



## Incomplete professional identity goals override moral concerns



Michael K. Marquardt<sup>a</sup>, Ana P. Gantman<sup>b,\*</sup>, Peter M. Gollwitzer<sup>a,b</sup>, Gabriele Oettingen<sup>a,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Konstanz, Germany

<sup>b</sup> New York University, USA

<sup>c</sup> University of Hamburg, Germany

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 9 April 2015

Revised 26 February 2016

Accepted 11 March 2016

Available online 17 March 2016

#### Keywords:

Self-completion theory

Self-symbolizing

Identity goals

Morality

### ABSTRACT

According to self-completion theory (SCT; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), people committed to identity goals (e.g., being a lawyer or a business manager) strive for goal attainment by collecting indicators of completeness (e.g., relevant achievements). When the completeness of an identity goal becomes threatened, people are driven to engage in self-symbolizing to compensate. In two studies, we found that committed individuals endorsed immoral behaviors displayed by professional businessmen (Study 1) and lawyers (Study 2) after having received bogus negative feedback about their aptitude for the respective profession. When high school seniors committed to pursuing a STEM profession received bogus negative (vs. positive) feedback on possessing relevant cognitive abilities (Study 3), they were observed to self-scribe personality traits associated with professional success but also with engaging in immoral behavior. Strategies for ameliorating negative compensation behavior, differences from general self-affirmation, and implications for understanding immoral behavior are discussed.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

In December of 2001, it was revealed that *Fortune Magazine's* "Most Innovative Company in America" for six consecutive years had been sustaining itself on institutionalized, systematic accounting fraud. This company, of course, was Enron. The revelation of these "creative" accounting practices led to the largest bankruptcy in history, costing thousands of jobs, retirement plans, and investments, totaling over \$60 billion in losses, and providing the first window into the nation's coming economic crisis. While it is easy to imagine a few corrupt and evil perpetrators, the accounting fraud succeeded because the practices were borderline, and part of a larger culture of striving to be an innovative and leading company. Indeed, recent research suggests that the majority of dishonest behavior comes, not from a few cheaters who deceive on a large-scale, but rather from everyone cheating just a little bit (Ariely, 2012).

One possible explanation for the widespread, small-scale cheating of employees at Enron is that some professional identities are associated with dishonest behavior. Recent research suggests that for bankers, identity salience leads to an increase in dishonest behavior. Bankers were randomly assigned to an identity priming condition in which they answered questions about their position in the bank vs. those who answered questions about other aspects of their life, such as how much television they watch. They were then given a monetary incentive and asked to report the number of coin flips that came up 'heads.' Bankers reminded of their professional identity reported a greater number of favorable coin tosses than chance would predict, whereas those

not primed with their banking identity did not (Cohn, Fehr, & Maréchal, 2014). This finding suggests that the professional identity of being a banker, when made salient, can lead to increased cheating behavior as compared to bankers whose identity was not made salient. Moreover, these studies emphasize the importance of understanding professional identity in context (e.g., when and where professional identities are salient, aspired to, or maintained).

### 1. Identity goals and self-completion theory

According to self-completion theory (SCT; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), people aspire to attain and maintain long-term goals related to identities such as bankers (i.e., commit to self-defining goals). Striving for identity goals takes the form of accumulating indicators of successful goal attainment (i.e., symbols; Ledgerwood, Liviatan, & Carnevale, 2007; Moskowitz, Li, Ignarri, & Stone, 2011). These symbols can be tangible (e.g., elegant business suits) but also intangible, such as academic titles, for instance, an MBA degree (Harmon-Jones, Schmeichel, & Harmon-Jones, 2009), positive self-descriptions (e.g., "I am a successful manager"; Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982), the exertion of social influence, such as mentoring newcomers (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985a), skills and tools that facilitate identity-striving (e.g., participation in leadership workshops), or even the mere statement of behavioral intentions (e.g., "I will raise profits by 10%"; see Gollwitzer, Sheeran, Michalski, & Seifert, 2009).

The process of acquiring identity symbols is referred to as *self-symbolizing*. Whenever a person who is committed to a certain identity goal experiences a lack of relevant symbols, a state of identity goal incompleteness is assumed to arise. In order to compensate for identity

\* Corresponding author at: New York University, Psychology Department, 6 Washington Pl, New York, NY 10003, USA.

E-mail address: [agantman@nyu.edu](mailto:agantman@nyu.edu) (A.P. Gantman).

goal incompleteness, the individual intensifies his or her self-symbolizing efforts. All identity-relevant symbols qualify for self-symbolizing, no matter which lacked symbol provoked the sense of incompleteness originally (for a review, see Gollwitzer, Bayer, Scherer, & Seifert, 1999). This compensation principle assumes that people can continue to strive for their identity goals in the case of setbacks (Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998). Moreover, identity goal striving and self-symbolizing must take place in the plane of social reality—it is necessary that other individuals take notice of one's claim to that particular identity (Gollwitzer, 1986).

While all identity-relevant symbols may qualify for compensation, affirming a global sense of self does not. The process of self-symbolizing is critically different from responding to threats to self-esteem. According to self-affirmation theory, people are motivated to affirm their own “adaptive and moral adequacy as well as a positive self-image” (Steele, 1988, p. 281). In other words, people want to see themselves as good, capable, and efficacious, and threatening information leads people to want to restore their positive self-evaluation. Because people are multifaceted and active in multiple life domains (e.g., family, work, hobbies), we are able to restore a threatened sense of global self-worth in one domain (e.g., a bad decision at work) with positive information from another (e.g., support from a friend; Steele, 1988). In contrast, when people are made incomplete with respect to their identity goals, they cannot successfully self-symbolize merely by affirming their global self-worth (see e.g., Gollwitzer, Marquardt, Scherer, & Fujita, 2013; Ledgerwood et al., 2007, Study 4; Moskowitz et al., 2011). As a consequence, self-completion theory allows for the unique prediction that compensation efforts may take the form of negative—antisocial or even immoral—behavior, as long as this behavior indicates the possession of the aspired-to identity.

Indeed, past research hints at the possibility that in order to self-symbolize people may behave in a negative or antisocial manner. For example, in one study (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985b, Study 2), male students were made incomplete or complete with respect to their aspired-to identity: They took part in a personality test and were informed either that they did not have the personality characteristics of someone successful in their desired field (i.e., bogus negative feedback) or that they did (i.e., bogus positive feedback). Next, they were informed that they would participate in a second experiment, in which they would introduce themselves to an attractive female known to prefer self-effacing males. In this introduction, they were told to elucidate their strengths and weaknesses with respect to their desired identity (i.e., to self-symbolize). Identity goal incomplete participants, in contrast to complete ones, ignored the woman's preferences for humility and self-symbolized by preferring self-promoting descriptions. In another study (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985b, Study 1), women committed to the professional identity of being successful in the business world were either made incomplete or complete, using a similar manipulation. Next, groups of two with one incomplete and one complete participant were instructed to talk to each other about their own business savvy. It was observed that in order to self-symbolize, identity goal incomplete participants dominated the discussion, ignoring their discussion partners' desire to speak. In sum, incompleteness of identity goals can induce people to engage in self-symbolizing behavior that is socially inept and impolite.

A likely reason that people may even resort to inept or impolite compensation behavior is that after identity goal threat, affirming another aspect of one's identity cannot serve a compensatory function. For example, in research by (Moskowitz et al., 2011, Study 2) participants were made incomplete with regard to their goals to be egalitarian. A sample of all White participants were recruited and asked to write an essay about a time in which they had violated the egalitarian ideal, described as acting fair, being tolerant of others, and treating people equally regardless of their ethnicity, religion, gender, race, or physical appearance. To test whether participants were able to compensate by affirming their self more generally, half of participants were assigned

to write a second essay about a time where they lived up to the egalitarian ideal (specifically compensating for the previous identity goal threat) while the other half wrote about a situation in which their sense of self as a positive and good person had been highlighted by a loved one. While both kinds of essays highlighted a positive interpersonal experience, only one could also serve to compensate for the previously incomplete identity goal of being egalitarian. As predicted, only those participants who were still incomplete (i.e., wrote about a positive memory with a family member) showed enhanced processing for African-American faces, (in a race-irrelevant classification task) suggesting their egalitarian goal was activated. Apparently, when identity goals are threatened, self-symbolizing behaviors must be specific and relevant to the threatened domain; an affirmation of the self in an unrelated domain will not suffice.

## 2. Moral identity goals

Recent research has also specifically investigated moral identity goals, both generally and with regard to specific moral values (e.g., egalitarianism, environmentalism). Jordan, Mullen, and Murnighan (2011) observed that individuals may have an identity goal to be a moral person. They found that those made incomplete with regard to their moral identity goal behaved more morally than those who were made complete. In a first study (2011, Study 1), the researchers asked MBA students either to recall a past immoral behavior (to induce identity goal incompleteness) or to recall a past moral behavior (to induce completeness). In comparison to identity goal complete individuals, the identity goal incomplete participants subsequently agreed more strongly with symbolic moral identity items such as, “the types of things I do in my spare time (e.g., hobbies) clearly identify me as having these [moral] characteristics” (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011 p. 704). A study using a similar identity goal completeness manipulation (2011, Study 2) found that moral identity goal incompleteness (as compared to identity goal completeness) increased reported intent to enact pro-social behaviors, such as donating to charity. Finally, participants with satiated (vs. threatened) moral identity goals also allowed the computer to reveal the answers to a series of math problems, knowing that seeing the answers would ruin the experiment.

People can also have specific moral identity goals. For example, when participants thought about failing to uphold their egalitarian goals, they showed decreased accessibility to stereotype-relevant words (Experiment 1) and increased accessibility to egalitarian-related words (Experiment 2) following Black male faces (Moskowitz & Stone, 2012). In addition, Longoni, Gollwitzer, and Oettingen (2014) investigated identity goal pursuit among individuals strongly committed to the identity goal of being “green” or caring about the environment (a moral value for some; Feinberg & Willer, 2013). In one study, those who received negative (vs. positive or neutral) feedback about their green shopping behavior in a simulated grocery store (i.e., they were told that they had chosen fewer green products than a bogus average student) recycled more materials when cleaning up after completing a seemingly separate “creativity” task that asked individuals to cut pieces of paper. When their identity goal is temporarily incomplete, they may be more likely to choose green products.

Finally, self-completion theory can provide a unifying theoretical framework for two prominent findings in moral psychology. First, it may give us insight into the processes behind moral licensing behavior, in which recalling past immoral behavior increases the likelihood of pro-social behavior, while recalling past moral behavior decreases the likelihood of pro-social behavior (Effron, Miller, & Monin, 2012; Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva, Ilic, & Medin, 2009). Recalling past moral or immoral behavior may serve to complete or threaten one's moral identity. Second, self-completion theory may elucidate the processes behind moral cleansing behavior, in which recalling or performing immoral actions increases the desire for products and behaviors associated with cleansing such as hand washing (Zhong &

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/947661>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/947661>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)