Academic Self-Handicapping and Achievement Goals:
A Further Examination

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This study extends previous research on the relations among students’ personal achievement goals, perceptions of the classroom goal structure, and reports of the use of self-handicapping strategies. Surveys, specific to the math domain, were given to 484 7th-grade students in nine middle schools. Personal performance-avoid goals positively predicted handicapping, whereas personal performance-approach goals did not. Personal task goals negatively predicted handicapping. Perceptions of a performance goal structure positively predicted handicapping, and perceptions of a task goal structure negatively predicted handicapping, independent of personal goals. Median splits used to examine multiple goal profiles revealed that students high in performance-avoid goals used handicapping more than did those low in performance-avoid goals regardless of the level of task goals. Students low in performance-avoid goals and high in task goals handicapped less than those low in both goals. Level of performance-approach goals had little effect on the relation between task goals and handicapping.

‘‘I could have aced the test, but I put off studying until the last minute.’’
‘‘I could have gotten a good grade in this course, but I spent a lot of time with my friends this semester.’’ The struggle to escape looking stupid (Covington, 1992) predisposes some students to engage in strategies such as these that will deflect attention away from their ability should poor performance occur. Unfortunately, these strategies also are likely to undermine performance. Thus they are called self-handicapping.

Much of the earlier research on the use of handicapping strategies was...
conducted by personality theorists and often in laboratory settings (see Higgins, Snyder, & Berglas, 1990, pp. 100–102 for a table summarizing these studies and the strategies that have been examined). Only recently has the study of handicapping been extended into the academic domain. Prior to the current study, we conducted three studies of the reported use of handicap ing by students, with three different samples (Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996; Midgley & Urdan, 1995; Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998). We used goal orientation theory as the lens through which to examine academic self-handicapping. Goal orientation theory is concerned with the meaning and purpose of achievement to the individual. A comparison is often made between the goal to develop ability (a personal task goal) and the goal to demonstrate ability or hide the demonstration of lack of ability (a personal performance goal) (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Maehr, 1989; Nicholls, 1989).

The goal structure in the learning environment is also integral to goal orientation theory. Classrooms and schools, through their policies and practices, can emphasize mastery, effort, improvement, and intellectual development (a task goal structure) and/or relative ability and competition among students (a performance goal structure) (Ames, 1984; Midgley, 1993; Urdan, 1994). In a classroom where a performance goal structure predominates, teachers frequently compare students’ abilities and performance, students compete with each other and are recognized for their performance relative to others, and the importance of grades and test scores is discussed frequently. When this is the case, students’ awareness of how others perceive their ability is a central concern, and strategies to appear able, or at least to avoid appearing unable, are likely to be used (Covington, 1992). Our studies have been based on the premise that an orientation to demonstrating ability (a personal performance goal orientation) and/or the perception that the learning environment emphasizes relative ability and competition among students (a performance goal structure) is associated with a greater reported use of strategies to deflect attention away from ability as a reason for low performance, should it occur (self-handicapping).

Our first study (Midgley & Urdan, 1995) was conducted with a sample of 8th-grade students attending two middle schools in a working-class community. In this study, personal task goals, personal performance goals, and perceptions of an emphasis on task goals in the school were unrelated to reports of handicapping, whereas perceptions of an emphasis on performance goals in the school were positively related to handicapping. It should be noted that both the handicapping scale and the scales assessing achievement goals were refined and improved after this study was conducted. The second study (Midgley et al., 1996) was conducted with a different sample of 8th-grade students attending one middle school in an ethnically diverse working class community. Personal performance goals were positively related to the reported use of handicapping, whereas personal task goals were unrelated.
to handicapping. Perceptions of the goal structure were not included in this study. The third study (Urdan et al., 1998) was conducted with a large ethnically and economically diverse sample of 5th-grade students. Using hierarchical linear modeling, we found that the reported use of handicapping varied significantly across classrooms. Both aggregated student perceptions of an emphasis on performance goals in the classroom and teachers’ reports of the use of performance-focused instructional practices predicted the reported use of handicapping. Aggregated student perceptions of an emphasis on task goals in the classroom and teachers’ reports of the use of task-focused instructional practices did not emerge as significant predictors of handicapping. The current study includes the same sample as in the third study described above (Urdan et al., 1998) after those students had moved from 23 elementary schools to 9 middle schools.

Until recently, our studies included scales to assess students’ orientation to the development of ability (personal task goal) and students’ orientation to the demonstration of ability (personal performance-approach goal), but did not include a scale to assess students’ orientation to avoiding the demonstration of lack of ability (personal performance-avoid goal). The distinction between the approach and avoidance components of performance goals is a relatively new development in goal orientation theory (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996, Middleton & Midgley, 1997, Skaalvik, 1997). Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) pointed out that this distinction, which was an integral part of classic motivational theory (Atkinson, 1957; McClelland, 1951), has been neglected by goal theorists. Researchers incorporating this distinction into their studies have found that the approach and avoidance dimensions of performance goals not only differ in the strength of their relations to outcomes, but also are not always related significantly to the same outcomes (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Middleton & Midgley, 1997; Skaalvik, 1997). For example, Elliot and Church (1997) found that performance-approach goals positively predicted achievement in a college-level psychology class, whereas performance-avoid goals negatively predicted achievement. Similarly, Middleton and Midgley (1997) found that performance-avoid goals positively predicted avoiding seeking help in the classroom when needed, whereas performance-approach goals did not. Handicapping is another example of an avoidance behavior, and we predict that the avoidance dimension of performance goals will be more highly predictive of handicapping than will the approach dimension.

As described above, in our previous studies we found that a performance goal structure was associated with a greater use of handicapping strategies at both the classroom and school levels (Urdan et al., 1998; Midgley & Urdan, 1995). Dweck (e.g., Henderson & Dweck, 1990) points to the personal goals students espouse as the driving force in organizing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. However, she also acknowledges that situational de-
mands must be taken into account. However, little research using a goal orientation framework has simultaneously examined personal goals and perceptions of the goals emphasized in the learning environment. A performance goal structure may make an independent contribution to self-handicapping beyond that associated with personal performance goals.

It is also important to take into account gender, ethnicity, and achievement level when examining the relation between handicapping and achievement goals. Several studies have found that handicapping is associated with lower achievement (Midgley et al., 1996; Midgley & Urdan, 1995; Urdan et al., 1998). Boys at both the 5th- and 8th-grade levels were found to use handicapping strategies more than did girls (Midgley & Urdan, 1995; Urdan et al., 1998). Additionally, in one study (Midgley et al., 1996) we found that the relationship between an orientation to performance goals and handicapping was positive for African American students but not for European American students.

A final issue is considered in this examination of self-handicapping and achievement goals. Students do not always espouse a single goal to the exclusion of others. A number of studies have used various techniques to examine the role of multiple goals (Ainley, 1993; Meece & Holt, 1993; Pintrich & Garcia, 1991; Pintrich, 1999; Urdan, 1994; Wolters, Yu, & Pintrich, 1996). In many of these studies, the combination of high task goals and low performance goals was the most facilitative pattern. Recently, however, Pintrich (1999) divided students into four groups based on a median split of their scores on scales assessing task and performance goals. He then compared students who were high in both goals, low in both goals, high in task and low in performance, and low in task and high in performance goals. On a number of outcomes, including self-handicapping, he found that the high task/high performance group and the high task/low performance group did not differ significantly from one another and that these two groups were associated with more positive outcomes than the other groups. He concluded that ‘‘a high approach performance goal, when coupled with a high (task) goal does not have to have a dampening effect on the general positive effect of a high (task) goal’’ (p. 20). However, he did not include the avoidance component of performance goals in his study. It may be that high performance-approach goals do not have a negative effect if task goals are high, but that high performance-avoid goals have a negative effect regardless of the level of task goals. We make the following hypotheses:

1. Personal task goals and the perceived task goal structure in the classroom are unrelated to the reported use of self-handicapping strategies; (2) personal performance-approach and performance-avoid goals are positively related to the reported use of self-handicapping; personal performance-avoid goals are more predictive of handicapping than are performance-approach goals; and (3) the perceived performance goal structure in the classroom is
associated with the reported use of self-handicapping independent of personal performance-approach and performance-avoid goals.

Although Pintrich (1999) found a significant relationship between task goals and handicapping, in the studies that we have conducted, this relationship was not significant. Moreover, the avoid component of performance goals was not included in either the Pintrich study or in our previous studies. Therefore, we decided not to propose hypotheses regarding the expected results of the multiple goal analysis.

METHOD

Sample

The participants in this study included 484 7th-grade students from nine middle schools in southeastern Michigan. These students were participants in an ongoing longitudinal study that began when they were in 5th grade and continued through 9th grade (C. Midgley, principal investigator). The sample included 245 boys and 239 girls. Fifty-five percent of the sample was African American and 45% was European American. These participants were selected from a slightly larger sample that included small numbers of Asian American, Latino/Latina, and Native American students. Because these groups were too small to examine separately, they were excluded from the analysis. The decision was made to exclude these students rather than combine them with African American students into a larger “minority” group because there is evidence that these different ethnic groups are distinct in their motivational and achievement characteristics (e.g., Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Steinberg, Dornbusch & Brown, 1992). In addition, any students for whom we were missing data on any of the variables included in the study were excluded (N = 25). Students were required to have parental permission in order to participate; 83% received permission.

Measures

Data for this study were collected via surveys and from students’ academic records. The Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS; Midgley et al., 1997) was administered to students by trained university research assistants in the spring of their 7th-grade year. The surveys were read aloud to students in their classroom with the teacher present but seated at his or her desk. The variables included in this study were all specific to the domain of mathematics. Because students attend different subject matter classes in middle school, we felt that it was important to focus on one subject area, and we chose mathematics.

Self-handicapping was assessed using a six-item scale with an alpha level of .86, which is similar to alpha levels reported in our previous studies with a different sample and with this sample in an earlier grade (e.g., Midgley et al., 1996; Urdan et al., 1998). Information about the psychometric properties of the scale can be found in Midgley et al. (1996). Sample items include “Some students put off doing their math work until the last minute so that if they don’t do well on their work, they can say that is the reason. How true is this of you?” and “Some students purposely don’t try hard in math so that if they don’t do well they can say it is because they didn’t try. How true is this of you?” The personal task goal scale (five items, \( \alpha = .80 \)) included items such as “I like math work that I’ll learn from, even if I make a lot of mistakes” and “An important reason I do my math work is because I like to learn new things.” The personal performance-approach goal scale (six items, \( \alpha = .84 \)) included items such as “I want to do better than other students in my math class” and “It is important to me that other students in my math class think I am good at my math.” The personal performance-avoid scale (six items, \( \alpha = .78 \)) included items such as “It is important to me that I
don’t look stupid in my math class’’ and ‘‘One of my main goals in math is to avoid looking like I can’t do my work.’’ To assess the classroom task goal structure in math, we used a five-item scale (α = .81) including items such as ‘‘My math teacher thinks mistakes are okay as long as we are learning’’ and ‘‘My math teacher recognizes us for trying hard.’’ To assess the classroom performance goal structure in math, we used a seven-item scale (α = .82) that included items such as ‘‘My math teacher lets us know which students get the highest scores on a test’’ and ‘‘My math teacher tells us how we compare to other students.’’ These reliabilities are similar to those found in earlier studies (Midgley et al., 1996; Urdan et al., 1998) Evidence of the validity of the personal goal orientation scales is presented in Midgley et al. (1998).

Students indicated whether they were boys or girls on the front cover of the survey. Grades and information about ethnicity were collected from students’ records at the end of the academic year. Students’ grades in the their mathematics class were used in this study.

RESULTS

Our primary research questions in this study were whether (a) personal performance-approach and performance-avoid goals differed in their relationship to self-handicapping, (b) the perceived classroom performance goal structure predicted self-handicapping after controlling for the effects of personal performance-approach and avoid goals, and (c) the level of performance goals had an effect on the relationship between high task goals and handicapping. We examined these questions by conducting bivariate correlations, multiple regression, and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

Correlation and Regression Analyses

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were computed for each variable in the study and are reported in Table 1. The correlations in Table 1 indicate that self-handicapping is weakly, positively related to personal performance-approach and more strongly related to personal performance-avoid goals and that it is negatively related to task goals and to mathematics grade. There is also a positive correlation between self-handicapping and perceptions of a classroom performance goal structure and a negative correlation between handicapping and perceptions of a classroom task goal structure.

To examine more closely the multivariate relations among reports of self-handicapping, personal goals, the perceived classroom goal structure, and gender, ethnicity, and math grade, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted. The standardized regression coefficients and $R^2$ values associated with each step in this analysis are presented in Table 2. In the first step of the analysis, gender, ethnicity, and math grade were entered. Math grade emerged as a significant (negative) predictor of handicapping, and boys were more likely to report using handicapping strategies than were girls. In the second step, performance-approach, performance-avoid, and task goals were entered, and together explained an additional 10% of the variance in handicapping. When controlling for other predictors in the model, an orientation
| 1. Self-handicapping | 2.17 | 1.02 | — | 2. Performance-approach goals | 2.60 | 1.06 | .12 | — | 3. Performance-avoid goals | 2.09 | .89 | .33 | .59 | — | 4. Task goals | 3.25 | 1.09 | −.20 | .07 | −.05 | — | 5. Classroom performance goal structure | 2.33 | .96 | .34 | .19 | .25 | −.16 | — | 6. Classroom task goal structure | 3.35 | .97 | −.21 | .02 | .01 | .43 | −.24 | — | 7. Math grade | 6.47 | 3.58 | −.40 | −.04 | −.15 | .10 | −.29 | .17 | — | 8. Ethnicity | .45 | .50 | −.12 | −.05 | −.06 | −.17 | −.06 | −.13 | .20 | — | 9. Gender | .49 | .50 | −.14 | −.12 | −.10 | .03 | −.14 | .08 | .11 | −.05 |

| Note. Ethnicity coded 0 = African American, 1 = European American; gender coded 0 = Boy, 1 = Girl. All correlations ≥ absolute value .09 significant at p < .05; correlations ≥ absolute value .12 significant at p < .01 |
TABLE 2
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Examining Predictors of Self-Handicapping among 7th-Graders (N = 484)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variables</th>
<th>Step 1β</th>
<th>Step 2β</th>
<th>Step 3β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.12**</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>-.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.08*</td>
<td>-.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math grade</td>
<td>-.38***</td>
<td>-.32***</td>
<td>-.27***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-approach goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Performance-avoid goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Task goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class performance goal structure</td>
<td></td>
<td>.15***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class task goal structure</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in $R^2$</td>
<td></td>
<td>.10***</td>
<td>.03***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Ethnicity coded 0 = African American, 1 = European American; gender coded 0 = Boy, 1 = Girl.

* $p < .05$.
*** $p < .001$.

Performance-approach goals was a significant positive predictor of handicappping ($\beta = .30, p < .001$), whereas a performance-approach orientation was not a significant predictor. A task goal orientation was a significant, negative predictor of handicappping ($\beta = -.17, p < .001$). In the final step of the model, the perceived classroom performance and task goal structure variables were added and both emerged as significant predictors of handicappping. Controlling for the other predictors in the model, performance goal structure was a positive predictor of handicappping ($\beta = .15, p < .001$), whereas task goal structure was a negative predictor ($\beta = -.09, p < .05$). In the final model, gender, ethnicity, math grade, personal task and personal performance-avoid goals, and both classroom goal structure variables were significant predictors of handicappping. There were no significant interactions by race or gender.

In our final set of analyses, we used ANCOVA to explore whether students with different goal profiles differed in their reported use of self-handicapping strategies. We began by performing median splits on the personal task, performance-approach, and performance-avoid goal measures. We used this strategy in order to replicate the analysis strategy of Pintrich (1999). We then created two new variables: (a) a four-group task and performance-approach goals variable and (b) a four-group task and performance-avoid goals.
variable. The adjusted means and standard deviations for each of these groups on self-handicapping strategy use are reported in Table 3, along with the number of cases in each group.

To determine whether these groups differed in their reported use of self-handicapping strategies, factorial ANCOVAs were conducted using the goal groups, gender, and ethnicity as between-subjects factors and math grade as the covariate. For the analysis involving the task/performance-approach goals groups, performance-avoid goals were included as a covariate. For the analysis involving the task/performance-avoid goal groups, performance-approach goals were included as a covariate. By including these covariates, we were able to examine the simultaneous effects of task goals with one type of performance goal while controlling for the effects of the other type of performance goal as well as for math grade, gender, and ethnicity.

The first analysis reported in Table 3 revealed that, when controlling for performance-avoid goals and math grade, there was an overall main effect for the multiple goals groups on self-handicapping \( F(3, 483) = 4.07, p < .01 \). Post hoc analysis revealed that students in the high task/low performance-approach group reported engaging in less handicapping than did students in either of the two low task groups. Students in the high task/high performance-approach group did not differ significantly from those in the low task/high performance-approach group, indicating a small effect of performance-approach goals on handicapping for students also high in their pursuit of task goals. Overall, the results for the analysis involving task and performance-approach goals indicated that the groups differed in handicapping primarily according to their level of personal task goal orientation and that there was little difference between the four groups. The second analysis produced an overall main effect for the multiple goals groups on self-handicapping when controlling for performance-approach goals and math grade \( F(3, 483) = 11.82, p < .001 \). Post hoc analysis demonstrated that the groups differed primarily according to their pursuit of performance-avoid goals, with greater handicapping among those students in the high performance-avoid groups. Students low in their performance-avoid goal orienta-

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Chi-square analysis revealed that on each of these new four-group variables, there were differences in group membership by ethnicity and by gender. For both the task/performance-approach variable \( \chi^2 = 18.44, p < .001 \) and the task/performance-avoid variable \( \chi^2 = 19.78, p < .001 \), African American students were somewhat overrepresented in the two high task groups. The chi-square analyses involving gender indicated that for both the task/performance-approach \( \chi^2 = 12.06, p < .01 \) and the task/performance-avoid \( \chi^2 = 8.80, p < .05 \) variables, boys were overrepresented in the high task/high performance group and underrepresented in the high task/low performance group. Because of these differences by gender and ethnicity, as well as the significant correlations between these demographic variables and self-handicapping, gender and ethnicity were included and controlled for in the ANCOVA analyses.
TABLE 3
Results of ANCOVA Analyses Comparing Median-Split Task and Performance-Approach or Performance-Avoid Goals on Self-Handicapping in 7th-Graders (N = 484)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low task</th>
<th>High task</th>
<th>Low task</th>
<th>High task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low performance-approach</td>
<td>High performance-approach</td>
<td>Low performance-approach</td>
<td>High performance-approach</td>
</tr>
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<td>Handicapping1</td>
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<td>N = 113</td>
<td>N = 132</td>
<td>N = 130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.33a</td>
<td>1.94b</td>
<td>2.25ac</td>
<td>2.09bc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task and performance-approach analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handicapping2</td>
<td>N = 115</td>
<td>N = 122</td>
<td>N = 126</td>
<td>N = 121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.13a</td>
<td>1.75b</td>
<td>2.48c</td>
<td>2.31c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The reported means were adjusted for the covariates (math grade and performance-avoid goals for analysis 1, math grade and performance-avoid goals for analysis 2). Different superscripts indicate means which differed at the p < .05 level.

1 F(3, 483) = 4.07, p < .01 controlling for math grade, gender, ethnicity, and performance-avoid goals. No significant interactions.

2 F(3, 483) = 11.82, p < .001 controlling for math grade, gender, ethnicity, and performance-approach goals. No significant interactions.
SELF-HANDICAPPING

When students purposefully put off studying until the last minute, fool around with their friends instead of doing school work, and find other ways to point to circumstances rather than lack of ability in case subsequent performance should be lower than desired, they are putting themselves at risk academically. In our meetings with middle school teachers to describe the results of our studies, they seem particularly interested in what we have learned about students who engage in self-handicapping. Who are these students and what can teachers do to lessen the likelihood that they will engage in handicapping?

As was the case in earlier studies (Midgley et al., 1996; Midgley & Urdan, 1995; Urdan et al., 1998), students with lower grades in mathematics reported using these strategies more than did students with higher grades. It makes sense that it is lower achievers who take steps to provide an alternative explanation for possible poor performance. These students have not given up completely. That is, they still care enough about looking able to others that they devise strategies to protect their academic self-image. Unfortunately, self-handicapping in all likelihood will further undermine their academic performance, so that they may be headed for more profound academic disengagement and devaluing of academics.

The current study is the first to use both the avoidance and approach components of performance goals to examine self-handicapping. As predicted, performance-avoid goals emerged as a stronger predictor of the use of handicapping than did performance-approach goals. Just as performance-avoid goals positively predicted avoiding seeking help in the classroom when needed, and performance approach goals did not (Middleton & Midgley, 1997), in this study performance-avoid goals were significantly positively related to handicapping, whereas with both dimensions of performance goals in the equation, performance-approach goals had no significant relation to handicapping. Contrary to previous studies (e.g., Midgley & Urdan, 1995; Urdan et al., 1998), holding a task goal orientation was a weak but significant negative predictor of handicapping. In Midgley and Urdan (1995) there was a significant negative correlation between a task goal orientation and handicapping, but task goals did not emerge as a significant predictor of handicap-
ping when other variables were included in the regression. Including both
the approach and avoidance components of performance goals in the current
study may have resulted in a more accurate and sharp division of the variance
in handicapping, allowing for a more accurate view of the relation between
task goals and handicapping. Clearly there is a need to replicate this finding
regarding the negative relation between task goals and handicapping using
the two dimensions of performance goals.

This study provides important information about the predictors of avoid-
ance behaviors such as handicapping. Although somewhat neglected in the
research literature until recently, there is growing evidence that avoidance
beliefs and behaviors are associated with a range of negative outcomes
(Gheen & Midgley, 1999; Harackiewicz & Elliot, 1996; Middleton &
Midgley, 1997; Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley. 1998; Skaalvik, 1997). More re-
search is needed to examine the antecedents of these avoidance tendencies,
particularly in relation to processes in the home and in the classroom that
might contribute to or ameliorate the use of these strategies.

In an earlier study, we found that students’ reported use of handicapping
was higher in some classrooms than in others (Urdan et al., 1998). Both
students’ perceptions of an emphasis on performance goals in the classroom
and teachers’ reports of their use of performance-focused strategies in the
classroom predicted the use of handicapping. The question of whether
the emphasis on performance goals in the learning environment is related to
the use of handicapping independent of personal performance goals has not
been examined previously. In the current study, as hypothesized, we found
that students’ perceptions of an emphasis on performance goals in the class-
room predicted handicapping independent of the predictive power of per-
sonal performance goals. The message to teachers is clear. Regardless of
students’ personal goals, what teachers do in the classroom makes a differ-
ence. When well-meaning teachers display the work of the highest achieving
students as an example, point out to students how their performance com-
pares with others, and encourage students to compete with each other aca-
demically, they are providing a learning environment in which maintaining
self-worth is difficult for some students and the struggle to avoid looking
stupid may become paramount. It should be pointed out that perceptions of
a performance goal structure in the mathematics classroom predicted handi-
capping, controlling for students’ math grades. Regardless of math grade,
perceiving an emphasis on performance goals in the classroom was associ-
ated with the reported use of these debilitating strategies. Contrary to our
hypothesis, in this study we also found that a perceived task goal structure
negatively predicted handicapping. Thus it may be that teachers can reduce
the incidence of handicapping in the classroom by emphasizing learning,
understanding, and effort.

The findings from this study also provide some information regarding the
recent controversy about whether performance-approach goals are adaptive or at least not maladaptive (Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998, Urdan, 1997). In this study, it is performance-avoid goals that are clearly maladaptive. Although performance-approach goals were positively correlated with handicapping, in the regression which controlled for other variables, performance-approach goals were not significantly related to handicapping. A comparison of the results from the bivariate and multivariate analyses indicated that it was the shared variance with performance-avoid goals that resulted in the null relationship between performance-approach goals and handicapping. Clearly more research is needed that distinguishes between the approach and avoidance components of performance goals for a range of outcomes.

In our analysis comparing groups with multiple goal profiles we found that students high in their pursuit of task goals differed in their reported use of self-handicapping strategies according to their simultaneous pursuit of performance-avoid goals. Specifically, we found that high task/high performance-avoid students engaged in more handicapping than did high task/low performance-avoid students. When it comes to avoidance behaviors such as handicapping, the benefits of a task goal orientation appear to be outweighed by the negative effects of performance-avoid goals. This again documents the negative effects of performance-avoid goals, even when combined with high task goals. The recent finding by Middleton, Kaplan, and Midgley (1999) that performance-approach goals in 7th grade predicted performance-avoid goals in 8th grade for high-achieving students is particularly provocative given the increasing evidence that performance-avoid goals are maladaptive and even in combination with task goals. However, our results also indicated that when students were low in their performance-avoid goal orientation, there was some benefit in being highly task goal oriented.

We also found that when students were high in their task goal orientation, they did not differ in their reported use of handicapping depending on their level of performance-approach goal orientation. Similarly, students low in their pursuit of task goals did not differ in their reported handicapping according to the simultaneous level of their performance-approach goal orientation. Overall, these results reveal both the powerful relationship between performance-avoid goals and handicapping as well as the potential for task goals to reduce the tendency to self-handicap when performance-avoid goals are low. The need for future research examining the combined effects of multiple goals on avoidance behaviors is clear, particularly for other academic subjects.

REFERENCES


