

## Chapter 7

# Striving for Specific Identities: The Social Reality of Self-Symbolizing

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Striving for specific identities (e.g., lawyer, mother, pious person) is not a strategic effort at self-presentation, but is rather a nonstrategic approach to self-construction. To understand which form such self-constructive efforts need to take in order to be effective, it is necessary to examine how individuals conceive of the intended identity goal state. My analysis of this issue—which draws on Lewin's ideas on goal striving—suggests that people define the goal of possessing a certain identity as located on the plane of social reality. That is, one feels it is necessary that others be aware of one's claim to possession of a particular identity.

However, individuals engaged in identity-related goal striving see in others nothing more than a passive witness of their efforts. This rather rudimentary form of relating to others is rooted in the special motivational force that instigates identity striving: a person's commitment to identity attainment. To highlight the unique nature of identity striving, I shall compare it with strategic forms of self-presentation. In sharp contrast to strategic self-presentation, identity striving does not necessitate a strong concern with the thoughts and feelings of the audience addressed.

## The Subjective Conceptions of Identity Goals

The meaning of particular identities is ultimately derived from society, for an integral part of our socialization process involves learning what is expected of persons holding a particular identity. Moreover, the social community tends to teach its members unambiguous definitions of the various identities, since dual or triple definitions create misunderstandings among its members, hamper productive interactions, and only serve to split the community (Inkeles, 1968).

Individuals who are committed to an identity conceive of that identity in terms of a goal state, whose attainment requires not only possession of the potential to enact identity-relevant behaviors, but also the ability to maintain that potential over time. However, the key question with regard to identity attainment is whether these

individuals also feel that *others* need to know about such potential before it is possible to lay claim to identity possession. In order to investigate the extent to which a sense of possessing an intended identity is dependent upon others' awareness of the individual's potential to enact identity-relevant behaviors, it is necessary to reflect back on the psychology of goal-striving as presented by the Lewinian school.

### The Social Reality Concept of Lewin's Berlin Group

Mahler's (1933) operationalization of Lewin's (1926) ideas on goal striving led to the development of a methodology that is most useful in addressing the issue of individual representations of goals. Mahler claimed that individual goal conceptions can be unveiled by analyzing activities that are substitutable for original goal striving. The experimental paradigm she introduced (see also Lissner, 1933; Ovsiankina, 1928) was quite simple in nature: Subjects were instructed to perform a certain task, such as to build a playhouse from wooden blocks, to solve a mathematical problem with pencil and paper, or to construct meaningful sentences from word lists. Shortly after beginning the task, subjects were interrupted and asked to solve a substitute task. They were then allowed to return to the interrupted, original task. Of interest was whether subjects would take advantage of this opportunity to *complete* the original task.

Mahler postulated that whenever subjects experience a correspondence between the quality of the goal served by solving the *substitute* task and the quality of the goal served by working on the *original* task, they are no longer inclined to return to the original task since substitute completion has occurred. Accordingly, in the event that solving a substitute task reduces the frequency of resumption of the original task, it can be inferred that the goal of the original task entails qualities that are served by the substitute task performed.

Furthermore, Mahler suggested that tasks differ with respect to whether their solutions need to be shown to *others* for a feeling of task completion to emerge. For example, whether the building of a house out of wooden blocks is considered to be completed is not dependent on whether anyone else ever notices the finished house. However, when solving a certain task is interpreted by the individual as a test of intelligence, of creativity, or of any other self-related attribute, it is necessary that others take notice of the solution in order for a sense of completion to occur. Mahler therefore maintained that all *self*-related goals are located on what she referred to as the *plane of social reality*. No sense of having reached these goals occurs as long as relevant task solutions do not become a social fact through being noticed by others.

In experiments on this issue, Mahler applied the substitution paradigm such that the substitute tasks employed either served or did not serve goals located on the plane of social reality. For example, when the original task involved such activities as solving mathematical problems or constructing creative sentences from lists of words on a piece of paper, the substitute tasks required that individuals solve these problems either through silent deliberation or by speaking aloud. For both types of tasks, speaking aloud proved to be the more effective substitute task with respect to suppressing the resumption of the original task. Mahler interpreted these findings as

indicative of the fact that subjects conceived of the original goals as located on the plane of social reality. That is, subjects not only sought to find solutions to mathematical or creative problems, but also wanted *others* (in this case the experimenter) to know that they were smart or creative. Thus, only solving the substitute tasks aloud provided a sense of having attained the self-related goals of being smart or creative to which subjects had aspired while working on the original tasks.

It appears, therefore, that having people engage in substitute activities that are either noticed by others or remain unnoticed is a simple and straightforward approach to determining whether the original activity served a goal that is located on the plane of social reality.

### Exploring the Concept of Social Reality in the Realm of Identity-Related Goal Striving

Striving for particular identity goals requires the execution of identity-related activities. It is possible, for example, to strive for a specific identity through the exercise of identity-related social influence (e.g., an academic psychologist may engage in teaching psychology), by displaying material symbols (e.g., a pious person may wear a golden cross), through the fulfillment of the daily duties associated with a particular identity (e.g., a baker bakes bread), by simply making a verbal claim to possession of a particular identity (e.g., "I am a baker"; Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982), or through the acquisition of the skills and tools associated with an identity (e.g., an educational background in music theory and a fine-quality instrument for a musician).

Symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982, 1983; Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985b) provides a theoretical framework for the analysis of identity-related striving. It is assumed that identity goals are composed of an entire set of indicators of attainment, referred to as the *symbols* of that identity, for they tend to carry a meaning that goes far beyond the purely physical, sensory experience of that indicator. Wearing a white coat, for example, triggers a more-or-less universal reaction in others that goes beyond the white coat's physical qualities, for it symbolizes to others that they are dealing with a physician.

To acquire one of the many societally defined identity goals, it is necessary to accumulate its symbols. Clearly, social identities are so broadly defined (e.g., pious person) that one is generally not in a position to acquire *all* of the indicators of an identity. Consequently, it is always possible to continue striving for an identity-related goal through the acquisition of further relevant symbols. Self-completion theory refers to such identity-constructing efforts as *self-symbolizing* activities.

Thus, to investigate whether people conceive of identity goals as located on the plane of social reality, subjects are first given the opportunity to engage in a self-symbolizing activity. In order to vary whether these efforts become a social fact, subjects are then placed in a situation where self-symbolizing is either noticed by others or simply remains unnoticed. Given that identity goals are located on the plane of social reality, striving for an identity in front of an audience should provide a stronger sense of possessing the intended identity than striving in the absence of

an audience. To determine whether this is the case, self-symbolizing individuals are finally provided with a further opportunity to strive for the intended identity in order to observe the extent to which self-symbolizing efforts persist.

*The impact of social reality on self-symbolizing efforts.* In the first experiment conducted on this issue (Gollwitzer, 1986a, Study 1), female undergraduates who had expressed the intent to raise a family were asked to write down personal skills relevant to succeeding as a mother (e.g., "I love to cook") in order to prepare themselves for an exchange of personal information with a partner subject. Subjects were either informed that their self-descriptions would be carefully studied by the partner subject, or they were shown that their self-descriptions had been discarded and therefore would not become known to others. By placing subjects' self-descriptions under these two conditions, it was possible to vary whether subjects' self-symbolizing activities were noticed by others, and consequently, whether these efforts became a social fact.

Thereafter, subjects were given the opportunity to engage in further self-symbolizing by completing a personality profile questionnaire. The experimenter handed them a semantic differential type of personality questionnaire on which a sample profile was drawn, and explained that the sample profile represented the ideal personality for a mother (i.e., successful mothers have a personality profile similar to this sample profile). The experimenter had, however, merely fabricated the personality profile so as to describe a person with five positive and five negative traits. Subjects were then instructed to rate their own personality traits on this questionnaire.

When initial self-symbolizing (i.e., the written self-descriptions of mother-related personal skills) was not made known to the partner subject, subjects felt compelled to engage in further self-symbolizing by drawing their own personality profile similar to the ideal mother profile provided, thereby claiming possession of the personality attributes characteristic of ideal mothers. However, subjects whose initial self-descriptions were noticed by the partner subject ascribed attributes to themselves on the personality profile questionnaire that were at variance with the ideal mother profile. Evidently, self-symbolizing that remains unnoticed, and thus does not become a social fact, is less effective in furnishing subjects with a sense of possessing the intended identity than self-symbolizing that is noticed by others. Since it is necessary that others be aware of identity striving in order to acquire a stronger sense of goal attainment, it can be inferred that individuals conceive of identity goals as located on the plane of social reality.

Considering that in the present study initial self-symbolizing occurred only with respect to identity-related self-descriptions, and not in terms of actual identity-related performances, it is conceivable that taking notice of self-symbolizing might have failed to enhance people's sense of possessing the intended identity if subjects had instead been given the opportunity to carry out identity-relevant performances. In order to clarify this issue, a second experiment was conducted, in which subjects' self-symbolizing entailed actually solving identity-relevant problems (Gollwitzer, 1986a, Study 2). Subjects were medical students committed to becoming physicians.

They were instructed to suggest solutions for a number of problems frequently confronted by physicians (e.g., "A diabetic refuses to abide by the diet the physician prescribed. What should the physician tell the patient?"). Subjects were told that they could quit working on these problems whenever they desired, that is, they were not required to complete the entire set of 45 problems. Shortly after subjects had begun to work on the problem set, a confederate appeared. For half of the subjects, she skimmed through the solutions to the first three problems, and then addressed the subjects as physicians. For the other half of the subjects, however, the confederate did not take notice of task performance, nor did she address subjects as physicians. The subjects' subsequent persistence at task performance was measured by recording how long they continued to work on the assigned tasks after the confederate departed.

Taking notice of subjects' solutions and addressing them as physicians resulted in less task persistence than not taking notice of task performance. Thus, self-symbolizing that was noticed by others evidently provided a stronger sense of attainment of the intended identity than self-symbolizing that remained unnoticed. Since taking notice of identity striving proved efficacious for feelings of identity attainment, subjects apparently conceived of their identity goal of physician as being located on the plane of social reality.

The results of both studies suggest that one can effectively strive for identity goals not only by making identity-related verbal statements (Study 1), but also by executing identity-related tasks (Study 2). The key issue with respect to identity attainment, however, is not whether identity-related efforts take the form of verbal claims or actual performances, but whether these efforts, irrespective of their form, are *noticed* by others, and thus become a social fact.

*Self-initiative in turning self-symbolizing into a social fact.* Whether identity goals are conceived of as being located on the plane of social reality can also be approached by examining self-initiative in calling self-symbolizing efforts to the attention of others. Since self-symbolizing that is noticed by others appears to be more effective in providing a sense of possessing the intended identity than self-symbolizing that remains unnoticed by others, individuals oriented toward achieving a particular identity should be especially concerned with finding an audience for their identity-related striving. In order to explore this issue, people's readiness to engage in identity-related goal striving was first manipulated, and subsequent efforts to make self-symbolizing public were observed.

Whenever people are confronted with identity-related weaknesses, a heightened readiness to exert self-symbolizing efforts is elicited, as has been repeatedly demonstrated by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982). This principle was employed in the following two experiments in order to vary people's readiness to strive for intended identities. In the first study (Gollwitzer, 1986a, Study 3), medical students with the expressed intention of becoming physicians were told that they either possessed or did not possess the personal qualities that characterize successful physicians, thus subjecting them to either positive or negative feedback with respect to their prospects as physicians. Delivering negative feedback was meant to generate a

heightened readiness to engage in self-symbolizing. In a subsequent, presumably independent experiment, subjects were provided with an opportunity to engage in self-symbolizing through finding solutions to medical tasks. Subjects were instructed to solve a set of 15 medical problems placed in front of them. In addition, subjects were told that they could submit completed sections of the assignment to the experimenter whenever desired, that is, before having completed the entire set of 15 tasks.

More than 50% of the subjects who had received negative identity-related feedback, as opposed to only 8% of the subjects who had received positive feedback, attempted to bring completed tasks to the experimenter's notice before finishing the entire sequence of tasks. These results clearly demonstrate that individuals whose readiness to strive for an intended identity is heightened are anxious to convert identity-related goal striving into a social fact. Apparently, effective striving for an identity goal necessitates that identity-related efforts are noticed by others. That is, people feel that they need to make self-symbolizing public in order to move toward attainment of their identity goals.

The propensity toward making one's self-symbolizing efforts known to others was investigated further in an additional study (Gollwitzer, 1986a, Study 4). Female undergraduates with a commitment to the identity of dancer were requested to write a lengthy essay. Half of the subjects were instructed to describe the worst dancing instructor they had ever had, the other half their best dancing instructor ever. Thus, half of the subjects were compelled to recall a negative aspect, and the other half a positive aspect of their educational dancing background, so as to induce in the former a comparatively greater readiness to step up self-symbolizing efforts (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981).

Within a different social context, subjects were subsequently asked to participate in a public dancing session, where they would be given the opportunity to dance in front of a small audience. A sign-up sheet was handed out on which subjects were asked to indicate exactly when (i.e., in how many days) they wanted to be called back for one of these sessions. Our results revealed that those who had recalled their worst dancing instructor wanted to appear in public nearly two weeks earlier than subjects who had written about their best dancing instructor. Thus, subjects whose readiness to engage in self-symbolizing had been stimulated selected comparatively earlier dates for the public performance of a dance routine. These results strongly suggest that people are more anxious for self-symbolizing efforts to be noticed by others when identity-related striving is stimulated.

*Summary.* The results of these four experiments suggest that self-symbolizing that is noticed by others makes further striving for identity goals less necessary than self-symbolizing that remains unnoticed by others. In addition, people who are in the process of striving for identity goals are eager to make these efforts known to others, that is, they impatiently attempt to convert their self-symbolizing activities into a social fact. These findings imply that people conceive of identity goals as located on the plane of social reality. That is, people feel that the attainment of identity goals requires that others be aware of one's potential to enact identity-related behaviors.

## The Motivational Basis of Identity-Related Striving

The way in which people attempt to display identity-related goal striving to others can take many different forms. For example, the publishing efforts of a self-symbolizing scientist could be brought to others' attention by engaging in informal discussions concerning the main themes of a book in progress, or by making short declarative statements, such as "I just signed a publication contract!" Since the potential audiences available are also numerous (e.g., family, neighbors, students, or colleagues), the self-symbolizer is in a position to be rather selective in choosing an audience for identity-related efforts. In fact, however, self-symbolizing individuals are not at all selective with respect to the people they address. Nor are they interested in engaging in meaningful interactions with the audience at their disposal (Gollwitzer, 1984; Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985a). Rather, self-symbolizers appear to see in audiences nothing more than passive witnesses of identity-related goal striving. In order to explicate this phenomenon, it is necessary to examine the motivational basis of self-symbolizing.

### Commitment to an Identity

In an early study on self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981), subjects interested in such fields as music, dance, and languages were questioned with respect to their readiness to instruct others in activities related to their respective field of interest. In the course of our investigation, a most interesting observation was made. After an identity-related shortcoming with respect to their educational background (i.e., inadequate musical, dance, or foreign language training) was pointed out, some subjects indicated a reduced interest in teaching others the skill in question. Further investigation revealed that these individuals were no longer pursuing the identity of musician, dancer, or foreign language speaker respectively, that is, they had given up striving for these identities. Other subjects, however, expressed an intensified interest in teaching, and it was found that these individuals were still actively engaged in the pursuit of the identities mentioned above. On the basis of these results, we postulated that only individuals still *committed* to identity attainment attempt to compensate for identity-related shortcomings through self-symbolizing. We referred to this variable as the *commitment to a self-definition*.

In subsequent experiments, our focus of interest was primarily on individuals strongly committed to attaining a particular identity (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). We only recruited subjects who had indicated that they were still actively pursuing a certain identity and that they would be very upset if it were necessary to terminate this pursuit. In all of these studies, making subjects face identity-related shortcomings (e.g., poor identity-related educational background or inadequate identity-related personal attributes) did not result in reduced striving for the intended identity. Instead, subjects reacted by increasing their efforts to achieve the identity in question via self-symbolizing. We observed this phenomenon for a variety of different identity goals (e.g., athlete, Catholic, businessman, mathematician, vintner), as well as for various forms of self-symbolizing (e.g., writing identity-

related positive self-descriptions, influencing and teaching others, displaying identity-related status symbols, and associating with others known to possess the intended identity).

Apparently, the commitment to an identity operates as a force that propels people toward attainment of that identity. The energizing quality that emanates from making an identity commitment actually becomes most evident when hindrances (i.e., the experience of identity-related shortcomings) to attaining the intended identity are encountered. Under such conditions, committed individuals become even more determined to attain the identity in question, whereas the subsequent actions of non-committed individuals appear to reflect reduced identity-related aspirations and a sense of modesty.

### Deliberation Motivation Versus Implementation Motivation

Recently, Heckhausen and Kuhl (1985) suggested that it is necessary to distinguish between two qualitatively different motivational problems. Motivational problems of choice entail deliberation on the subjective importance and likelihood of certain potential outcomes and consequences associated with taking a particular course of action. Motivational problems of implementation, however, involve addressing the question of when and how to act in order to accomplish desired ends. Experimental results (Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1986) suggest that people engage in deliberation on incentives and expectancies *prior* to committing themselves to a particular course of action, and focus on questions of implementation only *after* this commitment has become established. Moreover, making a decision to engage in a certain course of action apparently terminates deliberative thought and launches the individual into a fundamentally different motivational state, oriented solely toward executing the selected course of action. The transition from deliberative to executive thought appears to function somewhat like crossing the Rubicon (Heckhausen, 1985), that is, once the implementation mode of thought has been entered, one can no longer return to the preceding, deliberative motivational state.

With respect to people's identity commitments, two important implications can be derived from the proposition that individuals who are oriented toward implementation of an action are not in a position to undergo deliberation on the consequences of this action. First, people committed to a particular identity should be inclined to focus on acquiring this identity, to the exclusion of deliberative concerns. Since deliberation on the importance and likelihood of potential outcomes and their consequences comes to an end as soon as the individual makes a commitment, whether the intended identity is instrumental for attaining desired consequences or whether one is suited for the pursuit of a particular identity is no longer at issue. Committed individuals should therefore not be inclined to engage in deliberative thoughts that might challenge their choice of identity goal (e.g., "Am I suited for this identity? Do I really want to be a . . .? Should I give up trying to be a . . .?"), even when confronted with identity-related shortcomings. As our research showed (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), an awareness of identity-related shortcomings actually generates an even greater determination to attain the intended identity goal. This suggests that



implementation motivation (i.e., volitional strength; Gollwitzer, 1986b) actually increases when difficulties hinder identity striving. As a result, deliberative concerns should be suppressed even more effectively, thus preventing the possibility that doubts could arise with respect to the value and expectancy of identity attainment.

Second, assuming that people conceive of identity goals as located on the plane of social reality, the implementation motivation characteristic of committed individuals should compel them to convert their self-symbolizing efforts into a social fact. Self-symbolizing individuals should also be inclined to seek audiences for their efforts in accordance with increases in implementation motivation. Thus, committed individuals who have just experienced an identity-related shortcoming should be especially concerned with making others notice identity-related striving. The results of Study 3 and Study 4 (Gollwitzer, 1986a) reported above strongly support this line of thought. More importantly, however, implementation motivation should suppress any concerns with the potential consequences of addressing others, that is, it should hinder reflection on how those addressed might feel about or potentially react to one's self-symbolizing efforts. This tendency has major social implications for the type and quality of interaction between self-symbolizing individuals and their audiences.

### Social Implications of the Unique Motivational Basis of Self-Symbolizing

An analysis of the motivational basis of self-symbolizing reveals that not only self-reflective thoughts on the choice of identity goal, but also reflective thoughts on the potential reactions of the audience addressed are suppressed when a person engages in self-symbolizing. The issue of self-reflection with respect to one's personal attributes ("Am I a person who is smart, athletic, religious, . . .?") has been dealt with extensively by the school of symbolic interactionism, whereas the issue of individual concerns with audience reactions falls under the domain of social psychologists focusing on strategic self-presentation. Both of these research traditions, however, entertain a view of the way in which individuals relate to others that is opposed to what one would expect from the self-symbolizing individual. Thus, an analysis of the ideas advanced by symbolic interactionists, as well as by researchers concerned with strategic self-presentation, should prove fruitful with respect to explicating how self-symbolizing individuals relate to their audiences.

#### Self-Symbolizers Are Not Self-Reflective

Symbolic interactionists have advanced the idea that the origin and development of the self is ultimately rooted in relating to others, a proposition that is commonly attributed to the early work of Cooley (1902). Our "self-feeling" is presumably determined by the attitude we hold toward the assumed thoughts of another with respect to our appearance, aims, character, and needs. Cooley referred to this self-