

2003

# Tendency to self-handicapping in the situation of expected failure

Smederevac Snežana, Novović Zdenka, Milin  
Petar, Janičić Bojan, Pajić Dejan, Biro Mikloš

---

Smederevac Snežana, Novović Zdenka, Milin Petar, Janičić Bojan,  
Pajić, Dejan, et al. 2003. Tendency to self-handicapping in the situation  
of expected failure. Psihologija 36(1): str. 39-58.

<https://open.uns.ac.rs/handle/123456789/16290> (accessed 19 May 2024).

<https://open.uns.ac.rs/handle/123456789/16290>

*Downloaded from DSpace-CRIS - University of Novi Sad*

## TENDENCY TO SELF-HANDICAPPING IN THE SITUATION OF EXPECTED FAILURE

***Snežana Smederevac<sup>1</sup>, Zdenka Novović, Petar Milin, Bojan  
Janičić, Dejan Pajić and Mikloš Biro***

Department of psychology, University of Novi Sad

*The basic objective of this research is to determine what type of self-handicapping strategies subjects will use when they face potential failure, under the condition that they have the possibility of strategy choice. Another research objective is directed to the research of relation between the selected self-handicapping strategy and personality characteristics.*

*120 student of the second and third year of the Department of psychology, University of Novi Sad has been taken into sample. In the first research stage, all students administrared a series of personality self-report tests. In the second experiment stage, the participants were divided into four groups, on the basis of two criteria: the solvability of intelligence test tasks and the presence of hampering factors during task solving.*

*The research results show that there are at least two types of self-handicapping strategies. One type is used by the majority of people when found in the situation where potential failure is expected. It refers to searching for alibis in external circumstances and it is probably the reflection of sound tendencies of facing possible consequences of information on one's own incompetence. Another type of strategies presents consistent behaviour pattern, determined by the higher degree of adverse affectivity and negative image of oneself, and it is manifested in the use of poor psychophysical condition as the alibi for failure.*

**Key words:** Self-handicapping strategies, self-esteem, self-concept, depression, anxiety.

---

<sup>1</sup> Author's address: savina@NSpoint.net

The term self-handicapping was first used by Berglas and Jones (1978), thus explaining one of few known strategies of facing potential failure. When a threat to self-esteem is present, i.e. when failure is expected in some activity, which is most often connected to capabilities, a person actively searches for or creates the factors which might hamper the performance of this activity, and which may serve as justification for potential failure.

The concept of self-handicapping issues from the theories of attributions (Arkin and Baumgardner, 1985; Brown, 1991). Self-serving bias in causal attributions refers to a rather pervasive tendency of individuals to attribute successful outcomes to themselves and unsuccessful outcomes to other factors. By denying personal responsibility for failure, the negative feedback is vastly reduced. Although the failure has occurred and cannot be reversed, the implications of the failing outcome in determining one's level of ability is minimized. In contrast, by assuming personal responsibility for successful outcomes, the positive image of one's own abilities can be increased. This distortion in causal attribution is a fairly clear use of attributional principles aimed at protecting or sustaining one's image.

A more subtle use of attributional principles would consist of performing only certain behaviors or manipulating the context proactively, so that only desired inferences about personal qualities could be drawn. These refined manoeuvres are applied before a given behavioral sequence is undertaken. One of these subtle manoeuvres is self-handicapping. Berglas and Jones argued that this strategy refers to the design of obstacles for the achievement of certain objective and the acceptance of all factors that decrease personal responsibility for mediocrity or failure, and exaggerate personal responsibility for success. In case of mediocre or failing performance, the role of the individual's ability must be discounted as a causal factor, since another plausible cause (the handicap) is present. In the case of successful performance, the role of individual's ability as cause is augmented because the success occurred in spite of the adverse circumstances.

Ideal handicap should make impression that it is related with the performance of an activity, but, actually, it should serve as a minimal obstacle to success. For example, tiredness due to sleepless night may serve as the alibi to student for potential failure at his/her exam. If, however, the exam is successfully passed, despite the handicap, the impression of high abilities is confirmed.

The use of symptoms or personality traits as accounts for future negative evaluation has been extended beyond test anxiety. Some studies have indicated that shyness, depression, hypochondriacal complaints may be used in the same fashion (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985). Handicaps may be behaviours that decrease the possibility of exact failure cause evaluation. (the decrease of efficiency due to the consumption of alcohol or drugs). Despite these internal handicaps, there are also external handicaps, such as choosing poor performance conditions or difficult goal choice.

Internal handicaps should carry more negative repercussions for the self-handicapping individual. For example, to fail because one is drunk should be viewed more negatively than failure attributable to an impossible task. It appears that

internal handicap carries a special risk of its own because they ordinarily produce negative personal and social evaluations. However, the disadvantage of external handicaps is that they may be less persuasive than the more costly, internal sort of handicap. They may be more subject to public scrutiny and consequently more easily “discovered” by a skeptical audience.

Two methodological remarks may be made to previous researches of self-handicapping concept. Namely, for the most part, experimental designs did not provide the possibility of choice strategy could participants would used.

To test whether individuals engage in self-handicapping behaviors when failure anticipated, Berglas and Jones (1978) first led some male subjects to believe that they were likely to succeed on an upcoming test; others were given sufficient reason to believe that future success was unlikely. All subjects were then told that the second part of the experiment involved testing the effect of two new drugs on tests performers. The subjects were then given a choice as to which drug they wished to ingest. Consistent with the notion that individuals will take active efforts to sabotage their performance when future success is improbable, subjects who believed that success was unlikely were most apt to select the performance-inhibiting drug. In this research, the selection of drug was one possible strategy of self-handicapping.

The practice of the provision of only one possibility has been used in a few replication of the original self-handicapping finding. For instance, Tucker (1981, according to Arkin and Baumgardner, 1985), replicated the Berglas and Jones methodology using alcohol consumption as the dependable measure.

The question that arises after these studies is what type of handicapping strategy an individual is likely to adopt, should he have a choice?

Another objection that may be directed to previous researches of self-handicapping is selective and insufficient attention paid to personality variables. The concept of self-handicapping was frequently related with self-esteem (Rhodewat, et al., 1991) and self-serving attributional biases (Thompson & Richardson, 2001). At the other hand, anxious persons may use their symptoms as handicap when they are not sure of their success in future tasks (Smith et al., 1982, according to Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985).

Also, self-handicapping may be seen like a personality trait, such as perfectionism (Hobden & Pliner, 1995).

Some people may dedicate high attention to every detail, while preparing for some task, and these activities provided them alibi for failure. Therefore, inefficiency in task performance will be interpreted through their need to do it perfectly.

Here, as well as in the above-mentioned research regarding anxiety (Smith et al., 1982, according to Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985), some personality characteristics and conditions were used as strategies of self-handicapping, while they, also like some other characteristics and conditions are not researched as possible predisposed factors – as the characteristics, which due to their (un)emphasis, make a person more subject to self-handicapping.

The research presented in this paper is outlined with actual objective to answer the questions for which there is serious doubt that they have been neglected in

previous self-handicapping studies. The basic objective of this research is to determine which type of self-handicapping strategies will be used by subjects when facing potential failure, under the condition that they have the possibility of strategy selection.

Another research objective is focused to the examination of relation between selected self-handicapping strategy and personality characteristics. Besides self-esteem, as important personality aspect, it was anticipated that some other characteristics may affect the selection of the self-handicapping strategy, which could be permanent and consistent personality characteristic. Also, it was assumed that the presence of more permanent emotional variables, like anxiety and depression features could also be related to the type of selected self-handicapping strategy.

## **METHOD**

### **Subjects**

The research was participated by 120 students of the second and third year of psychology, where one class of exercises was replaced with participation in experiment. The average age of participants is 21.

Subjects were divided into four groups, equalised according to gender. Although it was predominantly female sample, each group had proportional number of young women and men ( $2/1=2.27$ ;  $p=0.51$ ). The subjects were also equalised in relation to the intelligence degree, considering the results from entrance examination for psychology studies. Additionally, post hoc control of subject groups equivalence in relation to intelligence was performed. All groups were actually solving a series of tasks of verbal and numerical capabilities, which were the same for all groups. Then, the significances of differences in these control tasks were tested. MANOVA showed that none of possible differences is statistically significant (Table 1 and 2).

*Table 1: Multivariate test of significance*

<b>EFFECT</b>	<b>WILKS</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>P</b>
with distractor/ without distractor	0.958	2.503	0.086
solvable tasks / unsolvable tasks	0.98	1.128	0.327
interaktion	0.983	0.955	0.388

**Table 2: Univariate test of significance**

EFFECT	F <sub>NUM</sub>	P <sub>NUM</sub>	F <sub>VER</sub>	P <sub>VER</sub>
with distactor / without distractoa	2.868	0.093	2.156	0.145
solvable tasks / unsolvable tasks	2.17	0.143	0.101	0.751
interaktion	1.879	0.173	0.044	0.835

## Procedure

In the first part of the research, all subjects were pretested with a battery of tests, which controlled relevant and independent variables. The participants were instructed that one of the authors needed the subjects for his research. With regard to the need to coordinate the results of these questionnaire with the entrance examination results, the testing was not anonymous.

In the second part, the subjects solved several intelligence test tasks, after the following instruction: *»This is intelligence test designed by your proffessor. You will first do exercisse and several examplesafter that. Ttime for examples is limited to 10 min. Afterwards, you will answer the questions on the back of your paper, and only then shall we return to the rest of the intelligence test.«* For the needs of the second stage of the experiment, the subjects were assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, obtained by crossing two criteria: the first criterion was task difficulty (easy and unsolvable), and the second criterion referred to favourable and unfavourable testing conditions. Thus, thirty subjects were assigned to the each of the following groups: with solvable tasks and distractor (SD); with unsolvable tasks and with distractor (UD), with solvable tasks and without distractor (SW), and with unsolvable tasks and without distractor (UW).

The groups that performed the tests under favorable conditions (SW and UW) where tested in the classrooms where one of the researches was present. He read the instruction, gave them signal to start, and silently waited for ten minutes, and finely, signalled that the time was up. During all the time of testing no one entered the classroom and the activity was performed in silence.

The groups with unfavourable testing conditions (SD and UD) were invited to participate the research in the hall with TV and video. Having entered the room, the subjects found two researches in it. The researchers were watching cartoons on TV and writing down the aggressive reactions of the cartoon characters into the protocol prepared for them. The subjects were, with apology, informed that both researches must take place simultaneously, because of a problem with premises. The

researchers behaved according to the following scenario in the experimental situation:

*Two researchers are sitting in a hall, doing “their research”, not noticing entering students, and without any comments. The third researcher, before reading the test instruction, turns to them. Interviewer: “Dear colleagues, we apologise for this disturbance, but we have some work to do. Would you be so kind to silence TV a bit?” One of the TV watchers: Of course (silences it just a bit). After the instruction for the intelligence test, the communication is continued: Interviewer: “Once again, please silence TV a bit” Researcher: “Well, don’t interrupt us all the time! Here, I missed to write something down. I have to rewind it at the beginning” (rewinds at the beginning of the cartoon). Students start to answer the test tasks, and the researchers amplify TV and continue with making notes in the prepared protocol. In Attachment No. 4, there is the protocol filled in during quasi - research. Other elements of testing, explanation, instruction for solving, the time of solving, have been the same as with the groups with favorable conditions.*

After they had completed their tasks, the subjects in all four groups were asked to answer few questions. The purpose of questions was to check the manipulation success and self-handicapping measurement. The list of questions is provided in Appendix No. 2.

## **Instruments**

The series of tests for the evaluation of personality aspects, relevant for the research, was used. The series comprised of:

*The Self-Handicapping Scale* (Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982). SHS is 25- items self-report inventory answered on six-point Likert scale. Cronbach-alpha reliability of our translation of test is only 0.51. This imposed the need to reduce the scale, which is the strategy also used by some other researchers (Strube, 1986). So the reliability is slightly improved and amounts to 0.67. Through scale factorisation, three factors describing three different Self-Handicapping strategies were extracted: factor 1: verbal justifications; factor 2: delay, the lack of effort; factor 3: internal self-handicapping (through psycho-physical state).

*The Beck Depression Inventory* (Beck et al, 1988) – Level of depressive symptoms was assessed by BDI, a 21 items self-report inventory. Internal consistency of BDI in our research is Alpha = 0.86.

*The Beck Self-Concept Test* (Beck et al, 1989). This is a self-report measure some aspects of self-conception. 25 traits with 5-point rating scale make up BSCT. The instruction is to rate yourself in relation to other people, for each trait. The original version of the BSCT test, as well as our translation, provide four interpretable sub-scales on the basis of which four fields of self-conception may be evaluated: attractiveness (Alpha = 0.78); working efficiency (Alpha = 0.70); intellectual ability (Alpha = 0.68); and vices and virtues (Alpha = 0.58).

*Spielberger State–Trait anxiety inventory – Trait version* (STAI- Spielberger et al, 1970.) The trait version of Spilberg's anxiety inventory assess anxiety as personality trait. Twenty items of the scale are statements about different forms of anxious reacting, and subjects assess, on four-point scale, how frequently they react in that way. The reliability of our version of the scale is Alpha = 0.84.

Rosenberg *self-esteem scale* (Rosenberg, 1965) is 10 items scale, which is answered to by five-point scale (Alpha = 0.84).

*“The intelligence tests”* consisting of numeric and verbal tasks are designed by one of the authors. They were used as instruments for the experimental manipulation. Tasks examples are provided in the Appendix No. 1. There were two test versions: with easy and with unsolvable tasks. In pilot research, task difficulty was checked. Namely, in the pilot version it appeared that the numerical solvable tasks were too difficult to induce the success feeling. Therefore, final version was significantly facilitated. Verbal tasks were found to be easy enough already in the pilot study.

In both test versions, the series of tasks was the same (and solvable), and they had an additional function of additional check of the group equalisation according to intelligence. The test solving was limited to ten minutes – the time which, during the pilot research, was found out to be long enough for everyone to answer solvable tasks and enough for the subjects with unsolvable form to be convinced that short time was not the reason of their failure.

## The treatment of criteria variables

Through the optimisation of the linear combination of a given questions (pi1/q1 – pi7/q7; Appendix No. 2), latent dimensions with pre-defined structure were obtained. Those latent dimensions served as criteria of self-handicapping in the multivariant analysis of co-variance

*Table 3: Factor loadings (with factor names given)*

	ABANDONMENT	EXTERNAL CONDITIONS	PSYCHO- PHISICAL CONDITIONS
question 1	-0.53444	0.49373	0.56882
question 2	-0.48906	0.46967	<b>0.73523</b>
question 3	<b>-0.75749</b>	<b>0.74673</b>	<b>0.8603</b>
question 5	<b>-0.85046</b>	0.18324	0.34334
question 6	-0.15972	<b>0.82994</b>	0.43082
question 7	-0.51301	0.63862	<b>0.89458</b>



## RESULTS

### The check of experimental manipulation success

Since the basic objective of the manipulation was focused to the inducement of success and failure with the subjects, by providing solvable and unsolvable tasks, variance analysis shows that four groups of subjects significantly differ in relation to the evaluation of their own success (Table 4).

*Table 4: ANOVA results*

	AS				F	df1	df2	p
group	SD	UD	SW	UW	44.12	3	114	0.00
evaluation of success	4.50	1.65	4.17	1.85				

SD–solvable tasks, distractor; UD- unsolvable tasks, distractor; SW-solvable tasks, without distractor; UW- unsolvable tasks, without distractor

Both groups, which had unsolvable tasks, evaluated themselves as less successful than groups that had solvable tasks. Besides that, the groups of subjects with solvable tasks evaluated themselves as successful, but the group with solvable tasks without distracter experienced itself as more successful in relation to the group that solved the tasks in the conditions without distractor.

The results are significant, not only as verification of the experimental manipulation success, but also as indirect significance indicator ascribed to the conditions where testing was performed. Namely, the subjects who were solving easy, i.e. solvable tasks in the conditions with the distracter, evaluated themselves as successful to the greatest extent, with tendency (which still does not reach the level of statistical significance) to experience themselves as more successful even in relation to the subject group who solved the same easy tasks in the conditions without distracter. It is possible that greater value is attached to the success achieved with difficulties, and also the image on one's own capabilities becomes more positive.

### The results of the multivariate analysis of covariance

Criteria variables in the analysis of covariance were abandonment, external conditions, and psychophysical conditions. Predictor variables are those that result from the experimental manipulation (task solvability and testing conditions), and personality variants are involved in the analysis as covariances.

**Table 5: Test of Overall Model**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup><sub>Adjusted</sub></b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>
Abandonment	0.553	0.306	0.21	<b>3.188</b>	0
External conditions	0.681	0.463	0.389	<b>6.239</b>	0
Psycho-physical conditions	0.638	0.407	0.325	<b>4.96</b>	0

By testing total model, the results indicating that the relation of predictor variables with all three types of handicapping criteria is significant at the level  $p = 0.00$  were obtained, which points out the significance of the experimental manipulation and personality variables for the prediction of the selection of abandonment, external and psycho-physical conditions as self-handicapping strategies. Nevertheless, the highest percentage of common variability (46%) with predictors is shown by the external conditions. Probably, the conditions of testing and subject characteristics contributed, to the greatest extent, to the selection of the type of self-handicapping, which was imposed by the experimental manipulation itself, i.e. the task solvability and distracter presence. Contrary to this, the lowest percentage of variability with predictors is shown by the abandonment (31%). By its logic, it probably serves as self-esteem protection, for the abandonment prevents facing not only expected future failure, but also possible success.

**Table 6: Multivariate Test of Significance**

<b>Effect</b>	<b>Wilks</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>
BDI- Depression	0.928	2.386	0.074
RSS- Self-esteem	0.983	0.546	0.652
STAI –Anxiety	0.99	0.318	0.812
SELF – attraction	0.955	1.459	0.231
SELF – work efficacy	0.951	1.593	0.197
SELF - intellectual efficacy	0.981	0.599	0.617
SELF - negative aspects	0.962	1.201	0.314
SHS – verbal excuses	0.986	0.429	0.733
SHS – procrastination	0.996	0.117	0.95
SHS – internal handicap	0.908	<b>3.091</b>	0.031
with distract/ without distract	0.576	<b>22.605</b>	0
solvable tasks / unsolvable tasks	0.743	<b>10.582</b>	0
interactions	0.985	0.452	0.717

In the prediction of criteria variables, variables resulting from the experimental manipulation (testing conditions and task difficulty) have been more significant in

relation to variables from the perspective of personality (depression and psycho-physical condition as the self-handicapping strategy).

**Table 7: Univariate test of significance**

Effect	Abandonment		External conditions		Psycho-physical conditions	
	F	p	F	p	F	p
BDI- Depression	0.411	0.523	1.322	0.253	<b>5.423</b>	0.022
RSS – Self-esteem	0.94	0.335	0.524	0.471	0.045	0.833
STAI- Anxiety	0.022	0.883	0.06	0.807	0.191	0.663
SELF – attraction	3.533	0.063	2.846	0.095	3.825	0.053
SELF – work efficacy	0.028	0.869	3.327	0.071	1.833	0.179
SELF – intellectual efficacy	0.034	0.854	1.31	0.255	0.856	0.357
SELF - negative aspects	1.416	0.237	2.794	0.098	3.515	0.064
SHS – verbal excuses	0	0.979	0.54	0.464	0.649	0.422
SHS – procrastination	0.118	0.732	0.026	0.873	0.242	0.624
SHS – internal handicap	<b>8.574</b>	0.004	<b>5.69</b>	0.019	<b>6.773</b>	0.011
with distractors / without distractors	1.873	0.174	<b>28.956</b>	0	1.097	0.298
solvable tasks / unsolvable tasks	<b>13.252</b>	0	<b>28.484</b>	0	<b>28.449</b>	0
interactions	0.554	0.459	0.073	0.788	0	0.989

Predictors that have impact to all three types of handicaps provided in this research are (un)solvability of tasks and psychophysical condition as self-handicapping strategy.

The selection of the abandonment as the handicap during the experiment is impacted by only one variable resulting from experimental manipulation, which is task (un)solvability, and from the perspective of personality – psycho-physical condition as the self-handicapping strategy.

The selection of external conditions as the handicap in the course of experiment is also impacted by the task (un)solvability and poor experimental conditions. From the perspective of personality, significant variables are psycho-physical condition as well as the self-handicapping strategy.

The selection of the psycho-physical conditions as the handicap in the course of the experiment is impacted by only one variable resulting from the experimental manipulation, which is the task (un)solvability. The psycho-physical condition as the self-handicapping strategy and depression occur as the predictors of this handicap from the perspective of personality.

**Table 8: Basic Statistics for Significant Categorical Predictors**

<b>Crircia</b>	<b>Predictors</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>s</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>-95%</b>	<b>+95%</b>
Abandonment	solvability of tasks	solvable	-0.489	1.133	0.154	-0.798	-0.179
		unsolvable	0.477	1.568	0.213	0.049	0.905
External conditions	presence of the distractors	with	-0.524	1.261	0.175	-0.875	-0.173
		without	0.572	1.458	0.195	0.182	0.963
	solvability of tasks	solvable	0.608	1.419	0.193	0.221	0.996
		unsolvable	-0.519	1.298	0.177	-0.874	-0.165
Psycho-physical conditions	solvability of tasks	solvable	0.76	1.9	0.259	0.241	1.278
		unsolvable	-0.759	1.717	0.234	-1.228	-0.29

The presence of the distractors as a form of the experimental manipulation impacts the fact that external conditions are evaluated as worse. Similarly to this, the task solvability, which has been also varied experimentally, impacts the selection of the abandonment as the self-handicapping strategy, but also that the external and psycho-physical conditions are evaluated as worse. At the same time, this is the most robust factor.

**Table 9: Coefficients - Basic Statistics for Significant Continuous Predictors**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Covariance</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>BETA</b>
Withdrawal	SELF – attraction	0.266	0.184
	SHS–internal handicap	0.386	0.268
External circumstances	SELF – work efficacy	0.276	0.188
	SHS– internal handicap	-0.281	-0.192
Psychophysical state	BDI- depression	-0.51	-0.262
	SELF – attraction	-0.346	-0.177
	SELF - negative aspects	0.327	0.167
	SHS – internal handicap	-0.43	-0.22

The subjects who select the abandonment as the handicap in the course of the experiment, achieve low scores at the attraction dimension of self-concept, i.e. the impression they make on others, and they tend to use the psycho-physical condition as the self-handicapping strategy.

The subjects who select the external conditions as the explanation for failure in the course of the experiment, tend more toward the use the psycho-physical condition as the self-handicapping strategy, to some higher extent. They also demonstrate the tendency to evaluate their working efficiency as high. At the same time, this means that the conditions in which the tasks were solved have been suitable to the subjects who actually evaluate their working efficiency as low.

## **DISCUSSION**

A primary aim of this study was to test the assumption whether subjects when anticipated failure would choose one of the three possible handicaps, consistent with the estimated personality traits. This assumption is confirmed. Namely, both the experimental manipulation and the personality traits emerged as predictors of all three types of handicaps. Possible handicaps during the experiment were the withdrawal, psychophysical state and external circumstances.

The withdrawal presents the final instance on the dimension of lack of effort, which can serve as a useful impediment to performance and thus obscure ability inferences based upon failing outcomes. The individual who expects to fail will reduce effort and thus minimize the likelihood of an attribution of low ability (Frankel & Snyder, 1978 according to Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985). In this experiment, the withdrawal is, as well as other provided handicaps, significantly related to the difficulty of the tasks. The direction of relation points out that those subjects faced with potential failure tend to give up.

Two personality traits predicted withdrawal - internal handicap and low attractiveness as self-concept. This handicap use persons who usually demonstrate the tendency to the self-handicapping, as well as those who evaluate themselves as less attractive in relation to other people. Their estimate that they are less likable may be related to the self-handicapping in two ways. They may select this final measure of handicapping because they do not care what impression they will make, which may be the reflection of the psycho-pathological manner. But, these individuals may, also, manifest their desperate attempt to preserve their own self-esteem preceding unavoidable failure.

In this research, the withdrawal was evaluated through the question referring to further task solving. It is important to emphasise that the subjects who decided not to continue participation in the research did not express this explicitly. Namely, none of them stood up and said that he/she didn't want to continue. After the experimental tasks, all participants continued to wait and expect the rest of the tasks. It is possible that the answer to the question about further participation represents verbally expressed opposition (or aggression). However, this verbal withdrawal is also the self-handicapping strategy, providing the alibi for failing afterwards. By this strategy subjects indirectly demonstrate that they will not make effort during the rest of experiment.

The external circumstances is the self-handicapping strategy, which, according to the previous researches, costs a person the least, but, at the same time, this is also the least convincing strategy (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985). The subject's decision to use the external circumstances as the handicap was influenced by the task solvability and objectively poor circumstances. The external circumstances as the handicap were most frequently used by the subjects who also expressed internal handicapping like trait and high work-efficacy. It is possible that those are the individuals who are self-handicapping only if necessary. These persons believed in their diligence,

tidiness, and responsibility. Probably, the research circumstances disturbed them the most. The poor circumstances were the attack to their effort, the need for order and responsible attitude to the task solving. Having high opinion of their work-efficacy, they “rebelled” against the objectively poor conditions, because their virtues could not be expressed. It is possible that this maneuver is used only when it is necessary, like in this experiment.

The subjects who used the psychophysical state as the handicap, also expressed high score on the internal handicapping like trait. At the same time, they are also more depressive and they achieve high scores at the attractiveness as self-concept. The handicapping criterion regarding the search of the alibi to one's own psychophysical state is not precisely operationalised. Namely, the objective of this research was not to examine individual self-handicapping patterns of the psychophysical state. For this purpose, none of the instruments that would have the function esteemed of the anxious state, tiredness or illness. This criterion was defined through the subjective subject's experience of current condition.

The subjects with unsolvable tasks, estimated their psychophysical state as significantly worse than the subjects with solvable tasks. This is one of the most significant results of this research. Namely, internal handicaps are far more persuasive than the external ones, but they have higher price, especially when one pattern of the handicap is predominated (for example, anxiety). In this research, the individuals who used the psychophysical state as the handicap express high score on the internal handicap like trait, they are more depressive, they have low score on the attractiveness like self-concept, and their self-concept includes some negative traits, i.e. shortcomings. Probably those are the persons with self-handicapping tendency as consistent behaviour pattern in coping with potential failure, and they applied it in this experiment, when they faced unsolvable tasks.

The question remains why do persons with depressive tendencies and with negative self-concept use handicaps when expecting failure? They expressed negative view about themselves, but at the same time they didn't achieve low self-esteem scores. The self-handicapping is primarily a protective strategy, which maintains high self-esteem, so, it is necessary to make distinction between self-concept and self-esteem. Namely, the self-concept refers to the cognitive aspect of self-regard, while the self-esteem implicates both evaluative, i.e. emotional attitude to oneself. It is possible that the subjects who use the psychophysical state in this research are the persons who see their bad characteristics, they are more unhappy due to this, but they also tend to use their misfortune in the aim of self-esteem protection. Thus, their self-esteem is not necessarily decreased. They may evaluate themselves as unlikable, with a series of negative traits, but, they are still worth respecting.

In this research, the criteria variables are determined by the predictors from the experimental situation, mostly than by the predictors from personality traits. Probably experimental situation have higher role in decision to apply the self-handicapping strategy than personality traits. However, the psychometrical characteristics of the instruments applied for the evaluation of personality traits are

poor. Because present the justifiable doubt that some other instruments of the personality traits would be seen as more adequate in the prediction of this phenomenon.

The participants who use their worse psychophysical state as the alibi for the potential failure, presents reaction to the situation where the failure is realistic, and it is also predisposed by some consistent personality characteristics, such as depression or negative self-concept. It is possible that different forms of the self-handicapping, as searching for the alibi in the psychophysical state, may present the etiological basis of many psycho-pathological symptoms. Namely, Arkin and Baugardner (1985) conclude that people use attributional principles to manipulate their image by developing symptom, consuming alcohol and drugs, which enable self-serving attributions for the possible failures.

In modern psychopathology theories, the self-handicapping is also seen as the basis of disorders such as hypochondriasis (Smith et al., 1983) and somatomorphic disorders (the presence of complaints where there is no physiological basis). In one research, Baumeister (Baumeister et al., 1990) presented preliminary evidence that some people may use obesity as the self-handicapping strategy.

It is important to make distinction between this type of the handicapping and the strategies people used ad hoc, in the situation when they estimate that they will fail, such as the alibi in this research seen as worse external conditions. These strategies are, to some smaller extent, determined by personality characteristics, i.e. there is no doubt that they are the reflection of pre-formed style of facing the potential failure. Therefore, the problems that occurred during the processing of the results regarding the self-handicapping scale (SHS, Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982), may present the reflection of the inadequate attempt of the conceptualisation of the possible measure of this strategy. It seems that the attempt to operationalise the self-handicapping concept as the questionnaire, which is more applicable to the evaluation of basic personality characteristics, is not appropriate regarding the problem. Since there is the possibility for the situation characteristics to determine this strategy, some form of S-R scale could perhaps present more appropriate form of the instrument.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

When anticipated the failure, people used different forms of the self-handicapping strategies. The choose depends on the situation characteristics, but also predisposed personality traits.

It may be concluded that there are at least two types of the self-handicapping strategies. One type usually used in the situation where the people expected the failure. This is the search for the alibi in the external circumstances (if there is possibility for this) and it is probably the reflection of sound tendencies of facing possible consequences of information on their own incompetence. The second type

of the strategies presents the consistent behaviour pattern, determined by the higher degree of negative affectivity and negative image of oneself, and it is manifested in using bad psychophysical state as the alibi for the failure. The tasks in some future empirical researches of this concept should be focused to the more adequate operationalisation of the psychophysical state like strategy of self-handicapping.

## REFERENCES

- Arkin, R.M., Baumgardner, A.H. (1985). Self-handicapping. U J.H. Harvey & G. Weary (Eds.) *Attribution: Basic Issues and Applications*. London, Academic Press.
- Baumeister, R.F., Kahn, J., Tice, D.M. (1990). Obesity as a self-handicapping strategy: Personality, selective attribution of problems, and weight loss. *Journal of Social Psychology*, **130**, 121 – 123.
- Beck, A.T., Steer, R.A., Brown, G., Epstein, N. (1989). *The Beck Self-Concept Test*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Beck, A.T., Steer, R.A., Garbin, M.G. (1988). Psychometric properties of the Beck Depression Inventory: Twenty-five years of evaluation. *Clinical Psychology Review*, **8**, 77-100.
- 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.
- Brown, J.D. (1991). Accuracy and Bias in Self-Knowledge. U C.R. Snyder & D. Forsyth (Eds.) *Handbook of Social and Clinical Psychology*. New York, Pergamon Press.
- Hobden, K. & Pliner, P. (1995). Self-Handicapping and Dimensions of Perfectionism: Self-Presentation vs Self-Protection. *Journal of Research in Personality*, **29**, 461-474.
- Jones, E.E., Rhodewalt, F. (1982). *The Self-Handicapping Scale*. Department of Psychology, Princeton University.
- Rhodewalt, F., Morf, C., Hazlett, S., Fairfield, M. (1991). Self-handicapping: The Role of Discounting and Augmentation in the Preservation of Self-Esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **61**, 122 – 131.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Retrieved September 20, 2002 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/soc/rosenberg.html>
- 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.
- Spielberger, G., Gorsuch, R. & Lushene, R. (1970). *State-Trait Anxiety: Inventory Manual*, Consulting Psychologist Press, Palo Alto.
- Strube, M.J. (1986). An analysis of the Self-Handicapping Scale. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, **7**, 211-224.



## APPENDIX NO. 1: The examples of the numerical and verbal tasks designed for the purpose of the experiment

The examples were the same both for the test form with solvable and the test form with the unsolvable tasks. **The example for numerical tasks:** Write the missing number.

24	(32)	56
16	( )	38

True answer is **22**. It is necessary to subtract left number from right number to obtain the value in brackets: **56-24 = 32**. The same is with **38 – 16 = 22**.

**The example for verbal tasks:** Write down missing letters.

čo	. . .	na
----	-------	----

The true answer is **vek**. Words **čoVEK** and **VEKna** are obtained. The number of dots always reveals how many letters are missing.

**APPENDIX NO. 2: The list of questions filled in by the interviewers after they had solved “examples” in the course of the experiment.** Question 1 served as a basis for checking the success of the experimental manipulation, and questions 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7 presented the basis for the forming of the self-handicapping criteria.

**1. Do you think that you would be successful in solving these examples?**

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

**2. How do you evaluate your current psychophysical condition (tiredness, illness, anxiety...)?**

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

**3. To what extent do you think that you will be successful in task solving in the course of the examination follow-up?**

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

**5. Do you accept to solve the rest of the test?**

**6. Would it be appropriate to have the same testing conditions in the testing follow-up.**

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

**7. Would it be appropriate for you to solve the rest of the test in the current psychophysical condition?**

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

### **APPENDIX NO. 3: protocol for measuring aggressive reactions in cartoons**

## Tom and Jerry



The number of times Tom hits Jerry		Total
1) using side arms (knife, hammer...)		
2) kitchen accessories (rolling pins, pots...)		
3) without weapons		
The number of times Jerry hits Tom		Total
1) using side arms (knife, hammer...)		
2) kitchen accessories (rolling pins, pots...)		
3) without weapons		
The use of dangerous accessories (dynamite, etc.)		
The number of Tom's serious injuries		
The number of Jerry's serious injuries		
<b>Observations:</b>		
<b>We are not able to present the results of the examination of the cartoon characters' aggressive reactions due to realistic danger to cause the complaint by Warner Bros co.</b>		

## REZIME

### **SKLONOST KA SAMOHENDIKEPIRANJU U SITUACIJI OČEKIVANOG NEUSPEHA**

***Snežana Smederevac, Zdenka Novović, Petar Milin, Bojan Janičić,  
Dejan Pajić i Mikloš Biro***

Termin samohendikepiranje prvi su upotreбили Berglas i Džons (Berglas & Jones, 1978), objašnjavajući njime jednu od strategija suočavanja sa potencijalnim neuspehom. Kada je prisutna pretnja samopoštovanju, odnosno kada se očekuje neuspeh u nekoj aktivnosti, koja je najčešće povezana sa sposobnostima, osoba aktivno traži ili kreira faktore koji mogu ometati izvođenje te aktivnosti, a koji mogu poslužiti kao opravdanje za potencijalni neuspeh. Mnogi psihopatološki simptomi tumače se u svetlu samohendikepirajućih strategija - anksioznost, depresivnost, ali i upotreba alkohola ili droga.

Istraživanje koje je prikazano u ovom radu je konceptualizovano sa ciljem da se odgovori na pitanja za koje postoji ozbiljna sumnja da su zanemarena u dosadašnjim ispitivanjima samohendikepiranja. Osnovni cilj ovog istraživanja jeste utvrđivanje koju vrstu samohendikepirajućih strategija će koristiti ispitanici kada se suoče sa potencijalnim nesupezom, pod uslovom da imaju mogućnost izbora strategije.

Drugi cilj istraživanja usmeren je na ispitivanje povezanosti između vrste izabrane samohendikepirajuće strategije i osobina ličnosti.

U istraživanju je učestvovalo 120 studenata druge i treće godine psihologije. U prvoj fazi istraživanja svi subjekti su popunili bateriju testova za procenu ličnosti. U drugoj fazi eksperimenta, ispitanici su podeljeni u četiri grupe, na osnovu dva kriterijuma: rešivost zadatak iz testa inteligencije i prisustvo ometajućih činilaca tokom rešavanja zadataka. Po trideset ispitanika pripadalo je sledećim grupama: I grupa - sa rešivim zadacima i sa distraktorom (RD); sa nerešivim zadacima i sa distraktorom (ND), sa rešivim zadacima i bez distraktora (RB) i sa nerešivim zadacima i bez distraktora (NB). Kao distraktor tokom eksperimenta poslužila je buka koju su pravili dva istraživača, dok su gledali crtane filmove na TV-u, ostavljajući utisak zauzetosti istraživanjem, dizajniranim da meri agresivne reakcije junaka crtanih filmova,

U istraživanju su primenjeni sledeći instrumenti za procenu ličnosti: *Skala samohendikepiranja* (The Self-Handicapping Scale, Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982); *Bekova skala depresivnosti* (Beck et al, 1988); *Bekov self-koncept test* (The Beck Self- Concept Test, Beck et al, 1989); *Spilbergerov state – trait inventar*

*anksioznosti – trait verzija* (STAI- Spielberger et al, 1970.) i *Rozenbergova skala samopoštovanja* (Rosenberg, 1965).

Kao instrumenti uz pomoć kojih je vršena *eksperimentalna manipulacija* korišćeni su testovi koji su sadržali numeričke i verbalne zadatke, a koje je sastavio jedan od autora rada. Postojale su dve verzije testa: sa lakim i sa nerešivim zadacima.

Primenjena je Multivarijatna analiza kovarijansi. Kriterijske varijable u analizi su bile odustajanje, spoljašnji uslovi i psihofizički uslovi, kao oblici samohendikepirajućih strategija. Prediktorske varijable su varijable koje proizilaze iz eksperimentalne manipulacije (rešivost zadataka i uslovi testiranja), a varijable ličnosti su u analizu uključene kao kovarijeteti.

Rezultati istraživanja su pokazali da su kriterijske varijable u većoj meri određene prediktorima koji proizilaze iz eksperimentalne situacije, nego prediktorima iz prostora ličnosti. Na osnovu toga bi se mogao izvesti zaključak da zahtevi situacije imaju veću ulogu u odluci da se primerni samohendikepirajuća strategija od osobina ličnosti.

Može se zaključiti da postoje najmanje dve vrste samohendikepirajućih strategija. Jednu vrstu koristi većina ljudi kada se nađe u situaciji kada očekuje potencijalni neuspeh. U pitanju je traženje alibija u spoljašnjim okolnostima (ako za to postoji mogućnost) i verovatno je odraz zdravih tendencija suočavanja sa mogućim posledicama informacija o vlastitoj nekompetentnosti. Druga vrsta strategija predstavlja konzistentan obrazac ponašanja, determinisan većim stepenom negativnog afektiviteta i negativne slike o sebi, a manifestuje se u korišćenju lošeg psihofizičkog stanja kao alibija za neuspeh. Zadatke u budućim empirijskim istraživanjima ovog fenomena trebalo bi prvenstveno usmeriti upravo na adekvatniju operacionalizaciju psihofizičkog statusa ispitanika koji se hendikepiraju primenom ove strategije.