

Control of Attributions about the Self Through Self-handicapping Strategies: The Appeal of Alcohol and the Role of Underachievement

Edward E. Jones¹
Princeton University

Steven Berglas
Harvard Medical School

Abstract. Explores the hypothesis that alcohol use and underachievement may serve as strategies to externalize the causation of poor performance and to internalize the causation of good performance. Such a strategy may be prominently used especially by those who have a precarious but not entirely negative sense of self-competence. The etiology of this strategic preference may follow either of two scenarios. The child may attach desperate importance to this competence image because competence is the condition for deserving parental love. Or the child may have been rewarded for accidental attributes or performances that do not predict future success, thus leaving him in a position of one who has reached a status he fears he cannot maintain through his own control. The linkage of alcohol appeal to underachievement strategies is stressed; both are seen as expressions of the same overconcern with competence.

Let us proceed from the premise that people use attributional principles in the service of self-image protection. We believe that people actively try to arrange the circumstances of their behavior so as to protect their conceptions of themselves as competent, intelligent persons. This is part of a general pattern of self-presentation that goes beyond the verbal claims and disclosures that are usually considered under that heading. We shall explore the hypothesis that the appeal of alcohol can be understood with reference to its strategic role in obscuring the meaning of performance feedback. We shall try to relate this discussion of strategic alcohol use to the similarly obscurant possibilities of underachievement and overachievement, here seen as strategies for controlling self-attributions by withdrawing or augmenting one's effort.

If there is any novelty in our premise, perhaps it lies in the suggestion that we sometimes do things to *avoid* diagnostic information about our own characteristics and capacities. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) posits a fundamental motive to gain an accurate view of reality and a discriminating appraisal of our abilities to cope with it. Indeed, attribution theory itself is typically couched in terms of stabilizing the distal features of the environment and accurately penetrating the causal structure of the social world. Harold Kelley (1971) makes this very explicit in his emphasis on the relationship between accurate or stable attributions and control through understanding. But do people always want to know precisely who they are and exactly what they are capable of accomplishing at their best? We doubt it, and we suggest that social psychologists have overlooked each person's need for certain kinds of ambiguity to allow room for self-sustaining and self-embellishing fantasies.

To illustrate the dangers of too much self-knowledge, we offer this brief excerpt from the musings of Denison Andrews (1975) upon learning from his old grade school principal that his measured IQ is only 125:

“Keep cool. Control wobbly knees. I25. Not brilliant. Not undiscovered genius. Ordinary bright. Everyday bright like everyone else...No brighter than my stockbroker. No brighter than insurance agent. Did they laugh when I applied to medical school? ...IQ has no meaning. Totally discredited. No one takes it seriously...Who was Otis anyway? I test badly. IQ doesn't measure creativity. Winston Churchill. Maybe I was depressed. Maybe I had an earache. A bad night's sleep. Maybe I lost time daydreaming. Creatively...”

Here we see the tortured efforts of posterior defensive attribution, but our present argument is that people actively select those settings for action that render performance feedback ambiguous, thus anticipating the kinds of excuses Andrews is forced lamely to offer.

The hypothesis, specifically, is that an important reason why some people turn to alcohol is to avoid the implications of negative feedback for failure and to enhance the impact of positive feedback for success. This is part of the more general notion that people drink to escape from responsibility for their actions, but it is more specific than that notion, and it trades on the public assumption that alcohol generally interferes with or disrupts performance. This assumption paves the way for what we shall call self-handicapping strategies. By finding or creating impediments that make good performance less likely, the strategist nicely protects his sense of self-competence. If the person does poorly, the source of the failure is externalized in the impediment; perhaps in the glass or the bottle. In the terms of Jones and Davis (1965), it is difficult for the strategist and for others to make a “correspondent inference” about competence. If the person does well, then he or she has done well in spite of less than optimum conditions. According to Kelley's (1971) augmentation principle, then, the person's competence should receive a boost. Alcohol is what Kelley refers to as an inhibitory cause of a successful performance effect, whereas ability is a facilitative cause. The presence of ability as an inferred potential cause of a given performance level is augmented by the presence of alcohol. Regardless of what the outcome is, the self-handicapping strategist cannot lose, at least in those settings where the attributional implications of performance are more important than the success of the performance itself.

Before going any further, it might be helpful to run through some other examples of self-handicapping to show that alcohol appeal is only one subset of a variety of strategic instances. The high school senior who gets but two hours of sleep before taking his SAT exams may be a self-handicapper. The ingratiation who avoids disclosing his true preferences or opinions protects himself from the ultimate implications of rejection as a person. Even if he gets rejected, this isn't so bad if he was “just trying to be nice,” if he held his true self in reserve. Similarly, the professional actor may build a career around the externalization aspect of self-handicapping by constantly retreating to roles so that failure is never attached to the real self. We have all seen the occasional talk show guest who, actor or comedian by profession, is petrified by the assigned “role” of being himself. Self-handicappers are legion in the sports world, from the tennis player who externalizes a bad shot by adjusting his racket strings, to the avid golfer who systematically avoids taking lessons or even practicing on the driving range.

Therapists have long been aware of the appeal of the “sick” role to those who wish temporarily to drop out of life's competition. This is a form of self-handicapping where the body is seen as outside the system of personal responsibility. Many clinicians have noted that even the roles of “neurotic” or “mental”

patients may be partly strategic in nature. Carson (1969), for example, points out that "acquisition of the label 'mentally ill' is not invariably treated as a major disaster by the person so labeled . . . it is an excellent 'cover story' for various types of rulebreaking ('it's not me who is doing this—it's my illness')" (p. 228).

The self-handicapper, we are suggesting, reaches out for impediments, exaggerates handicaps, embraces any factor reducing personal responsibility for mediocrity and enhancing personal responsibility for success. One does this to shape the implications of performance feedback both in one's own eyes and in the eyes of others. Handicapping is a self-defending maneuver whose significance is probably augmented by the presence of an audience, but we emphasize that the public value of the strategy is not its original impetus. This lies in the exaggerated importance of one's own private conception of self-competence and the need to protect that conception from unequivocal negative feedback even in the absence of others.

Underachievement as a strategy to protect self-esteem. The same defensive dynamic may underly the strategy of underachievement, a strategy that involves the subtraction of facilitative effort rather than the imposition of inhibitory performance barriers. The underachiever like the impediment-seeking externalizer wishes to avoid the most drastic implications of possible failure. If one is excessively worried about his basic competence and simply cannot face the prospect of being judged incompetent, it is better to exert less than total effort, thus inviting probable (but not inevitable) failure, than to try and risk a possible failure that would implicate the self more irrevocably. In the unlikely event of successful achievement the performer who has only casually or half-heartedly involved himself gains the added esteem award of ability-relevant positive feedback.

At this point, there are two broad questions that must be confronted. The first is whence derives this intense concern with the maintenance of a competence image? The second is what determines the choice of alcohol or underachievement over other strategic alternatives within the self-handicapping family?

The choice of the alcohol strategy. Considering the latter question first, it must be clearly understood that the appeal of alcohol is a function of many things beside the personality of the drinker or the stresses inherent in his life. Jessor and his colleagues (1973), for example, have noted that drug abuse and problem drinking may be (1) a learned way of coping with personal frustrations and anticipated failure, (2) an expression of opposition to or rejection of conventional society—including the very norms that define the behavior as a problem, (3) a negotiation for or claim on status transformation or developmental transition, or (4) a manifestation of solidarity with the peer subculture. So we are interested at best in one set of factors that predispose individuals to alcohol use, though it may well be the set that is most likely to lead to serious problem drinking.

The path from use to abuse to addiction involves many complexities that take us beyond our present concern. What interests us at this point are the factors that predispose a person toward alcohol use and which enhance the reinforcement value of such an agent. Our basic proposition rests on the fact that alcohol has the reputation of reducing one's responsibility for good performance. But it has other properties that undoubtedly enhance its attractiveness to the self-handicapper. Here the relationship between alcohol appeal and underachievement must be specifically stressed. Beckett (1974) notes that alcohol and drug addicts are almost always distinct underachievers. Jessor and his colleagues (1973) also stress the negative relationship between achievement value and the appeal of drugs and alcohol. While the conventional interpretation would emphasize the direct effects of problem drinking on performance capability, our present view suggests that both

alcohol appeal and underachievement may be symptoms of the same self-protective strategy. For reasons that we shall explore below, the problem drinker and the underachiever are fearful of receiving the unequivocal message that they are unworthy and incompetent. They perhaps suspect this might be true and are very afraid of being "discovered." So much follows directly from the original hypothesis of self-handicapping: such a person would be motivated to get equivocal or biased information from the environment about self-worth.

Another aspect of the appeal of alcohol is that it lends itself to a subjectively temporary strategic commitment. The drinker does not set out to achieve addiction. He believes that he can control the agent that temporarily lowers his performance capacity. This belief fits nicely into *manana* fantasies that are so common in alcohol use. These fantasies involve thoughts about how successful one will be *when* he breaks the drinking habit or could be *if* he did. The problem drinker tells himself that he will report for meaningful social measurement when he's good and ready, but typically he never is. The suspected truth is too horrible to risk, and in the meantime he may prosper in fantasies of glorified competence.

There is no question that alcohol has direct physiological effects on nervous system functioning. The appeal of alcohol has been commonly attributed to its euphoric and anxiety reducing effects (Cappell & Herman, 1972; Kingham, 1958). Our present line of argument adds a psychological dimension to the anxiety-reduction phenomenon. It suggests that anxiety is typically centered around one's competence or respectworthiness and that it is reduced when the alcohol provides an excuse for marginal performance. This oversimplifies the complex interactive effects of alcohol and mood, since there are legendary as well as vividly real examples of drink-induced morosity (e.g., the "crying jag"). But the euphoric effects of alcohol are certainly more commonly observed and therefore built into the expectations of the drinker himself. Self-handicapping agents like alcohol may in fact enhance performance for those with an inordinate fear of the competence implications of failure. Weiner and Sierad (1975), in a fascinating study, examined the digit symbol performance of subjects high in need for achievement and those low in need for achievement (but high in fear of failure). Half of these subjects ingested a placebo under the impression that it would interfere with visuo-motor performance. All subjects were given periodic failure feedback and their performance was measured. The high fear of failure subjects actually performed better after taking the performance-inhibiting placebo than those in the control condition. The subjects high in need for achievement performed better in the control condition in line with their normal tendency to attribute failure to low effort and to try harder. When the pill obscured this attributional line they did not perform as well. Although this is not Weiner and Sierad's exact interpretation, we would suggest that the high fear-of-failure subjects do better in the pill condition because the placebo removes the competence implications of failure and this reduction in anxiety actually releases energy for attention, motivation and therefore improved performance.

The competence image. But now let us return to the question of etiology and consider the special reasons why strategies to protect one's competence image are necessary. Why is it so important for the potential alcoholic to avoid information implying that he is unworthy and incompetent? Imagine the following developmental scenario. The potential problem drinker, like the rest of us, early realizes that reward follows good behavior. However, social rewards have either or both of two meanings. The first of these is the *exchange* implication, reward rendered for costs incurred. The child who receives thanks for wiping the dishes may accept this

merely as a quid pro quo, rather than drawing any deep inferences about his or her basic worthiness. On the other hand, there may be something about the "thanks" that does carry a self-esteem increment. The reward may have a *signifying* implication as well as an exchange value (cf. Jones, 1964).

The potentially dual meaning of reward introduces a complexity which the developing child may find difficult to penetrate. A part of this complexity is the difficulty of establishing whether the love of significant others is unconditional. The child may reflect on whether the parental rewards received are solely contingent on performance (exchange) or whether they are signals of parental love and esteem (signification). We can imagine the child attempting to separate these implications, these parental messages, by experimental tests to find out whether there is love in the absence of performance. One source of the "competence complex" that we theoretically attribute to the potential problem drinker may be the tentative discovery that he or she is not unconditionally loved. The very unpleasantness of this experimental outcome may support the disinclination to conduct similar unfounded experiments in the future.

Reactions to conditional love suspicions. Here there is a crucial choice point. The child can confound subsequent experimental tests of parental love by oversufficient effort and application. Such a child is driven to zeal by an overdetermined fear of failure, for failure may invite further evidence that love is conditional on performance. The vicious circularity of this strategic course is apparent in the attributional implications of overachievement. The more one tries, the more essential it is that one avoids failure, for failure under conditions of high effort carries unequivocal implications about ability. In this way, perhaps, trying can lead only to more trying. The overachievement strategy is a precarious one, but with sufficient talent, appropriate choice of performance setting, and luck, it may effectively propel the person into relative emotional security. Even the overachiever, though may be periodically attracted to alcohol and to nonperformance settings in which he may escape the burdens of being tested while competence is fully engaged.

The other path is more self-destructive and involved. The feedback from the child's conditional love experiment goes beyond the simple exchange implication to carry a more complicated message. The child reads the message as saying "You can do it if you try, and that's why we love you." And if the child does occasionally succeed, the only reward is a "We knew it all along," which vindicates the parents more than it reinforces the child. These messages create the bind of the underachiever. He who tries and fails loses everything. He who fails without trying maintains a precarious hold on the illusion of love and admiration. The resulting strategy of lowered motivation may be buttressed by a culturally derived competence elitism. We live in a world in which people are (sometimes secretly) admired for their talents and intelligence regardless of the quality of actual performances. This may be a residual of the many myths stressing the inevitable genetic superiority of the aristocracy and the nobly born (going back at least to Oedipus). It may also be a not unreasonable interpretation of Calvinist predestination doctrines. The vital importance of underlying competence may be stressed by the parents who are motivated to see their children as the carriers of their own superior genetic potential.

This line of argument seems to fly in the face of the results of Weiner and his colleagues (1971) who have shown that the low ability person who tries hard is rewarded more than the able slacker by subjects playing a teacher role. In such a teacher-student context the exchange model may emphasize the importance of

doing one's best. However, it is another matter when we ask whether the average person would rather be a highly motivated dummy or a highly competent low achiever. Theoretically, the competent person has more potential control over performance outcomes than the incompetent person. Motivation can be turned on at some later time; competence is more irrevocably fixed. Some results by Nichols (1975) support this notion that performance linked to ability is more gratifying than performance linked to effort.

Thus the self-handicapper, whether seeking to impose external performance impediments or to withdraw effort, may in many ways be similar to the over-achiever. Each is fearful that failure will implicate competence. Each has an abnormal investment in the question of self-worth. One succeeds in avoiding failure through persistent effort, the other embraces failure as an alternative to self-implicating feedback. We have suggested that each strategy originates in a conditional love experiment in which the child draws different conclusions from the evidence that the signs of love are actually or potentially absent after failure.

The role of reinforcement contingency. An alternative scenario points to the contingency of rewards and performance as more crucial than the signification value of parental messages. Perhaps the self-handicapping path is followed by those whose reinforcement history has been capricious or chaotic. It is not that they have been unrewarded; it is that they have not been able to determine consistently what the reward was for, or they suspect that they have been rewarded for extraneous reasons such as beauty or the ascribed status of simply being a family member. We are reminded here of Seligman's (1975) theory of depression as a condition growing out of noncontingent reward histories. Of particular interest is the "success depression" where rewards have been ample, but uninformative regarding one's competence image.

The notion of self-protecting strategies implies, after all, that the strategist has something to protect. There has to have been some experience of success, something in the person's history that has created a fragile and ambiguous, but not a wholly negative, self-concept. The perpetual loser may not be the prime candidate for alcohol abuse. He may be more likely to handle his problems by drastically lowering his aspirations to fit realistically his meagre talents.

No doubt success-avoidance has other motivational origins as well. For one thing, success often incurs a future obligation to perform at a high level (cf. Jones, 1973). A performance Peter Principle often operates such that success propels a person into new and more demanding challenges where the risk of failure increases. This would seem to amplify further the appeal of self-handicapping strategies for both the failure-avoider and the success depressive.

These alternative etiologies describe different reinforcement histories. In the first version the potential problem drinker responds to what he fears might happen if he were to commit himself to maximal effort or establish ideal conditions for a performance. In the second version, the emphasis is more on the protection of ill-gotten gains. Both etiological versions, however, emphasize the potential addict's vital concern with the signifying implications of performance for his self-image of competence. Both assume that this image has become a deep and over-riding consideration. Both further assume that the individual is willing to settle for confounded performance feedback rather than taking the chance on repeated tests of the conditional love hypothesis under maximally informative conditions. The problem drinker and the underachiever are willing to forego success to protect the illusion that they have the competence to be consistently successful.

From the viewpoint of advice to parents, however, the implications of the two scenarios appear antithetical. On the one hand we imply that parents should avoid tying rewards exclusively to performance. On the other hand we inveigh against non-contingent reinforcement schedules. What is the poor parent to do in this ostensible no-win situation? Somehow, the parent must segregate his or her signifying response from those which provide informative feedback about performance. Interest and affection should not be withdrawn in the absence of achievement, but contingent tutelage is essential to give the child a sense of adaptive control or effectiveness. Often, we suspect, the parents divide their roles so that the cross-sex parent emphasizes non-contingent, signifying love, whereas the same-sex parent emphasizes feedback contingent on performance (in part through serving as a performance model). The two roles combine in the ideal case to provide emotional security and a sense of mastery of the environment. To the extent that signification and exchange feedback are inextricably tangled in the family setting, there is potential for the kind of competence concern that leads to disturbances in achievement strivings and/or the subsequent appeal of such performance inhibitors as alcohol.

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Footnote

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¹Requests for reprints should be sent to Edward E. Jones, Department of Psychology, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, 08540.