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Predicting Self-Handicapping Based on Early Maladaptive Schemas, Cognitive Avoidance, and Tolerance of Ambiguity

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Abstract

Objective: The present study was conducted to predict self-handicapping based on early maladaptive schemas, cognitive avoidance, and tolerance of ambiguity.
Method: The research method was descriptive-correlational. The statistical population included all students of Islamic Azad University, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, during the 2024-2025 academic year. From this population, a sample of 150 individuals was selected using convenience sampling. The participants responded to the Young Early Maladaptive Schema Questionnaire (2005), Sexton and Dugas's Cognitive Avoidance Questionnaire (2008), McLain's Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (1993), and Midgley's Self-Handicapping Scale (2001). Data were analyzed using hierarchical regression analysis and regression coefficients.
Results: The research findings indicated that the domains of impaired autonomy and performance (β = 0.227, p = 0.01), impaired limits (β = 0.173, p = 0.01), and other-directedness (β = 0.311, p = 0.001) had a positive and significant relationship with self-handicapping. Furthermore, the regression coefficient for cognitive avoidance (β = 0.195, p = 0.01) was statistically significant, and tolerance of ambiguity (β = -0.187, p = 0.001) significantly predicted self-handicapping. Therefore, the roles of early maladaptive schemas, cognitive avoidance, and tolerance of ambiguity in students' self-handicapping are emphasized.
Conclusion: Beyond aligning with theoretical perspectives such as Young's Schema Therapy and cognitive-behavioral models, the findings highlight the importance of psychological interventions based on cognitive restructuring, increasing tolerance of ambiguity, and schema therapy in preventing self-handicapping among the student population.

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Introduction

Today, one of the most common psychological impairments and the greatest obstacle to the sense of self-efficacy among learners in educational systems is academic self-handicapping. Self-handicapping is among the personality traits that significantly impact student performance (1). Numerous studies have confirmed that self-handicapping is associated with self-satisfaction, psychological disorders, poor academic performance, and an inability to cope adaptively with challenges (2).

This term was first introduced by Jones and Berglas. This strategy is likely employed to manipulate the beliefs of others (3). In fact, in self-handicapping, an individual creates obstacles to the evaluation of their own performance so that any potential failure can be attributed to these obstacles, thereby preserving their reputation (saving face). Self-handicapping individuals prefer to use these strategies as substitutes for factors

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that might otherwise compromise their competence. In another definition, any action or choice of performance setting that allows an individual to attribute success to internal factors and failure to external factors is called self-handicapping (4). According to Uysal and Knee (2012), self-handicapping correlates with cognitive and psychological constructs, and early maladaptive schemas are among the most important cognitive constructs related to self-handicapping (4).

Therefore, among the psychological constructs that play a fundamental role in the formation and maintenance of self-handicapping behaviors are "Early Maladaptive Schemas" (EMS). These schemas are deep and enduring patterns of beliefs, emotions, and memories regarding oneself, others, and the world, typically formed during childhood within the context of early relationships (5). Certain schemas, such as failure, defectiveness, dependence, subjugation, or mistrust, may make individuals more vulnerable to failures and life challenges, driving them toward adopting maladaptive strategies like self-handicapping (6). Individuals with failure schemas often perceive themselves as worthless and helpless, approaching new situations with negative assumptions about the future.

Alongside maladaptive schemas, "Cognitive Avoidance" is another mechanism that may contribute to self-handicapping. Cognitive avoidance refers to a set of mental strategies in which an individual avoids confronting unpleasant thoughts, emotions, or memories to reduce anxiety or psychological distress. Although this strategy might seem beneficial in the short term, in the long run, it leads to the consolidation of dysfunctional beliefs, decreased self-awareness, and the adoption of more maladaptive strategies such as self-handicapping (7). In other words, rather than realistically facing challenges, the individual attempts to avoid the emotional experience and bypasses situations that might jeopardize their performance (8).

Another important cognitive variable that has gained attention in recent years is "Tolerance of Ambiguity. " Tolerance of ambiguity refers to the psychological capacity of individuals to accept situations that are uncertain, complex, or lack a definitive answer. Individuals with low tolerance of ambiguity experience anxiety, procrastination, and hesitation when faced with ambiguous situations, often employing strategies such as self-handicapping to escape the psychological stress of these circumstances (9). In an attempt to control their environment and gain certainty, they resort to behaviors that conflict with personal growth and effective performance (10). This condition can lead to a decline in performance and a sense of helplessness, particularly in academic and professional settings (11).

Given the importance of understanding the psychological mechanisms influencing self-handicapping, there is a need for research to simultaneously investigate the roles of early maladaptive schemas, cognitive avoidance, and tolerance of ambiguity in predicting this mechanism. Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the fundamental question: Can early maladaptive schemas, cognitive avoidance, and tolerance of ambiguity predict self-handicapping among students?

Afshari (2022) developed a causal model of self-handicapping based on negative self-evaluation, intolerance of ambiguity, and cognitive avoidance, with the mediating role of academic procrastination; the findings indicated that these variables play a significant role in predicting self-handicapping (12).

Ahmadi et al. (2022) conducted research on predicting tolerance of ambiguity based on early maladaptive schemas and self-handicapping; their findings showed that maladaptive schemas can decrease tolerance of ambiguity, and this reduction leads to self-handicapping behaviors (13).

Karimi et al. (2021) studied the relationship between early maladaptive schemas, cognitive avoidance, and self-handicapping, with results demonstrating that these variables significantly predict self-handicapping (7).

Furthermore, Morrison and O'Connor (2021) analyzed the relationship between cognitive avoidance, early maladaptive schemas, and tolerance of ambiguity with self-handicapping, finding that these variables can serve as predictors of self-handicapping behaviors (14).

Methodology

The present study is applied in terms of objective and descriptive-correlational in terms of method, as it examines the relationships between variables without manipulation. The statistical population consisted of all students enrolled at Islamic Azad University, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, during the 2024-2025 academic year.

According to the formula proposed by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) ($N \geq 50 + 8M$), based on the number of predictor variables entered into the regression equation and accounting for potential dropouts or distorted questionnaires, a sample size of 150 individuals was determined. These participants were selected using convenience and voluntary sampling methods.

Research Instruments

1.**Midgley and Urdan's Self-Handicapping Scale (2001):** This 6-item questionnaire measures the extent to which students utilize self-handicapping strategies. All items are scored on a 5-point scale (ranging from 1 = not at all true to 5 = very true).

*__Midgley and Urdan's Self-Handicapping Scale (2001):__ The authors reported a Cronbach's alpha

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coefficient of 0.86 for this scale. In Iran, Hashemi Sheikh Shabani (2001) reported reliability coefficients of 0.78 and 0.76 using Cronbach's alpha and split-half methods, respectively.

*__Young Early Maladaptive Schema Questionnaire (YSQ-SF, 2005):__ This 75-item questionnaire assesses 15 early maladaptive schemas: Emotional Deprivation, Abandonment/Instability, Mistrust/Abuse, Social Isolation/Alienation, Defectiveness/Shame, Failure, Dependence/Incompetence, Vulnerability to Harm or Illness, Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self, Subjugation, Self-Sacrifice, Emotional Inhibition, Unrelenting Standards/Hypercriticalness, Entitlement/Grandiosity, and Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline. Young, Klosko, and Weishaar (1986) reported Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.83 to 0.96 and test-retest reliability between 0.53 and 0.82 in non-clinical populations. The Persian version was standardized by Ahi, Mohammadifar, and Besharat at the University of Tehran, yielding Cronbach's alpha of 0.97 for females and 0.98 for males. Higher scores in a subscale indicate a higher probability of the presence of that maladaptive schema (15).

*__McLain's Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (MASTS-II):__ This 13-item scale (Type II) was developed by McLain (1993) as a revised version of the original 22-item scale. McLain reported an internal consistency of 0.82. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, and 12 are reverse-scored. Higher scores indicate greater tolerance for ambiguity, with scores above 45 representing an appropriate level. Abolghasemi and Narimani (2005) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 for the Persian version (16).

*__Sexton and Dugas's Cognitive Avoidance Questionnaire (CAQ, 2008):__ This 25-item instrument measures five cognitive avoidance strategies on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all true to 5 = Completely true):

1. Suppression of worrying thoughts (Items 1, 2, 5, 6, 14);
2. Substitution of positive thoughts (Items 4, 11, 17, 20, 25);
3. Use of distraction (Items 8, 10, 12, 13, 21);
4. Avoidance of threatening stimuli (Items 7, 9, 16, 18, 24);
5. Transformation of images into thoughts (Items 3, 15, 19, 22, 23). Sexton and Dugas reported an alpha coefficient of 0.95 and a six-week test-retest reliability of 0.85. For the Persian version, Hamidpour and Andouz reported an internal consistency of 0.86 and a two-month test-retest reliability of 0.80 (17).

To analyze the data, two levels of statistical methods were employed. In the descriptive statistics section, indices such as mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis were used. In the inferential statistics section, Pearson correlation coefficient and hierarchical regression analysis were performed using SPSS software.

Findings:

The descriptive statistics of the research are presented as follows

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample based on gender

Gender	frequency	percent
men	69	46%
women	81	54%
sum	150	100%

As shown in Table 1, 46% ($n=69$) of the respondents were male and 54% ($n=81$) were female.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of respondents by educational level

Education	frequency	percent
Undergraduate student	65	43%
Master's student	72	48%
PhD student	13	9%
sum	150	100%

As shown, 43% ($n=65$) of the respondents had a Bachelor's degree, 48% ($n=72$) had a Master's degree, and 13% ($n=9$) had a Doctoral degree.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of respondents by age

age	frequency	percent
Under 20	1	5.0%
Between 21 and 25	59	39%
Between 26 and 30	35	23%
Between 31 and 35	37	24.5%
Over 35	18	12%
sum	150	100%

As shown, 0.5% ($n=1$) were under 20 years old, 39% ($n=59$) were between 21 to 25, 23% ($n=35$) were between 26 to 30, 24.5% ($n=37$) were between 31 to 35, and 12% ($n=18$) were over 35 years old.

Table 4. Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for research variables, including early maladaptive schemas, cognitive avoidance, ambiguity tolerance, and self-handicapping.

As observed, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the variables are within the acceptable range. In the following section, the research hypotheses are examined and tested.

Hypothesis 1: Early maladaptive schemas predict self-handicapping.

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Hypothesis 2: Cognitive avoidance predicts self-handicapping.

Hypothesis 3: Ambiguity tolerance predicts self-handicapping.

The above hypotheses were tested using a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Specifically, the domains of early maladaptive schemas were entered in the first step, cognitive avoidance in the second step, and ambiguity tolerance in the third step as predictor variables into the equation predicting self-handicapping. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 5.

Table 4. Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the research variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Disconnection and Rejection Domain	18.38	3.53	0.75
Impaired Autonomy Domain	16.83	3.22	0.78
Impaired Limits Domain	15.35	2.49	0.73
Other-Directedness Domain	19.67	4.17	0.69
Overvigilance and Inhibition Domain	17.07	3.37	0.71
Cognitive Avoidance	57.14	7.51	0.82
Ambiguity Tolerance	47.03	6.94	0.79
Self-Handicapping	9.04	2.41	0.69

Table 5. Results of multiple regression analysis in predicting self-handicapping based on early maladaptive schema domains, cognitive avoidance, and ambiguity tolerance

variable	b	SE	β	t	p
Step 1 (Early Maladaptive Schemas)					
Disconnection and Rejection	0.053	0.066	0.079	0.79	0.425
Autonomy	0.169	0.063	0.227	2.67	0.01
Limits	0.139	0.056	0.173	2.50	0.01
Other-Directedness	0.214	0.062	0.311	3.38	0.001
Overvigilance	0.057	0.060	0.093	0.94	0.349
0.001=P‹ 16.85)=149 ‹5(F	, adjR²=0.347 R²=0.369				
Step 2 (Cognitive Avoidance)					
Cognitive Avoidance	0.033	0.011	0.195	2.90	0.001
0.001=P‹ 16.17)=149 ‹6(F	, adjR²=0.379 R²=0.404			0.035=ΔR²	
0.001=P‹ 8.42=ΔF					
Step 3 (Ambiguity Tolerance)					
Ambiguity Tolerance	0.034	0.012	-0.187	-2.80	0.01
0.001=P‹ 15.65)=149 , 7(F	0.436, adjR²=0.408 R²=			0.031=ΔR²	
0.001=P‹ 7.86=ΔF					

Based on the results presented in Table 5, the research hypotheses were tested as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Early maladaptive schemas predict self-handicapping.

Table 5 shows that the domains of early maladaptive schemas, entered in the first step of the prediction equation for self-handicapping, significantly predicted it ($F(5, 149) = 16.85, p = .001$). Examination of the obtained multiple correlation coefficient squared showed that the R^2 value is 0.369. This indicates that early maladaptive schemas explain 36.9% of the variance in self-handicapping. Furthermore, an examination of the regression coefficients revealed that the domains of Impaired Autonomy and Performance ($\beta = 0.227, p = .01$), Impaired Limits ($\beta = 0.173, p = .01$), and Other-Directedness ($\beta = 0.311, p = .001$) were positively and significantly related to self-handicapping. Thus, in testing the first hypothesis, it was concluded that early maladaptive schemas positively and significantly predict self-handicapping.

Hypothesis 2: Cognitive avoidance predicts self-handicapping.

Based on the results in Table 5, with the entry of cognitive avoidance into the prediction equation for self-handicapping in the second step, the R^2 value reached 0.404. This finding means that the inclusion of cognitive avoidance in the prediction equation accounted for 40.4% of the variance in self-handicapping. The R^2 change value (ΔR^2) was 0.035. This indicates that by entering cognitive avoidance into the prediction equation and controlling for the contribution of early maladaptive schemas, the amount of explained variance in self-handicapping

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increased by 3.5% ($\Delta F = 8.42, p = .001$). Examination of the regression coefficients also showed that this relationship was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.195, p = .01$). Consequently, in testing the second hypothesis, it was concluded that cognitive avoidance positively and significantly predicts self-handicapping.

Hypothesis 3: Ambiguity tolerance predicts self-handicapping.

Based on the results in Table 5, with the entry of ambiguity tolerance into the prediction equation for self-handicapping in the third step, the R^2 value reached 0.436. This finding signifies that the inclusion of ambiguity tolerance in the prediction equation accounted for 43.6% of the variance in self-handicapping. The R^2 change value (ΔR^2) was 0.031. This indicates that by entering ambiguity tolerance into the prediction equation and controlling for maladaptive schemas and cognitive avoidance, the amount of explained variance in self-handicapping increased by 3.1%, which was statistically significant ($\Delta F = 7.86, p = .001$). The regression coefficient also showed that ambiguity tolerance ($\beta = -0.187, p = .001$) significantly predicts self-handicapping. Consequently, in testing the third hypothesis, it was concluded that ambiguity tolerance significantly predicts self-handicapping.

Discussion

The present study was conducted with the aim of predicting self-handicapping based on early maladaptive schemas, cognitive avoidance, and ambiguity tolerance. The findings indicated that early maladaptive schemas, cognitive avoidance, and ambiguity tolerance have the power to predict self-handicapping.

Hypothesis 1: Early maladaptive schemas predict self-handicapping.

The findings of the present study revealed that early maladaptive schemas, particularly the domains of "Impaired Autonomy and Performance," "Impaired Limits," and "Other-Directedness," are positive and significant predictors of self-handicapping. These results are clearly aligned with domestic research (7, 12, and 18); as these studies have also shown that early maladaptive schemas play a significant role in the occurrence of self-handicapping behaviors, suggesting that the presence of these schemas can create a strong psychological and cognitive foundation for self-handicapping. Furthermore, research (11 and 13) has provided similar findings regarding the direct impact of early maladaptive schemas on reducing ambiguity tolerance and increasing avoidant behaviors and self-handicapping, which indicates a strong alignment of the current results with domestic literature. From an international perspective, the current results are consistent with the study by (14).

Hypothesis 2: Cognitive avoidance predicts self-handicapping.

Based on the results obtained in Chapter Four, with the entry of the cognitive avoidance variable into the self-handicapping prediction equation in the second step of the regression, while controlling for the contribution of early maladaptive schemas, the inclusion of cognitive avoidance led to a 3.5% increase in the explained variance of self-handicapping. Examination of the regression coefficients also showed that cognitive avoidance significantly and positively predicts self-handicapping ($\beta = 0.195, p = 0.01$). Therefore, the findings indicate that higher levels of cognitive avoidance in students are associated with an increased likelihood of self-handicapping behaviors. These findings are fully consistent with domestic research. For instance, study (7) showed that cognitive avoidance plays a significant role in predicting self-handicapping, and study (11) emphasized that cognitive avoidance, in combination with low ambiguity tolerance, exacerbates self-handicapping behaviors. Afshari (12) also introduced cognitive avoidance as one of the important predictors in a causal model of self-handicapping. On the other hand, international findings are also aligned with these results; specifically, study (14) has shown that cognitive avoidance can increase self-handicapping behaviors, while its reduction in certain conditions strengthens coping abilities and reduces self-handicapping. Overall, the current results indicate that cognitive avoidance, as a cognitive-behavioral mechanism, plays a prominent and direct role in reinforcing self-handicapping.

Hypothesis 3: Ambiguity tolerance predicts self-handicapping. The entry of the ambiguity tolerance variable into the self-handicapping prediction equation in the third step of the regression, while controlling for the contribution of schemas and cognitive avoidance, led to a 3.1% increase in the explained variance of self-handicapping, and this change was statistically significant. These results are fully consistent with domestic and international research. From the perspective of domestic research, study (13) showed that a decrease in ambiguity tolerance can lead to an increase in self-handicapping behaviors, and findings from (11) also indicated the significant role of low ambiguity tolerance in exacerbating self-handicapping. In the international literature, (14) also referred to the negative impact of ambiguity tolerance on self-handicapping behaviors. Therefore, enhancing the ability to face ambiguity can act as a protective factor against self-handicapping behaviors. Accordingly, ambiguity tolerance, as a cognitive-emotional trait, reflects an individual's ability to accept and manage

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uncertain and unpredictable situations, information, or outcomes. Individuals with low ambiguity tolerance show greater sensitivity to uncertainty and experience intense worry, anxiety, and doubt when faced with ambiguous situations.

Conclusion

The results of the statistical analyses indicated that all three predictor variables significantly predict self-handicapping. Specifically, early maladaptive schemas had a positive and significant relationship with self-handicapping; this means that individuals who experience schemas such as emotional deprivation, failure, mistrust, or defectiveness are more likely to resort to self-handicapping behaviors such as procrastination or exerting low effort. Additionally, cognitive avoidance was identified as another positive predictor of self-handicapping, serving as a dysfunctional strategy for coping with negative thoughts and emotions. Individuals who tend to avoid uncomfortable subjective experiences are more likely to use self-handicapping as a defensive shield in academic and performance situations.

Furthermore, the findings showed that low ambiguity tolerance also plays a significant role in self-handicapping. Individuals with low tolerance for ambiguous situations—especially those with uncertain outcomes—experience more anxiety and, due to their inability to tolerate these conditions, resort to behaviors such as procrastination, denial, and self-sabotage. Overall, it can be concluded that the presence of negative schemas in the mind, combined with the avoidance of unpleasant cognitive experiences and an inability to manage ambiguity, paves the way for the formation and stabilization of self-handicapping behaviors (19, 20). These findings, while aligning with theoretical perspectives such as Young's Schema Therapy theory and cognitive-behavioral models, highlight the importance of psychological interventions based on cognitive restructuring, increasing ambiguity tolerance, and schema therapy in preventing self-handicapping among the student population.

Recommendations and Limitations

Based on the findings of this research, it is suggested that educational and psychological interventions in university settings focus on modifying early maladaptive schemas and reducing cognitive avoidance. Training in acceptance skills, mindfulness, and increasing ambiguity tolerance can play an effective role in reducing the tendency toward self-handicapping. Additionally, holding workshops based on schema therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapies for students—especially those at risk of academic failure or performance anxiety—can lead to the strengthening of their self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. Since self-handicapping behaviors are usually rooted in stable cognitive structures, long-term and multi-dimensional interventions focusing on changing these structures can produce more sustainable results. Finally, it is suggested that future research utilize longitudinal and more experimental approaches to examine the causal relationships between these variables and the role of mediating factors such as affectivity or self-efficacy to provide a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms of self-handicapping.

One of the main limitations of the present study was the use of convenience and voluntary sampling, which may reduce the generalizability of the results to the entire population. The self-report nature of the questionnaires may also be associated with response bias or social desirability bias. Accordingly, conducting qualitative research and exploring lived experiences would be useful for a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of self-handicapping individuals when facing academic or professional situations. It is also suggested that the relationship between self-handicapping and maladaptive schemas be investigated in different age groups, such as adolescents or organizational employees.

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The authors contributed to the data analysis. Drafting, revising and approving the article, responsible for all aspects of this work.

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The research data and literature have not been copied from any worksauthor upon reasonable request.

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