Affirmation x Practice Instruction x SHS interaction also reached significance, see Figures 2a and 2b. Within the control self-affirmation condition, a significant practice instruction effect was found among low SHS individuals (simple-slope = 1.029, $t = 4.19$, $p < .001$), but not among high SHS individuals (simple-slope = .264, $t < 1$, $p > .33$). This effect replicates past work showing that high SHS individuals are more likely to behaviorally self-handicap by withdrawing practice effort (Hirt et al., 1991). In the unrelated-domain self-affirmation condition, high SHS individuals did practice significantly more in the practice matters condition than in the practice does not matter condition (simple-slope = .873, $t = 3.33$, $p < .002$). This finding replicates past work (Schimel et al., 2004; Siegel et al., 2005) showing that unrelated-domain self-affirmations can reduce self-handicapping behavior. Unexpectedly, the practice instruction effect was no longer significant among low SHS
individuals in the unrelated-domain self-affirmation condition (simple-slope = .198, $t < 1$, ns). This result could be taken as evidence that even unrelated self-affirmations are potentially threatening to those who typically do not self-handicap. However, follow-up analyses indicated that, whereas the Practice instruction x SHS interaction was significant in the control condition, only the practice instruction main effect was significant in the unrelated self-affirmation condition. Thus, the null effect of practice instruction among low SHS individuals should be interpreted with some caution. The results are therefore consistent with our prediction that unrelated self-affirmations would reduce self-handicapping.

The Related-Domain vs. Control Self-Affirmation x Practice Instruction x SHS interaction was not significant. Indeed, within the related-domain self-affirmation condition, the practice instruction effect only approached significance among high SHS individuals (simple-slope = .543, $t = 1.95$, $p < .06$) and was nonsignificantly negative among low SHS individuals (simple-slope = -.178, $t < 1$, $p > .52$). Thus, the related-domain self-affirmation was less effective than the unrelated-domain self-affirmation in reducing self-handicapping among high SHS individuals, and appeared to actually increase self-handicapping behavior among low SHS individuals. We interpret these results as evidence that related-domain self-affirmations maintain or increase evaluative threat and uncertainty by creating a high standard of comparison for the upcoming performance (Stone & Cooper, 2001, 2003). Summarizing our results, it is clear that the desire to defend self-esteem, particularly specific self-concepts, can undermine efforts to maximize performance as a result of self-handicapping behavior (McCrea & Hirt, 2001). Moreover, there appear to be real limits to the substitutability of self-handicapping (see also Schimel et al., 2004). Only self-affirmations unrelated to the domain of the threatening performance appear to be effective in freeing individuals from the costly pursuit of self-esteem.
Study 2 - Receiving Success Feedback in Related and Unrelated Domains

We sought to replicate these results in a second study using a different type of self-handicap and a different manipulation of self-affirmation. One could argue that the reason we failed to observe a reduction in self-handicapping in the related-domain self-affirmation condition was that individuals simply had difficulty generating sufficiently positive past experiences in this condition. We therefore examined whether similar effects would be observed when the self-affirmation was provided in the form of positive feedback (see also Aronson et al., 1995). We also investigated whether we would observe the same effects of self-affirmation with a claimed self-handicap of reported stress. Thus, we examined the ability of related-domain and unrelated-domain self-affirmations to reduce the strategic reporting of stress (see also Hendrix & Hirt, 2009).

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 57 (43 female, 14 male) students at the University of Konstanz. They received 5 Euros or an hour of research participation credit as compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three (related-domain, unrelated-domain, or control) self-affirmation conditions in a between-subject design, with SHS scores again allowed to vary.

Procedure

Prior to taking part in the study, participants were asked to complete the SHS as part of a packet of prescreening measures supposedly required by all participants of studies in the Social Psychology Department. They were asked to complete the questionnaire and place it in a drop-box at least one day prior to participating in the study. Questionnaires were matched with participants on the basis of a code number.
Upon entering the laboratory for the main study, participants were told the researchers were interested in factors related to mathematical ability. They were told they would be taking a standardized test of mathematical and logical ability, and that scores on the test were related to the ability to solve complex problems and were predictive of success in careers that require logical reasoning.

Participants were then assigned to one of three self-affirmation conditions. Those in the related-domain self-affirmation condition were told that prior to completing the main math test, they would first complete a related type of math test. Specifically, although the type of problems presented were quite similar, time to complete the items was also measured in the main exam. They were told that, as a result, they could expect that their score on the initial test would be strongly predictive of their score on the second exam. They then completed a relatively easy 15 item math exam, and received feedback concerning the number they answered correctly and were told that they had scored in the top 10% of university students.

Those in the unrelated-domain self-affirmation condition were told that, prior to completing the main math test, they would first complete a test of verbal abilities. They were told that, as a result, they could expect that their score on this test would not be related to their score on the primary exam. They then completed a relatively easy 15 item analogy exam, and received feedback concerning the number they answered correctly and were told that they had scored in the top 10% of university students.

Finally, those assigned to the control condition were asked to complete a word search task (consisting of German place names) but were not given any instructions concerning the abilities measured by this task.
Following the self-affirmation manipulation, all participants were told that they would be taking the timed math exam. They were told that, because the scoring of the test included speed, a weakness of the math test was that it was sensitive to the amount of stress that a person was currently experiencing in his or her life. Thus, those who were currently experiencing hassles or problems in their life could be distracted and score more poorly on the test than would be warranted. Participants were therefore asked to complete a measure of daily hassles (cf. Kanner, Coyne, Schaeffer, & Lazarus, 1981), indicating to what extent they were experiencing 45 different everyday problems using a four-point scale (0 = not at all to 3 = severe). Past work has shown that high SHS men and women strategically report higher levels of stress on this measure than do low SHS individuals, even after controlling for differences in trait anxiety (Hendrix & Hirt, 2009).

Participants then completed the math exam. They were subsequently asked to indicate how important it was to them to do well on the math exam, using a five-point scale (1 = not at all to 5 = very much). They were then fully debriefed and received their compensation.

Results and Discussion

Items on the stress measure were combined into a single index. Descriptive statistics and correlations between the primary measures are presented in Table 3. Consistent with the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991), two self-affirmation condition variables were created using effects coding. The first variable tested the unrelated-domain self-affirmation against the control condition, and the second variable tested the related-domain self-affirmation against the control condition. SHS scores were mean-centered. The effects of the SHS, self-affirmation condition dummy variables, and their interaction were included in the model. As in
Study 1, importance of the test was included as a covariate. We also controlled for gender\(^3\), given that women often report more stress on this measure (Hendrix & Hirt, 2009).

The final regression model is presented in Table 4. SHS score was a significant predictor of stress reporting, indicating that high SHS individuals generally reported higher levels of stress. More importantly, the Unrelated-Domain vs. Control Self-Affirmation x SHS interaction was significant, see Figure 3. There was a significant effect of SHS in the control condition (simple-slope = 1.196, \(t = 3.15, p < .01\)), but not in the unrelated-domain self-affirmation condition (simple-slope = 0.060, \(t < 1, p > .87\)). Although the SHS effect within the related-domain self-affirmation condition was not significant (simple-slope = 0.391, \(t = 1.30, p < .21\)), this effect failed to significantly differ from the SHS effect in the control condition, \(t < 1.67, p > .10\). Thus, the related-domain affirmation was not as effective in eliminating claimed self-handicapping as was the unrelated-domain self-affirmation. Only the latter significantly reduced higher stress reporting of high SHS individuals compared to low SHS individuals.

**General Discussion**

Our results show that there are clear limits to the substitutability of self-handicapping behavior. Self-affirmations in the same domain as the threatening performance can paradoxically maintain or even increase evaluative threat by serving as a standard of comparison (Stone & Cooper, 2001, 2003). As a result, related-domain self-affirmations are less effective in reducing self-handicapping, and may even increase self-handicapping in certain cases, compared to unrelated self-affirmations.

We believe there are several important implications of these findings. First, our results indicate that attempts to protect a specific ability belief by reminding the self of past success in that domain may fail to inspire strong goal striving (as indicated by reduced persistence, Study
Instead, individuals may worry that they cannot live up to such a high standard (Stone & Cooper, 2001, 2003). Indeed, providing individuals with related-domain positive feedback (as we did in Study 2) is remarkably similar to the provision of non-contingent success feedback (as was the case in Study 1), which has been repeatedly shown to increase uncertainty and subsequent self-handicapping behavior (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Hirt et al., 2000). Particularly when the related-affirmation is not perceived to be contingent on past performance, individuals are likely to doubt their ability to meet the same high standard again.

Second, our results are part of converging evidence showing that the goal of self-handicapping is to protect specific ability beliefs. McCrea and Hirt (2001) found that the protection of global self-esteem after self-handicapping was mediated by the maintenance of more specific ability beliefs. Because self-affirmations in the same domain serve as standards for performance rather than as a resource, it can be concluded that self-handicapping is motivated by the desire to protect these more specific self-concepts.

**Limitations and future directions**

In addition to relevance of the domain, a number of other important moderators of the effects of self-affirmation on self-handicapping likely exist. For example, we selected performances that were either idiographically (Study 1) or normatively (Study 2) important. We would assume that only self-affirmations of equally or more important domains would be effective in reducing self-handicapping in a given context. Future research could address this issue more directly by measuring or manipulating domain importance. Another moderator of whether positive information about the self serves as a resource or as a standard of comparison might be the diagnosticity of the information for subsequent performance. Indeed, relevance of the domain is likely correlated with diagnosticity (i.e., scores on a math test are more likely to predict scores on
other math tests than are scores on an analogy test). Would providing individuals with relevant, but non-diagnostic, feedback prove more effective? We think not. As discussed earlier, noncontingent success is experienced as relevant but non-diagnostic. A “self-affirmation” of this form may prove even more threatening in terms of increasing uncertainty and creating a standard of comparison. Future studies should nonetheless attempt to orthogonally manipulate diagnosticity and relevance of the feedback to test these predictions more directly.

In addition to these moderators of the effectiveness of self-affirmation in reducing self-handicapping in the short-term, the long-term effectiveness of this intervention is questionable. Affirming the self may simply involve “kicking the can down the road,” leaving underlying concerns about the threatened domain unaddressed. Thus, future research should examine whether self-affirmation reduces the long-term likelihood of self-handicapping. Furthermore, although some types of self-affirmation may be effective, individuals may not choose to self-affirm in an unrelated domain when faced with a specific threat to the self. Given the choice, individuals seem to actually prefer dealing with threats to the self directly (Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997). This preference may explain why individuals choose to self-handicap instead of simply engaging in self-affirmation. Rather than pursuing such short-term solutions, one might consider that self-handicapping would only be truly eliminated by reorienting individuals toward self-improvement and away from concerns of demonstrating their ability (Elliot, Cury, Fryer, & Huguet, 2006; Niiya, Crocker, & Bartness, 2004). For example, Hendrix and Hirt (2009) found that framing the task in terms of promotion significantly reduced claimed self-handicapping. In addition, providing individuals with more binding self-regulatory strategies that direct attention onto the task could prove effective in reducing the limiting effects of self-protection concerns.
References


SUBSTITUTABILITY OF SELF-HANDICAPPING


Footnotes

1 Past work has shown that men, particularly those also scoring high on the SHS, tend to behaviorally self-handicap more than do women (Hirt et al., 1991). For simplicity of presentation we do not discuss this gender difference extensively. Nonetheless, the reader might question whether we observed similar effects in the present study. Indeed, the main effect of gender, the significant Related vs. Control x SHS x Gender interaction, and the marginally significant four-way interaction revealed that the self-handicapping pattern of practice effort observed in the control and related affirmation conditions tended to be stronger among high SHS men than among high SHS women. Thus, the present results are quite consistent with past work in this area.

2 None of the participants expressed suspicion of the affirmation feedback during debriefing.

3 Preliminary analyses revealed no significant interactions involving gender, consistent with past work showing that men as well as women engage in claimed self-handicapping (Hirt et al., 1991).
Table 1.

*Descriptive statistics and correlations (Study 1).*

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Note. * $p < .05$. Cronbach’s $\alpha$ presented on the diagonal.
Table 2.

*Final regression model predicting practice index scores (Study 1)*

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$F(24,211) = 3.05, \ p < .001, \ R^2 = .26$
Table 3.

*Descriptive statistics and correlations (Study 2).*

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<th>Stress index</th>
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<th>Importance</th>
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<td>SHS</td>
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<td>.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
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<td>.07</td>
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</table>

| M | 80.37 | 55.99 | 3.14 |
| SD  | 16.97 | 10.69 | 1.11 |

*Note.* *p* < .05. Cronbach’s α presented on the diagonal.
Table 4.

*Final regression model predicting stress index scores (Study 2)*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Term</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$f^2$</th>
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</table>

$F(7,49) = 2.78, p < .02, R^2 = .28$
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Related vs. Control Self-Affirmation x Practice instruction interaction (Study 1)

Figures 2a and 2b. Unrelated vs. Control Self-Affirmation x Practice instruction x SHS interaction (Study 1)

Figure 3. Unrelated vs. Control Self-Affirmation x SHS interaction (Study 2)
SUBSTITUTABILITY OF SELF-HANDICAPPING

The figure illustrates the relationship between practice instruction and practice index. The x-axis represents the practice instruction, ranging from "Does Not Matter" to "Matters". The y-axis represents the practice index, ranging from -1 to 1.

Three lines are plotted on the graph:
- Blue line: Control
- Red dotted line: Unrelated
- Green dotted line: Related

The blue line shows a linear increase as practice instruction increases. The red dotted line also increases linearly but at a steeper rate, indicating a stronger relationship for the Unrelated condition. The green dotted line shows a moderate increase, suggesting a related but less intense relationship compared to the other conditions.
SUBSTITUTABILITY OF SELF-HANDICAPPING

![Graph showing the comparison of stress levels across different conditions.

- **Control**
- **Unrelated**
- **Related**

The graph illustrates the relationship between SHS (Self-Handicapping Scale) and stress levels. The x-axis represents SHS with Low and High categories, while the y-axis represents stress levels from 45 to 95. The graph shows a positive correlation between SHS and stress levels across different conditions.}