



The role of attachment to parents, peers and teachers in predicting academic self-handicapping of first secondary school students

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Background and Aim: Academic self-disability is one of the less known strategies used to explain failure. The aim of the present study was to investigate the role of attachment to parents, peers and teachers in predicting academic self-handicapping of first secondary students. **Methods:** This research was descriptive and correlational. The statistical population of the present study included all students (girls) of the first secondary level in Tehran in the academic year 2019-2020, which number was approximately 1840000, and 384 people were selected to determine the sample size using available sampling. The research tools included the academic self-handicapping scale, the revised list of attachment to parents and peers, and the scale of attachment to the teacher. In order to analyze the data, Pearson's correlation test and multiple linear regression were used. **Results:** The results have shown that there is a negative and significant relationship between attachment to parents, peers and teachers (acceptance and non-rejection) and self-disability ($P < 0.01$). Also, the results of the regression analysis showed that attachment to parents and peers explain 0.56 percent of academic self-handicapping. attachment to teachers has no role in this prediction. **Conclusion:** It can be concluded that attachment to parents and peers played a role in predicting students' academic self-handicapping, but attachment to teachers has no effect on it.



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Introduction

Academic self-handicapping is a lesser-known strategy used to explain failure (Dogana, Bradshaw, Carroll, Rattigan, & Altman, 2009). Berglas and Jones (1978) defined self-handicapping as behaviors or choices that allow an individual to attribute failure to external factors and success to internal factors. This active strategy increases opportunities to externalize failure and internalize success (Mansournia & Karimi, 2020). Factors such as attachment are related to this variable (Afshari, 2022). Berglas and Jones (1978) proposed two primary origins of self-handicapping: the first being uncertainty about one's competence due to a history of receiving performance-unrelated rewards; the second being a lack of unconditional care and love. Grivon et al. (2000) noted that developmental factors are key to self-handicapping tendencies and that there is strong theoretical support for the relationship between attachment styles and self-handicapping. They further stated that weak parental care weakens parent-child bonds, whereas strong attachment enhances self-worth in adulthood.

Given the above, it becomes evident that family environmental factors are paramount when discussing the antecedents of self-handicapping. Within the family context, one significant area of focus for specialists is establishing emotional bonds during development with significant others and revealing disparities in emotional turmoil experienced during disruptions in these relationships (Davis, Morris, & Drake, 2016). Attachment to parents is established through parental attunement to the child's needs, laying the groundwork for their initial perceptions of relationships and the basis of verbal and non-verbal communication (Reiss, 2016). Attachment relationships serve determinative functions that facilitate the attachment figure's availability to the child, enabling the child to use this relationship to foster a sense of security and independently explore their surroundings. Such secure exploration provides experiences that pave the way for mature and independent functioning (Hunter & Mander, 2016). Various studies have shown a relationship between parental attachment and academic self-handicapping (Jensen & Demir, 2020; Whitaker, 2016; Kliteman & Moscrop, 2010;

Waant & Kietman, 2006; Soleymani, Habibi Kalthor, & Farid, 2020).

Furthermore, according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, any developmental change originates from complex and progressive interactions between the active, developing bio-psycho-social organism (such as the learner) and people, objects, and symbols (such as teachers, classmates, learning tasks, goals) in proximal environments (such as the educational microsystem; schools or universities). Given the broad scope of environmental concepts and the significant influence of peer groups and teachers, especially during adolescence, attachment to peers and teachers is also examined as essential components in the environmental context (Schopps, Monaco, Cotuli, & Montoya Castilla, 2020).

Peer attachment is a social, interpersonal, and emotional phenomenon that evolves from and is based on parental attachment. It can be seen as a complementary aspect of attachment to others and as a necessary transition in the psychosocial development process. The experience of peer attachment can solidify the quality of parental attachment and serve as an indicator for predicting the quality of attachment in post-adolescent developmental stages and subsequent emotional-social life quality (Schopps et al., 2020). It appears that peer attachment experiences, through enriching or weakening security, trust, and intimacy, can serve as successful or failed practices in independence-seeking and social adjustment, mediating the relationship between parental attachment and academic capabilities (Elena, Doinita, & Dorinamaria, 2015). Various studies have indicated a relationship between peer attachment and academic self-handicapping (Anli, 2019; Hejazi, Ejei, & Ranjbar, 2020).

Another important aspect of attachment during adolescence is the relationship with teachers (Tebian, Han, & Howabner, 2014). The teacher-student relationship acts as an affective-contextual factor in the learner's subsequent learning (Robinson, 2022). The quality of this relationship fosters a type of attachment, encompassing being understood and supported by teachers (Rezai Sharif, Ghazi Tabatabai Hejazi, & Ejei, 2020). This attachment creates a sense of security in the classroom, allowing students to explore freely. While all students

seek security, attachment helps them balance this need with their intrinsic motivation for environmental exploration. Additionally, attachment lays the foundation for students' sociability. In a secure attachment style, students engage positively and extensively with teachers (Len & Radin, 2020). Positive interactions with teachers enhance learning and educational processes, suggesting that positive relationships with teachers are linked to reduced educational issues such as academic self-handicapping (Len, Ma, & Ma, 2021).

Various research evidences highlight the influential role of family, peers, and teachers in students' academic self-handicapping (Len et al., 2021). According to Bandura's social cognitive theory and studies based on this theory, environmental factors influence individual performance by affecting individual factors such as self-belief, cognitive strategies, and motivation. Consequently, academic self-handicapping, as an individual factor influenced by the perception of the social environment and derived from educational support, can be considered a significant factor. Particularly, evidence suggests that this skill in students leads to behavior management and effective coping with stressful educational events (Len & Radin, 2020). Therefore, this research aims to investigate the mechanisms of how environmental and individual factors influence academic self-handicapping, addressing the question, "Do attachments to parents, peers, and teachers play a role in predicting academic self-handicapping in middle school students"?

Method

The present study is applied in aim and descriptive-correlational in data collection method. The population comprised all female middle school students in Tehran during the 2020-2021 academic year, approximately 1,840,000 students. The sample size was determined to be 384 students using convenience sampling, based on the Krejcie and Morgan table.

Materials

1. Revised Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA): Developed by Armsden and Greenberg (1987), this 24-item inventory assesses attachment to parents (12 items) and peers (12 items) on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly agree=5 to strongly disagree=1). Items 7 and 19 are scored

inversely. The reliability and validity of the questionnaire have been confirmed in various studies (Liebel, 2007). In a study by Jokar and Salimi (2011), factor analysis was used to validate the questionnaire. Two factors were extracted based on the slope of the scree plot and eigenvalues greater than one. Items 4, 21, 23, and 24 were removed due to low factor loading. The KMO coefficient was 0.86, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was 2985.72. Cronbach's alpha for the attachment to parents dimension was 0.88, and for the peer attachment dimension, it was 0.77.

2. Teacher Attachment Scale: The "Teacher as Secure Base" scale is a 25-item self-report measure that evaluates students' perceptions of their teachers in terms of positive (availability, acceptance) and negative (rejection) aspects. The availability and acceptance subscale includes 17 items assessing the perception of teacher availability when needed. The rejection subscale has 8 items assessing the perception of teacher rejection. Students rate each item on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all applicable; 7 = very applicable). The scale has high internal consistency Cronbach's alphas (availability/acceptance = 0.96; rejection = 0.87).

3. Academic Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS): This 25-item scale, designed by Jones and Rhodewalt (1982), correlates with related constructs like excuse-making and lack of effort, with correlations ranging from 0.27 to 0.60 and internal consistency ranging from 0.28 to 0.70. The scale was translated into Persian by Heydari et al. (2009), and its psychometric properties were examined. Factor analysis revealed that 23 items loaded onto three factors: negative mood, lack of effort (indicative of behavioral self-handicapping), and the combination of negative mood with excuse-making (indicative of claimed self-handicapping). Test-retest reliability was 0.86, and internal consistency ranged from 0.60 (excuse-making subscale) to 0.72 (negative mood subscale). Heydari et al. (2009) found that the factors, subscales, and total score of self-handicapping had high and significant correlations, ranging from 0.47 (effort factor) to 0.86 (total score). The internal consistency check revealed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.6 for effort and excuse-making factors and 0.77 for the total self-handicapping score.

Implementation

Inclusion criteria were informed consent to participate in the research, answering all relevant questions, being female, studying at the middle school level, and exclusion criteria included non-response to questionnaire items.

Results

Among the participants in this study, 26.6% (102 students) were in seventh grade, 35.9% (138 students) in eighth grade, and 37.5% (144 students) in ninth grade. Regarding fathers'

education level, 18.2% (70 respondents) had a diploma or less, 17.7% (68 respondents) had an associate degree, 54.7% (210 respondents) had a bachelor's degree, and 9.4% (36 respondents) had a master's degree or higher. For mothers, 11.7% (45 respondents) had a diploma or less, 16.9% (65 respondents) had an associate degree, 65.1% (250 respondents) had a bachelor's degree, and 6.3% (24 respondents) had a master's degree or higher.

Table 1. Description of variables by mean and standard deviation

Variable	Mean	SD	Max-min
Attachment to parents	35/37	8/05	55-16
Attachment to peers	33/97	8/37	55-16
Acceptance	34/74	10/10	60-15
Non-rejection	21/45	8/38	49-15
Attachment to teacher	66/92	13/80	101-30
Negative mood	25/16	5/84	39-11
Lack of effort	21/33	3/83	34-11
Excuse-making	20/75	5/18	33-10
Self-handicapping	67/12	11/64	35-104

Table 1 presents the correlation coefficients and significance between variables of parental attachment, peer attachment, teacher attachment

(acceptance and non-rejection), and academic self-handicapping (negative mood, lack of effort, and excuse-making).

Table 2. Correlation matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Attachment to parents	1								
2. Attachment to peers	0/58**	1							
3. Acceptance	0/22**	0/22**	1						
4. Non-rejection	0/22**	0/21**	0/06	1					
5. Attachment to teacher	0/31**	0/30**	0/79**	0/61**	1				
6. Negative mood	-0/77**	-0/53**	-0/23**	-0/15**	-0/27**	1			
7. Lack of effort	-0/47**	-0/40**	-0/22**	-0/12*	-0/24**	0/51**	1		
8. Excuse-making	-0/43**	-0/38**	-0/07	-0/17**	-0/15**	0/49**	0/39**	1	
9. Self-handicapping	-0/71**	-0/55**	-0/20**	-0/18**	-0/27**	0/85**	0/72**	0/78**	1

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Based on the correlation matrix results in Table 2, there is a significant relationship between parental attachment and academic self-handicapping ($r = -0.71$, $p < 0.01$), between peer attachment and academic self-handicapping ($r = -0.55$, $p < 0.01$), and between teacher attachment and academic self-handicapping ($r = -0.27$, $p < 0.01$).

Furthermore, multiple regression analysis using a simultaneous method was conducted to examine the role of variables of attachment to parents, peers, and teachers (acceptance and non-rejection) in predicting academic self-handicapping. The variance inflation factor for

all independent variables was less than 10 and within the desirable range (parental attachment = 6.12, peer attachment = 4.04, acceptance = 8.32, non-rejection = 5.81). The tolerance index was also greater than zero and close to one for all independent variables (parental attachment = 0.26, peer attachment = 0.88, acceptance = 0.33, non-rejection = 0.65). The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.81, falling within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5, thus accepting the assumption of independence between errors. Analysis of variance results is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of ANOVA tests

Independent variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Attachment	Regression	30898/238	4	7724/560	107/754	0/001
	Residual	24086/823	336	71/687		
	Total	54985/062	340			

According to Table 3, the significance of the calculated F-value indicates that academic self-handicapping can be predicted through

attachment to parents, peers, and teachers (acceptance and non-rejection). The regression model summary is reported in Table 4.

Table 4. Regression model summary

R	R ²	ΔR ²	SE	Durbin-watson statistics
0/750	0/562	0/557	8/46	1/81

According to Table 4, parental attachment, peer attachment, and teacher attachment (acceptance and non-rejection) could significantly predict 56.0% of academic self-handicapping ($p <$

0.05). To determine which research variables were stronger predictors of academic self-handicapping, a regression test was used, the results of which are reported in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of regression analysis to predict academic self-handicapping based on attachment to parents, peers and teachers

Independent variable	B	SE	BETA	T	Sig
Constanst	110/824	2/572	-	43/090	0/001
Attachment to parents	-0/837	0/066	-0/575	-12/599	0/001
Attachment to peers	-0/352	0/066	-0/235	-5/304	0/001
Acceptatance	0/005	0/048	0/004	0/095	0/924
Non-rejection	-0/071	0/057	-0/047	-1/231	0/219

Table 5 uses beta coefficients to determine the individual contribution of each predictor variable in explaining the variance of the criterion variable (academic self-handicapping). The results indicate that parental attachment (-0.57) and peer attachment (-0.235) significantly predict academic self-handicapping. In this prediction, acceptance and non-rejection, which were part of teacher attachment, did not play a role.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of attachment to parents, peers, and teachers in predicting academic self-handicapping in middle school students. The results have shown that there is a significant negative relationship between parental attachment and academic self-handicapping. These findings align with those of Jensen and Demir (2020), Whitaker (2016), Kliteman and Moscrop (2010), Want and Kietman (2006), and Soleymani, Habibi Kalhor, and Farid (2020). To explain these findings, it can be said that individuals with insecure attachment styles (avoidant and ambivalent) cannot trust others

properly and find reliance in relationships challenging. These individuals are also constantly worried about rejection. When a person is anxious and lacks stability and security in emotional and interpersonal relationships, they are incapacitated from striving and concentrating to establish healthy interpersonal relationships and be consciously present in social and educational situations. This isolation and distrust in relationships, as well as disbelief in their own influence in matters, can lead to maladjustment, especially in educational contexts, resulting in self-handicapping. According to Whitaker (2016), avoidant attachment, fixed intelligence theory, and negative goal orientation significantly predict students' self-handicapping behaviors in university settings. This means that avoidant attachment, belief in fixed intelligence, and negative orientation are positively related to self-handicapping, while secure attachment, belief in the malleability of intelligence, and positive orientation are negatively related to it. Individuals with insecure attachment grow up with schemas that are dysfunctional and pave the way for many future problems. They cannot establish secure and satisfying attachments with

others, believing their needs for stability, security, affection, love, and belonging are unmet. These individuals have characteristics of emotional instability, unpredictability, untrustworthiness, and irregularity. They believe they are incapable of controlling their impulses, cannot delay immediate needs for future benefits, and cannot overlook others' mistakes. Due to these negative interpretations, they tend to self-handicap, attributing it to external factors because of their inability to connect with others. Low care and overprotective paternalism lead to the emergence of impostor phenomenon, which in turn leads to reduced self-confidence and self-handicapping. These researchers showed that fathers in this group impose their desires on the child, leading to the development of the impostor phenomenon in their offspring.

There is also a significant negative relationship between peer attachment and academic self-handicapping, in line with the findings of Anli (2019) and Hajazi, Azhai, and Ranjbar (2020).

In fact, validation and attachment to peers are significant negative predictors of self-handicapping. Attachment to peers means receiving a kind of social validation from an important social source and, in fact, reinforces the independence of the adolescent from the parents. Behavior that maintains harmony and continuity with the parents while reinforcing independence enhances the adolescent's perception of their capabilities in a positive way. In such conditions, the individual's self-respect is ensured within the family, strengthened in relationships with friends, and ultimately suppresses self-handicapping. As essential psychological needs, validation of independent action, especially during sensitive developmental periods, strengthens adaptability and self-belief. When independent choice of friends is valued by parents, adolescents believe in their capabilities and exhibit effective and acceptable performance in educational, social, personal, and emotional areas, which explains the reduction in self-handicapping; individuals with such internal skills do not underestimate their abilities and, with increased self-belief, adopt more positive emotions and a problem-oriented approach. This explanation is also justifiable from a social-cognitive perspective, where humans are not only affected by the environment but can also be influenced by their

cognitive processes and in turn affect the environment. Therefore, humans have agency, and this agency and validation of independence by peers are negatively related to self-handicapping. The increase in positive experiences creates a secure base, forms a foundation of positive self-belief, and thus marginalizes self-handicapping states. In an environment where attachment relationships are secure, a convincing environment is created that makes adolescents aware of the consequences of their behavior and clarifies the relationship between effort and resulting success. In such conditions, individual capabilities and positive self-feeling increase, the opposite of self-handicapping.

The relationship between teacher attachment and its components, acceptance and non-rejection, with academic self-handicapping is also significant and negative. This finding is not aligned with the research of Narimani et al. (2020), Anli (2019), and Hajazi et al. (2020).

Considering that theoretical foundations emphasize a negative relationship, this research hypothesis can be explained by stating that self-handicapping students, compared to those who are not and have higher self-worth, lack necessary skills in initiating and maintaining positive social relationships with others. Consequently, they score lower in independence and extraversion. This group also has lower self-concepts, affecting their behavior in the learning environment. They experience repeated failures and often develop unresolved beliefs about progress, causing problems that can affect their relationships with key elements of the learning environment, such as teachers, leading to tendencies towards non-compliant behaviors, one of the most significant being self-handicapping and withdrawal from efforts that could lead to positive outcomes. Given that class management and patterns are largely under the control of the teacher, one can overlook similar results and refer to the prior limitation in this connection, pointing to the research of Narimani et al. (2020), which showed significant differences between two groups in classroom behavior patterns and academic self-handicapping. In other words, students with academic self-handicapping behaviors scored higher in non-compliant classroom behavior and lower in compliant classroom behavior. However, the lack of relationship between

teacher attachment and self-handicapping could potentially be due to the recent shift to virtual education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reducing the mandatory interaction between teacher and student and diminishing the teacher's role in students' psychological-educational states. Thus, this relationship is disrupted and becomes insignificant.

Conflict of Interest

According to the authors, this article has no financial sponsor or conflict of interest.

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