



Fragile High Self-Esteem and Self-Handicapping Behavior: The Role of Easily Activated Self-Doubt

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Introduction

- Self-esteem has become quite important in today's society, accompanied by efforts to develop and enhance high self-esteem (HSE) in particular
- Psychological research has also focused on understanding HSE, which has yielded mixed evidence for the positive effects of HSE
 - Although HSE has been associated with several benefits, recent research has also shown that the benefits of HSE are not as widespread as one might think
 - For example, HSE has been shown to be related to higher levels of aggression and defensiveness, which may indicate a darker, negative side
- *Self-handicapping* refers to intentionally hindering one's performance on a relevant task either by inadequate preparation or by engaging in activities prior to the task that are not conducive to optimal task performance
 - Self-handicapping can be used as a defensive strategy, protecting self-esteem by providing an excuse for failure
- Previous research in our lab has shown that self-handicapping is more likely among those with *fragile* HSE compared to those with *stable* HSE (Lupien, Seery, & Almonte, 2010)
 - **Fragile HSE** refers to favorable but shallow feelings of self-worth that can fluctuate or that are easily disrupted
 - **Stable HSE** refers to well anchored and secure, favorable self views
- Other previous work has provided evidence that people with fragile HSE possess easily activated self-doubt, relative to those with secure HSE (Seery, Blascovich, Weisbuch, & Vick, 2004)
 - This easily activated self-doubt may motivate self-handicapping behavior (and previously observed defensiveness in general) among those with fragile HSE

Purpose

- To extend previous research in understanding the motivation underlying defensive behaviors of those with fragile HSE during a task when there is low likelihood of success in a domain where it is possible to demonstrate one's excellence
 - In previous research, such situations have elicited the greatest defensiveness for participants with fragile HSE, and presumably most readily trigger their self-doubt
- To assess responses during task performance, we applied the biopsychosocial model of challenge and threat (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996) and measured cardiovascular responses

Biopsychosocial Model of Challenge and Threat

- Evaluations of demands and resources determine the extent to which a relatively positive motivational state (challenge) versus a negative state (threat) is experienced during a motivated performance situation
 - A goal-relevant situation in which one must act instrumentally to achieve a self-relevant objective (i.e., active goal pursuit)
- A constellation of cardiovascular responses differentiates challenge from threat

- *Challenge* occurs when personal resources meet or exceed situational demands
 - Increase in heart rate (HR) from resting baseline - heart beats faster
 - Increase in ventricular contractility (VC) - heart beats harder
 - Decrease in total peripheral resistance (TPR) - arteries dilate
 - Increase in cardiac output (CO) - heart pumps more blood
- *Threat* occurs when situational demands exceed personal resources
 - Like during challenge: increase in HR and VC
 - Unlike during challenge:
 - Increase in TPR
 - Decrease or no change in CO

Method

Participants

- 159 University at Buffalo undergraduates (80 women; 79 men)

Procedure

- **Web-Based Session**
 - Participants completed 8 web-based measures over the course of 4 days to assess stability of self-esteem
 - Instability—the degree of short-term fluctuations in state self-esteem—reflects fragile self-esteem
- **Laboratory Session**
 - Sat for a 5-minute resting baseline after having physiological sensors attached
 - Given instructions that an upcoming test only predicts exceptionally high ability
 - Completed a difficult version of the Remote Associates Test (RAT), creating a situation of low success likelihood
 - During the test, participants listened to a music clip that was described as either “detracting” or “neutral”

Dependent Variables

- Cardiovascular reactivity markers of challenge/threat
 - TPR and CO reactivity values were combined into a single index of challenge/threat (CO z-score – TPR z-score), with higher values reflecting greater challenge

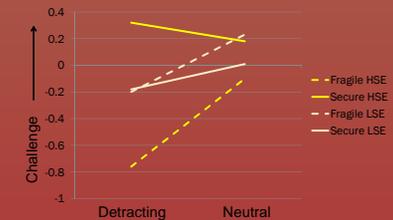
Hypotheses

- Relative to those with secure HSE, those with fragile HSE should exhibit a threat response when not provided with a handicap (i.e., when listening to the neutral clip)
 - This is presumably due to easily activated self-doubt and the fear of not having an excuse if unable to demonstrate one's excellence
- However, when given a handicap (i.e., when listening to the detracting clip) those with fragile HSE should exhibit a challenge response
 - The handicap should provide an excuse for the potential inability to demonstrate excellence during the difficult RAT

Results

Challenge/Threat

- Marginal 3-way interaction between music condition, self-esteem level and fragility ($B = 0.26, p = .085$)



Within Detracting Music Clip

- 2-way interaction between self-esteem level and fragility ($B = -0.28, p = .02$). Specifically, within LSE there was no effect for self-esteem fragility ($B = 0.01, p = .91$), whereas within HSE there was a significant effect for self-esteem fragility, such that those with fragile HSE exhibited greater threat than those with secure HSE ($B = -0.54, p = .017$)



Discussion

- The pattern of results is inconsistent with expectations. However, given these particular procedures, it is possible that participants may have misinterpreted the information we provided concerning the music to mean that the test was only able to identify exceptionally high ability *because* of the detracting music, rather than the music being a separate factor that could be utilized as an excuse-providing handicap
 - If this is the case, it is likely that we manipulated test difficulty rather than providing a potential handicap
 - Given this possibility, the results are consistent with expectations for fragile versus secure HSE during a difficult versus easy test: Those with fragile HSE should exhibit greater threat than those with secure HSE, whereas those with LSE should not be differentially affected

Conclusion

- With the addition of a follow-up study to test our reasoning for the unexpected findings, the results of this study will add to prior work linking fragile HSE to self-handicapping behavior in response to the possibility of failing to achieve excellence
- This may better explain the undesirable behavior associated with HSE in previous research