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Review Article

Perfectionism and Self-Handicapping Behaviors of Gifted Students: A Review of the Literature [1]

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Abstract

The study addresses two issues, perfectionism and self-handicapping, which may threaten gifted students' academic achievement and self-esteem. While perfectionism refers to setting unreasonably high standards for one's own performance, self-handicapping is defined as creating impediments or obstacles to use as an excuse for poor performance. Although both perfectionist and self-handicapping behaviors have some potential benefits for gifted students, they are mostly detrimental and can lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, and poor performance. This study aims to provide an overview of perfectionism and self-handicapping with a particular emphasis on how perfectionism may provoke self-handicapping behaviors among gifted students so that educators in gifted programs might become more aware of these behvaiors and their implications. The study also discusses some of the strategies that can be helpful to avoid these behaviors and their negative outcomes on gifted learners.

Keywords

self-handicapping, perfectionism, gifted students

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Introduction

Adam is a gifted sophomore student in a middle class, urban high school. He is one of the best students in his class, and gets the top grades for most of the subjects. One of Adam's characteristics is perfectionism, so he has very high expectations, and some of them are not reachable. In an individual project, Adam felt that he was not be able to perform to the criteria he set up, so instead of applying himself, he hung out with his friends instead of studying and submitted the project with an average performance. When his teachers asked why he performed poorly, he said he did not have time for the assignment, but he could have created a perfect one if he had had time.

Adam and many other gifted students with perfectionism are vulnerable to its negative influences and may experience self-handicapping behaviors to cover their failure in case they are unable to accomplish such perfectionist goals. Based on the possible connection between gifted students' self-handicapping behaviors and perfectionism, the present study reviews the research literature and examines how perfectionismmight influence self-handicapping behaviors. The main questions guiding the literature review are:

- Is there an association between perfectionism and self-handicapping?
- What are the implications of self-handicapping and perfectionism for gifted learners?
- What kind of interventions, services, or strategies can help to overcome self-handicapping behaviors?

Besides the core questions, the practical purpose of the study is to learn more about perfectionism and its influence on self-handicapping, and how they impact gifted students. The study also aims to provide a resource to inform parents and teachers of gifted students about perfectionism and self-handicapping behaviors.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a personal tendency to do something perfectly and is considered a common characteristic among gifted students (Parker, 2000, Neumeister, 2007; Hebert, 2010). Based on the literature, perfectionism is controversial in that it can be considered a positive characteristic to be nurtured or a destructive factor for gifted learners (Greenspon, 2000; Hebert, 2010). The main motivation behind the discussion focuses on the different categories of perfectionism and their implications for gifted students.

Healthy and unhealthy, or neurotic, the categories of perfectionism are commonly accepted by researchers and applied in perfectionism studies. According to Silverman (1999), healthy perfectionism is a positive characteristic

and can facilitate students' achievement, self-esteem, and development for excellence; whereas unhealthy or neurotic perfectionism undermines students' achievement and self-concept and can lead to procrastination, anxiety, stress, and avoidance behaviors. While healthy perfectionists enjoy dealing with highly challenging tasks and seeking excellence, neurotic perfectionists do not have the same experience since a performance is never good enough based on their unrealistic expectations (Greenspon, 2000; Hamachek, 1978, as cited in Parker, 2000; Kearns, Forbes, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008; Hebert, 2010).

Hewitt and Flett (1991) proposed a different categorization that suggests three dimensions of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. Perfectionists with self-orientation set high standards for their performance and evaluate their achievement based on these self-set standards. Other-oriented perfectionists have very high expectations from people in their environment. Lastly, socially prescribed perfectionists assume that other people have perfectionist standards for them; thus, they are concerned about meeting those standards.

The study by Parker (2000) shows that most gifted students have a healthy perfectionism, a smaller percentage is non-perfectionist, but still a significant amount of gifted students suffer from unrealistic expectations and unhealthy perfectionism. In terms of academic success, they push for the highest grades and even the highest test scores may not satisfy them (Adelson, 2007), which in turn may lead to some social and emotional issues for gifted students, such as anxiety, depression, stress, low self-esteem, suicide, etc.

Self-Handicapping

Self-handicapping is defined as creating impediments or obstacles to a successful performance that enable individuals to deflect the cause of low performance away from their ability on to the created impediment (Covington, 1992). Some examples of self-handicapping are procrastination, getting drunk, leaving little time to study before an exam, lack of sleep, and over involvement with friends (Urdan, 2004). The main difference between self-handicapping and other attributions is that these behaviors or lack of behaviors occur prior or simultaneously with the performance task. Other attributions, such as making excuses or external factors, do not reflect an actual behavior (Urdan & Midgley, 2001; Urdan, 2004). Self-handicapping behaviors reflect a planned behavior in which an individual is purposefully involved in a distraction without any resistance (Martin, Marsh, Williamson, & Debus, 2003).

Self-handicapping can function either as a self-presentation or a self-protecting strategy. Self-handicapping as a self-presentation strategy serves to

manipulate others' perceptions to avoid revealing a lack of ability, yet self-handicapping in the form of a self-protection strategy is used to protect personal self-esteem (Urdan & Midgley, 2001). Self-handicappers may believe that by using these strategies, they can protect their self-worth or image in public, and mask the attribution between poor performance and evaluation of personal ability (Chen, Wu, Kee, Lin, & Shui, 2009). In both cases, individuals focus on covering up their possible failures instead of enhancing their skills and reversing the low performance.

Students' self-handicapping behaviors can be sorted into two categories: behavioral and self-reported self-handicapping. Behavioral handicapping refers to an actual behavior, such as lack of sleep or alcohol consumption; whereas self-reported handicapping refers to non-behavioral attributes, such as claiming general anxiety, stress, test anxiety, or health problems (Learly & Shepperd, 1986). Although both kinds of strategies are used to protect the individuals' self-esteem, it has been suggested that behavioral self-handicapping has a more detrimental impact on academic outcomes than self-reported handicapping, which may or may not have an impact since it still allows the chance for achievement (McCrea & Hirt, 2001; Lovejoy & Durik, 2010). Since self-reported handicapping does not include self-sabotage, it provides safer grounds for individuals in respect to future performances, and gives a sense of security when encountering failure (Lovejoy & Durik, 2010). Self-reported handicapping, however, was found to be less effective in protecting self-esteem and the sense of ability when compared to behavioral handicapping (McCrea & Hirt, 2001). Although both types of behaviors are potential risk factors for gifted learners, it is possible that self-reported self-handicapping behaviors may not influence gifted students' academic outcomes as much as behavioral self-handicapping.

Individuals can use self-handicapping for different purposes. In general, in a case of expected failure, individuals may have fear of failure and attempt to use self-handicapping behaviors to avoid the negative implications about their ability (Covington, 1992). These behaviors can also be used as an esteem-protective or esteem augmenting strategy (Urdan & Midgley, 2001). By deflecting others' attention from low ability and creating an excuse in the case of expected failure, students can protect their general and domain specific self-esteem. If they achieve a task despite the obstacles they created, they feel a sense of imrovement in their self-esteem (McCrea & Hirt, 2001; Urdan & Midgley, 2001).

Regarding academic achievement, self-handicapping behaviors may function positively for some students. Elliot and his colleagues (2006) pointed out that self-handicapping can facilitate performance by reducing pressure on

evaluations and providing a sense of security. They suggested that self-handicapping may not be harmful as expected for some students, who may be involved in purposeful self-handicapping to enhance their self-esteem and lessen the pressure they experience. It may work in the short run but ultimately causes the belief among self-handicappers that they are lazy and not honest with others (Covington, 1992). Hence, using self-handicapping, in general, may undermine self-esteem, personal well-being, students' adjustment to new tasks, and achievement over the long run (Covington, 1992; Elliot, Cury, Fryer, & Huguet, 2006).

Gender differences are an important indicator of variance in students' self-handicapping behaviors. In general, male students have greater self-handicapping tendencies than female students (Midgley & Urdan, 2001; Hirt, McCrea, & Boris, 2003; Kimble & Hirt, 2005). While male students are more involved in behavioral self-handicapping, female students are more likely to claim self-reported handicapping (McCrea & Hirt, 2001). One possible reason is that male students are threatened by possible failure, and are exposed to higher competition than girls (Kimble & Hirt, 2005). The study by Hirt, McCrea, & Boris (2003) also argues that in case of failure, people tend to attribute failure to an insufficient effort by men, but to a lack of ability for women; thus, men are more likely to use self-handicapping to manipulate others' attention away from their ability. Since attempting self-handicapping does not provide the same benefits for women, female students are less likely to use it.

Relationship between Perfectionism and Self-Handicapping Behaviors

Perfectionism is considered one of the underlying reasons behind gifted students' self-handicapping behaviors (Kearns et al., 2008; Stewart, & De George-Walker, 2014). Based on their observation on students, Kearns and his colleagues (2008) concluded that all perfectionist students may not show self-handicapping behaviors, but they have a higher tendency to use such behaviors. Their model of self-handicapping proposes that perfectionism with other factors, especially fear of failure, leads to the belief that they won't perform well enough, so they intentionally use self-handicapping to mask their possible upcoming failure.

Perfectionist gifted students who are concerned about self-image are more likely at risk of self-handicapping. These students want to be perfect and also to be perceived as perfect by others. If they have doubts about whether they can meet the expectations, then they may prefer to eliminate themselves. This gives them a chance to say "they could have won and been perfect" (Adelson, 2007). In terms of different dimensions of perfectionism, the study by Hobden and

Pliner (1994) revealed that students with high self-oriented or socially prescribed perfectionism are more likely to exhibit self-handicapping behaviors. While self-oriented perfectionists use self-handicapping for self-protection, socially prescribed perfectionists self-handicap for the purpose of self-presentation (Hobden & Pliner, 1994).

Although the association between unhealthy perfectionism and self-handicapping, to our knowledge, has not been addressed in research literature, gifted students with unhealthy perfectionism are more likely to exhibit self-handicapping behaviors than healthy perfectionists. Based on the literature, maladaptive perfectionism is associated with stress, anxiety, shame, and depression symptoms (Ashby, Rice, & Martin, 2006), which in turn may lead to self-handicapping. For students with healthy perfectionism, there is no reason to self-handicap because they have advanced intellectual potential and clear, consistent, and reachable goals.

Procrastination is considered as a kind of self-handicapping behavior, and often leads to lower performance for gifted students. When a perfectionist gifted student has a fear of failure about a given task, s/he may prefer not taking action because s/he does not believe s/he would be successful, so the student leaves little time to study, which causes a mediocre performance (Adelson, 2007).

Conclusion

A perfectionist characteristic with unrealistic expectations and unreachable goals may lead to self-handicapping behaviors among gifted students and undermine their academic performance and personal self-esteem. Healthy perfectionism, which is striving for excellence, does not have such a destructive impact, but unhealthy, self-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism may have negative implications for gifted students and encourages them to attempt self-handicapping behaviors to manipulate others' perceptions for an upcoming failure.

To deal with self-handicapping behaviors, perfectionism and self-handicapping should be considered together for a successful counseling service. Teachers or counselors of gifted students first need to understand the difference between perfectionism and advanced goals. Since gifted students have higher intellectual ability, they may accomplish a sophisticated task, which might be considered highly challenging and unrealistic for regular classroom students, so teachers or counselors need to understand the difference between advanced goals that gifted students can achieve and unreachable and unrealistic goals (Greenspon, 2000). Hence, expectations that go beyond gifted students'

intellectual capability and potential could be considered as indicators of perfectionism.

In general, creating a positive classroom climate may help to cope with both perfectionism and self-handicapping. It is highly recommended in gifted education that students should be involved in challenging learning experiences (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). Emphasis on competition, however, may encourage students with perfectionist tendencies to use self-handicapping behaviors; thus instead of competition, challenging learning experiences should be designed as enjoyable learning experiences. Emphasizing process and effort rather than a final product is another effective strategy and implies that teachers should use effort-oriented feedback, such as "you showed great progress," and avoid strict judgments about the final products (Adelson, 2007). All of these strategies contribute to a psychologically safe environment that makes students feel supported and encourages them for risk taking and experiencing failure.

Providing resources and a customizable environment also helps students to reveal their own potential and reaching their goals, (Leana, 2014a, 2014b). Such environment may make students feel supported for their highly sophisticated goals and help them to reach those self-set goals instead of creating impediments. Lastly, using biographies of artists or inventors may also help gifted students understand that many scientists and artists who showed outstanding performances failed many times and devoted a significant amount of time for their masterpieces.

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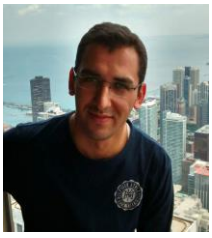

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