

Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin

<http://psp.sagepub.com>

Self-Handicapping: The Moderating Roles of Public Self-Consciousness and Task Importance

James A. Shepperd and Robert M. Arkin

Pers Soc Psychol Bull 1989; 15; 252

DOI: 10.1177/0146167289152012

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://psp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/15/2/252>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc.

Additional services and information for *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://psp.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://psp.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations (this article cites 14 articles hosted on the SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):
<http://psp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/15/2/252#BIBL>

Self-Handicapping: The Moderating Roles of Public Self-Consciousness and Task Importance

James A. Shepperd
Holy Cross College

Robert M. Arkin
Ohio State University

A study was conducted to explore the role of individual differences in self-presentational concerns on a public form of self-handicapping. Male and female introductory psychology students, high and low in public self-consciousness, chose either facilitating or interfering music prior to taking a test described either as a valid predictor of academic success or as having unknown predictive ability. In addition, in an attempt to induce protective and acquisitive self-presentational styles, half the subjects were given instructions that emphasized the likelihood of failure, while the remainder were given instructions that underscored the likelihood of success. Males handicapped more than females. High public self-conscious individuals handicapped more than their low public self-conscious counterparts, but only when they confronted a test characterized as valid. The success- versus failure-oriented instructions had no effect in the present study.

The term *self-handicapping* refers to the acquisition of an impediment, or the staging of performance conditions, so that the handicap constitutes a persuasive impediment to successful performance and serves as a pre-emptive excuse for potential failure. Self-handicapping permits an individual, and relevant others, to attribute a forthcoming failure to a source other than lack of ability (Jones & Berglas, 1978). Consequently, the phenomenon has been characterized as a coping strategy (Baumgardner & Arkin, 1987), one designed to deflect the negative implications of spoiled self- or social esteem. Further, any success enjoyed in spite of the handicap, albeit unlikely after the handicap has been introduced, carries added benefit. When an individual succeeds in spite of disadvantages, he or she is seen as all the more able (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1971). Comprehensive reviews of the self-handicapping literature are now available (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985; Berglas, 1987).

AUTHORS' NOTE: A portion of this article was presented at the meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, May 1987, and also was awarded the Edwin B. Newman Award for Excellence in Graduate Research, American Psychological Association meetings, New York City, August 1987. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to James A. Shepperd, Department of Psychology, Holy Cross College, Worcester, Massachusetts 01610.

Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Vol. 15 No. 2, June 1989, 252-265
© 1989 by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc.

Although there are competing interpretations of self-handicapping (Berglas, 1987; Snyder & Smith, 1982), several studies point to self-presentation concerns as one motivational force underlying the phenomenon. For instance, a number of studies have shown that subjects are more inclined to handicap an upcoming performance if the handicap they choose is public and therefore available to others as an explanation for poor performance than when the handicap is private and thus known only to the performer. In these studies, self-handicapping seems designed to protect the subject's public image rather than his or her private, personal estimate of his or her abilities (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985).

In circumstances where self-handicapping is prompted by self-presentational concerns, it follows that individuals who are particularly sensitive to and concerned with their public image would be prime candidates for adopting self-handicapping as a coping strategy. One personality inventory, the public self-consciousness subscale of the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), was conceived to measure individual differences in concern with public appearance. Individuals scoring high on public self-consciousness subscale are described as highly concerned with how others view and interpret their behavior and as attending to those aspects of themselves that are open to the inspection and scrutiny of others.

In several studies, individuals scoring high on the public self-consciousness subscale seem to be more sensitive to the impressions others form of them than individuals who score low on the subscale. For instance, one study showed that, following rejection by a peer group, high but not low public self-conscious women liked the group less and chose not to affiliate with the group in the future (Fenigstein, 1979). A second study (Froming & Carver, 1981) found that high public self-conscious individuals conform more to group pressures than low public self-conscious individuals do. Several other studies support the idea that people high in public self-consciousness are more cognizant of how they appear to others and, further, are motivated to manage their public appearance more than individuals who score low in public self-consciousness (e.g., Miller & Cox, 1982; Solomon & Schopler, 1982; Tobey & Tunnell, 1981).

Given their concern with self-presentation, in circumstances where an individual's public image is made salient, high public self-conscious individuals should be expected to self-handicap an upcoming performance more than their low public self-conscious counterparts. In light of their sensitivity to the social context, however, individuals high in public self-consciousness would be expected to regulate their self-presentation on the basis of features of the social context. Previous research has demonstrated that the way a task is characterized (e.g., as important or ego-relevant versus inconsequential) can influence the tendency to self-handicap (DeGree & Snyder, 1985; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1983; Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer, 1984; Shepperd & Arkin, 1989; Snyder, Smith, Augelli, & Ingram, 1985; Smith, Snyder, & Handelsman, 1982; Smith, Snyder, & Perkins, 1983). Therefore, a task characterized as important, in that relevant others treat it as diagnostic of some valued characteristic such as

intelligence, should elicit more self-handicapping among high public self-conscious individuals than a task characterized as inconsequential. In contrast, unimportant tasks (e.g., tasks that are not characterized as diagnostic of scholastic ability) would not be expected to elicit self-handicapping much at all. Thus, a self-presentation interpretation of self-handicapping would anticipate an interaction of public self-consciousness and task importance.

The present study was also designed to investigate the specific motivational concern underlying self-presentational self-handicapping. Arkin (1981) suggested two distinct motivational bases of self-presentation. The first, acquisitive self-presentation, is aimed at garnering social approval and, through it, other social and material rewards. By contrast, protective self-presentation is aimed at protecting one's existing public image and ensuring that a loss of face, or foolish appearance, is unlikely (Arkin, 1981). If self-handicapping stems from protective motives, any aspect of a task that leads individuals to focus on avoiding failure might enhance self-protective behavior and thus stimulate self-handicapping. However, subjects focused on success rather than failure, and therefore engaged in acquisitive rather than protective behavior, would not be expected to self-handicap and thereby interfere with their performance. Because of their sensitivity to their social milieu, high public self-conscious individuals might be especially likely to handicap when failure-oriented, yet strive toward successful performance when success-oriented.

In summary, it was predicted that individuals high in public self-consciousness would self-handicap more than individuals low in public self-consciousness but that the extent of their self-handicapping would depend on the way the task was characterized. That is, a task described as important should promote greater self-handicapping than a task characterized as irrelevant. It was also predicted that individuals would handicap an upcoming performance when led to focus on failure (where protective interests would predominate) than when led to focus on success (where acquisitive behavior would be pre-eminent).

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 40 male and 60 female introductory psychology students at the University of Missouri who were administered the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) at the beginning of the semester during a general mass testing session. On the basis of subjects' scores, they were categorized as high or low in public self-consciousness (via median split; $mdn = 20$). The mean public self-consciousness score for subjects classified in the high criterion group ($M = 23.48$) was significantly different from the mean public self-consciousness score of subjects classified in the low criterion group ($M = 15.63$), $t(97) = 12.30$, $p < .0001$, suggesting that the two groups represented different populations. Data from one female subject were excluded because of failure to follow instructions.

Procedure

Upon arriving for the experiment, subjects were greeted by a male or female experimenter and seated at a table on which a cassette recorder and a tray holding five cassettes had been placed. The cassettes were arrayed from right to left, beginning with one cassette marked with two red labels, one with one red label, followed by one with no label, one with one green label, and one with two green labels. In a paradigm similar to that used by Rhodewalt and Davison (1986), subjects were told that they were participating in an experiment investigating the effect of music on performance on an intellectual test. An elaborate cover story noted the use of "mood music" in supermarkets, elevators, and car dealerships and characterized the present study as consistent with a vast literature in marketing on the effects of such music on various domains of human behavior.

Subjects were told that, on the basis of pilot research, the music on the cassette marked with a red label was likely to inhibit performance on the upcoming test and the music on the cassette marked with a green label was likely to enhance performance. Further, it was explained that the cassette marked with two red labels inhibited performance more than the cassette marked with one red label and that the cassette marked with two green labels had been found to enhance performance more than the cassette marked with only one green label. The unmarked cassette was described as documented neither to enhance nor to obstruct test performance but to have been included in the selection set for comparison purposes (i.e., to provide a control against which the remaining tapes could be compared). In reality, the same music (Strauss & Bernstein, 1962) had been recorded on all cassettes.

After subjects signed a consent form, half were told that the test they were taking was a reliable and valid predictor of college and career success (high task importance), whereas half were told that the test was a new test that had yet to be validated or shown useful for any predictive purposes (low task importance). This information was embedded in a brief description of the particulars of the test and an elaborate description of the purposes of the study. Fully crossed with the task-importance induction, half the subjects were told that they would be penalized for guessing (failure orientation). More specifically, these subjects were told that 1 point would be given for correct responses, no points would be given for omitted items, and 1/3 point would be subtracted for each incorrect response. The remaining subjects were merely told that there was no penalty for guessing (success orientation; see Berglas & Jones, 1978).

All subjects were given an opportunity to solve three sample items modeled on items from the Diagnostic Spatial Relations Aptitude Test (DSRAT; Bennett, Seashore, & Weeman, 1972). Pretesting revealed that on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *very easy* to 9 = *very difficult*, subjects ($N = 22$) rated one of the sample items as easy ($M = 1.45$) and two of the sample items as moderately difficult ($M_s = 6.50$ and 5.27). More important, when asked to rate

how certain they were that they would perform well on a test composed of such items (where 1 = *not at all certain* and 9 = *very certain*), pretest subjects indicated that they were uncertain of their ability to perform well ($M = 4.18$). For experimental subjects the correct answers to the sample items were displayed in the lower right corner of the sheet for subjects to inspect after attempting the sample items. The actual test administered to subjects was composed of 20 fairly difficult items fashioned after the DSRAT. Subjects were led to believe that the experimenter would score the DSRAT immediately after it was completed.

Subjects were told that they would be given 10 min to complete the DSRAT and then were instructed to select a cassette while the experimenter observed their choice. When subjects had selected a cassette, the experimenter placed the cassette in the recorder, briefly repeated the instructions, gave subjects a test booklet and a computer answer sheet on which to place answers, and then left the room. These procedures are the same as procedures in the "public setting" conditions of several experiments in which the public versus private nature of the experimental setting was manipulated successfully (e.g., Arkin & Shepperd, 1988; Baumgardner, Lake, & Arkin, 1985; Kolditz & Arkin, 1982). The public nature of the experimental setting was intentionally made salient to provide a context in which self-presentational concerns would be high. After 10 min the experimenter returned and collected the test and answer sheet. After completing a postexperimental questionnaire, consisting entirely of manipulation check items, subjects were debriefed thoroughly.

Postexperiment Questionnaire

Two dichotomous manipulation check items assessed whether subjects understood the meaning of the red and green labels on the cassettes. The remaining items were 5-point Likert-type items anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*. Eight items asked subjects to imagine succeeding or failing on the DSRAT task. Four of these items assessed the extent to which subjects would attribute their performance separately to luck, effort, task ease, and ability should they perform well; four additional items assessed the extent to which subjects would attribute their performance on the DSRAT separately to luck, effort, task difficulty, and lack of ability should they perform poorly. Of the final three items, one measured the importance subjects placed on their performance on the DSRAT, one measured the extent to which subjects perceived the test as a valid predictor of college and career success, and one assessed the extent to which subjects believed that performing well on the DSRAT corresponded to doing well in school.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

All subjects correctly identified the music marked with green labels as likely to facilitate performance and music marked with red labels as likely to debilitate performance.

Subjects receiving success-oriented instructions ($M = 19.43$) supplied more answers than subjects receiving failure-oriented instructions ($M = 17.58$), $F(1, 91) = 14.29, p < .0003$. This “response withholding” effect replicates earlier research (Geen, 1985a, 1985b). However, the manipulation of success orientation versus failure orientation had no effect on music choice, the main dependent measure. Consequently, this variable was omitted from subsequent analyses.

In addition, the initial analyses included sex of experimenter (three males and two females) as an independent variable. However, like success/failure orientation, the sex of the experimenter had no effect on subjects’ music choice. Consequently, the sex-of-experimenter variable was also omitted from subsequent analyses. All analyses reported below were conducted using a 2 (high vs. low public self-consciousness) \times 2 (male vs. female) \times 2 (high vs. low task importance) analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Subjects were more likely to rate the DSRAT a valid predictor of success if they were in the high ($M = 2.66$) than if they were in the low ($M = 1.84$) task importance condition, $F(1, 81) = 9.60, p < .003$. Likewise, subjects receiving high ($M = 2.93$) rather than low ($M = 2.20$) task importance instructions were more likely to believe that performing well on the DSRAT was related to doing well in school, $F(1, 81) = 7.17, p < .009$. Interestingly, no effects emerged regarding the item assessing the importance of doing well on the test. Overall, subjects’ response withholding (success/failure orientation) and ratings of the test (task importance) suggest that both experimental inductions were successful.

Music Choice

For the purpose of analysis, a cassette with two green dots was given a weight of 1, a cassette with one green dot 2, the neutral tape 3, the cassette with one red dot 4, and the cassette with two red dots 5. Thus, subjects could receive a music choice ranging from 1 to 5, higher scores reflecting greater self-handicapping and a music choice of 3 representing the neutral point. Analysis of variance revealed a main effect for sex, $F(1, 91) = 4.71, p < .033$. Consistent with previous research on active, acquired forms (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985) of self-handicapping (Arkin & Shepperd, 1988; Jones & Berglas, 1978; Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986), males were more likely to handicap their upcoming performance, by choosing debilitating music ($M = 3.05$), than were females ($M = 2.41$).

In addition, the predicted interaction of task importance and public self-consciousness emerged, $F(1, 91) = 6.15, p < .020$. As can be seen in Table 1, individuals receiving high-task-importance instructions were more likely to handicap their performance, but only if they were high in public self-consciousness. No other significant main effects or interactions for music choice emerged on the analysis of this main dependent measure.

In light of questions regarding the empirical and conceptual purity of the public self-consciousness subscale, music choice was analyzed further, using analysis of covariance techniques. The two other subscales of the Self-Consciousness Scale (social anxiety and private self-consciousness) were

TABLE 1 Means for Music Choice, by Level of Public Self-Consciousness and Task Importance

<i>Public Self-Consciousness</i>	<i>Task Importance</i>			
	<i>High</i>		<i>Low</i>	
Low	2.38 _a (25)	27%	2.81 _a (26)	42%
High	3.25 _b (24)	57%	2.33 _a (24)	34%

Note: Cell *n* in parentheses. Higher numbers reflect greater self-handicapping. A score of 3.0 represents the neutral point. Means that do not share a common subscript, within rows and columns, are reliably different by simple effects comparisons, $p < .05$. Percentages represent the proportion of subjects in each cell who chose debilitating music.

entered into an analysis of covariance model (ANCOVA) as covariates. The size of the effect for the interaction of public self-consciousness and task importance decreased only slightly and remained significant, $F(1, 91) = 4.33, p < .04$.

DSRAT Score

Analysis of the scores on the DSRAT revealed a significant main effect of sex, $F(1, 91) = 5.68, p < .019$. Males ($M = 13.75$) scored significantly higher on the DSRAT than females ($M = 12.03$).

Attributions

Concerning attributions for successful performances on the DSRAT, males ($M = 3.20$) were more likely than females ($M = 2.75$) to attribute a good performance to ability, $F(1, 91) = 4.49, p < .037$. Likewise, males ($M = 1.98$) indicated that they were more likely than females ($M = 1.58$) to attribute a poor performance on the DSRAT to lack of ability, $F(1, 91) = 5.82, p < 0.18$. Although males were clearly taking more responsibility for their performances than females were, regardless of the outcome, it is notable that males and females both engaged in the self-serving bias (see Weary & Arkin, 1981) by favoring ability attributions for success and avoiding lack-of-ability attributions for failure.

The significant main effect of sex for attributions of a poor performance to lack of ability was qualified by an interaction involving sex and task importance, $F(1, 91) = 5.19, p < .025$. A similar sex by task importance interaction also emerged for the question asking the degree to which a poor performance would be attributed to lack of effort, $F(1, 91) = 10.04, p < .002$. Means relevant to these parallel effects are displayed in Table 2. The pattern of these interactions would suggest that male subjects were inclined to deny personal responsibility for failure on tasks described as diagnostic of intellectual acumen. Female subjects, by contrast, were not. However, post hoc individual comparisons revealed that

TABLE 2 Mean for Attributions, by Sex and Task Importance

Measure	Task Importance			
	High		Low	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Lack of ability	1.71	1.68	2.26	1.48
Lack of effort	1.76	2.29	2.63	1.84

Note: Higher numbers reflect greater attributions to lack of ability or lack of effort. Post hoc individual comparisons (Behrens-Fisher procedure; Howell, 1982) revealed no significant effects for either measure.

these effects were not reliable and, therefore, should be viewed as tentative. No other significant main effects or interactions emerged for these or the remaining attribution questions.

DISCUSSION

In the present study individuals high in public self-consciousness chose to handicap their performance more than individuals low in public self-consciousness, but only when the task was characterized as potentially self-defining. That is, individuals high in public self-consciousness chose to listen to performance-debilitating music only when the task was presented as an acknowledged and valid indicator of academic and career success. This interaction of public self-consciousness and task importance suggests two boundary conditions to self-handicapping. First, whether a given individual engages in self-handicapping is determined in part by the nature of the task. The present finding suggests that tasks that are potential indicators of an individual's ability in an important domain are likely to elicit self-handicapping, whereas tasks that are not diagnostic of ability are unlikely to do so. A similar conclusion has been reached by researchers investigating *self-reported "claims"* of self-handicaps or excuses (e.g., DeGree & Snyder, 1985; Smith, Snyder, & Handelsman, 1982; Smith, Snyder, & Perkins, 1983; Snyder, Smith, Augelli, & Ingram, 1985). However, the present study adds to the mounting evidence (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1983; Shepperd & Arkin, 1989) demonstrating that the way a task is defined can influence the extent to which individuals behaviorally *acquire* impediments to performance (see Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985; Leary & Shepperd, 1986).

Second, the extent to which a given task elicits self-handicapping is moderated by individual differences in self-presentational concerns. That is, individuals who are dispositionally high in their self-presentational concerns can be expected to engage in self-handicapping more than individuals who are dispositionally low in their self-presentational concerns. By extension, the

mounting evidence for the self-presentational basis of self-handicapping (Arkin & Shepperd, 1988; Baumgardner, Lake, & Arkin, 1985; Kolditz & Arkin, 1982) would seem to lend support to the utility of the public self-consciousness subscale as a measure of self-presentational concerns. The individual differences uncovered here are consistent with the existing evidence concerning the self-presentational basis of self-handicapping.¹

It might be argued that, with a mean of 3.25 in the high-task-importance condition, the high public self-conscious individuals were opting for performance circumstances that were diagnostic of their ability rather than performance circumstances that were debilitating. It is important to note, however, that of all individuals participating in this study, only 7% chose neutral music (i.e., a score of 3 on a 5-point scale). The vast majority chose either facilitating or debilitating music. This argues against the contention that subjects were seeking diagnostic information by choosing a neutral performance setting in which to take the test (i.e., they chose performance-enhancing music). It was only the high public self-conscious subjects in the high-task-importance condition, those subjects predicted to self-handicap, who tended to prefer performance-debilitating music.

Because the normative response appears to be choosing facilitating performance conditions, designating 3.00 as the midpoint seems arbitrary. Moreover, a self-handicapping score that exceeds the scale midpoint only slightly is consistent with data from the original demonstration of self-handicapping (Berglas & Jones, 1978, p. 414, col. 7) and with data from other studies investigating self-handicapping (e.g., Shepperd & Arkin, 1989).

The Conceptual Purity of Public Self-Consciousness

A question may arise regarding the conceptual purity of public self-consciousness as a predictor of self-handicapping. Given that public self-consciousness is moderately correlated with self-esteem ($r = .26$), social anxiety ($r = .21$), and private self-consciousness ($r = .31$) (Turner, Scheier, Carver, & Ickes, 1978), it might be argued that the variance in self-handicapping explained by public self-consciousness in the present study is actually attributable to some related personality construct that has some relevance to self-handicapping. With regard to social anxiety and private self-consciousness, the analysis of covariance findings reported here militate against such a third-variable interpretation. With regard to self-esteem, to date four studies have investigated the relationship between self-esteem and self-handicapping. One study uncovered a positive relationship between self-esteem and self-handicapping (Tice & Baumeister, 1984), one found a negative relationship (Strube, 1986), and two studies found no relationship at all (Harris & Snyder, 1986; Shepperd, Miller, & Arkin, 1986). These contradictory findings suggest that the relationship between self-esteem and self-handicapping is inconsistent at best.

Sex Differences in Self-Handicapping

Consistent with previous research (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986), male subjects engaged in the active, acquired form of self-handicapping used in this experiment significantly more than females. Although there are innumerable explanations for the repeated finding of a sex difference in acquired forms of self-handicapping (see Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985), the present data provide some intriguing hints regarding why these differences occur. First, it might be that males self-handicapped more than females because they saw the task as more diagnostic of ability. However, the fact that males and females did not differ in their ratings of the predictive capacity of the test would seem to militate against such an interpretation. Males also did not differ from females in their rating of the importance of doing well on the test. Consequently, their greater tendency to handicap does not seem attributable to such an overall difference in how the task was perceived.

A second possibility is that the sex difference in self-handicapping reflects a difference in attributional styles. That is, males may be more inclined, in general or specifically with regard to the intellectual achievement task used here, to make ability attributions for their performance outcomes than females. This tendency to make ability attributions for performance outcomes might, in turn, lead males to handicap their performance on an upcoming task to protect themselves from the ability implications of a potential failure.

Results from the present study lend some support to this explanation. Males were more likely than females to make ability attributions for both success and failure. However, whether such an attributional pattern led males to self-handicap more than females is unclear. Caution in such an interpretation seems necessary in that subjects were required to make attributions for their performance only after indicating their music choice and after taking the test. It is possible that their attributions were influenced by their response to the main dependent measure (music choice) or even by their performance on the test. It is unknown at this time whether males would have made the same (internal) attributions prior to selecting music and taking the test.

Finally, Berglas and Jones have suggested that the sex differences in self-handicapping may reflect sex-typed tasks. That is, after seeing the example problems from the test, females may have concluded that the test favored male examinees. The female subjects, seeing themselves at a disadvantage because of their gender, may have then concluded that there was no need to handicap their performance by choosing debilitating music. In short, their sex qualified as a pre-existing handicap, and pre-existing handicaps have been found to preclude the necessity of self-handicapping (Shepperd & Arkin, 1989). Unfortunately, although males did perform significantly better on the task than females did, this study does not address this potential explanation directly. The fact that the interaction of task importance and self-consciousness held for men and women alike would seem to argue against such an interpretation, though. Female

subjects handicapped less than males, but they were still influenced by the independent variable induction in precisely the same way as males were.

Self-Presentation Styles

An important prediction, one that received no support, concerns the issues of protective versus acquisitive self-presentation. There was no difference in music choice between subjects given failure-oriented and subjects given success-oriented instructions. This failure to uncover differences would seem to suggest that self-handicapping is not characteristic of one self-presentational style over another. However, it is also possible that the failure to find the expected effect was due largely to a problem in the operationalization of the variable. The manipulation clearly had an effect in eliciting different approaches to taking the test (a cautious strategy for subjects told they would be penalized for guessing). However, a penalty for guessing may be restricted to test-taking strategies only.² Self-presentation styles may depend on factors that pertain to approval and disapproval rather than objective success and failure. A clearer means of testing the self-presentational styles idea in the self-handicapping domain seems desirable.

Nevertheless, in view of other evidence, the present study could be seen as shedding some light on the relationship between self-presentational styles and self-handicapping. There is mounting evidence that high public self-conscious individuals are more concerned with being negatively evaluated than with seeking approval and that they center their self-presentational skills and efforts on avoiding disapproval (Carver & Humphries, 1981; Fenigstein, 1979; Froming, Corley, & Rinker, 1987; Froming, Goldthorpe, & Brown, 1987; LaDue, 1981). These studies suggest that high public self-conscious individuals are not necessarily motivated to present themselves positively but, rather, are most clearly motivated to avoid presenting themselves negatively. To the extent these findings prove reliable, it would follow that people high in public self-consciousness would tend to favor protective self-presentation over acquisitive self-presentation. If so, the present findings could be taken as indirect evidence that self-handicapping reflects a protective self-presentational style. Further evidence on this point is clearly desirable.

To summarize, by revealing a relationship among public self-consciousness, task importance, and self-handicapping, the present study provides further evidence that self-handicapping can be motivated by self-presentational concerns. Moreover, the present study adds to the accumulating evidence that males are more likely to self-handicap in active, acquired forms than females and offers some hints about why this is so. Unfortunately, the present effort to investigate the precise motivational determinants of self-handicapping—acquisitive versus protective—was inconclusive. More evidence on this issue is needed.

NOTES

¹It might be argued that the high-task-importance instructions threatened self-esteem rather than subjects' public image. However, given that only highly public self-conscious

individuals chose to handicap under these conditions, it seems both more parsimonious and more straightforward to assume that the task importance manipulation evoked self-presentational concerns. In short, the nature of the present task and context in which the public quality of subjects' behavior was emphasized, coupled with the fact that individuals most concerned with their public image were most inclined to self-handicap, suggests that self-presentation rather than self-esteem concerns elicited self-handicapping in the present study.

²The finding that subjects led to focus on failure supplied fewer responses on the test than subjects led to focus on success is intriguing in its own right. This finding is consistent with the literature showing that test-anxious individuals engage in response withholding when in testing situations, often performing more poorly than their non-test-anxious peers, solely because they attempt fewer problems (Geen, 1985a, 1985b). Other research has demonstrated that response withholding can be induced by criticism for failure, while risk taking is produced by praise for success (Canavan-Gumpert, 1977). The present study complements these findings by showing that response withholding can also be induced by very simple task instructions.

REFERENCES

- Arkin, R. M. (1981). Self-presentational styles. In J. T. Tedeschi (Ed.), *Impression management theory and social psychological research* (pp. 311-333). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.
- Arkin, R. M., & Baumgardner, A. H. (1985). Self-handicapping. In J. H. Harvey & G. W. Weary (Eds.), *Attribution: Basic issues and applications* (pp. 169-202). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.
- Arkin, R. M., & Shepperd, J. A. (1988). *The role of social anxiety in self-presentational self-handicapping*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Missouri, Columbia.
- Baumgardner, A. H., & Arkin, R. M. (1987). Coping with the prospect of disapproval: Strategies and sequelae. In C. R. Snyder & C. E. Ford (Eds.), *Coping with negative life events* (pp. 323-346). New York: Plenum Press.
- Baumgardner, A. H., Lake, E. A., & Arkin, R. M. (1985). Claiming mood as a self-handicap: The influence of spoiled and unspoiled public identities. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *11*, 349-357.
- Bennett, G. R., Seashore, H. G., & Weeman, A. G. (1972). *Differential aptitude tests*. New York: Psychological Corporation.
- Berglas, S. (1987). Self-handicapping model. In H. T. Blane & K. E. Leonard (Eds.), *Psychological theories of drinking and alcoholism* (pp. 305-345). New York: Guilford Press.
- Berglas, S., & Jones, E. E. (1978). Drug choice as a self-handicapping strategy in response to noncontingent success. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *36*, 405-417.
- Canavan-Gumpert, D. (1977). Generating reward and cost orientation through praise and criticism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *35*, 501-513.
- Carver, C. S., & Humphries, C. (1981). Havana daydreaming: A study of self-consciousness and the negative reference group among Cuban-Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *40*, 545-552.
- DeGree, C. E., & Snyder, C. R. (1985). Adler's psychology (of use) today: Personal history of traumatic life events as a self-handicapping strategy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *48*, 1512-1519.

- Fenigstein, A. (1979). Self-consciousness, self-attention, and social interaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 75-86.
- Fenigstein, A., Scheier, M. F., & Buss, A. H. (1975). Public and private self-consciousness: Assessment and theory. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 43, 522-527.
- Froming, W. J., & Carver, C. S. (1981). Divergent influences of private and public self-consciousness in a compliance paradigm. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 15, 159-171.
- Froming, W. J., Corley, E. B., & Rinker, L. (1987). *Public self-consciousness, audience composition and social withdrawal*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Florida, Gainesville.
- Froming, W. J., Goldthorpe, P. B., & Brown, S. (1987) *Public self-consciousness, expectancies and impression management*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Florida, Gainesville.
- Geen, R. G. (1985a). Evaluation apprehension and response withholding in solution of anagrams. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 6, 293-298.
- Geen, R. G. (1985b). Test anxiety and visual vigilance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 49, 963-970.
- Harris, R. N., & Snyder, C. R. (1986). The role of uncertain self-esteem in self-handicapping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 451-458.
- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Howell, D. C. (1982). *Statistical methods for psychology*. Boston: Duxbury Press.
- Jones, E. E., & Berglas, S. (1978). Control of attributions about the self through self-handicapping strategies: The appeal of alcohol and the role of underachievement. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 4, 200-206.
- Kelley, H. H. (1971). Attribution in social interaction. In E. E. Jones, D. E. Kanouse, H. H. Kelley, R. E. Nisbett, S. Valines, & B. Weiner (Eds.), *Attribution: Perceiving the causes of behavior*. Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press.
- Kolditz, T. A., & Arkin, R. M. (1982). An impression management interpretation of the self-handicapping strategy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43, 492-502.
- LaDue, T. (1981). *A multitrait, multimethod matrix analysis of the Self-Consciousness Scale*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Florida.
- Leary, M. R., & Shepperd, J. A. (1986). Behavioral self-handicaps versus self-reported handicaps: A conceptual note. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 1265-1268.
- Miller, L. C., & Cox, C. L. (1982). For appearances' sake: Public self-consciousness and makeup use. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 8, 748-751.
- Pyszczynski, T., & Greenberg, J. (1983). Determinants of reduction in intended effort as a strategy for coping with anticipated failure. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 17, 412-422.
- Rhodewalt, F., & Davison, J. (1986). Self-handicapping and subsequent performance: Role of outcome valence and attributional certainty. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 7, 307-322.
- Rhodewalt, F., Saltzman, A. T., & Wittmer, J. (1984). Self-handicapping among competitive athletes: The role of practice in self-esteem protection. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 5, 197-210.
- Shepperd, J. A., & Arkin, R. M. (1989). Determinants of self-handicapping: Task importance and the effects of preexisting handicaps on self-generated handicaps. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 15, 101-112.

- Shepperd, J. A., Miller, P. J., & Arkin, R. M. (1986). *Self-handicapping and self-consciousness*. Paper presented at the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago.
- Smith, T. W., Snyder, C. R., & Handelsman, M. M. (1982). On the self-serving function of an academic wooden leg: Test anxiety as a self-handicapping strategy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 42*, 314-321.
- Smith, T. W., Snyder, C. R., & Perkins, S. C. (1983). The self-serving function of hypochondriacal complaints: Physical symptoms as self-handicapping strategies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 44*, 787-797.
- Snyder, C. R., & Smith, T. W. (1982). Symptoms as self-handicapping strategies: The virtues of old wine in a new bottle. In G. Weary & H. Mirels (Eds.), *Integrations of clinical and social psychology* (pp. 104-127). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Snyder, C. R., Smith, T. W., Augelli, R. W., & Ingram, R. E. (1985). On the self-serving function of social anxiety: Shyness as a self-handicapping strategy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 48*, 970-980.
- Solomon, M. R., & Schopler, J. (1982). Self-consciousness and clothing. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 8*, 508-514.
- Strauss, R. (Composer), & Bernstein, L. (Conductor). (1962). *Festival Prelude for Organ & Orchestra, Op. 61* (Performed by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra) [Recording]. New York: Columbia Records.
- Strube, M. J. (1986). An analysis of the self-handicapping scale. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 7*, 211-224.
- Tice, D. M., & Baumeister, R. F. (1984). *Self-handicapping, self-esteem and self-presentation*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago.
- Tobey, E. L., & Tunnell, G. (1981). Predicting our impressions on others: Effects of public self-consciousness and acting, a self-monitoring subscale. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 7*, 661-669.
- Turner, R. G., Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Ickes, W. (1978). Correlates of self-consciousness. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 42*, 285-289.
- Weary, G., & Arkin, R. M. (1981). Attributional self-presentation. In J. H. Harvey, W. Ickes, & R. F. Kidd (Eds.), *New directions in attribution research* (Vol. 2, pp. 223-246). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

James A. Shepperd is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Holy Cross College. His research interests include self-protection strategies and attribution processes.

Robert M. Arkin was Professor and Area Director of the Social Psychology Program at the University of Missouri when this article was written. He is now Professor of Social Psychology at Ohio State University. His research interests include impression management, anxiety in interpersonal relations, and attribution processes.