

Self-Handicapping, Defensive Pessimism, and Goal Orientation: A Qualitative Study of University Students

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Interviews with 1st-year university students selected as high or low in either self-handicapping or defensive pessimism identified (a) personal perspectives on the nature of self-handicapping and defensive pessimism, (b) the perceived reasons why they engage in these strategies and the perceived advantages that follow from them, and (c) the extent to which ego goals and task goals mark their approach to their studies. The data confirm previous quantitative research and also provide important qualitative information on the congruencies and differences in goal orientation for self-handicappers and defensive pessimists, the social and academic costs of self-protective behavior, the control students feel they have over their self-protective behavior, and the roles of the family and students' culture in their tendency to self-protect.

For some students, protecting self-worth is of paramount importance. In the academic context, students' self-worth is most threatened when they fail to perform successfully at a given task and there is the risk that they may be seen to have low ability. According to the self-worth theory of motivation, ability is closely tied to self-worth and so when there is doubt as to individuals' ability, there is doubt as to their self-worth (Covington, 1984, 1992). A priority of some students, therefore, is to protect their sense of ability and to try to influence others' evaluations of their ability. The present study examines self-handicapping and defensive pessimism as two ways students are able to do this. Given that the present analysis of self-handicapping and defensive pessimism is located in an educational context, we consider it important to also investigate motivational constructs that may be closely related to them and that are relevant to students' academic experiences. One such construct, goal orientation, is central to much educational research and is also explored in this study.

We hope to gain a number of insights through our analysis. First, we seek to explore more fully the specific ways students engage in self-handicapping and defensive pessimism. Secondly, we aim to uncover students' views on the advantages that they see as emanating from their self-handicapping and defensive pessimism. Thirdly, we examine what goal orientations underpin self-handicappers' and defensive pessimists' educational approaches. Much research is now positing goal orientation as central to students' approaches to their studies, and locating self-handicapping and defensive pessimism in this context brings these strategies into line with central educational theory. Finally, quan-

titative perspectives on psychological phenomena can limit (through predesigned surveys or experimental manipulation) the extent to which new insights and information can emerge from students, and so this study is an opportunity to transport quantitative constructs into a qualitative methodology and allow new insights and directions to emerge.

A Qualitative Perspective in a Quantitative Domain

There has, in recent years, been growing recognition that quantitative and qualitative research methods can complement each other in a way that both consolidates findings and sheds light on issues that could only be researched by one and not the other. Numerous commentators over the past 3 decades have noted the benefits to be derived from both approaches to research (Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Campbell, 1975; Cook & Campbell, 1979; Cronbach, 1975; Firestone, 1987; Gage, 1989; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Patton, 1990). In terms of self-handicapping and defensive pessimism, the research to date has adopted a quantitative perspective. It is considered that a qualitative analysis of these issues is not only timely but can add important personal insights into the lived experience of self-handicappers and defensive pessimists, which experimental manipulations or psychometric scales would have difficulty accessing. Moreover, self-handicapping and defensive pessimism are strategies that may be manifested in a variety of ways for a variety of subtle or not so subtle reasons. It is not until individual respondents are interviewed that the richness of this information can be used to better understand the constructs and their relationships in the substantive area.

For the most part, self-handicapping and defensive pessimism have been assessed among university students using experimental manipulation or through self-report questionnaires. Data derived from studies using either of these methodologies provide insights into causal relationships between constructs or provide correlational information about associated constructs. As a result of this research, we know much about their correlates or the experimental conditions under which they can be evoked. What we do not know much about are the finer-grained features of self-protection em-

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bedded within them. Our qualitative study provides an opportunity to find such information. In relation to goal orientation, the quantitative data are not able to provide the personal detail about the ways self-handicappers and defensive pessimists differ in their orientation to their studies and the important ways in which these students converge.

Self-Handicapping and Defensive Pessimism

Self-handicapping involves the choice of an impediment or obstacle to successful performance that enables individuals to deflect the cause of poor performance away from their competence and on to the acquired impediment. In doing so, self-handicappers avoid disconfirmation of a desired self-conception (Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986). Examples of self-handicapping include the strategic reduction of effort, procrastination, ingestion of drugs or alcohol, or the choice of performance-debilitating circumstances (see Berglas & Jones, 1978; Higgins & Harris, 1988; Martin, Marsh, & Debus, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986; Shepperd & Arkin, 1989; Tice & Baumeister, 1990). In the event of failure, individuals have a ready excuse for it: For example, the lack of effort is seen as the cause and not their lack of ability. Self-handicapping is to be distinguished from attributions in that it occurs prior to rather than after an event. It should also be noted that not all procrastination (and the like) is self-handicapping and that an anticipatory self-protective (or enhancing) motive is needed for it to be considered self-handicapping.

Defensive pessimists are students who set unrealistically low expectations prior to tasks that undergo some form of assessment. There are a number of advantages associated with the defensive pessimistic strategy. First, individuals are able to work through potential failure and steel themselves for this outcome. According to Norem and Illingworth (1993; see also Norem & Cantor, 1986, 1990; Martin et al., 2001a, 2001b, 2003), defensive pessimists acknowledge apprehensions and work through them cognitively. A defensive pessimistic strategy can also “cushion” the individual “against debilitating anxiety prior to stress-provoking tasks and motivate continued persistence in the face of that stress” (Cantor & Norem, 1989, p. 93). In fact, projecting lowered expectations can serve to set performance standards that are less difficult to achieve (Martin et al., 2001a, 2001b; Showers & Ruben, 1990) and may even lower the threshold for satisfactory performance (Baumgardner & Brownlee, 1987; Martin et al., 2001a, 2001b).

As noted earlier, much quantitative research exists in relation to self-handicapping and defensive pessimism derived from correlational studies utilizing psychometric scales or from experimental manipulations. A need exists for more focused in-depth perspectives on self-handicapping and defensive pessimism, particularly from individuals high and low on these traits. This is considered important not only because such data can shed further light on the quantitative research findings but also because they can provide new perspectives on the concepts and how they function in relation to educationally relevant constructs such as goal orientation. Indeed if, as may be the case, self-handicapping and defensive pessimism are ultimately not adaptive in the educational context, students’ own views of these strategies and reasons for their occurrence must be taken into account if educators are to successfully help students work through these strategies.

Goal Orientation, Self-Handicapping, and Defensive Pessimism

A good deal of motivational and educational research has identified goal orientation as a pivotal construct influencing the way students go about their studies. Goal orientation is comprised, inter alia, of ego orientation and task orientation (Duda & Nicholls, 1992; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Martin & Debus, 1998; Nicholls, 1989). Consistent with previous work, we propose that individuals’ goal orientation plays a role in the degree to which they are motivated to protect their self-worth. Ego-oriented individuals tend to be competitive, feel most successful outperforming others (Duda & Nicholls, 1992; Thorkildsen & Nicholls, 1998), and see outcomes as due primarily to ability rather than effort (Martin et al., 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Middleton & Midgley, 1997; Nicholls, Patashnick, & Nolen, 1985). From a self-protection perspective, ego-oriented students are particularly vulnerable in achievement scenarios in which there is the possibility of failure (Covington, 1992).

Task-oriented individuals, on the other hand, are more concerned with the task itself than with outperforming others and see success as due primarily to effort rather than ability. From a self-protection perspective, failure seen to be due to insufficient effort is not so threatening because the individual usually believes he or she has control to avoid it next time by simply investing greater effort (Covington, 1992). Hence, the quantitative data suggest that self-handicappers and defensive pessimists are more inclined to have a history of concern about their ability relative to others and feel most successful when they outperform others. The data also suggest that individuals low in the tendency to self-handicap or be defensively pessimistic are more likely to have a history of mastery and task orientation. We seek to explore the extent to which this trend emerges through students’ stories, and then we explore the specific ways students’ goal orientations play out in their lives and the personal contexts in which they operate.

Method

Participants

A questionnaire assessing self-handicapping and defensive pessimism (see Martin, 1998) was administered to 584 first-year Education students enrolled in three universities in metropolitan Sydney (Australia). Included in the questionnaire was an invitation for students to record their names and phone numbers if they were willing to be interviewed at a later time. In total, 134 students volunteered this information. There was no significant difference in self-handicapping between these students and the larger sample, $t(575) = 1.26$, *ns*, nor were there any differences in defensive pessimism, $t(581) = 0.30$, *ns*. A list of these students was generated on which they were sorted in ascending order on the basis of their responses to the self-handicapping scale (e.g., “I often fool around the night before a test or exam so I have an excuse if I don’t do as well as I hoped”) and the defensive pessimism scale (e.g., “No matter how well I have done in the past, I go into academic situations expecting to do worse”) in the questionnaire (adapted from Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996; Norem & Cantor, 1986; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994; Strube, 1986).

High self-handicappers (HISHs) in the eligibility list, for example, were the students who volunteered their contact name and phone number and who were the highest ranked of these volunteers on the self-handicapping score. Further sorting was done by gender, age, and institution. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling such that the sample was intended to match approximately age, gender, and institutional composition

of the larger sample as well as ensuring that those sampled represented the four target academic profiles (low and high self-handicapping and low and high defensive pessimism). The self-handicapping subscale used to select low self-handicappers (LOSH) and HISHs was reliable for students in the qualitative study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$) and for the larger sample from which the qualitative sample was drawn (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$). This was also the case for the defensive pessimism subscale in terms of the subsample examined in this study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .98$) and the larger sample from which the subsample was drawn (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Twenty-four students were selected and agreed to a follow-up interview. The mean age of respondents was 21 years 10 months. Six respondents were male and 18 were female. Eight respondents were drawn from each of the three institutions in such a way that 2 were HISHs, 2 were LOSHs, 2 were high defensive pessimists (HIDPs), and 2 were low defensive pessimists (LODPs). Sample composition appears in Table 1. In aggregate, there was no significant difference between those interviewed and the larger sample in terms of self-handicapping, $t(575) = 0.47, ns$, and defensive pessimism, $t(581) = 0.95, ns$. In terms of self-handicapping and defensive pessimism, then, the interview sample was not markedly different from the larger sample of 584 students.

Procedure

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix A). Students were informed that their honest and frank opinions were what the researchers were interested in and at no stage were any of their responses reacted to with anything other than acceptance. At no stage were the terms *self-handicapping* or *defensive pessimism* used by the interviewer in the interviews. Descriptions of the behavior rather than their labels were used. The interview began with some questions about what subjects respondents were studying, their thoughts about the course, and university life in general. When some rapport had been established through the introductory questions, the interviewer then began exploring some of the issues relevant to the study. The average duration of each interview was approximately 45 min. The interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were used for the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Formation of Categories

The manner in which the data are coded and categorized directly influences the way in which they are analyzed and interpreted, and so data categorization is one of the most important aspects of qualitative research. Categorization can dictate the way themes are generated, the way these themes are integrated in subsequent analyses, and ultimately the conclusions drawn from the study. One criticism of qualitative research is that researchers often do

not document how their categories are formed and so do not leave the important "audit trail" for the reader (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In suggesting ways by which the categorization process can be more transparent, Constat (1992) has proposed that researchers document their category development by outlining the components of categorization and the temporal aspects of category formation. He divides the components of categorization into various elements, three of which—origination, verification, and temporal designation—are relevant here.

Origination refers to where the responsibility or authority of categorization resides. In this study, authority of categorization lay in (a) the researchers' interests and theoretical viewpoints (e.g., the protective rather than enhancing dimensions of self-handicapping were explored as the researchers were pursuing a research program with self-protection as a central component), (b) the literature (e.g., conceptualizing in the research literature was the basis on which students' goal orientations were differentiated), and (c) participants' responses (e.g., students identified issues not anticipated by the researchers or central in the literature, issues such as family and cultural contexts relevant to self-handicapping). Also, subtleties in how questions were positioned were influenced by participants' reactions in the interview (e.g., questions about self-handicapping were often couched in the third person so that students did not feel threatened or uncomfortable when interviewed). *Verification* refers to the strategies used to justify the creation of categories. In this study, categorization was guided by (a) rational considerations in which categories have face validity and the appearance of logical connectedness (e.g., categorization directly reflected the core research questions revolving around advantages and disadvantages of self-handicapping and defensive pessimism and the precise ways in which these are played out in students' lives) and (b) referential considerations in which established research findings are used to justify the category generation (e.g., goal-orientation research addresses the issue of multiple goals, and so categorization was developed to account for this). *Temporal designation* refers to the timing of category development. In this study, many categories were determined a priori because they are largely based on the extant quantitative literature, which is quite prescriptive in terms of findings and relevant arguments and issues. Notwithstanding this, there was a good degree of iterative processing in that additional categories were formed in response to participants' reports, which, on the basis of the researchers' interpretation, went beyond the predetermined category structure (e.g., the "that's interesting" category was an outlet for such responses).

The broad categories into which the data were sorted are presented in Appendix B. Major divisions within this categorization are illustrated with extracts from the interviews. The structure of the categories very much reflects the structure of the interview. Where respondents provided information that went beyond the predetermined categories, their responses were assigned to a category labeled *that's interesting*. Examples of such data included details about respondents' family or cultural background as deemed relevant to the central issues, respondents' perceived control over their defensive maneuvering, aspects of their behavior that went beyond previous accounts in the literature, and unforeseen consequences of respondents' defensive maneuvering. Hence, in addition to the a priori determination of categories, there was ample scope provided for more inductive data analysis and thematic development.

Table 1
Participants

Strategy type	University 1	University 2	University 3
High self-handicapper (HISH)	Trudy ^a Christine ^a	Peter Carol ^a	Sophie Rachel
Low self-handicapper (LOSH)	Reg Gina	Sharon Lucy	Angela Tania
High defensive pessimist (HIDP)	Gwen Cassie	Marie ^b Robert ^b	Joe Dianne ^b
Low defensive pessimist (LODP)	Tony Amanda	Bernadette Tasha	Brendan Lynne

Note. Pseudonyms were used for the participants.

^a Students also high in defensive pessimism. ^b Students also high in self-handicapping.

Analytic Methods

Goetz and LeCompte (1981; see also LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) identified a number of qualitative analytic strategies including analytic induction, pure analytic induction (or constant comparison; see Glaser & Strauss, 1967), typological analyses, enumerative systems, and standardized observational protocols. The former strategies are aligned to more grounded and naturalistic theoretical approaches, whereas the latter are more typical of conventional analytic approaches (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because this study explores the ground lying between traditionally quantitative approaches and qualitative perspectives, an intermediate approach was selected as the analytic method of choice. On the Goetz-LeCompte continuum, this method is the typological analytic approach (see also Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Here the researcher draws on theory to develop questions, categories, and assignment of data. Following this approach, we drew on theory seminal to self-worth motivation (Covington, 1992), self-handicapping (Berglas & Jones, 1978), defensive pessimism (Norem & Cantor, 1986), and goal orientation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1989). The typological approach is primarily based on what Goetz and LeCompte refer to as a *deductive-verify-objective process* of data analysis typically drawing on previous research and theorizing but which also enables inductive-generative-subjective processing so that additional or qualifying themes can emerge (consistent with the categorization methods described previously).

In terms of interpretation and conclusions drawn from the data, it is important to recognize that because this is not a quantitative study, some level of subjectivity was required. In the context of qualitative research, summary statements such as “more likely,” “less likely,” “most,” “least,” and “less” are not quantitatively derived nor statistically testable with confidence. Rather, they tend to reflect trends, nuances, and profiles. For example, the fact that all self-handicappers do not share ego goals in a similar way or to a similar extent does not necessarily mean that ego goals are not relevant to this type of student. Indeed, this is consistent with the fact that self-handicapping and performance goals do not share 100% variance (see Martin et al., 2001b) and that students holding ego goals can respond to these goals in different ways (see Dweck & Leggett, 1988). It should also be recognized that task and ego goals are typically not mutually exclusive (Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; Martin & Debus, 1998), and a growing body of research shows that these goal orientations are sometimes positively correlated (e.g., Marsh, Craven, Hinkley, & Debus, in press). Hence, some students can endorse both task and ego goals. Indeed, related to the research issues under focus here, it is of interest whether defensive pessimists are more likely than self-handicappers to reflect this complementary mix.

Data were analyzed using the NUDIST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching, and Theorising) software program (Richards, Richards, McGalliard, & Sharrock, 1993). NUDIST is designed to integrate a number of documents (in this case, interview transcripts) for analysis including index components of text (in this case, interview responses), search for text, search indexing, and reorganize indexing systematically in a manner that can both harness and generate theory. NUDIST assists in organizing coded data into nodes and node patterns that essentially constitute the fabric of data analysis and theorizing findings.

Results

Self-Handicapping

How students self-handicap. The self-handicapping behavior reported by respondents selected as high in self-handicapping illustrated the extremity and diversity of ways in which it occurs in their day-to-day lives. When asked how he went about assignments and study for exams, Peter¹ (an HISH) indicated that his self-handicapping behavior seemed to be beyond his control:

It's just like if I have an assignment due, say it's due on Monday and it's the weekend, I seem to just want to watch TV or go out. It's just something that happens. You know you've got to do something but you get off track and go somewhere.

Sophie (an HISH) actually had a special term for her self-handicapping. When asked whether she engaged in such behavior she replied: “Pointless time wasting? Yeah. I'll say, ‘I've got study to do, well I really need to clean my wardrobe.’ Yeah, I relate to that. I'm the queen of pointless time wasting.” Sophie reported that when exams or assignments were approaching she would engage in such diverse activities as cleaning her wardrobe, tidying under her bed, cleaning the fish tank, and cleaning the garage. Sophie would even visit her out-of-town grandmother who, curiously, only received visits when Sophie's exams were looming.

Carol (an HISH) would be inclined to watch television and leave her study until very late in the night. Christine (an HISH) was much the same, reporting that she had been having difficulty adjusting to academic demands and finds herself becoming occupied with other things, leaving study to the very last minute. Moreover, despite the fact that she would promise herself not to do this in the future, each time an exam or assignment approached, she seemed to do the same, “no matter how hard I try.” Rachel (an HISH) said that when an exam approached she would engage in activities like alphabetizing her books and videos.

When it was put to LOSHs that some students seem to place obstacles in the way of success, they, for the most part, did not identify with such behavior. Tania (an LOSH) was well aware of the potential distractions surrounding her while studying at home (she mentioned distractions as wide ranging as the television and food in the refrigerator) and so that these would not interfere with her study, she went to the library. Reg (an LOSH) said that he could not go out to nightclubs and parties and expect to stay focused on his studies, so he stayed at home. Gina (an LOSH) reported that she was so inclined to get on top of her assignments and study that she had no social life. She said that she declined invitations to go out in case it interfered with her study.

Why students self-handicap. A range of reasons was given by the HISHs as to why they engaged in such behavior. For example, Rachel (an HISH) reported that if she sat down and spent too much time studying she would get “stressed out and lose the plot.” She said that procrastination was not so much used as an excuse as it was to avoid becoming stressed. Interestingly, however, she later reported that if she did fail, she usually identified something that interfered with her success such as “going and getting drunk every night.” It seems, then, that while she explicitly denies using her behavior as an excuse, when failure does occur, she invokes her

¹ Pseudonyms were used for the participants.

self-handicapping behavior for this purpose. Carol (an HISH) also felt somewhat uncomfortable with the notion that her behavior could be used as an excuse. Instead, she suggested that her behavior was used as an “explanation” for poor performance.

Christine (an HISH), however, was in little doubt that her behavior was used as an excuse if she did not do so well. She said that it was always important to have an “alibi” in the form of an excuse. When Trudy (an HISH) was asked why she self-handicapped, she also identified the importance of an excuse:

If I leave it [study] to the last minute, then I've got an excuse if I didn't do well. Any excuse is better than 'You're just not smart enough to do it.' I know that I should be putting effort in all the time, but then I've got the excuse if I don't go well.

Sophie (an HISH) said that she engaged in self-handicapping behavior because by not trying “then the whole thing's not an issue,” implying that a lack of effort may rob the event of its importance—with the importance of the event at a minimum, the threat of failure is not so acute. In fact, when asked at the end of the interview if she would like to add anything, she returned to her study style, again arguing that her self-handicapping was suited to her and that she was better off engaging in that kind of behavior because her performance was better served by last-minute study and “cramming.”

Although several HISHs (Carol, Rachel, and Peter) reported that there were no real advantages to their self-handicapping, other comments by them suggested otherwise. For example, Peter went on to identify the fact that it was a comfort to him when he did not do so well knowing that there was an excuse. Christine (an HISH) returned to the issue of self-handicapping when asked at the end of the interview if she had anything to add. In contrast to her earlier thoughts, her comments reflected self-handicapping:

Interviewer: What if you don't do so well?

Christine: Then you've got an excuse. . . . It's just easier to cope with if you think you haven't put as much work into it.

Interviewer: What's easier to cope with?

Christine: From feeling like a failure because you're not good at it. It's easier to say, 'I failed because I didn't put enough work into it' than 'I failed because I'm not good at it.'

When the LOSHs were asked why some students might self-handicap, they, for the most part, did not seem aware of the protective possibilities that self-handicapping presented. Angela (an LOSH) reported that now that they were all out of school with no one to push them, some students were enjoying their new-found freedom and this is why they behaved in ways that seemed to limit their success. Reg (an LOSH) also reported that he did not really know why but suggested that possibly those students wanted to have a break from study and then tackle the assignment or exam fresh.

Defensive Pessimism

How students are defensively pessimistic. All of the students selected as being HIDPs reported that no matter how well they had performed in previous exams and assignments, they expected to perform more poorly in the future. For example, despite the fact

that she had never failed anything, Dianne (an HIDP) reported that she always had the feeling she was going to fail. She reported that although a part of her thinks rationally about her likely performance, she finds that her academic life is a balancing act between how she *feels* she will do in upcoming exams and assignments and what she rationally *knows* will probably be the case.

Robert (an HIDP) cited an instance when a lecturer announced that a few students had not performed well in an assignment and he proceeded to spend the next day worrying that he was one of them (it turned out that he was not). He said thinking like this was like “walking a tightrope” between knowing that he has passed everything before but expecting that he will do more poorly in the future. Cassie (an HIDP) also reported that despite having done well in the past, she thought she would do worse in the next assignment or exam. She reported that each time she begins an assignment or studies for an exam, she “starts from scratch” in her expectations about how she will perform. She said that she would slowly build her confidence as she felt she was mastering the subject matter, but that no matter how confident she eventually feels about it, the next assessment task is met with unrealistic pessimism.

All students selected as being LODPs reported that they were generally optimistic about future performance in assignments and exams. In contrast to the HIDP students, when asked how they would perform in the future given previous successful performance, these students replied that they would be optimistic. As Bernadette (an LODP) reported, “Basically when I'm on a roll, I feel good. I think, 'Well, I've got this mark and I can do it again.'”

Why students are defensively pessimistic. Defensive pessimists were also asked for the reasons why they held unrealistically low expectations. Gwen (an HIDP) cited cultural reasons for why she was defensively pessimistic. According to her, there was much pressure on her to perform well and that having lower expectations was a way of dealing with the fear of not meeting these expectations: “Coming from an [ethnic background] family, if you get a good mark, they'll expect you to do the same thing again.” Also, she has found in the past that when she has been optimistic, these positive expectations have not been fulfilled: “In the past when I've looked at things optimistically, something bad has happened and now I question myself all the time.”

Joe (an HIDP) reported that by holding unrealistically negative expectations and entertaining the possibility of not doing so well, he does not feel let down if those expectations are realized. This disappointment seemed to be what most defensive pessimists were particularly concerned to protect themselves from. As Robert (an HIDP) reported:

I try to be pessimistic 'cause that way I think the fall's less when you do actually 'come a cropper.' . . . I think if I border slightly on the pessimistic, then if I do better than I expected then it's a pleasant surprise, and if I do worse than expected then it's less of a fall. You just try to minimize those falls.

When Marie (an HIDP), who has been having some difficulty performing on exams, was asked at the end of the interview whether she had anything else to add, she reported that her negativity was learned at home: “My parents have always said, 'Don't set your goals too high because you'll only get disappointed.' . . . They're always careful not to raise my hopes so I don't get disappointed.”

According to Cassie, Robert, and Joe (all HIDPs), thinking more negatively is a good way of motivating them into action. According to Joe, his negative expectations motivated him into action by making him feel more stressed. According to him, “if you’re negative you stress more, and a bit of stress is good.” Robert felt that the pessimism was advantageous in that it kept him more emotionally balanced:

It keeps you a bit more even keeled. You don’t have the highs and lows, the peaks and troughs. You’re not walking around one week saying, ‘I’m fantastic, I’m the greatest thing since sliced bread’ and not living up to the expectations the next week and feeling like going out to slash your wrists.

Marie (an HIDP) saw mixed blessings in her defensive pessimism. She recognized that it probably is not good for her self-esteem but that in other respects it reduces the potential blow to the self-esteem by not “thinking that you’re going to reach the moon when you can only get as far as the clouds.” Dianne (an HIDP) added that if it turns out that she does do well, the advantage of having thought negatively is that she is pleasantly surprised.

Participants’ Goal Orientation

Students high and low in self-handicapping. HISHs were more likely than LOSHs to endorse ego goals and less likely to subscribe to a mastery orientation. Carol and Christine (both HISHs) reported that outperforming others would make them feel more successful than having mastered something and that this was primarily because outperformance was something visible to other people, whereas mastery was not. Trudy (an HISH) reported that outperforming others makes her feel as though “I’m not as down there as I thought—at least for a little while.” She said that she always likes to know how close to the top of the class she is, and when asked whether mastery or outperformance would make her feel most successful, she replied: “Oh, the top of the class. Because that’s how you’re measured in society.” In fact, Trudy was actually dismissive of a task orientation in the context of university: “No one’s going to care if you learn something new—maybe you can solve world peace by it or something. It doesn’t matter that you learnt great things getting those marks—that’s not what [university is] about.”

Nonetheless, in some situations LOSHs also reported feeling successful when they outperformed others but in a slightly different sense than the HISHs. For example, whereas Gina (an LOSH) was more interested in outperforming others, she did not conform to the stereotypical ego-oriented student in that she held some regard for those she outperformed. When asked how she felt when she outperformed others, she replied, “I feel proud, but I also feel sorry for whoever fails.” Also, outperforming others was not enjoyed for the sake of outperforming others but in confirming her positive self-concept and also providing diagnostic feedback: “It’s sort of the proof of the pudding . . . that I’m right in being confident in my abilities.”

LOSHs were more inclined than HISHs to endorse mastery goals and to recognize the contribution of mastery to their academic lives. According to Lucy (an LOSH), “I love that [mastery] . . . that’s something in yourself that you can feel good about rather than outperforming others and bagging them out.” Reg (an LOSH) reported gaining great satisfaction through “just doing or knowing something that you’ve never done before and getting the hang of

it and being able to do something well.” Tania (an LOSH) saw the long-term benefits of mastery:

It’s something that you’re always going to have. As a teacher that’s important because it doesn’t matter that you went better than everyone in a first-year test. It’s best if you can learn something that you use in the future to transfer knowledge to students.

Students high and low in defensive pessimism. The defensive pessimists also provided reports that were indicative of an ego orientation, but their endorsement of ego orientation was more equivocal. For example, Gwen (an HIDP) reported that outperformance would make her feel most successful but made the point that this would mean more to her not so much because she outperformed others but because, in true defensively pessimistic fashion, the relief of performing well was great. Although Joe (an HIDP) recognized that mastery was a more laudable goal, outperformance would make him feel more successful primarily because university is a competitive environment and beating others is consistent with this climate. He also reported that outperforming others is the best way to gauge how he is doing at university: “Don’t get me wrong, I would rather feel better by mastering something, but it’s all competition. If you’re doing better than others, then you know you’re doing well and that’s how you gauge yourself.”

In contrast to self-handicappers who were not mastery oriented, defensive pessimists recognized that there was value in mastery orientation but that this value was connected to performance issues. Such data are good examples of the “grey” terrain to which we alluded earlier. For example, Marie (an HIDP) reported that mastery was more important to her because mastery was required in order to outperform others. When asked what was most important to her, she replied, “probably understanding ‘cause to beat other people, you have to have understanding first.” Cassie and Dianne (both HIDPs) implied that although success in competition would give them satisfaction, it was difficult to compare their performance with that of others, and so by default, mastery became important. For example, Cassie reported that because everyone studied different subjects, competition with them became difficult. Hence it became important to her to compete with herself, and this was more attuned to a task orientation than an ego orientation. Dianne also reported that she did not compete with others because they may all have done badly and outperforming them was not a testament to much.

As another testament to the grey terrain, some LODPs were also ego oriented. Again, however, this was qualified. For example, Bernadette (an LODP) reported that she enjoyed outperforming others but more to satisfy personal standards: “In some ways I like to outperform others but it’s more a sense of doing better for myself like, ‘This is what I got last time and I’d like to do better than last time.’” Interestingly for Bernadette, ego orientation also held implications for mastery. She reported that she preferred to outperform others “because that’s indicative of being able to understand.” Although it was important to Lynne (an LODP) to outperform others, this was because it made her feel good about herself and not because others had not performed as well as her. Amanda, another LODP, made the point that outperforming others is in no way a cause for her to feel successful and in fact reported that she saw competition as competition with herself and not with others.

Students low in defensive pessimism were more unambiguously concerned with mastery (note, however, that for some there was also the presence of performance goals, which were previously described). For example, Bernadette (an LODP) reported that she loved challenge and the feeling that she has learned something new. According to Brendan (an LODP), university is not a place of competition, "it's more about learning." Amanda (an LODP) agreed: "If I can grasp something by stretching my mind or worked really hard on something then I've made progression in myself and I'm proud of myself more so than being able to do something better than someone else."

Discussion

A major aim of the present study is to use a qualitative approach to shed further light on self-handicapping and defensive pessimism as a means to generate new insights, identify key complexities, illuminate the personal perspectives of students in their first year at university, and give expression to students' voices to allow new perspectives, contexts, and insights relevant to self-handicapping and defensive pessimism to emerge.

Self-Handicapping and Defensive Pessimism

The qualitative data add to existing knowledge of the idiosyncratic ways in which students self-handicap as well as the various lengths to which students will go to protect their self-worth. What these data also underscore is that there is no shortage of potential handicaps at these students' disposal. Motivations and behaviors of the HISHs contrasted quite markedly with those of the LOSHs who were more focused and conscientious in their studies. The data in relation to LOSHs were particularly illuminating in that these students seemed to be well aware of the distractions that posed a threat to their study. It seems, therefore, that students are aware of the variety of ways in which they can distract themselves from the central purpose of study but that HISHs seize opportunities to engage in these distractions, whereas the LOSHs actively resist these potential distractions. It is important to note, however, that although the LOSHs were well aware of potential distractions surrounding them, they were relatively less unaware of the strategic ways in which these distractions could be used. In this sense, the qualitative data lend support to quantitative research findings, which show that individuals who are not inclined to self-handicap are unaware of the strategic way it can be used, and as a consequence are more likely to accept at face value the self-handicapping strategies of others (Smith & Strube, 1991).

Not only do the data contribute to current understanding about the strategic nature of self-handicapping, they also underscore and confirm quantitative data concerning the strategic nature of defensive pessimism (Cantor & Norem, 1989; Martin et al., 2001a, 2001b; Norem & Cantor, 1990). For example, consistent with quantitative work indicating how defensive pessimism can motivate students (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994; Norem & Cantor, 1986), some defensive pessimists used their defensive pessimism partly to motivate them into action. Defensive pessimism was also strategic for others in that it obviated disappointment in the event of poor performance, confirming quantitative data that it may cushion the individual in the event of failure (Martin et al., 2001a, 2001b; Norem & Cantor, 1986) and establish lower and safer standards with which to compete (Baumgardner & Brownlee, 1987; Martin

et al., 2001a, 2001b). Indeed, the fact that some defensive pessimists reported that they "knew" they were not going to fail and yet "felt" they were going to also suggested some cognitive posturing in support of the strategic nature of defensive pessimism.

The results also indicated that the role of significant others as well as cultural factors can contribute to defensive pessimism (see, e.g., Gwen, an HIDP). Indeed, not only do results illustrate the family and cultural factors that potentially underpin defensive pessimism, they also demonstrate how individuals react to others' high expectations in a defensive way, confirming quantitative findings (Baumgardner & Brownlee, 1987). However, not only can the family inadvertently influence the tendency to engage in defensive pessimism, they can quite directly influence students' expectations. For example, Marie's (an HIDP) parents actually taught her that by holding lower expectations for upcoming events, she could avoid the disappointment if she fails. Indeed, early quantitative work demonstrated that expected negative outcomes are not so hard hitting as unexpected ones (Feather, 1967).

Although the data were illustrative of the distinctiveness of self-handicapping and defensive pessimism, they extend extant research by suggesting a number of ways in which they are similar. Both are strategic in the sense that students are for the most part aware of their tendency to use the strategies and aware of the benefits that follow from them. Following from this point, another common feature is their self-protective nature: Self-handicappers are provided with an excuse (or explanation) for potential poor performance, and defensive pessimists create lower and safer standards against which to compete, minimizing the chances of failure. It is important to note, however, that although on an aggregate basis the two share key features (e.g., self-protection), the diversity of ways in which students engage in these strategies highlights the uniqueness of students' experiences and the idiosyncratic ways they negotiate their studies. Indeed, this highlights the strength of qualitative data.

Goal Orientation, Self-Handicapping, and Defensive Pessimism

Although the broad finding is that ego orientation is a hallmark of self-handicapping, the data indicated the unique ways in which ego orientation occurs as well as the reasons respondents were ego oriented. Indeed, this is supported by previous research showing that similar goal orientations can be manifested in different ways (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). For example, a theme that emerged was self-handicappers' concern with outperforming fellow students because such performance was visible to others (whereas mastery was not). This implies an extrinsic orientation on the part of self-handicappers and their concern with how others view them. Indeed, this confirms the relationship between self-handicapping and a public orientation obtained in quantitative research (Ferrari, 1992; Martin et al., 2001a, 2001b; Shepperd & Arkin, 1989; Strube, 1986). Respondents identified other reasons for their need to outperform others. For example, Trudy (an HISH) reported that society judges individuals' worth on the basis of their academic achievement, and hence outperforming others was more important than mastery. She also identified her family's emphasis on academic results, again underscoring the extrinsic dimension of goal orientation. Indeed, the LOSHs' responses contrasted markedly with those of the HISHs in the sense that their reports were underpinned by an intrinsic orientation in which they enjoyed the

experience of mastery and challenge. On the other hand, the relationship between goal orientation and defensive pessimism was not as clear cut as that with self-handicapping. For example, some defensive pessimists saw value in mastery, and other defensive pessimists' endorsement of ego orientation was qualified. It seems, then, that ego orientation does not mark defensive pessimists' approach to study to the extent that it does that of self-handicappers.

Self-handicappers' and defensive pessimists' responses also indicated that their concern with outperforming others was partly influenced by the learning climate in which they operated. According to Trudy (an HISH), university is about competition, and there is little place for mastery in such an environment, whereas Joe (an HDP) reported that a concern with outperforming others was consistent with the competitive university climate. Interestingly, not all students saw university as a place of competition. Brendan (an LODP) saw university as a place in which one's focus was on mastering the material and not a place of competition. Another difference, then, between low and high self-protective students is not only their individual goal orientation but also their perceptions of the learning climate in terms of ego and task goals. This supports quantitative research that has found a relationship between the (performance-ego-oriented) focus of the learning environment and self-handicapping (Midgley & Urdan, 1995). More recent research utilizing statistical procedures appropriate for the analysis of class-level data has confirmed the relationship between students' perceptions of and emphasis on relative ability in the classroom and self-handicapping (Urdan, Midgley, & Anderson, 1998).

Implications for Education

The data clarify not only substantive issues relevant to self-protection but also hold important implications for educational practice. The data showed that some self-handicappers perceived little or no control over their self-handicapping. This can be risky from an educational perspective as it can ultimately lead to some form of learned helplessness (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). It is important for educators to encourage students to develop a greater sense of perceived control. For example, encouraging students to attribute outcomes to effort and strategy promotes perceived control (Perry & Magnusson, 1989), adaptive approaches to learning (Craven, Marsh, & Debus, 1991), and performance (Martin, 2001; Perry & Penner, 1990). Moreover, in the educational context, a prime contributor to uncertain control is noncontingent or inconsistent feedback (Perry & Dickens, 1988; Thompson, 1994). Administering reinforcement and feedback in a way that is commensurate with students' performance is one means of enhancing their perceived control over educational outcomes (Thompson, 1994).

Ego orientation seemed to mark self-handicappers' approach to their studies and to a lesser extent was a feature of defensive pessimists' approach. It is important, then, to identify elements of instruction delivery and the educational environment that contribute to the pursuit of ego goals. One element seems to be competition (Covington, 1992; Duda & Nicholls, 1992; Nicholls, 1989). We propose that competitive environments not only contribute to a tendency to pursue ego goals but also are relevant to self-protection. Competition for those not guaranteed success could represent a climate in which self-protection may be an appealing

option. For example, Urdan et al. (1998) have identified the effects of the learning environment on self-handicapping. Cooperative learning environments, on the other hand, are task oriented and focus more on mastery through collaboration with one's peers (Qin, Johnson, & Johnson, 1995). Balancing competitive interests with mastery and cooperation may reduce the extent to which students are motivated to maneuver defensively. It is important to note that we do not reject the possible benefits to be gained through an ego or competitive focus (see Elliot & Church, 1997; Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998; Martin & Debus, 1998). We do, however, suggest that an overly competitive focus at the expense of mastery and cooperation can incur certain academic costs (Qin et al., 1995). What this implies is that students may benefit from coordinating a competitive and mastery orientation and this brings into consideration the issue of multiple goals (Ainley, 1993; Martin & Debus, 1998; Wentzel, 1989).

The data also illuminate the lengths to which students will go to avoid failure and self-protect. Covington has outlined the variety of ways educational environments promote failure avoidance (Covington, 1992; see also Martin, 2001) and has also suggested ways that this can be addressed. Essentially, the very nature and bases of learning must be changed so that motives become goals and draw rather than drive the student (Covington, 1992; Covington & Roberts, 1994). Such a program would encourage students to gain knowledge for mastery's sake rather than for the sake of performance, encourage students to serve the interests of the group, and to give expression to their creativity and curiosity. Changing the reward system has also been proposed as a way in which the purpose of learning can be altered. Covington and Roberts (1994) suggested that reward should be based on students meeting personal standards rather than outperforming others. Hence, the student is encouraged to become success oriented rather than failure avoiding or failure accepting. When students are success oriented, they are then in a stronger position to learn and, as Covington and Roberts noted, have even been shown to perform well in competitive scenarios (see also Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1994; Harackiewicz & Elliot, 1993).

Limitations

There are a number of limitations that require consideration when interpreting the results. The data in this study were "static"—collected at only one point in time. Although qualitative research is not centrally concerned with establishing causal relationships to the extent that quantitative research often is, our conceptualization of the proposed model of the self-protection process begs the question of "what precedes what"? Also, all of the data were derived from self-reports. Although this study is based on students' personal perspectives, qualitative research need not be based on self-report alone. There is scope for observational data and reports by others close to the student. Also, artifacts such as course results and examples of student work would be useful. It is therefore important that future research examines the issues using data derived from additional sources.

Another concern is the extent to which students are aware of their use of self-protection strategies or the extent to which they are aware of the reasons for their use of these strategies. It may be that individuals cannot access their self-protective motivations in great detail and to the extent that this is the case, the present data are limited. Another issue concerns the possibility that some self-

protective students are not inclined to acknowledge their adoption of self-protection strategies—particularly self-handicapping. Although it has been argued that individuals are prepared to admit to their self-protection (Arkin & Oleson, 1998), the present results must be interpreted with the possibility of defensive self-reports in mind. Related to this, it must be recognized that interviews were typically conducted within 1 hr, and in some cases this might mean that more detailed insights into students' academic lives were limited. Future researchers might immerse themselves in students' academic lives on a more extended basis. For example, talking with students just before and after major assessment periods would provide important data on the strategies under focus. Also related to time constraints, the time available to interview students required some weighting of the depth to which some constructs were explored. For example, although students were asked detailed questions about their self-handicapping and defensive pessimism, questions in relation to self-regulation were broader. Again, immersing in students' academic lives over a longer period of time would provide greater detail about all relevant constructs.

Future Research

Some self-handicappers and defensive pessimists noted the costs of their defensive maneuvering, beyond simply not performing well. These findings suggest that the consequences of self-handicapping and defensive pessimism are not just restricted to the academic domain but are felt in a variety of areas of students' lives. One direction for future research is to explore more fully the nonacademic (e.g., social and affective) consequences of defensive maneuvering in the academic context.

The data suggested that cultural factors may also underpin some students' defensive maneuvering. Although some research has examined cultural differences in self-handicapping and negative attitudes (e.g., Midgley et al., 1996), this tends to be restricted to ethnic minorities in the North American context. Cross-cultural comparisons are needed. Related to the issue of culture is the role of the family in influencing students' tendency to engage in self-protective strategies. The present data are suggestive of some family influence in this respect, but further work is required to determine the precise nature and extent of this influence. Indeed, this need for further work into cultural and family factors is not only important in relation to self-protection but is also important from an achievement goal perspective (Urduan, 1997).

An interesting extension of students' goal orientation was their perceptions of the learning climate. The data indicated that self-handicappers and defensive pessimists tended to see the learning climate as competitive, and this evoked a need to outperform others. This supports previous quantitative findings (Midgley & Urduan, 1995), but some issues remain unclear. For example, the learning climate and its impact on defensive pessimism have not been addressed to date. Also, the impact of altering the learning climate (e.g., from competitive to cooperative; see Qin et al., 1995) on students' academic strategies has not been studied, and future research might focus on this with a view to identifying interventions that can take place at class and institutional levels. The need for further research in relation to climate is consistent with recent reviews of achievement goal theory (Urduan, 1997), and data have recently emerged showing a relationship between the nature of the learning environment and self-handicapping (Urduan et al., 1998).

Conclusion

The present study explored students' personal insights into self-handicapping and defensive pessimism. Although previous quantitative findings have identified the broad nature of self-handicapping and defensive pessimism, our qualitative data have indicated (a) the idiosyncratic ways in which students engage in these strategies, (b) the salience of these strategies in students' lives, (c) the strategic nature of these strategies, particularly in the context of self-worth protection, and (d) the various factors that contribute to students' defensive posturing. Students' personal perspectives shed new light on congruencies and differences in goal orientation for self-handicappers and defensive pessimists, the social and academic costs of self-protective behavior, the control students feel they have over their self-protective behavior, and the roles of the family and students' culture in their tendency to self-protect. The strength of this qualitative approach to phenomena typically studied from a quantitative perspective lies in its detailed and contextualized exploration of self-handicappers' and defensive pessimists' motivations and behaviors. In listening to students' stories about the diverse ways they go about their studies in a self-protective manner, we can better understand the factors other than ability that lead to success or failure at university.

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Appendix A

Summary of Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Question guide to establish rapport

- Have you come straight from school?
- If not, what did you do between school and now?
- What subjects are you majoring in?
- So now you're at university, what do you think?
- Is university what you expected?
- Are you enjoying university?
- What made you decide to do Education?
- What do you think of the course?
- Have you found it demanding? Many assignments–exams?

Question guide to address goal orientation

- Would you say you feel more successful when you outperform others or when you learn–master something new?
- Why do you say that?
- What does outperforming others–mastery mean to you?

Question guide to address defensive pessimism

- If I ask you to look down the track to your next assignment or exam, do you think you'll do the same, better, or worse than you've done before?
- Why do you say that?
- How does it make you feel when you go into an exam thinking more negatively–positively than previous experience would predict?
- Does thinking this way have any advantages–disadvantages?

Question guide to address self-handicapping

- Some students do things that seem to get in the way of their success. For example, they might procrastinate before an upcoming assignment or become occupied on other things before the exams. Other students get onto the job of doing their assignments and studying for the exam and maximize their chances of success. Would you relate to either of these two students?
- If so, in what ways do you do some of these things?
- Why do you think you do these things?
- What advantages and disadvantages might follow from doing these things?

Invitation for additional comments

- That's all the questions I have to ask you. Is there anything you would like to add? Is there anything you feel I haven't touched or focused on? Is there anything you would like to emphasize? Is there a particular way you go about your studies that I haven't addressed?

(Appendixes continue)

Appendix B

Categories Into Which the Data Were Sorted and Extracts From Interviews That
Reflect Major Categories

1. GOAL ORIENTATION

1.1 Ego orientation–competitiveness

(e.g., “Oh, the top of the class. Because that’s how you’re measured in society.”—Trudy, an HISH)

1.1.1 Feelings of success through outperforming others

1.1.2 Feelings of success not dependent on outperforming others

1.1.3 Feelings of success only partly determined by outperforming others

1.1.4 That’s interesting

1.2 Task orientation

(e.g., “I love that [mastery] . . . that’s something in yourself that you can feel good about rather than outperforming others.”—Lucy, an LOSH)

1.2.1 Feelings of success through mastery and new learning

1.2.2 Feelings of success not dependent on mastery or new learning

1.2.3 Feelings of success only partly dependent on mastery

1.2.4 Both mastery and competitive concerns

1.2.5 That’s interesting

2. SELF-PROTECTION STRATEGIES

2.1 Self-handicapping

2.1.1 Students who self-handicap

(e.g., “I’ll say, ‘I’ve got study to do, well I really need to clean my wardrobe.’ I’m the queen of pointless time wasting.”—Sophie, an HISH)

2.1.1.1 Typical behavior

2.1.1.2 Why do I do it?

2.1.1.3 What advantages does it offer?

2.1.1.4 That’s interesting

2.1.2 Students who do not self-handicap

2.1.2.1 Typical behavior

2.1.2.2 Why do some students self-handicap?

2.1.2.3 What advantages does it offer?

2.1.2.4 That’s interesting

2.2 Defensive pessimism

2.2.1 Students who think in a defensively pessimistic fashion

(e.g., “I try to be pessimistic ‘cause that way I think the fall’s less when you do actually ‘come a cropper.’”—Robert, an HIDP)

2.2.1.1 Typical defensive expectations

2.2.1.2 Why do I think this way?

2.2.1.3 What advantages does it offer?

2.2.1.4 Self-presented–public aspects

2.2.1.5 That’s interesting

2.2.2 Students who think optimistically

(e.g., “When I’m on a roll, I feel good. I think, ‘Well I’ve got this mark and I can do it again.’”—Bernadette, an LODP)

2.2.2.1 Typical optimism

2.2.2.2 Why do I think this way?

2.2.2.3 That’s interesting

Note. HISH = high self-handicapper; LOSH = low self-handicapper; HIDP = high defensive pessimist; LODP = low defensive pessimist.

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