

## Admission of Failure and Symbolic Self-Completion: Extending Lewinian Theory

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The present research examined the dynamic relation between two self-relevant actions, one self-supportive and the other self-abasing. These self-relevant actions were undertaken by subjects within the context of particular self-definitions (e.g., journalist, guitarist) to which subjects were actively committed. In the first experiment, subjects were offered an opportunity to compose a supportive self-descriptive essay to be seen later by others. Half of the subjects wrote to completion, while the others were interrupted. Subsequently, in a different context, all subjects were asked to list mistakes they had made previously in the realm of their respective self-definitions. Uninterrupted subjects admitted more readily to mistakes than did interrupted subjects. In the second experiment, the extent of subjects' self-abasement became the independent variable. Following that manipulation, all subjects were given 15 minutes to write a supportive self-descriptive essay. Subjects who had been induced to be self-abasing were the least likely to interrupt themselves while writing the essay. The results of both studies are interpreted within the framework of symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, in press).

When a person is unusually modest, self-deprecating, or especially ready to confess to mistakes, it is commonly thought that these negative, public self-commentaries reflect definite weaknesses in the person's abilities or other qualities. For instance, a physician who admits to having administered the wrong antibiotic to a patient is thought to be lacking in various ways central to a physician's status. One might conclude that the training is poor, the overall performance is below average, and that little respect from colleagues is generally accorded. Similarly, in the domains of criminal and religious confessions, Aubry and Caputo (1980) and

Berggren (1975) assume that people admit to failings in proportion to their actual failings. If the positive relation between the presence of faults and admission of them breaks down, inhibitory factors such as fear of the confession context or incorrect definition of what is indeed a fault are seen as the primary interfering factors.

The same consistency idea is expressed in a basic assumption of personality psychology (i.e., self-reports or self-descriptions are in principle valid; Pryor, 1980; Wylie, 1961). The person who admits to being machiavellian should be found to be devious and strategic in interpersonal behaviors and the person who admits to social ineptness should tend to show incorrect protocol when meeting strangers, to name just two examples. Although this assumption has received intense critical attention (cf. Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Mischel, 1968; Wicker, 1969), the focus of these critiques has been primarily on methodological questions and not on the underlying consistency notion itself.

This article looks at people's self-descriptions from the perspective of symbolic self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981,

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in press). A central assumption inherent to the self-completion notion is that flaws in the person's training or performance are "covered over" by what we shall call *self-symbolizing behaviors*. It follows from the idea that a person who currently possesses numerous durable indicators of competence is unlikely to engage in self-symbolizing actions. Thus, paradoxically, the way is paved for others to react to the person as having shortcomings.

The core assumption underlying these suggestions is that the various possible indicators of one's self-definition or self-identity are related to one another in a hydraulic fashion. For example, Harvard-educated prize-winning journalists are less likely to display their PhD titles than are their counterparts who are without prizes; the latter must rely more heavily on academic degrees as markers of completeness. In other words, the stronger a person is on one dimension of evidence for completing a self-definition, the less that individual needs to pursue evidence on other dimensions. This brings us to the central thesis of this article: To the extent that one's background allows the person to point to strong evidence of being complete in the area of pursuit, that person will more readily be publicly self-abasing. Before delving into this thesis in operational detail, we will describe the theoretical basis of the present research, which has its origins in the thinking of Lewin.

#### Historical Background

The idea that the potential effectiveness of one symbolic indicator of an aspired-to self-definition can be substituted for by an alternative symbolic indicator was implicit in the thinking of Lewin (1926) and several of his students. Their analysis of goal-oriented behavior and interrupted activities is the main conceptual background of this article. Lewin argues that when an organism establishes a particular goal, a tension system comes into play and remains until the goal is reached or until the organism "leaves the field." Further, if the task is interrupted due to outside forces, the tension system will remain intact, and the psychological effects of that tension system will be detectable even

if the person cannot resume the activity immediately. This rather simple principle surfaces in a highly testable, operationalized form in the often-cited work on memory (Zeigarnik, 1927), as well as in the analysis of interrupted-task resumption by three other students of Lewin (Lissner, 1933; Mahler, 1933; Ovsiankina, 1928).

We have concentrated especially on Mahler's (1933) research and conceptualization of the dynamics of substitute activities. In Mahler's research paradigm, subjects were typically assigned a number of simple tasks, such as piecing a mosaic together or constructing a tower from building blocks. Mahler interrupted each subject on a number of the tasks, using a variety of creative devices. Following each interruption, the subjects were eventually allowed to resume the original task. Approximately 90% of the original tasks were resumed. Following some of the interruptions, Mahler gave her subjects substitute tasks; after working on these they could resume work on the original. The substitute activities had a decided impact on the subsequent tendency to resume the original task: The resumption rate was curtailed sharply. In Lewin's terms, the activity was carried to a tension-reducing conclusion via a task that was not identical with the original but that served the same tension system.

Thus, Mahler points to the concept of substitutability. Given a goal with some finite, objective quality (such as constructing a tower), a whole class of substitute goals could reduce the tension system corresponding to the original goal. Henle (1944) argues that the substitute value of Mahler's alternative tasks was so substantial because subjects were oriented largely toward *self-defining* goals—such as creativity, industriousness, or intelligence—and not exclusively toward the objective goal of "tower completion" or "having written out a translation from French to German."

#### Symbolic Self-Completion

A theory of symbolic self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, in press) can now be summarized, using the concepts of *commitment to self-defining goals*, *symbols of completeness*, and *social reality*.

### *Commitment to Self-Defining Goals*

The self-completion process should be observable only when the individual is committed to a self-defining goal. From Lewin's perspective, a goal-specific tension remains active only as long as the person is psychologically involved in the pursuit of the goal. Ovsiankina (1928) found that the resumption effects were strongest when the task was personally important to subjects. For subjects who found the tasks to be personally unimportant, trivial, or arbitrary, the resumption rate was so low that one would be inclined to doubt the presence of a goal-directed tension system.

How does one recognize a self-defining goal, in contrast to other kinds of goals? *Self-defining* means that people lay claim to a quality that corresponds to a sense of control and capability, such as parent, athlete, or artist. In all of the research reported here, we have tried to insure an ongoing, goal-oriented process directed toward a self-definition. First, we have typically asked subjects to name one activity area in which they have a central interest (e.g., a sport, a musical instrument, or an academic subject). Second, we have established that subjects are continuously active in that area.

### *Symbols of Completeness*

To be sure, there is no single unequivocal indicator of possession of a self-definition, nor may we speak of a person's attainment of *the* objective indicator of a self-definition. Rather, each self-definition carries a number of possible indicators, each of which has the potential for being recognized or acknowledged by the immediate society. According to Rosenberg (1979), for example, "a minister is chosen because of his dignified manner . . . and an executive is promoted because of his social skills. In all these cases, success involves the presentation of a certain type of self" (p. 47). People learn about these alternative indicators of self-definitions through interactions with others (cf. Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), and in turn, once the individual displays the symbol (e.g., the minister), others react as though the person embodies that self-definition.

Within the context of symbolic self-completion, *symbols of completeness* may be defined generally as indicators (potentially recognizable by others) of one's standing regarding a self-defining goal. At a very rudimentary but important level are the simplest self-descriptions—a person teaching at a university introduces himself to an audience as a scientist. Of course, the human is not wholly dependent upon these kinds of open self-characterizations. There are numerous abbreviations for immediate social acknowledgment; many of these are describable as status symbols. That is, a diploma is a broadly recognized symbol of the person's self-definition, and it will propel the person toward a sense of completeness. Similarly, titles, official occupational positions, and membership in select interest groups are all socially evolved mechanisms for providing the individual with indicators or markers of possessing an aspired-to self-definition.

### *Social Reality*

Mahler (1933) found that the tension-reduction potential of a substitute task depended largely upon whether subjects' solving the substitute task carried a social reality (i.e., the substitute task had tension-reducing properties only if the solution was announced to the experimenter). Once others acknowledge the person for having solved the problem, having solved it becomes a social fact and thus can serve as a self-defining symbol. This line of thinking can be carried back to Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934), who state that a sense of self can come into being and remain stable only by virtue of the acknowledgment of others. Thus, the sense of progress toward a self-defining goal appears to be dependent on the acknowledgment of others. We will call this the *social reality factor*. We can also talk about the concept of broadening social reality. Once a person has an indicator at hand, the sense of completeness should be enhanced to the degree that one can inform more people about it, or more generally, enlarge the scope of individuals who could potentially recognize the completeness of the self-definition.

The foregoing overview of the self-com-

pletion notion allows us to restate the research problem of this article. The core of the theoretical idea is that symbols of completeness are potential substitutes for one another. This implies that a lack of symbolic support will lead to symbolizing the self as complete—within the parameters of a particular kind of self-definition. Therefore, if acknowledgment for one's self-definition from the immediate society could lead potentially to an increased sense of completeness, then the individual who is relatively lacking in existing symbolic support for a self-definition should be especially dependent on this immediate social reality (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981; Gollwitzer & Wicklund, Note 1). What happens, then, when the individual is under constraint to weaken the extent of public acknowledgment for being complete vis-à-vis the particular self-definition? That is, what transpires when the person becomes self-deprecating or admits to shortcomings? Such an individual is, in the present terms, undermining his symbolic support for the aspired-to self-definition. In light of the substitution idea, one would predict that individuals with strong preexisting symbolic support for their self-definitions should be the most ready to be self-disparaging, whereas those with existing symbolic deficits should try to avoid expanding the lack of symbolic support.

General requirements for an appropriate research design can now be spelled out. First, it has to be established that each subject has a particular, central self-definition toward which to strive, such as journalist, French speaker, or tennis player. The method chosen here first asks subjects to name one central activity area that they are pursuing, and also establishes the strength of that commitment by asking subjects about the behavioral intensity of their respective pursuits. Second, it is important to stipulate a symbolic dimension over which subjects have no easy control. Only in this way can we make a strong prediction that subjects who are short on that dimension will self-symbolize in some alternative way, within the same self-definitional area. This can be accomplished in two general ways: by taking advantage of existing (individual difference) lacks in sym-

bolic support or by inducing unequivocal lacks through experimental procedures. Both of these techniques are employed here. Finally, subjects must be given the possibility of self-symbolizing through a route that is easily accessible. In the present research that route is the simple and flexible self-description.

### Preliminary Study

Subjects committed to a number of different activity areas (e.g., chemistry, drawing, football, mathematics, piano) were asked for the amount of education they had received in that activity area. This choice of an independent variable was based on an earlier study (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981), in which years of formal education in a subject's indicated area of competence was taken to be an indicator of completeness. Then subjects were asked to state that they had performed poorly on a test in their activity areas, with the understanding that another subject would see that negative self-description. The dependent measure was the degree of this self-described negativity. On the basis of our reasoning, it should be the less well-educated subjects who would be the most reluctant to appear to be incompetent. Thus, we hypothesize a positive correlation between years of education and extent of negative self-portrayal.

### Method

#### Subjects

The subjects were 174 college students enrolled in introductory psychology classes. They were tested in four sessions ( $n_s = 58, 36, 36, \text{ and } 44$ ) in a lecture hall suited for 500 people.

#### Procedure

As subjects entered the lecture hall, they were positioned so that the distances between them were maximized. Then the experimenter and assistants handed out the first questionnaire. The first item asked subjects to indicate an area of special competence: "Please think of an activity, such as a sport or musical talent, that you have pursued for some time, or else a special area of knowledge (such as chemistry or a foreign language)." The second item inquired about each subject's years of education in that area of competence. Finally, subjects indicated whether they had been active in their respective activity areas within the last 14 days. This

last item served as the operational definition of whether the activity was ongoing, exactly as in Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981), and is explained more fully below.

When subjects were finished with the questionnaire, the experimenter explained that he needed the information requested to find out about college students' interests. In particular, he said he was studying which activities are most frequent among college students.

He then explained how he would conduct a subsequent session with different subjects. He said that in the subsequent session he wanted to find out how people would do on an ability test in their respective activity areas, when they are first led to believe that the test is rather hard. In line with this purpose, he purported to need the present subjects' help in creating these expectations about a hard test. A form was handed out, entitled "Performance Feedback Sheet for the Basic Ability Test." Subjects were asked to assume that they had taken a Basic Ability Test in their respective activity areas and were then requested, after indicating the activity in question on the feedback sheet, to write their alleged score on that form. The statement read, "(name) performed worse than \_\_\_\_% of the undergraduate sample which had taken this test." Explicit pressure was placed on all subjects to write down as negative a percentile as they could bring themselves to.<sup>1</sup> Finally, subjects were debriefed and dismissed.

### Results

A criterion for inclusion of subjects was imposed as in Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981), so that subjects' statements of their activity areas had to be unambiguous. If subjects could not decide upon one single activity area (on the first questionnaire item), their data were not analyzed. Also, only areas represented by at least three actively involved people were included in the analysis.

As in Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981), it was stipulated that subjects had to have been active in their pursuits during the past 2 weeks to be included in the sample. The reasoning here stems directly from Lewin (1926) and Ovsiankina (1928), as discussed above. Although alternative approaches to insuring subjects' commitment would no doubt be feasible (cf. Marcia, 1966, for a sophisticated method of differentiating among different grades of ego-identity), we used the 2-week behavioral criterion here because of its simplicity and because of its clear impact in our earlier research. By this criterion, we are left with 82 committed subjects and 12 who are designated as noncommitted.

For the sample of 82 committed subjects, the correlation between years of education and "percent worse than" was .27 ( $p < .01$ ), indicating that more education leads to greater self-deprecation. The effect appears stronger for males ( $r = .32, n = 42$ ) than for females ( $r = .15, n = 40$ ), although the difference between sexes is statistically negligible.

Although only actively involved subjects are appropriate for testing the hypothesis, it is informative to perform the same statistical analysis for the other 12 subjects. Interestingly, a negative correlation results ( $r = -.32, p < .16$ ). The difference between the two values approaches significance ( $z = 1.70, p < .10$ ). The direction of the correlation for these latter subjects would imply that self-descriptions can indeed be veridical with or congruent with other facets of the person (such as amount of training). However, it appears that this kind of congruency is a phenomenon associated only with individuals who are not actively committed to their named activity areas.<sup>2</sup>

### Experiment 1

The preliminary study supports the idea that there are conditions under which the readiness to deprecate oneself is positively related to the person's strengths within the domain where self-descriptions are relevant. These results suggest that there is reason to pursue this idea in an experimental context. The first experiment employs a negative self-description measure comparable to that of the preliminary study. However, the independent variable, completeness-incomplete-

<sup>1</sup> This dependent variable format, in which a person is pressured to admit to poor performance, has been used successfully in an experimental context (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, Study 4), where incompleteness was induced by making salient a negative aspect in the subject's educational background.

<sup>2</sup> Similar analyses were conducted among noncommitted subjects in the research by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981), and in every case it was found that the positive relationship between lack of symbolic support and further self-symbolizing was absent among the noncommitted group. Thus the reasoning of Lewin (1926) and findings of Ovsiankina (1928) seem to receive consistent validation.

ness, is considerably different. Subjects were first asked to write an essay describing how they became interested in their particular endeavor and what they had accomplished in it. Further, they had the expectation that a prestige audience would view this essay later. Half of the subjects were interrupted before they could finish, thus eliminating the essay as a tool of broadening the social reality for the self-definition. The idea of interruption was borrowed from the paradigms of Lissner (1933), Mahler (1933), Ovsiankina (1928), and Zeigarnik (1927). Following the reasoning of Lewin (1926), they had assumed that interruption would lead to a continued tension state and a prolonged need to deal with that tension. Similarly, we are assuming here that interruption of a self-symbolizing effort keeps the person in a state of tension regarding completing the self-definition and that further attempts at self-symbolizing will thereby be undertaken. Accordingly, the relatively incomplete subjects should be especially resistant to admit to blunders or inadequacies, for these are the subjects who should be the most motivated to rebuild the sense of self-definition.

There is a further design issue: An interruption manipulation might conceivably bring subjects to write down fewer errors for reasons independent of the present conceptualization. For instance, if subjects are irritated by the interruption, one might imagine that the irritation would carry over into the phase at which the second experimenter requests subjects to record their mistakes, with the result that they would simply write less. To control for this class of potential alternative explanations, we asked half of the subjects to record another person's mistakes rather than their own. It is doubtful that the interruption manipulation, if it is a variation in self-completeness, should affect the number of errors the person writes with respect to another person.

### *Method*

#### *Subjects*

Subjects were drawn from introductory psychology classes. All of them had been pretested concerning their primary activity areas at the outset of the semester. Male subjects interested in liberal arts, sports, natural

sciences, or a vocational interest (business, engineering) were called in, with the stipulation that they were committed by the 14-day criterion. Fifty-two subjects were assigned randomly to the four conditions, with the constraint that each activity area be approximately equally represented across the conditions.

#### *Design*

The experiment was a two-factor design with two levels of each factor. Subjects were either allowed to finish a self-descriptive essay (complete condition) or were interrupted shortly after they started to write (interrupted condition). Then they were asked to report either previous mistakes related to their respective activity areas (self condition) or mistakes by others that they had witnessed in the past ("other" condition).

#### *Procedure*

Subjects were tested individually by two experimenters. Upon arriving, each participant was greeted by Experimenter 1 (a female) who described the experiment as a study of representative college students' interests. The study was said to have been set up by two professors from the Department of Psychology. She also mentioned that the study would take only about half of the time allotted to the subject's experimental participation, and she indicated that it would be convenient for a graduate student from the Department of Educational Psychology to use him for the remainder of the hour.

The first study was then described in more detail. It was said that a number of essays written by college students were to be collected and that each essay should cover two questions: (a) how the student became involved in an area of special interest and (b) what the student finds enjoyable about it.

After the subject named his special area of interest, the experimenter handed out a 2-page booklet. This booklet repeated the central purpose of the study and also made it clear that the essay would likely be used later in a publication. As soon as the subject began work on his essay, which was to be 200 words long, the experimenter left the room and discreetly watched through a one-way mirror.

*Interruption manipulation.* In the complete condition, the experimenter waited until the subject had finished before she returned. In the interrupted condition, she returned once the subject had completed about one-third of a page. She addressed the subject in the following way:

Aren't you writing on [subject's activity area]? I'm sorry, but my supervisor just told me that we already have three essays on your area of interest. Since we want to collect essays from as many different areas as possible, we really don't need more than three in [subject's interest area]. Why don't you stop then, so I can go on to the next subject? It would be just a waste of time for you to finish.

The experimenter took the essay from the subject and signaled Experimenter 2 (a male), who came back to

the room alone, introduced himself, and then led the subject to a different part of the building. There he explained that he was developing new instructional techniques for teachers. One of these techniques was to center on specific mistakes that students make. He noted further that he planned to publish a teaching manual covering mistakes committed by students in a variety of different kinds of pursuits.

Then he said that he needed individual students to jot down mistakes they had made while performing the activities in their named area of interest. He said that the purpose of recording these mistakes was to collect material for the publication of a manual on typical mistakes of students. Following these general instructions, subjects received an envelope containing the specific instructions to write down as many specific mistakes as they could recall. At this point the second variable was introduced.

*Self-versus-other manipulation.* Half of the subjects were instructed to write down errors they had committed (self condition), whereas the other half were requested to record mistakes that they had seen others make ("other" condition). The written instructions reiterated the purpose of the study and gave a sample list of mistakes ostensibly generated by other subjects. From this sample, subjects should have gained the impression that the reports on mistakes should be relatively short (one or two sentences per mistake) and that a large number of mistakes was needed. After leaving the subject alone for 10 minutes, the experimenter returned and gave the subject a manipulation-check questionnaire. Specifically, subjects were asked whether they had fully expressed themselves in the essay and whether the essay they had written would have a good chance of being published. Before subjects were debriefed and dismissed, they were probed for suspicion, especially to insure that they saw no direct connection between the two phases of the experiment.

## Results

### *Effectiveness of Interruption Manipulation*

Interrupted subjects thought that they had been able to express themselves less ( $M = 4.16$ ) than complete subjects ( $M = 6.62$ ),  $F(1, 47) = 10.52$ ,  $p < .01$ . Also, the interrupted subjects considered the likelihood of their essays being picked for publication to be smaller ( $M = 2.87$ ) than did the complete subjects ( $M = 5.00$ ),  $F(1, 47) = 11.79$ ,  $p < .01$ . When asked how many of the mistakes reported had been committed by the subject himself, subjects in the "other" condition reported significantly fewer mistakes ( $M = 2.54$ ) than subjects in the self condition ( $M = 4.07$ ),  $F(1, 47) = 7.59$ ,  $p < .01$ .<sup>3</sup>

### *Number of Mistakes Listed*

It was hypothesized that subjects would report mistakes insofar as they had been

Table 1  
*Mean Number of Mistakes Reported in Experiment 1*

Essay	Mistake condition	
	Self	Other
Interrupted	3.23	5.38
Complete	5.23	4.85

Note. For all conditions,  $n = 13$ .

allowed to finish the essay. Further, the interruption manipulation should make a difference only if one's own mistakes are at issue (the self condition). In the "other" condition, there should be no effect for interruption. The mean number of mistakes reported for the four conditions is shown in Table 1, where one can see that the unique cell is the interrupted-self condition, showing the fewest recorded mistakes. The interaction is significant,  $F(1, 48) = 6.39$ ,  $p < .02$ , and that cell differs significantly from the complete-self cell ( $t = 2.82$ ) as well as from the interrupted-"other" cell ( $t = 3.03$ , both  $ps < .01$ ). Thus, the data bear out the main hypothesis.

The means for the interrupted-"other" and complete-"other" conditions ( $M_s = 5.38$  vs. 4.85,  $t < 1.0$ ) bear on the possibility that the outcome was due simply to a general set of uncooperativeness engendered by the interruption. If that had been the only psychological impact of the manipulation, the self and "other" conditions should then have been affected equally. Thus, the uniquely low mean in the interrupted-self condition attests to a process that is particular to descriptions about one's own self.

To determine whether the interaction was dependent on activity area, a three-way analysis of variance was conducted, adding activity area as a third factor. The levels of this factor were liberal arts, sports, natural sciences, and vocational interests. No significant interaction was found with the activity area that subjects were engaged in,  $F(3, 36) = 1.69$ ,  $p > .15$ . Again, the Interruption  $\times$  Self-"Other" interaction was sig-

<sup>3</sup> The degrees of freedom for the manipulation-check analyses are reduced by 1, since we lacked manipulation-check data for one subject.

nificant but this time slightly stronger,  $F(1, 36) = 12.94, p < .001$ .

### Discussion

The readiness to cast the self into a negative light appears to be a function of whether an earlier self-symbolizing act has been completed. To interrupt someone who is characterizing the development of a personal quality is to reduce that person's subsequent willingness to communicate to others the specific, erroneous aspects of one's endeavor. Readiness for self-criticism, then, is evidently the outcome of a sense of being complete regarding indicators of one's self-definition in a specific endeavor.

It is important to note that the results we have described here are not simply the outcome of variations in self-presentational strategies or self-presentational cues. The central idea behind self-presentation (cf. Schlenker, 1980) is that there is someone to be impressed and that depending upon the situational cues, the person will steer self-descriptions and other gestures to create an image of a positive self, a consistent self (cf. Schlenker, 1980), or a likable self (Gergen & Wishnov, 1965; Jones, 1964; Schneider & Eustis, 1972). Our subjects all had a cue that could easily be regarded as a self-presentational cue—the experimental constraint to be self-deprecating. However, the differences obtained have nothing to do with variations in self-presentational strategies as a function of differential situational cues, as in the classic self-presentation research. Rather, our subjects brought to the situation a condition of relative completeness or incompleteness, a condition unknown to the experimenter who measured self-deprecatory tendencies, and it is this prior motivational condition that determines how subjects respond to the cue to be modest.

Another set of findings that seems pertinent to the present study is reported by Baumeister and Jones (1978). They found that subjects presented themselves more favorably to a target person when they believed the target person to be aware of negative feedback that the subject had received previously. The effect in that study was one of compensating, in the course of a self-presentation, on dimensions irrelevant to the initial

feedback. A crucial aspect of their compensation finding was that it occurred only when the target person was ostensibly privy to the subject's initial feedback. In short, it looks as though the effect was one of compensating via self-presentation for an initially unfavorable impression. How is such a line of reasoning applicable to the present study?

In the present research, we made every attempt to separate the two sessions,<sup>4</sup> so that the second experimenter would not ostensibly be aware of any prior evaluative information about the subject. Debriefings assured us that subjects did indeed view the two sessions as separate. Further, and perhaps more important, the interruption manipulation did not constitute negative evaluative feedback per se; thus, the idea of compensating for an initial negative impression would be of questionable applicability in the present paradigm.

Finally, the compensatory phenomenon demonstrated by Baumeister and Jones does not involve compensation within one area of commitment. Subjects were given negative feedback on maturity and social skills, then proceeded to compensate on quite different personal dimensions. Such a phenomenon is more akin to that studied by Cialdini et al. (1976) and Tesser (1980) than to the one examined in the present research. In short, there are a number of seemingly central points of differentiation between what has been done here and what is studied under the broad conceptual rubric of self-presentation.

### Experiment 2

The theory of symbolic self-completion treats symbols of a self-definition as substitutable for one another. If a person is lacking in memberships in prestige associations, then instances of positive recognition from the immediate social milieu should be sought out. Conversely, if immediate positive recognition is hard to come by, then affiliation with prestige others would be pursued when possible. Within the context of the present

<sup>4</sup> The two experimental phases differed in location, in the gender, ostensible affiliation, and research interests of experimenters, and in the design and heading of questionnaire materials.



research, this means that theoretically, the independent and dependent variables are largely interchangeable. The purpose of Experiment 2 is to turn around the order of the variables that were used in Experiment 1.

Thus, the admission-of-mistakes variable was transformed into an independent variable in this study. Each subject in the experimental group was requested to write down six mistakes he had committed in the past, within his particular area. Control group subjects were also asked to record mistakes, but within an area to which they had no special attachment. Second, it was necessary to transform the interruption manipulation into a dependent variable. On the basis of Ovsiankina's (1928) findings on the effect of amount of work accomplished prior to interruption, one may assume the following: It is not the amount of work accomplished prior to interruption that is relevant to the theoretical predictions; rather, it is the subject's tendency to pursue the task uninterrupted that counts as the operationalization of goal pursuit. Therefore, the focus was on duration of working time as the dependent variable. As before, we asked subjects to write a self-descriptive essay, but this time they were given a 15-minute time limit. This meant that they could stop short of 15 minutes if they so desired, and the extent of stopping short was treated as the self-imposed interruption. The hypothesis follows clearly from the reasoning behind the first experiment. Subjects who are asked to admit to mistakes within their own areas of competence (as opposed to irrelevant areas) should be especially inclined to pursue the self-symbolizing task of writing essays that are potentially destined for publication. This means that they should pursue the essay-writing longer than subjects who are not asked to admit to personally-relevant mistakes.

### Method

#### Subjects

Subjects were drawn from introductory psychology classes. All of them had been pretested at the beginning of the semester concerning their areas of competence and were selected for participation according to the same criteria as in Experiment 1. Twenty-two male subjects, representing liberal arts, sports, natural sciences,

and vocational activity areas were assigned randomly to the two conditions with the constraint that each activity area be represented approximately equally across conditions.

#### Design

The experiment contained two conditions. Subjects were asked to write down mistakes they had committed either in their area of competence (relevant-mistake condition) or else while cooking (irrelevant-mistake condition). Subjects were then given an opportunity to write an essay as in the first phase of Experiment 1.

#### Procedure

Subjects were tested individually by two experimenters. When the subject arrived, he was greeted by Experimenter 1 (a male) and ushered to the cubicle. The subject was told that the experimenter was from the Education Department and that the Education and Psychology Departments were sharing subjects. The subject was then asked if he objected to participating in two short, independent studies. The first study was to deal with problems people encounter in different activity areas. The second study was to be conducted by a psychology student and was concerned with how people become interested in different activities. The purpose of the first study was then explained in more detail.

The study ostensibly was concerned with recording mistakes people make in different interest areas and then classifying these mistakes as either specific to an activity area or general in nature. What was desired of each subject was a list of mistakes he had committed. These mistakes were to be shown to competent raters who would classify the mistakes into one of the two categories. At this point the independent variable was introduced.

*Relevant-mistake versus irrelevant-mistake manipulation.* Half of the subjects were instructed to write down at least six mistakes they had made in their area of competence (relevant-mistake condition). The other half were asked to write down at least six mistakes they had made while cooking (irrelevant-mistake condition). Subjects were then shown a list of sample mistakes supposedly committed by previous subjects. This list was to aid the subject in generating mistakes. It showed the subject that the desired format should consist of relatively short descriptions of mistakes (two or three sentences long) and that the mistakes should have been committed by the subject himself. In the relevant-mistake condition, this list consisted of mistakes from various activity areas. In the irrelevant-mistake condition, the list consisted of cooking mistakes. After reading the list of sample mistakes, each subject was provided with a mistake form that provided a place for name, age, major, hometown, and a maximum of 12 mistakes.

Each subject was asked to sign the second page of the mistake form before he began. This signature ostensibly gave the researcher permission to display the subject's mistakes at an upcoming education conference. The subject was then left alone and given 10 minutes to generate mistakes. Following that interval, the experimenter took the subject to Experimenter 2 (a female), who was kept

blind to the previous treatment. After introducing the subject to Experimenter 2, he asked her to have the subject to fill out a final questionnaire (a manipulation check), and he then departed.

The instructions given to the subject by the second experimenter were virtually identical to those delivered during the first phase of Experiment 1. The subject was to write a self-descriptive essay relevant to his area of interest and was given 15 minutes to work. He was told that if he were to finish early, he could work on two paper-and-pen puzzles. These were mazes from a book of games and were introduced to give the subject a positive incentive to interrupt his work on the essay. She then set a timer for 15 minutes in view of the subject, left the room, and watched discreetly to time the subject's work.

After 15 minutes she returned and administered a questionnaire that checked on two aspects of the essays. Subjects were asked to what extent they had expressed themselves and also whether the essay they had written had a good chance of being published. Both items were accompanied by 9-point answer scales. Experimenter 2 then administered the final questionnaire (promised earlier by the first experimenter), which was used to check the relevant- versus irrelevant-mistake manipulation.

Finally, the experimenter probed for suspicion, debriefed the subject, and thanked him for his participation.

## Results

### Manipulation Checks

Subjects in the relevant-mistake condition reported having written more mistakes in their activity areas ( $M = 6.91$ ) than subjects in the irrelevant-mistake condition ( $M = .09$ ),  $t(20) = 15.31$ ,  $p < .001$ . No significant differences were found between conditions when subjects were asked whether they could express themselves in the essay they wrote ( $t = 1.13$ , *ns*) or whether their essay would have a good chance of being published ( $t = .64$ , *ns*). Therefore, one can assume that subjects in both conditions thought their essays had a similar chance for public recognition.

### Dependent Variable

It was hypothesized that subjects in the relevant-mistake condition would spend more time pursuing the self-descriptive essay than would subjects in the irrelevant-mistake condition. Accordingly, actual time spent in writing is the critical dependent variable. Since general verbosity or literacy also influences the total time spent in writing, a

covariate was added to the analysis, consisting of the average number of words the subject used to describe each mistake listed during the first phase of the experiment. This measure correlated positively with time spent on the essay ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .07$ ), and the relation holds both for the relevant-mistake condition ( $r = .24$ ) and the irrelevant-mistake condition ( $r = .31$ ).

As in Experiment 1, the factor of activity area was included in the analysis, resulting in a 2 (relevant vs. irrelevant mistake)  $\times$  4 (liberal arts, sports, natural sciences, and vocational activity) analysis of covariance. A significant main effect for the relevant- versus irrelevant-mistake manipulation emerged,  $F(1, 13) = 8.04$ ,  $p < .02$ , indicating that more time was spent in the relevant-mistake condition (14:31 minutes) than in the irrelevant-mistake condition (13:14 minutes). The manipulation did not interact with activity area,  $F(3, 13) = 1.82$ , *ns*. A significant main effect for activity area was also found,  $F(3, 13) = 4.98$ ,  $p < .02$ , so that natural sciences ( $M = 12:15$  minutes) had a lower mean time than the liberal arts ( $M = 14:40$  minutes), sports ( $M = 14:32$  minutes), and vocational areas ( $M = 13:30$  minutes).

It is also reasonable to ask whether subjects who spent more time writing the essay used this time to write a longer essay. The correlation between time spent writing and number of words written is positive ( $r = .36$ ,  $p < .06$ ) and so is the correlation between time spent writing and lines written ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These results indicate that subjects who spent more time at the task were in fact producing more material.

A subsidiary analysis of covariance, using the same covariate as before, can also be done with the words and lines written as dependent variables. The relevant-mistake condition tends to produce the higher mean, both for number of words,  $F(1, 13) = 2.24$ ,  $p < .16$ , and for number of lines,  $F(1, 13) = 3.94$ ,  $p < .07$ . There were no effects for activity area. Thus the results support the assumption from Ovsiankina's (1928) research that the time measure is the most appropriate indicator of subjects' goal-oriented tendencies, because it is immediately relevant to the concept of interruption-noninterruption.

### Discussion

The central point of the last study is that symbols of completeness are mutually substitutable for one another. It does not seem to matter whether self-deprecation is treated as a dependent or independent variable, for it retains its substitutability relationship to other sources of symbolic support in any case. More specifically, if the person begins by lacking in education (preliminary study) or by having been interrupted in trying to characterize the self positively in a potentially public, self-descriptive essay (Experiment 1), the resulting motivational state is then reflected in the person's hesitation to lose further symbolic support by admitting to poor performance. The converse of this relationship is shown in Experiment 2. If the person has no choice but to be openly self-critical at the outset, there is then an enhanced propensity to pursue completeness via persistent work on the self-descriptive essay.

### General Discussion

The findings on the dynamics of self-descriptions in the three studies presented here are also a commentary on the validity of self-reports in testing and measurement situations. By the present reasoning, self-reports can easily be invalid among the individuals who fall short of an aspired-to self-definition. As we have seen, the person who arrives at the self-description phase with a background of salient weakness or error is unwilling to describe the self in a manner congruent with those weaknesses. Ironically, individuals for whom a salient component of self is central are the most inclined to present a distorted picture of that component of the self. This theme has also surfaced in a related study by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981, Study 4). Further, within a context where there were no constraints to be self-deprecating (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, Note 1), subjects who were told that they had low potential in their area of self-definition went on to describe themselves the most positively when asked to characterize themselves to a target person. Although these studies have not dealt with standard personality-testing

formats, the conceptual point they make is germane to the validity issue: Self-report validity should be hard to obtain when the person is committed to a self-definition on the dimension in question and when symbols of completeness are conspicuously lacking.

The idea that self-descriptions can be highly unrepresentative of a person's standing on other indicators of the self-definition is in some ways akin to a line of reasoning by Mills and Hogan (1978). They propose that the psychological dynamics associated with self-reports are typically neglected in measurement research, to the deficit of a general understanding of the dynamics of accurate self-reports. Mills and Hogan (1978) and later Johnson (1981) have reasoned that test-taking can easily be a form of self-presentation, whereby people being tested try to project a congruent image of themselves. Thus, it would follow that those with stronger empathy skills (Mills & Hogan) or people who have clarity of self-image and social acuity (Johnson) would have fewer difficulties in communicating a consistent self, so that an "unspecified audience" (Johnson, 1981, p. 764) would be able to draw valid inferences about the person's identity. From this view, then, less valid, inconsistent self-descriptions should result from individuals who are not oriented toward the perspectives of others. Using a variety of individual difference variables in social-orientation and perspective-taking potential, Mills and Hogan (1978) and Johnson (1981) have supported this reasoning.

There is a point of convergence between the present approach and the approaches taken by Mills and Hogan and by Johnson. Their tack is to understand the individual who is consistent—who communicates a consistent self through self-reports—and their research indicates that the perspective-taker does this best. The symbolic self-completion analysis is complementary, by focusing on the dynamics of being *unpredictable* or *inconsistent*. There is a further phenomenon associated with the incomplete individual that makes the comparison to Mills and Hogan interesting. Gollwitzer and Wicklund (Note 1) found that subjects who were rendered experimentally incomplete had appre-

cial difficulty in acting on the perspective of a target person, relative to subjects whose symbolic support was left intact. Thus, if perspective taking is a necessary component in being predictable, it is no surprise that the incomplete individuals' self-descriptions were profoundly out of keeping with other indicators of the self-definitional quality.

### *Individual Differences and Self-Completion*

First, it is easy to imagine that there would be differences in the accessibility and effective use of specific routes to self-completion. A person with high intelligence has easier access to symbols such as quality education, degrees, and so forth. Further, with respect to the phenomenon of broadening social reality as a route to self-completion, a relevant individual difference may well lie in what Snyder (1980) has referred to as self-monitoring skills. High self-monitors not only should prefer what we have called the "broadening of social reality" as a route to self-completion but also show a better use of the cues associated with the targets they address. Thus, they would be more effective in creating a picture of completeness in the eyes of others.

Second, individuals can differ in regard to actual standing on symbolic indicators of self-completion. As shown in the present preliminary study, the amount of education affects the person's motivation for further self-symbolizing (see also Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, Study 1, for an effect of education on desire to persuade others). Quite analogously, Ross, Bierbrauer, and Polly (1974) showed that prior experience and training are potent elements in providing people with security concerning their self-definitions within a teaching context. Novice teachers were compared to experienced teachers in their tendency to attribute blame for a student's failure to the student. It was found that the experienced teachers were *less* likely to blame the failing student, suggesting that with a background of symbolic support, they did not need to be right in that particular instance. Independent of the Ross et al. study, it has also been shown by Wick-

lund and Gollwitzer (1981, Study 2) that the tendency to self-symbolize via attempted influence is affected by individual differences in job experience.

Although one's relevant experience and training are pertinent to nearly all self-definitions, there are individual differences in degree of completeness that are unique to the specific self-definition under investigation. For instance, Wicklund, Gollwitzer, Castelain, Korzekwa, & Blasko (Note 2) defined completeness in the realm of child-rearing ability as having already attained mother status. Consistent with the reasoning of this paper, women who had not yet attained that status were more prone to want to impose their child-rearing views on the immediate community. Thus, it seems clear that the variables determining the extent of a person's completeness vis-à-vis a certain self-definition are to be understood in the context of the self-definition in question.

Third, a theoretically relevant individual difference can be defined by assessing the psychological state of the person who is relatively complete or incomplete. For instance, if we may conceive of the *neurotic* as one who is caught in a permanent state of insecurity (Adler, 1912), then the Adlerian *superiority complex*, an immodest, grandiose style said to emanate from inferiority feelings, is in line with the present analysis of the bases of immodest behavior.

### *Alternative Approaches to Commitment*

The present findings characterize only the person who is actively committed to a self-definitional goal, as noted above in the context of discussing the 2-week criterion for commitment. One aspect of the data we have not dwelled on is the contrast in results when committed subjects are compared against their less involved counterparts. This was done in the preliminary study and also in three of the studies reported by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981). Each of these analyses produced the same finding, which is that an active commitment to the self-definition is a prerequisite for the motivational processes to go into gear. To return to our historical starting point: The effect of personal

involvement on the task-resumption phenomenon, reported by Ovsiankina, bears out the Lewinian reasoning and is also akin to what was found in the present experiments.

The present approach to operationalizing commitment is one of numerous possibilities. In the study of child-rearing philosophies (Wicklund et al., Note 2), we operationalized commitment by asking subjects to rate the importance of being a mother. Within other conceptual contexts one may find a still broader range of methodologies to establish that a person is in fact pursuing or holding a given self-identity. The work of Marcia (1966; Marcia & Friedman, 1970), for example, characterizes the committed person with the term *identity achievement*. Marcia goes further in elaborating the characteristics of three kinds of individuals who are comparatively uncommitted to an identity. Closely related to Marcia's work and also within the Erikson (1956) school is the developmental approach of Waterman and Waterman (1971, 1972), illustrating the crises by which a person comes to arrive at an ego-identity. The Waterman and Waterman findings would caution a self-completion researcher against selecting an ostensible self-definition for study when that self-definition has not yet been solidified developmentally.

Also pertinent is an approach by Santee and Jackson (1979), which operationalizes self-defining goals through an eight-step procedure, including decisions, social comparisons, and object choices that surround aspects of the self-definition. In summary, the conceptual material available for establishing the existence of self-definitions and documenting the growth of self-definitions is substantial. From our perspective, the important next steps are probing further into the nature of the self-symbolizing acts that individuals undertake to push these self-definitions toward completion.

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