



Self-compassion and self-protection strategies: The impact of self-compassion on the use of self-handicapping and sandbagging



Lars-Eric Petersen*

Department of Psychology, University of Halle-Wittenberg, 06099 Halle (Saale), Germany

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ABSTRACT

Self-compassion is a self-regulation strategy for countering negative self-directed feelings and emotions. High self-compassionate people treat themselves with kindness, care, and concern when facing negative life experience. The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of self-compassion on the use of two self-esteem protecting strategies, self-handicapping and sandbagging. Both strategies are conducive to maintaining or enhancing one's self-esteem by attributing failures in a way that serves as a protective mechanism to self-esteem, but the strategies must take performance loss or deterioration of social relations into account. High self-compassionate people were assumed to apply strategies associated with negative consequences less frequently, given their tendency to admit mistakes and not conceal their weaknesses. In the present study, 173 participants completed questionnaires that assessed self-compassion, self-esteem, self-handicapping, and sandbagging. Consistent with our hypotheses, negative correlations were found between self-compassion and self-handicapping as well as sandbagging. A hierarchical regression analysis also revealed that self-compassion significantly predicted the use of self-handicapping and sandbagging and confirmed that high self-compassionate people have less need to use these self-protecting strategies.

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1. Introduction

Self-compassion is a relatively new construct in the field of self-concept research. The construct was introduced by Neff (2003a) as an emotionally positive self-attitude that involves treating oneself with warmth and comprehension in problematic life situations. Neff (2009) also showed the importance of self-compassion for well-being, life satisfaction, and motivation in academic settings. The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of self-compassion on the use of the two self-esteem protecting strategies, self-handicapping and sandbagging. Below the concept of self-compassion, followed by the self-protecting strategies will be presented. Thereafter the potential impact of self-compassion on the use of self-handicapping and sandbagging will be discussed.

1.1. Self-compassion

Self-compassion was advanced by Neff (2003b) as a conceptualization of a healthy attitude and relationship to oneself. Self-compassion was defined by Neff (2003b) as “being touched by and open to one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from

it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness. Self-compassion also involves offering nonjudgmental understanding to one's pain, inadequacies, and failures, so that one's experience is seen as part of the larger human experience” (p. 86). Self-compassion within this context is composed of the following three bipolar qualities: self-kindness vs. self-judgment, common humanity vs. isolation, and mindfulness vs. overidentification.

According to Neff (2003b) the three qualities can be described as follows: Self-kindness refers to the ability to be caring and supportive to oneself when managing difficult life circumstances or personal failures and to avoid being overly self-critical. When people accept painful experiences with self-kindness, they are more apt to experience their pain rationally and calmly, rather than with self-criticism and frustration. Common humanity represents a world view characterized by the recognition that all humans are imperfect and vulnerable and that suffering is part of the universal human experience rather than a personal affliction. Such an acknowledgement of a common humanity enables people to be non-judgmental and understanding when encountering adverse situations. Mindfulness is a quality that refers to the ability to observe difficult feelings and events in the present moment without exaggerating, ignoring, or suppressing them. Neff (2003a, 2003b, 2009) demonstrated that the described bipolar qualities of

* Tel.: +49 3455524373.

E-mail address: l.petersen@psych.uni-halle.de

self-compassion are highly intercorrelated and can be explained by a single overarching factor which she referred to as self-compassion (Neff, 2003a, 2003b, 2009).

A great deal of research shows that self-compassion is positively associated with desired outcomes and negatively related to undesired outcomes. For example, self-compassion is associated with numerous aspects of well-being, including higher levels of social connectedness and life satisfaction (Neff, 2009, 2011) as well as optimism and happiness (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007), lower levels of depression, anxiety and academic burn-out (Lee, 2013; Neff, 2003b; Neff, Hseih, & Dejiththirath, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007), and more positive relationship behavior and satisfaction in romantic relationships (Baker & McNulty, 2011; Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Furthermore, high self-compassionate people show more intrinsic motivation in academic settings, less fear of failure, and were more able to cope with and accept negative feedback (Neff et al., 2005). Self-compassion appeared to function as an “antidote” to ego threat (Neff, Kirkpatrick, et al., 2007), daily distress (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007), and self-criticism (Germer, 2009). Altogether, the research indicates that high self-compassionate people attempt to change circumstances that they can but accept those they cannot change.

1.2. Self-handicapping and sandbagging

According to Jones and Berglas (1978), self-handicaps are impediments to performance that people create (or claim) to protect their perceived competence which in turn maintains or enhances their self-esteem. These impediments constitute attempts by self-handicappers to select or create settings in which feedback on performance is ambiguous. If they fail, attribution to poor ability can be discounted because the impediment serves as a potential cause. In the unexpected event of success, self-handicappers' sense of competency is enhanced, because they displayed a good performance despite the handicap. Based on Leary and Shepperd (1986), handicapping behavior comprises two types: Behavioral handicaps and self-reported handicaps. Behavioral handicaps refer to actual behaviors that would impede a performance, for example, drug and alcohol consumption (Higgins & Harris, 1988), effort withdrawal or reduction (Rhodewalt & Fairfield, 1991) and decrease in practice (Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer, 1984). Self-reported handicaps, on the other hand, refer to claims of handicaps before a performance, for example, reporting high social anxiety (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). Uysal and Knee (2012) proposed a third form, trait self-handicapping, which assessed by the Self-Handicapping Scale (Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982). According to the scale items, trait self-handicapping reflects a more chronic and habitual self-handicapping.

Research has shown that only a moderate or occasional use of self-handicapping strategies will protect or enhance the self-esteem. A reduction of the pressure to succeed by a suitable self-handicapping strategy can help a person to work without anxiety on a task and thus have a positive impact on the performance and on the self-esteem (Deppe & Harackiewicz, 1996; Sanna & Mark, 1995). The excessive use of self-handicapping strategies, however, leads at least in the long term to more disadvantages than advantages. Self-handicapping behaviors, such as taking drugs or effort withdrawal, increase the risk of failure in achievement situations (Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998) and can also cause social problems. In this regard, Rhodewalt, Sanbonmatsu, Tschanz, Feick, and Waller (1995) showed that people claiming to have used self-handicapping strategies before working on a task in an experimental setting received less favorable feedback than people performing at the same level but who had not offered excuses.

Gibson and Sachau (2000) define sandbagging as “a self-presentational strategy involving the false prediction or feigned demonstration of inability” (p. 56). Research by Baumeister and colleagues (Baumeister, 1984; Baumeister, Hamilton, & Tice, 1985) suggests that one's expectations of success facilitate performance, whereas other people's expectations of success inhibit performance. People using the sandbagging strategy attempt to influence the expectations of others by creating artificially low expectations for their performance. Sandbagging thus offers the advantage of reducing the performance pressure and provides a low baseline for the assessment of one's subsequent performance through other people.

Sandbagging could protect and enhance self-esteem by lowering the performance pressure and by the perception of performance results that is much better than predicted by the performer and expected by the audience. In addition to these positive aspects, the application of the sandbagging strategy also has some negative effects. First, people classified as high sandbaggers have been shown to limit themselves to consider and explore their abilities (Gibson, 2007). Gibson showed that high sandbaggers attempt to avoid self-relevant information when it would be made public. This could hamper the accurate self-perception of one's strengths and weaknesses. Second, Gibson, Sachau, Doll, and Shumate (2002) showed that sandbaggers who predicted lower performance scores in a sports task performed worse in the actual competition, which suggests that predicting worse performance could in some cases also work as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finally, the use of the sandbagging strategy may also lead to the deterioration of social relationships, if evaluators, opponents, or the audience detect the deceptive intent of the claims of inability, low levels of training, or skill.

1.3. Self-compassion and self-enhancing strategies

An essential characteristic of self-compassionate people is attributing experiences primarily to themselves and comparing their abilities and achievements less with others in contrast to low self-compassionate people (Neff, 2011). Comparing with other people is also important for people using self-handicapping and sandbagging strategies. Clearly, though, people with high self-compassionate qualities tend to use these strategies less than people with low self-compassion qualities. Furthermore, individuals with high self-compassion spend less time defending their self-worth and more on gaining experience (Neff & Vonk, 2009), and high self-compassionate people are more willing to admit their own mistakes and hide their weaknesses from themselves and others less than low self-compassionate people (Neff, Rude, et al., 2007). Based on the reviewed findings, self-compassion should therefore be a negative predictor of both self-worth protecting strategies.

In review of the relevant literature, a clear difference emerges between self-handicapping and self-compassion behaviors and their respective outcomes. In this regard, Zuckerman et al. (1998) found that self-handicapping is related to self-focused rumination, self blame and the usage of coping strategies implying withdrawal, and negative focus. Further, Zuckerman and Tsai (2005) reported that self-handicapping results in a loss in competence satisfaction and in intrinsic motivation. In contrast, high self-compassion people exhibit more adaptive perceptions and behaviors. People with a high level of self-compassion have a greater ability to assess their own skills and greater knowledge about their own competences than people low in self-compassion. After failures, they also attempt to learn from their mistakes to improve their ability to face new challenges (Neff et al., 2005).

Numerous studies have also explored the relationship of self-compassion and sandbagging with goal orientation. For example, Gibson and Sachau (1997) found that prior to performance, high

sandbaggers reported higher levels of anxiety than low sandbaggers. Gibson and Sachau (2000) suggested that high sandbaggers might view performance situations as unfortunate opportunities to harm their identity, whereas low sandbaggers view performance situations as good opportunities to demonstrate their abilities. In contrast, several studies have found that self-compassion correlates positively with mastery goals and negatively with performance-avoidance goals (Akin, 2008; Neff et al., 2005). These findings provide support for advancing the notion that low self-compassionate people such as high sandbaggers avoid being in unsuccessful performance situations and feel guilty when they fail, whereas people with high levels in self-compassion should react similar to low sandbaggers and should view performance situations as a chance to learn and grow as opposed to becoming consumed by fear about the possibility of negative outcomes.

Given that self-compassion has been shown to be moderately associated with self-esteem (Hupfeld & Ruffieux, 2011; Leary et al., 2007) it is important to show that correlations between self-compassion and other constructs hold true even when controlling for existing levels of self-esteem. For example, when controlling for self-esteem, self-compassion was still a significant predictor of optimism and positive affect (Neff & Vonk, 2009), and self-compassion still was negatively correlated with depression and anxiety (Neff, 2003a). In the present study, the simultaneous inclusion of self-esteem and self-compassion is not only important because of the overlap of the two constructs, but also because existing studies showed significant negative correlations between self-esteem and self-handicapping as well as self-esteem and sandbagging (Gibson & Sachau, 2000). The aim of the present study was to examine whether a negative correlation exists between self-compassion and self-handicapping as well as sandbagging even when controlling for self-esteem.

The following three hypotheses were formed:

Hypothesis 1: A negative correlation will be found between self-esteem and the two self-worth protecting strategies self-handicapping and sandbagging.

Hypothesis 2: A negative correlation will be found between self-compassion and the two self-worth protecting strategies self-handicapping and sandbagging.

Hypothesis 3: Self-compassion will be a significant predictor of the self-worth protecting strategies self-handicapping and sandbagging even when controlling for self-esteem.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 173 students at the University of Halle-Wittenberg (65% female, 35% male), the majority of which was psychology students. The students participated voluntarily or received experimental credits for their participation. The participants were between 18 and 30 years old, with an average age of 22.32 ($SD = 2.88$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Self-compassion

Self-compassion was measured with Neff (2003a) Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), using the German version by Hupfeld and Ruffieux (2011). The German version produced results comparable to results using the original six-factor scale and produced expected associations with indicators of subjective well-being (Hupfeld & Ruffieux, 2011). The scale consists of 26 items. Neff (2003b) reported for the scale a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.92, Hupfeld

and Ruffieux (2011) reported for the German version a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, and in the present study Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

2.2.2. Self-esteem

To assess self-esteem, the German version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Collani & Herzberg, 2003) was administered. The German version showed a single-factor structure and produced expected associations with indicators of optimism, hopelessness and self-efficacy (Collani & Herzberg, 2003; Ferring & Filipp, 1996). The scale assesses global self-esteem with 10 items. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.85 was reported by von Collani and Herzberg, and in the present study Cronbach's alpha was 0.91.

2.2.3. Self-handicapping

Self-handicapping was measured with the Self-Handicapping Scale by Jones and Rhodewalt (1982). The scale consists of 25 items. Rhodewalt reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.79, and in the present study Cronbach's alpha was 0.81.

2.2.4. Sandbagging

Sandbagging was measured with the Sandbagging Scale by Gibson and Sachau (2000). The scale consists of 12 items. Gibson and Sachau (2000) report a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.74, and in the present study Cronbach's alpha was 0.81.

2.3. Procedure

All participants completed a demographic survey for data on age, gender, and field of study, and then completed the four assessments for self-compassion, self-esteem, self-handicapping and sandbagging.

2.4. Data analysis

First, correlations between the predictor variables, control variables and criterions were conducted. Second, hierarchical regression analyses were performed with self-handicapping or sandbagging entered as criterion variable. In the first step, age and gender were entered as predictors, in the second step self-esteem was entered, and in the third step self-compassion.

3. Results

3.1. Correlations

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the variables. The self-esteem protecting strategies, self-handicapping and sandbagging, correlated positively with each other ($r = 0.37, p < 0.01$). A fairly strong correlation was found between self-esteem and self-compassion ($r = 0.66, p < 0.01$) which is in the range of $r = 0.59$ – 0.68 reported in the literature (Neff, 2003a; Neff & Vonk, 2009). Self-esteem correlated negatively with self-handicapping ($r = -0.53, p < 0.01$) as well as with sandbagging ($r = -0.35, p < 0.01$), thus confirming Hypothesis 1. Furthermore, self-compassion correlated negatively with the self-esteem protecting strategies self-handicapping ($r = -0.47, p < 0.01$) and sandbagging ($r = -0.38, p < 0.01$), thus Hypothesis 2 was also supported.

3.2. Hierarchical regression analysis (Criterion: Self-handicapping)

Table 2 shows the results of the hierarchical regression analysis for the criterion variable self-handicapping. The control variables, age and gender, entered in step 1 explained 6% of the total variance in the criterion variable. The regression weight for gender was

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the variables.

Variable	M	SD	SK	SC	SE	SH	SB	Age	Gender
SC	3.50	0.59	−0.15	–					
SE	3.03	0.46	−0.62	0.66**					
SH	3.27	0.49	0.04	−0.47**	−0.53**	–			
SB	3.56	0.76	0.08	−0.38**	−0.35**	0.37**	–		
Age	22.32	2.88	–	0.02	−0.01	0.12	−0.09	–	
Gender	1.35	0.48	–	0.30**	0.20**	−0.18*	−0.17*	0.14	–

Note: $N = 173$, SC, self-compassion; SE, self-esteem; SH, self-handicapping; SB, sandbagging. SC, SH and SB values can range from 1 to 6 and for SE values can range from 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating more self-compassion, more self-handicapping, more sandbagging and higher self-esteem. Age in years, Gender: 1 = female, 2 = male, SK = Skewness.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2
Regression analyses with self-handicapping as the criterion.

Predictor analysis	Self-handicapping		
	Step 1: β	Step 2: β	Step 3: β
<i>Step 1</i>			
Age	0.15	0.13	0.13
Gender	−0.20*	−0.10	−0.06
<i>Step 2</i>			
Self-esteem		−0.51***	−0.38***
<i>Step 3</i>			
Self-compassion			−0.21*
ΔR^2		0.24	0.03
ΔF		59.18***	5.82*
Overall R^2	0.06	0.30	0.33
F	4.9**	24.12***	20.07***
df (regression, residual)	2, 169	3, 168	4, 167

Note: $N = 173$.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.005$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

significant ($\beta = -0.20$, $p < 0.05$), but the regression weight for age was not ($\beta = 0.15$, *ns*). Entering self-esteem in step 2 led to a significant regression weight ($\beta = -0.51$, $p < 0.001$) and produced a change in R^2 of 0.24, $p < 0.001$, showing a significant influence of self-esteem on the criterion. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, self-compassion entered in step 3, led also to a significant regression weight ($\beta = -0.20$, $p < 0.05$) and produced an additional change in R^2 of 0.03, $p < 0.05$.

3.3. Hierarchical regression analysis (Criterion: Sandbagging)

Table 3 shows the results of the hierarchical regression analysis for the criterion sandbagging. In the first step, age and gender explained 4% of the variance. The regression weight for gender was significant ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < 0.05$), the regression weight for age was not significant ($\beta = -0.07$, *ns*). In step 2, self-esteem was entered and led to a significant regression weight ($\beta = -0.33$, $p < 0.001$) and produced a significant change in R^2 of 0.10, $p < 0.001$, indicating a significant influence of self-esteem on sandbagging. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, self-compassion entered in step 3 also showed a significant regression weight ($\beta = -0.25$, $p < 0.05$) and produced a significant change in R^2 of 0.03, $p < 0.05$.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyze the influence of self-compassion on the use of self-handicapping and sandbagging. Both strategies make it possible for people to attribute possible failures

Table 3
Regression analyses with sandbagging as the criterion.

Predictor analysis	Sandbagging		
	Step 1: β	Step 2: β	Step 3: β
<i>Step 1</i>			
Age	−0.07	−0.08	−0.08
Gender	−0.16*	−0.10	−0.05
<i>Step 2</i>			
Self-esteem		−0.33***	−0.17
<i>Step 3</i>			
Self-compassion			−0.25*
ΔR^2		0.10	0.03
ΔF		19.87***	6.66*
Overall R^2	0.04	0.14	0.17
F	3.07*	8.90***	8.56***
df (regression, residual)	2, 169	3, 168	4, 167

Note: $N = 173$.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.005$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

in a way that ensures protection for their self-esteem. For this reason, the connection between self-esteem and self-handicapping as well as sandbagging has received considerable attention in the literature. People with low self-esteem have a need to protect their self from further devaluation (Petersen, Stahlberg, & Frey, 2006). This argumentation has been supported by studies that found significant negative correlations between self-esteem and self-handicapping and between self-esteem and sandbagging (Gibson & Sachau, 2000). These findings were replicated in the present study. Furthermore, negative correlations were also found between self-compassion and both self-protecting strategies. The hierarchical regression analyses revealed significant regression weights for self-compassion in addition to the traditional predictor self-esteem with the criterion variables, self-handicapping and sandbagging.

Overall, the results support the derived hypotheses and advance a more complete picture of people with high self-compassion values and how they interpret and approach ego threatening or failure situations and sustain motivation in the face of failure. High self-compassionate people attempt to gain a realistic unbiased self-view. The use of the self-esteem protecting strategies self-handicapping and sandbagging compromise people's ability to accurately see their capacities and shortcomings. High compassionate people do not need such illusions or defensiveness. They aim to have a clearer view on their strength and weaknesses, which supports findings by Neff and Vonk (2009). When facing negative results, they are better able to assume personal responsibility even in the presence of others while simultaneously being kind to themselves (Neff, Rude, et al., 2007). In contrast, people with low self-compassion tend to use self-handicapping and

sandbagging to acquire self-protection in exchange for lower performance and a non-realistic self-view. Such a self-view can be assumed to make adaptive and successful behavior less likely in the future. Further, this maladaptive behavior could result in a loss in competence satisfaction and intrinsic motivation (Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005), and low self-compassionate people might view performance situations in the same vein as sandbaggers only as unfortunate opportunities to harm their self-worth (Gibson & Sachau, 2000).

There were several limitations of this study that should be taken into account when evaluating the findings. One issue is that the participants were mainly young university psychology students, thus the results might not easily generalize to other populations. Moreover, self-handicapping and sandbagging were assessed with questionnaires which contain items that assess undesirable behaviors. Participants may answer those questions untruthfully to portray themselves as socially acceptable (social desirability bias). Subsequent studies could benefit from the measurement of self-handicapping and sandbagging behaviors in experimental settings. Another potential limitation can be seen in the high correlation between self-compassion and self-esteem. The observed correlation ($r = 0.66$) fits in the range of correlation coefficients detected in other studies from 0.56 (Leary et al., 2007) to 0.75 (Hupfeld & Ruffieux, 2011). These correlations raise questions regarding the discriminant validity of these two constructs. Self-compassion, however, can be distinguished from self-esteem on a theoretical and empirical level. The most important conceptual difference is that self-esteem is evaluative while self-compassion is non-evaluative: Persons can be self-compassionate to themselves even when they do not feel good about themselves. Gilbert (2005) set self-esteem and self-compassion in relation to biopsychosocial systems that mediate responses to threat. He argued that self-esteem is associated with people's evaluations of their social rank and superiority, whereas self-compassion activates the self-soothing system and is associated with feelings of safety. Taking into account the patterns of relationships with other constructs, Neff (2003b, 2011) and Neff and Vonk (2009) explained the common variance of self-esteem and self-compassion in a very similar way. The variance accounted for by self-esteem reflects the positivity of one's self-view, whereas the variance accounted for by self-compassion reflects the amount of self-acceptance. Applied to the present results, high self-esteem could have made the use of self-handicapping and sandbagging unlikely because an overall positive self-view cannot be easily damaged by single events. High self-compassion, however, made the use of these two strategies unlikely, because self-compassion makes it possible to accept supposed negative experiences and feedback.

In the past, self-esteem has often been used to explain the extent that self-handicapping and sandbagging strategies are employed. The causal interpretation, however, is unclear as to whether low self-esteem leads to the use of the strategies or whether the use of strategies leads to low self-esteem. In this regard, Zuckerman and Tsai (2005) offered the following explanation of a vicious circle: People with low self-concept tend to use self-handicapping strategies, but if the degree of self-handicapping increases, then self-esteem further decreases. The causal interpretation, however, for self-compassion and the use of self-handicapping and sandbagging seems clear. Self-compassion should preclude the use of self-handicapping and sandbagging, but the causal path in the other direction that a low use of self-handicapping and sandbagging leads to self-compassion is theoretically inconceivable. The described causal direction was not tested in the current research. Future research could address this, for example, by testing the extent that existing programs for the enhancement of self-compassion (e.g. the Mindful Self-Compassion Program, Neff & Germer, 2013) leads to reductions in the use of

self-protecting strategies. Based on these considerations and the empirical findings in this study on the relationship between self-compassion and the self-esteem protecting strategies self-handicapping and sandbagging, future theoretical and empirical analysis of these strategies can benefit from considering the impact of self-compassion.

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