Brief report: How do they manage social interaction? The influence of concealing academic achievement information on self-monitoring by adolescents with low achievement

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ABSTRACT

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During social interactions people self-monitor their behavior at least partially to conceal socially devalued characteristics. This study examined the influences of concealing academic achievement on self-monitoring in an academically-relevant social interaction. An interview paradigm called for school-aged adolescent participants (total $N = 86$) who either did or did not have low (academic) achievement to play the role of someone who did or did not have low achievement while answering academically-relevant questions. The data suggest that adolescents with low achievement (low achievers) were more likely to tailor their behaviors according to the situational cues than did those without low achievement (non-low achievers). On the other hand, low achievers who played the role of good students (these adolescents could conceal their low academic achievement characteristics) were most likely to regulate their behaviors according to their inner cues (e.g., real feelings).

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Academic achievement is a key indicator in evaluating student performance. Previous studies have shown that low achievement is associated with many social problems such as peer rejection and unpopularity in childhood (Dodge, Coie, & Brakke, 1982). Adolescents with low academic achievement are more likely to be rejected or neglected by peers (Bakker, Denessen, Bosman, Krijger, & Bouts, 2007). As a result, students with low achievement may easily find themselves in a hostile environment, and some of them try to avoid possible negative feedbacks by masking their differences (Ferri, Connor, Solis, Valle, & Volpitta, 2005). In other words, low achievers often deliberately hide their academic achievement information during social interactions in order to avoid potential discrimination and rejection. Their strategies include concealing their failure (Singer, 2005), denying their disabilities and even inventing secret pictorial languages (Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001).

Individuals who dedicate themselves to concealing their socially devalued information devote considerable energy to ensuring that information-related leakages" do not occur (Goffman, 1963). If the socially devalued information is unintentionally revealed, they must spend even more energy to repair their self-presentation (Pachankis, 2007).

Self-monitoring, which some researchers (e.g., Snyder, 1987) have suggested is closely tied to impression management, can be defined as the extent to which people regulate their self-presentation by tailoring their behaviors to social situations (e.g., Hofmann, 2006). Many studies have suggested that individuals with socially devalued identities may engage in impression management behaviors in order to conceal their devalued characteristics (e.g., Rintamaki & Brashers, 2005).

However, few studies have directly examined the relationship between self-monitoring and concealing information, even though it is one of the most important impression management strategies (e.g., Pachankis, 2007).

Based on the idea proposed by Hetrick and Martin (1987) that adolescents who conceal socially devaluing information about themselves must constantly monitor their own behavior to avoid information leakages, we suggest that adolescents with low achievement may use more self-monitoring to keep the secret of their real (negative) learning status if the information about their academic achievement is able to be concealed. This study investigated the relationship between concealing academic achievement information and self-monitoring for adolescents with low achievement. Our hypothesis is that adolescents with low achievement who are able to conceal their negative academic achievement information will use more self-monitoring in social interactions.

Method

Participants

The participants were 43 adolescent low achievers (31 boys and 12 girls, with a mean age of 14.32 ± 0.91 years) and 43 adolescent non-low achievers (20 boys and 23 girls, with a mean age of 14.54 ± 0.90 years) from one middle school.

The low achievers consisted of adolescents whose academic achievement test scores were below 90% of their classmates in the last year (percentiles were computed by class). In the school situation these students are particularly likely to suffer from the constant threats that stem from low achievement.

Non-low achievers were randomly selected from students whose scores of achievement tests were average to high, above the 60th percentile. These students were generally considered as *good students* by their teachers and peers.

Experiment procedure[1]

When participants arrived at the experimental session, they were greeted by an assistant who introduced him/herself as a new teacher and were told that they would take part in an interview. The participants then were randomly assigned into one of the two following experimental situations:

1) In the non-low achiever context, participants were told that "Your interviewer in the laboratory is a respected expert in the field of educational psychology, who does not know anything about your academic background. This expert wants to interview some students and give some advice on learning strategies. He (she) needs a *good student* to talk with. Since I am a new teacher here and I do not know how to identify a suitable student for him (her), I'd like to ask you to role-play a *good student* and have an interview with the expert. You just need to follow the expert's instruction and do your best to complete all tasks. I will give you a very nice gift after you complete your tasks successfully."

2) In the low achiever context, the same instructions were given except that the assistant substituted the phrase "student with low achievement" for "good student".

We presumed that low achievers who were assigned to the non-low achiever situation would conceal their academic achievement information. Thus this experimental condition is a *concealed condition*. Since low achievers in the low achiever situation could not conceal their academic achievement, it constituted an *unconcealed condition*. Non-low achievers in both experimental situations served as two *control conditions*. Genders were balanced between the various experimental conditions.

Subsequently, participants were guided to the laboratory individually and his (her) assigned learning performance (real or bogus) was introduced to the "expert" (experimenter). The assistant then left the laboratory and the experimenter began the interview.

The interview began with some neutral questions. As the interview progressed, the questions became increasingly more relevant to the topic of low achievement. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked to respond truthfully to a self-monitoring scale. After the participants completed this measure, the experimenter administered a debriefing and gave each of them a present.

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[1] The whole experiment procedure was put through a careful ethical scrutiny. Before the experiment we discussed the purpose and the whole procedure of the experiment with a panel consisting of the principal and some veteran teachers of the middle school. None of them thought that the experimental procedure would have a negative effect on the students' developmental health. In addition, all the teachers acknowledged the feasibility of our debriefing procedure. After the experiment, we gave each participant a phone number to contact if there were any problems that were brought up during the study that he or she might want to discuss with a professional counselor. A follow-up re-interview was also made to all of the adolescent low achievers. Inquiries about how they felt about the experiment in retrospect were made, and no negative reactions were observed.

Measure

A 9-item self-monitoring scale, adapted from Snyder's (1974) SMS, was used to assess participants' instant self-monitoring during the interview. Participants rated how much they agreed with each item on a 7-point Likert scale.

Prior to this experiment, a factor analysis had been conducted on the 9-item scale using a different group of participants ($N = 98$). This led to identifying two factors with an eigenvalue of greater than one. See the appendix for individual items and factor loadings. With regard to the specific content of the questions, Factor 1, which referred to how much individuals were concerned about the situational appropriateness of their behavior and their tendency to regulate behavior according to perceived situational expectations, was termed *Outward Focusing*. Factor 2, which referred to perceived differences between the self-image manifested in the interview and the self-image that one usually accepted as his/her real self, was termed *Inward Focusing*. A high score on Factor 2 indicated greater effort to suppress one's real feelings and to tailor expressive behaviors. Reliability analyses revealed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.845 for Factor 1 and 0.696 for Factor 2.

A confirmatory factor analysis was also conducted to examine the goodness of fit of the 2-factor model, using the sample of the present study. Fitness indices were $\chi2/df = 1.58$ ($\chi2 = 31.262$, $df = 26$), $GFI = 0.926$, $IFI = 0.961$, $TLI = 0.942$, $CFI = 0.958$, and $RMSEA = 0.049$. These indices showed that this 2-factor model exhibited a good model fit, indicating that this state self-monitoring scale with two factors has a robust factor structure.

Results

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed, using types of participants (low achiever vs. non-low achiever) and types of experimental situations (low achiever context vs. non-low achiever context) as between-subjects factors, and two-subscale scores of state self-monitoring as dependent variables.

The two-way MANOVA revealed a significant main effect of participant types (Wilks' F (2, 81) = 3.379, $p < 0.05$) and a significant interaction between participant types and experimental situations (Wilks' F (2, 81) = 3.333, $p < 0.05$). The main effect of the experimental situation was not significant, Wilks' F (2,81) = 0.166, $p = 0.847$. Further analysis showed that low achievers scored higher on outward focusing ($M = 15.911$) than non-low achievers did ($M = 12.754$), $F(1, 82) = 5.701$) $p < 0.05$, indicating that low achievers were more likely to tailor their behaviors according to situational cues than non-low achievers in both situations. Similarly, the score on inward focusing of low achievers ($M = 18.042$) was higher than that of non-low achieving adolescents ($M = 15.473$), $F (2, 81) = 4.561$) $p < 0.05$.

Furthermore, univariate analysis of the simple interactions between two conditions ($p < 0.05$) indicated that low achievers in the non-low achievers situation scored higher on inward focusing than non-low achievers in the non-low achievers situation, F (1, 41) = 14.317, $p < 0.001$. There was no significant difference between the inward focusing scores for low achievers in the non-low achiever situation and those in the low achiever situation, $F(1, 41) = 2.055$, $p = 0.159$. The difference in the inward focusing scores between the non-low achievers in both situations was also not significant, $F (1, 41) = 3.623$, $p = 0.064$. These results indicated that low achievers in the concealed condition suppressed more real inner feelings and experienced more conflict about the self-image that they presented in the experimental situation and that of their actual status. The mean scores and standard deviations for the two subscales of state self-monitoring for the different participants in the different experimental situations are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Self-monitoring scores for participants in different conditions.

	Non-low-achiever		Low-achiever	
	NLA context	LA context	NLA context t	LA context
	($n = 21$)	($n = 22$)	($n = 22$)	($n = 21$)
Outward	12.190(1.337)	13.318(1.307)	15.727(1.307)	16.095(1.337)
Inward	13.810(1.217)	17.136(1.189)	19.227(1.189)	16.857(1.217)

(Outward = outward focusing; Inward = inward focusing; NLA = non-low achiever; LA = low achiever; Numbers in the brackets are standard errors).

Discussion

This study examined the characteristics of self-monitoring when their academic achievement information can be concealed by adolescent low achievers. The results well supported our hypothesis that low achievers would use more self-monitoring when they are able to conceal information about their academic achievements. Moreover, the interview situation exerted different influences on two factors of state self-monitoring. In terms of inward focusing, low achievers in the concealed condition had the highest score among the four experimental conditions, which indicates that low achievers who could conceal academic achievement information are more likely to suppress their real feelings and to utilize situational cues to regulate their self-expressive behaviors. However, with regard to outward focusing, low achievers had higher scores than non-low achievers in both experimental situations. This suggests that under either the concealing or the not-concealing condition, low achievers were more likely than non-low achievers to pay attention to situations which can be used as cues for adjusting their self-expressive behaviors to meet situational expectations. It is possible that characteristics of the experimental situation influenced the low achievers' self-monitoring. A previous study has suggested that whether self-monitoring

is beneficial is affected by stereotype and the nature of the current task (Flynn & Ames, 2006). It is possible that in this study there were negative stereotypes for low achievers in the experimental situations. For example, educational experts' and learning-relevant questions result in a learning-relevant situation, which could have led to negative expectations for low achievers. Therefore, self-monitoring may have a more positive effect for low achievers than for non-low achievers in the presence of such a negative stereotype. Because low achievers can adjust their behaviors to counteract a teacher's low expectations by self-monitoring and thus enhance their performance, in situations with negative stereotypes low achievers must search for cues from the environment to modify their behaviors regardless of whether academic achievement information can be concealed or not.

This study has increased our understanding of the difficulties faced by low-achieving adolescents. Pachinkis supposed that individuals who conceal their stigma must use continual self-monitoring of their behavior to ensure that their stigma not be exposed during social interactions (Pachankis, 2007). As was noted by Pachinkis, low achievers must continually self-monitor their behavior to attempt to hide their true performance. Our study demonstrated by self-reporting that these students used more self-monitoring than did students who were not low achievers when the low achievers knew that their negative achievement information could be concealed.

However, the current study paid no attention to individual differences within the groups. Different low achievers could have different styles for coping with low academic achievement. If such individual differences are found, they would have some influence on the concealing achievement effect for adolescent low achievers. Future researchers could therefore divide low achievers into different groups according to their coping style, comparing the different patterns of self-monitoring among different groups under conditions that allow for concealing information. Additionally, qualitative behavioral data could be collected during the interviews to aid in assessing the accuracy of the self-monitoring reported by the participants.

Acknowledgements

Appendix.

Items of state self-monitoring and their factor loadings.

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2
1. During the interview, I did not attempt to do or say things that the educational expert would like	0.837	0.186
2. During the interview, I would not change my opinions in order to please the educational expert or win his (or her) favor	0.823	0.132
3. During the interview, when I was uncertain how to act in a social situation, I looked to the behavior of the educational expert for cues	0.810	0.203
4. During the interview, I tried to change my behavior to suit the situation	0.689	0.394
5. During the interview, I appeared to the educational expert to be experiencing deeper emotions than I actually was	0.111	0.783
6. During the interview, my behavior was the expression of all my true inner feelings, attitudes, and beliefs	0.102	0.724
7. During the interview, I acted like very different persons	0.189	0.685
8. During the interview, I was not the person I appear to be	0.297	0.513
9. I felt a bit awkward in the interview and did not show up quite so well as I should	0.298	0.450

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