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SELF-HANDICAPPING: GENDER, RACE, AND STATUS

Jeffrey W. Lucas

University of Maryland

Michael J. Lovaglia

University of Iowa

ABSTRACT

Self-handicapping behavior exhibits a robust gender effect: Men but not women consistently choose behavior that they believe will impair their performance, even when that performance is important to them. Because previous research shows self-handicapping to occur when esteem is threatened, we propose that high status individuals will be more likely to self-handicap than will those of lower status. An experiment tests this proposition. In the study, men selected more study time (and thus self-handicapped more) than did women. With gender controlled, non-European Americans self-handicapped less than did European Americans. The study provides tentative evidence for our proposition that status processes impact self-handicapping behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals *self-handicap* when they select an alternative that they expect will impair a future performance (Berglas and Jones 1978). For example, a student concerned about his performance on an important test may decide to go out partying the night before rather than stay home to prepare for the test or get a good night's sleep. Curiously, self-handicapping appears unrelated to a person's motivation to achieve (Rhodewalt 1990). A student for whom a strong performance on the SAT is very important might be just as likely to decide to go partying the night before as one for whom the test matters little. Self-handicapping is an important area of study because it is surprisingly common and undermines performance that handicappers themselves deem important (Zuckerman, Kieffer and Knee 1998). Self-handicappers, however, are primarily male (Berglas and Jones 1978).

Self-handicapping exhibits one of the more robust gender effects in social psychological research, so much so that women who witness self-handicapping behavior are consistently critical of it, attributing it to lack of motivation or suspect motives (Hirt, McCrea and Boris 2003). We have noticed that male students in our classes often relate to a description of self-handicapping as something they themselves might do, while our female students just as often find the idea inexplicable. Why would someone who wants to perform well choose to do something that would hamper his performance?

Theories attempting to explain self-handicapping have struggled to account for the gender effect. Berglas and Jones (1978) proposed that self-handicapping shores up a person's wavering belief in his own abilities. A person who responds to a difficult challenge by self-handicapping can more easily attribute failure externally, to the handicapping behavior, but also can more easily attribute success internally, to personal ability capable of overcoming the handicap. Self-esteem is protected when failure is blamed on the handicap. Moreover, success enhances self-esteem because it was achieved despite the handicap. Kolditz and Arkin (1982) proposed that the esteem of others was also at stake because they found more self-handicapping when performance outcomes were public rather than private. Self-handicapping, then, could be explained as an attempt to reduce a threat to esteem (Arkin and Baumgardner 1985). Women, however, also have concerns about their abilities. Why do men consistently self-handicap but not women?

We propose that a person's social status plays a role in the decision to self-handicap. We define status as a person's rank in a social hierarchy based on the esteem accorded that person by self and others. If self-handicapping serves to reduce a threat to esteem, and if those with high status have more esteem to protect than do those with low status, then high status individuals would be more likely to self-handicap. And because men have generally been accorded higher status than women in our society, men would have more incentive to self-handicap than would women. The following section briefly describes research that established self-handicapping as a surprisingly common though perplexing phenomenon. We then use status characteristics theory to develop a general explanation for it. Our explanation implies that, in addition to women, minority group members will be less likely to self-handicap than majority group members.

SELF-HANDICAPPING TO PROTECT ESTEEM

Berglas and Jones (1978) studied self-handicapping as a problem related to such self-destructive behaviors as drug and alcohol abuse that they felt could stem from a person's basic uncertainty about personal competence. They proposed that individuals most likely to self-handicap would be those who had been amply rewarded in life but who were also deeply uncertain about what they had been rewarded for. That is, self-handicappers do not perceive that their rewards have been contingent on the quality of their performance.

Berglas and Jones (1978) conducted an experiment in which participants were told that they were testing the effect of different drugs on intellectual performance. Participants were given a preliminary test containing "challenging" intellectual puzzles to prepare them for the main test to come. In a contingent success condition, participants were given puzzles that they could solve easily. In a non-contingent success condition, participants were given insoluble puzzles. Then all participants were given feedback showing that they did very well on the preliminary test. Next, participants chose to take one of two drugs, either Activil purported to enhance performance or Pandocrin purported to inhibit performance on the main test.

Participants who received high marks for solving insoluble problems experienced non-contingent success, while those who solved easy problems experienced contingent success. Berglas and Jones predicted that participants who had experienced non-contingent success would choose the performance-hampering drug, Pandocrin, more often than would participants who experienced contingent success. Results supported that prediction but only for male participants. A substantial majority, 70%, of male participants in the non-contingent condition chose Pandocrin, a drug they believed would *impair* their performance. Only 13% of male participants in the contingent condition did so. Non-contingent success had no significant effect, however, on the drug choice of female participants, 40% of whom chose Pandocrin in the non-contingent condition compared to 26% in the contingent condition.

The basic results, that a surprising number of people self-handicap and that men are more likely to self-handicap than women, have been replicated in a variety of settings with various controls. Shepperd and Arkin (1989) informed college students that they would be taking a test that was a predictor of college success, and then gave them the option of listening to music that would facilitate their performance on the test or hamper it. In the study, *most* students self-handicapped by selecting the performance hampering music. Male normal drinkers were found to drink more alcohol in preparation for a non-contingent success task than for a contingent success task (Tucker, Vuchinich and Sobell 1981). In a study of heavy drinkers, Higgins and Harris (1988) found similar results. Kolditz and Arkin (1982) replicated the original Berglas and Jones (1978) study and found that not only would most male participants take a performance impairing drug in a non-contingent success condition but on average quite a high dose of it. In addition, Kolditz and Arkin established that self-handicapping was more likely among men when they expected the outcome of a performance to be public.

The public nature of self-handicapping was supported by a study showing that participants primed to focus on their "intrinsic self" self-handicapped less than did participants focused on the potential evaluations of others (Arndt, Schimel, Greenberg and Pyszczynski 2002). Self-handicapping, however, may shore up self-perceptions as well. McCrea and Hirt (2001) found that high self-handicapping men maintained high levels of self-esteem with respect to a specific ability despite poor performance. Thus the assumption is supported that people self-handicap in response to a threat to esteem, whether self-esteem or the esteem in which a person is held by others.

Gender Differences in Self-Handicapping

Various studies have found that men self-handicap more often and more consistently than do women and in a variety of contexts, from academic settings to sports to tests of social competence (See Berglas and Jones 1978; Harris and Snyder 1986; Hirt, McCrea and Kimble 2000; Midgley and Urdan 1995; Rhodewalt and Davison 1986; Rhodewalt and Hill 1995; Snyder, Smith, Augelli and Ingram 1985; Shepperd and Arkin 1989; Urdan, Midgley, and Anderman 1998). A study of grade school children found that by the sixth grade, boys were self-handicapping more than girls (Kimble, Kimble and Croy 1998). A survey of eighth graders found that boys reported more often using self-handicapping strategies than did girls (Midgely and Urdan 1995). In an attempt to explain the gender effect, Dietrich (1995) proposed that women would self-handicap more than men if a performance was indicative of social competence rather than academic competence. Contrary to her prediction, she found that men self-handicapped more than women prior to both academic and social performances. (1)

The Problem of Motivation

One puzzling aspect of self-handicapping is that motivation to succeed does not reduce self-handicapping (Rhodewalt 1990) and in some contexts may increase it. Shepperd and Arkin (1989) found that students chose music that they thought would impair their performance more often when the test was more important, but only when no pre-existing excuse for poor performance was readily available. With an alternative excuse available, students self-handicapped about the same for important and unimportant tests.

The amount of practice time that participants choose before taking a test is a commonly used indicator of self-handicapping, choosing more practice time indicates less self-handicapping. In one such study, men more concerned with the prospect of failure on a test chose less study time than did men less concerned with the prospect of failure (Hirt, McCrea and Kimble 2000). To test for self-handicapping in a non-academic setting, Stone (2002) gave participants the option of choosing the amount of practice time they wanted before an athletic contest. He found that participants who were motivated and engaged in the contest self-handicapped at least as much as those who were unmotivated and disengaged.

To summarize the results of self-handicapping research that suggest a role for status processes in self-handicapping: (1) self-handicapping is more likely when people are faced with a threat to esteem; (2) self-handicapping is more pronounced when the results of a performance will be publicly known; (3) men self-handicap more often than do women; (4) self-handicapping occurs more often when a performance is important to the self-handicapper and high motivation to succeed does not reduce self-handicapping; (5) self-handicapping is more likely when people are amply rewarded but uncertain about what they could have done to produce those rewards.

SELF-HANDICAPPING TO PROTECT HIGH STATUS

Status characteristics theory (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1966, 1972; Berger, Fisek, Norman, and Zelditch 1977) relates characteristics of an individual such as gender and race to that person's rank in a status hierarchy based on the esteem in which the person is held by self and others. The theory proposes that members of a group form expectations about each other's competence to contribute to group goals based on their status characteristics. Individuals expected to contribute more are more highly valued by the group, held in higher esteem (Podolny, 1993, Thye, 2000).

Status characteristics theory may explain gender differences in self-handicapping because performances have status implications. It may be that high-status individuals have more at stake from a performance than do low-status individuals. If a high-status individual fails when working on an important task, then her or his high-status position may be challenged, unless the failure is attributed to something other than personal competence. Gender is a status characteristic in many societies, with men more highly valued and esteemed than women (Pugh and Wahrman 1983). Thus men may self-handicap more than women to protect expectations for personal competence.

The theory operates within the scope of groups working on a valued and collective task (Berger, Fisek and Norman 1989). A status characteristic is any feature of an individual around which expectations and beliefs come to be organized (Berger, Fisek and Norman 1989). One category of a status characteristic is considered to be more desirable and highly esteemed than another. A status characteristic is *diffuse* if it carries with it expectations for competence in a wide variety of situations. Gender, race, and education are examples of diffuse characteristics. A characteristic is *specific* if it carries expectations for competence in a narrow range of situations, such as a math SAT score. Both diffuse and specific status characteristics contribute to determining group members' relative status--whether or not the characteristic is directly relevant to the task--by altering expectations for competence that members hold for one another (Berger, Norman, Balkwell and Smith 1992).

According to the theory, those individuals expected to make competent contributions to group goals are treated in ways that reinforce expectations for their competence and indicate the esteem in which they are held. High-status group members (1) are given more opportunities to perform in the group, (2) perform more, (3) have their performances evaluated more highly, and (4) have more influence over group decisions (Berger, Fisek, Norman and Zelditch 1977).

Interactions among group members create a stable status hierarchy because expectations for competence are self-fulfilling. The esteem accorded those with high status derives from expectations that they will make competent contributions. Those expectations, in turn, can be reinforced or undermined by the performances made and evaluations of those performances. In some cases, prior performances become status characteristics, SAT scores for example. Because those with high status can perform more and are evaluated more highly for their performances, competence expectations are self-fulfilling. High-status individuals get more credit than they deserve when the group succeeds and less blame when it fails than do those with low status.

Thus we propose that high-status individuals regularly experience non-contingent success. They are amply rewarded in life but may often wonder what they have done to deserve it and worry that the rewards may end. High status, then, results in non-contingent success that has been found conducive to self-handicapping.

Gender as a Diffuse Status Characteristic

Gender is a diffuse characteristic because it carries expectations for performance in a wide range of situations. In the United States, men are expected to perform better than women on many important tasks. Tests of status characteristics theory indicate that men are more highly valued than women in a variety of contexts (Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch 1980; Carli 1991; Pugh and Wahrman 1983; Ridgeway and Diekema 1989). Research shows that men have more influence than women on tasks that would appear to be gender-neutral, that men tend to receive higher evaluations for their performances than do women, and that it is illegitimate for women to occupy positions of high status (Eagley Makhijani, and Klonsky 1992; Fennell et al. 1978; Lucas 2003). Thus, men enjoy generally higher status than women, perhaps explaining the propensity for men to self-handicap.

Race/Ethnicity as a Diffuse Status Characteristic and Self-Handicapping

The status explanation also implies that status differences in characteristics other than gender will produce a similar self-handicapping effect, those with high status self-handicapping more than those with low status. Race is a diffuse status characteristic with European Americans valued more highly than members of other racial (and ethnic) groups in the United States (Webster and Driskell 1978). The analysis of self-handicapping using status characteristics theory suggests that African Americans and other minority groups would self-handicap less than would European Americans. Stone (2002) found that Hispanic participants self-handicapped less than did European-American participants in a sports contest. It is uncertain, however, whether that result was due to ethnicity, because stereotype threat was primed for European-American participants by framing the contest as one of "natural athletic ability." Thus, investigating possible differences in self-handicapping by race or ethnicity represents a cogent first test of the proposition that individuals with high status will self-handicap more than will those with low status.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

We designed a study to investigate the relationship between race as a status characteristic and self-handicapping. We predicted that, if status has an effect on self-handicapping, then European-American participants will self-handicap more than will African Americans, Asian Americans or Hispanic Americans. Students completed a standard ability test expecting that their performance on it would be made known in a subsequent group discussion. Prior to taking the test, students could select the amount of study time they wanted to use. Students who select less study time self-handicap more than do those who select more study time. The amount of study time selected by European-American students could then be compared to the amount selected by students of other races or ethnicities.

Participants in the study were undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university who were told that they would complete a standard ability test, and then work as part of a "focus group" with a partner to discuss issues related to the test. Before taking the test, participants were told that study time was a factor that influences test scores and that increased study time improves performance. They were then asked to select how much time they wanted to study for the test, between 5 and 20 minutes. Instructions made clear that their partner would know both the amount of study time they selected and their score on the test.

After selecting the amount of study time, participants studied problems from the Standard Raven Progressive Matrices test. They then took the Advanced Raven Progressive Matrices, a standard mental ability test for individuals in the top 25% of the population in IQ. (2) Either the Standard Progressive Matrices test or the Advanced test may be used with university students. The Advanced Progressive Matrices avoids ceiling effects. (Some students get a perfect score on the Standard Progressive Matrices.) The Raven is considered one of the least biased and most accurate tests of general intelligence (Raven, Court, and Raven 1992; Jensen 1992). Each item on both the Standard and Advanced Raven Progressive Matrices consists of a large pattern of geometric shapes that is missing a piece. The test taker must determine what the missing piece should look like and identify it from several options in a multiple-choice format. The tests are similar except that items on the advanced test are more difficult. After studying, participants were given as much time as they needed to complete the Advanced Raven Progressive Matrices.

Our measure of self-handicapping was the amount of study time chosen by the participant, a standard measure of self-handicapping (Deppe and Harackiewicz 1996; Eronen, Nurmi, and Salmela 1998; Ferrari and Tice 2000; Urdan, Midgley, and Anderman 1998). Participants who selected a small amount of study time self-handicapped more than participants who selected a larger amount.

Hypothesis: Controlling for gender, European-American participants will select less study time (self-handicap more) than will African-American, Asian-American, or Hispanic-American participants.

RESULTS

117 undergraduates participated. Experimental conditions contained unequal numbers of participants reflecting the size of different groups and the difficulty of recruiting minority participants. In all, Study 1 comprised 24 European-American men, 65 European-American women, 4 African-American men, 15 African-American women, 2 Asian-American men, 2 Hispanic-American men, 1 Hispanic-American woman, and 4 participants in other categories. Minority students are underrepresented at research universities. To increase the proportion of minority participants, we actively recruited in classes that contained a greater proportion of minority students with some success, but lack of resources prevented us from attempting to enroll comparable numbers of minority and non-minority students.

We predicted that European-American participants would self-handicap more than participants from other racial groups. Thus, we should expect lower levels of study time among European-American participants than among other participants. Because researchers have found self-handicapping to vary by gender, we examined self-handicapping and race independently among men and women.

Table 1. Mean Levels of Selected Study Time (Standard Deviations, N) and Results of t-test by Gender and Race of Participants.

	Men	Women
European-American	8.38 (4.19, 24)	10.28 (4.53, 65)
Non-European American	11.45 (4.61, 11)	14.29 (5.49, 17)

t-tests: European-American men versus Non-European-American men, $t = 1.96$, one-tailed $p = .030$. European-American women versus Non-European-American women: $t = 3.11$, one-tailed $p = .002$.

Table 1 shows that European-American men ($n = 24$) selected the lowest amount of study time, an average of 8.38 (S.D. = 4.19) minutes. Although numbers in specific racial and ethnic categories are small rendering results unreliable in each cell, study time chosen by non-European-American men was consistently higher than that by European-American men. (See Appendix A for mean levels of self-handicapping by gender and race/ethnicity.)

Because male participants in all non-European-American racial (and ethnic) categories, as predicted, selected higher amounts of study time than did European-American participants, we felt comfortable in aggregating our data for non-European-American participants. Non-European-American men ($n = 11$) selected an average of 11.45 (S.D. = 4.61) minutes. This difference is in the predicted direction and significant; European-American men self-handicapped more than did non-European-American men.

Among women, self-handicapping was also greater for European-American participants than it was for African Americans and the Hispanic American. (No Asian-American women volunteered for the study.) The mean level of study time selected by European-American women was lower than the level selected by non-European-American women. This difference is in the predicted direction and significant; European-American women self-handicapped more than did non-European-American women.

Table 2. Regression Analysis of Gender and Race Effects on Selected Study Time (N = 117).

Variable	B	SE	P
(Constant)	13.85	1.67	.000
Male	-2.38	1.06	.013
European-American	-3.58	1.08	.001
Male X Euro-Amer.	.25	.53	.645 (2-tailed)
Score on Raven	.01	.07	.876 (2-tailed)
R squared = .132			

The regression analysis in Table 2 confirms the bivariate results while controlling for participants' test scores. The coefficients for being male (-2.38) and for being European American (-3.58) are negative and significant, indicating that men and European Americans selected less study time (and self-handicapped more) than did others. The interaction between gender and race was not significant.

Test Score

Participants' scores on the Raven Advanced Progressive Matrices were consistent with those typical of university undergraduates. Overall mean score was 22.93 (S.D. = 6.02). Raven, Raven and Court (1998) provide normative data for the test. For 18 – 22 year olds in the United States, a score of 20 represents the fiftieth percentile, while a score of 30 represents the ninetieth percentile. Mean score of undergraduates at the University of Alabama-Birmingham was 20.14 (S.D. = 5.92), while at the University of California-Berkeley it was 27.98 (S.D. = 4.40).

DISCUSSION

Results from the study support the proposition that status affects self-handicapping. We investigated two diffuse status characteristics, race and gender. We found that European-American participants self-handicapped more than did others, similar to the way that men self-handicap more than do women.

Although race and gender are status variables, factors other than status associated with race and gender may have produced the observed effects on self-handicapping. More motivated students, for example, might choose more study time than less motivated students. While we do not have data to show whether women or minority group members in the study were more motivated than were European-American men, data from a similar sample found that women university undergraduates were more motivated to succeed academically than were men, and that African-American and other disadvantaged minority students were as motivated to succeed as were European-Americans (Lovaglia, Thompkins, Lucas and Thye 2000). African-American students, however, have been found to report high motivation to succeed academically while also reporting spending *less* time studying than do European-American students (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998), suggesting that motivation to succeed might not be the reason that African-American participants chose more study time than European Americans in the study.

CONCLUSION

Our study supported the idea that self-handicapping behavior is related to the desire to protect a valued status position. Non-European Americans and women self-handicapped less than did European Americans and men. How is it that men learn to self-handicap when self-handicapping can impair the performances that would reinforce their high status? Self-handicapping has been shown to impair performance (Markus 1989, Urdan, Midgley, and Anderman 1998). Why not forgo self-handicapping and turn in the best possible performance, expecting that high esteem will follow?

The answer may be that self-handicapping is only effective when it is costly to the self-handicapper. Surprisingly, other species handicap themselves. Zahavi and Zahavi (1997) find that handicaps are widely used in the animal kingdom to signal an individual's fitness. An effective signal, however, must be costly to the individual. Gazelles for example jump vertically several times when approached by a wolf. Jumping in place increases the gazelle's danger, wasting energy needed to escape and giving the wolf time to approach. Only the fastest gazelles can do it and survive. Jumping vertically signals the gazelle's ability to escape, discouraging the wolf from attempting an exhausting chase. A higher and more energetic jump is more convincing than a feeble one.

In social animals, fitness implies value to the group. Thus, high-status individuals esteemed as being especially worthy will be most likely to handicap themselves. Zahavi and Zahavi (1997) find, for example, that within flocks of babblers in Israel, individual birds compete for the right to act as sentry while the flock feeds. Sentry is a lonely and dangerous activity that interferes with the sentry's ability to feed. Yet only high-status babblers handicap themselves by acting as sentries, signaling their value to the group. Lower-ranked individuals then defer to a sentry in sleeping arrangements and other social activities.

The student who self-handicaps before an important test could be signaling (to himself as well as others) that any reduction in performance caused by the handicap will be overcome by his superior abilities or the high esteem in which he is already held. Men may self-handicap because they feel that they can afford to and because they have grown up watching high-status role models self-handicap. For example, Muhammad Ali became perhaps the highest prestige prizefighter of all time. He signaled ability early in his boxing career by approaching his opponent and then lowering his guard, dropping his hands to his sides, slouching and sticking out his chin. Ali's daring enthralled boys who watched him fight but his self-handicapping would not have increased his prestige had it gotten him knocked out.

We propose that men have been socialized to bid for high status using risky, self-handicapping behavior while women have not. This implies a possible interaction between status and socialization that could be detected in a full factorial study of gender, race, and assigned status effects on self-handicapping. If African-American men, like European-American men, have been socialized to bid for status by self-handicapping, then African-American men assigned to a high-status position would self-handicap more than would African-American men assigned to a low-status position. In contrast, African-American women placed in a high-status position would not self-handicap more than would African-American women placed in a low-status position.

Further research can test for interactions by assigning participants to status positions, and can additionally rule out potential alternative explanations for our results. Some propose that men self-handicap more than women because they are less motivated or more confident in their ability. This may be so. If it is, we should expect that in 25 years of research on self-handicapping, researchers would have identified settings in which women were less motivated or more confident than men. However, men continue to be more likely to self-handicap than women regardless of characteristics of the task setting.

Future research on the relationship between status and self-handicapping can address motivation or confidence as alternative explanations in two ways. First, pre-test items can be used to measure the motivation and confidence of participants before they have the opportunity to self-handicap. Second, future research might use measures of self-handicapping (such as performance-enhancing or performance-hampering dietary supplements) that are less likely than study time to correlate with motivation or confidence. It makes sense to assume that a non-motivated person will select less study time, perhaps in the hopes of finishing faster. There is little apparent benefit, however, to selecting a performance-hampering herbal supplement unless the goal is to self-handicap.

Having found evidence for a connection between status and self-handicapping, we hope to use that insight in future research to explain one of the most robust and interesting gender effects in social psychological research.

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APPENDIX A: MEAN LEVELS OF STUDY TIME (STANDARD DEVIATIONS, N) BY GENDER AND RACE/ETHNICITY

	Men	Women
European-American	8.38 (4.19, 24)	10.28 (4.53, 65)
African-American	10.00 (5.77, 4)	14.53 (5.08, 15)
Asian-American	12.50 (3.54, 2)	---
Hispanic-American	15.50 (.707, 2)	20.00 (---, 1)
Other	10.00 (5.00, 3)	5.00 (---, 1)

APPENDIX B: MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND CORRELATIONS FOR RELEVANT VARIABLES

	Mean (SD)	Gender	Race	Test score
Gender (F=0, M=1)	.30(.46)			
Race (Non-white=0, White=1)	.76(.43)	-.115		
Test score	21.85(6.17)	-.014	.253	
Study time selected	10.58(4.89)	-.166	-.299	-.071

ENDNOTES

(1) Studies of self-handicapping in women find that it may take a different form than the performance-impairing behavior typical of men. Instead, women faced with a performance capable of threatening their esteem may use excuses or attributions for potential poor performance (Degree and Snyder 1985; Harris, Snyder, Higgins and Schrag 1986; Smith, Snyder and Perkins, 1986).

(2) Because participants work alone to complete a test, it may appear that our experimental situation violates the scope condition of status characteristics theory that group members be collectively oriented. Researchers, however, have extended status characteristics theory to apply to individual tasks, especially those, like standardized tests, that have implications for an individual's future status rank. See Jemmott and Gonzales (1989), Lucas (1999), Lovaglia, Lucas, Houser, Thye, and Markovsky (1998).

AUTHORS' NOTE

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Jeffrey W. Lucas (jlucas@socy.umd.edu) is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland-College Park. His primary research interest is the experimental analysis of theories of basic social processes. Recent works include "Theory Testing, Generalization, and the Problem of External Validity" (*Sociological Theory*, 21, 3, 236-253) and "Status Processes and the Institutionalization of Women as Leaders" (*American Sociological Review*, 68, 3, 464-480).

Professor Michael J. Lovaglia (michael-lovaglia@uiowa.edu) chairs the Department of Sociology at the University of Iowa. His research investigates power, status and identity and how those social processes can be applied to problems of educational achievement and leadership.