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# Identity-Goal Threats: Engaging in Distinct Compensatory Efforts

Peter M. Gollwitzer<sup>1,2</sup>, Michael K. Marquardt<sup>1</sup>, Michaela Scherer<sup>1</sup>, and Kentaro Fujita<sup>3</sup>

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## Abstract

We hypothesized that threatening self-aspects that pertain to an identity specified in a binding identity goal leads to distinct compensation (i.e., self-symbolizing), whereas threatening self-aspects not specified in a binding identity goal leads to general self-worth restoration. To test this hypothesis, participants with either weak or strong commitments to becoming lawyers were subjected to either a related or unrelated self-threat, and then given the opportunity to restore both the lawyer identity and general self-worth. Only participants strongly committed to become lawyers responded to a related self-threat by distinct compensation rather than general self-worth restoration. Apparently, strong commitments to an identity goal isolate this particular part of the self from the overall self.

## Keywords

general self-worth, identity goals, self-affirmation, self-completion, self-threat

Rejections in romantic relationships, setbacks in one's job or in school, and interpersonal conflicts have in common that they threaten our general self-worth by inducing negative self-evaluations (Steele, 1988). Just as the biological immune system reacts to threats to our health, our "psychological immune system" (i.e., the self-system; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998) is triggered to counter threats to our self-worth. According to self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988), the self-system aims to protect and maintain a positive general self-worth through both direct and indirect mechanisms. General self-worth can be restored directly by cognitively reinterpreting the threat as less threatening or by addressing the threat through behavioral change. That general self-worth can also be restored through indirect means is supported by extensive research. For instance, reaffirming important personal values reduces stress experienced in evaluative situations (Creswell et al., 2007) and rumination following failure feedback (Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999). Reaffirming important values also leads people to being less defensive about past negative behavior (Reed & Aspinwall, 1998; Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000), and renders them more open to diverging political opinions (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000).

conceives of the self, that is, how the self-concept is construed. According to the recent multiple self-framework of McConnell (2011; see also Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2003), the self is an associative collection of multiple self-aspects. Self-aspects include social identities (e.g., memberships in groups or organizations), roles (e.g., being a parent or a student), values (e.g., being independent or social), and beliefs (e.g., religious beliefs). These self-aspects become activated through the dynamic inputs and constraints of a person's behavioral goals, actions, affect, and cognition while the self moves through the environment (e.g., Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005; Smith & Semin, 2004). For example, the self-aspect of being a good employee becomes activated when entering the workplace, whereas the self-aspect of being athletic becomes activated when entering the gym. With any given self-aspect, a number of associated personal attributes become activated as well. Those can include traits (e.g., shy), physical characteristics (e.g., attractive), affects (e.g., proud), social categories (e.g., male), or behaviors (e.g., learning). Some attributes are uniquely associated with one self-aspect, whereas others are

## Coping With Threats to the Self

*Multiple self-framework.* To explicate self-worth restoration processes, we introduce three relevant lines of research on the psychology of the self. The first line focuses on how a person

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, New York University, New York, NY, USA

<sup>3</sup> Department of Psychology, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Peter M. Gollwitzer, Department of Psychology, New York University,  
6 Washington Place, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10003, USA.  
Email: peter.gollwitzer@nyu.edu

multiply associated with several self-aspects. While attributes represent descriptive information about the person, self-aspects provide the context to bind that information together. Self-aspects vary in their accessibility, with some self-aspects being more accessible; these are then more likely to become activated and thus guide behavior.

According to McConnell (2011), the structure of the associative self-network plays an important role in shaping general affective states and thus self-worth. General affective states reflect the appraisal of all self-aspects weighted by their relative accessibility. If, for instance, a threat, like negative feedback, dampens the appraisal of a self-aspect, overall self-worth fades to the degree this self-aspect is accessible relative to others. Imagine an employee is being told by his subordinate that he is insufficient. Such feedback would not only reduce his self-evaluation of being a good employee but also affect his general self-worth. Some self-aspects have been found to be more central (Sedikides, 1995) and thus more important to the overall self (e.g., Boldero & Francis, 2000). Central self-aspects are characterized by their chronic accessibility and thus have a comparatively stronger impact on the person's general affective state. In addition to the relative accessibility, the number of self-aspects that share one and the same attribute determines the impact an attribute has on general self-worth. If, for instance, an employee was told to be ambitious, this attribute might be important for her self-aspect of being a good employee but also for her self-aspect of being an athlete. Through the sharing of attributes between self-aspects, receiving feedback on one single self-aspect can also affect other self-aspects. Accordingly, associative network models of the self suggest that threats to a certain self-aspect can be coped with by directly enhancing the evaluation of the threatened self-aspect but also indirectly by enhancing other self-aspects with shared attributes.

**Self-affirmation theory.** The second line of research relevant to self-worth restoration is that on Steele's (1988) self-affirmation theory (see also Tesser, Crepez, Beach, Cornell, & Collins, 2000). Here, it is also assumed that the self consists of multiple self-aspects. However, questions of self-evaluation rather than the structure of self are in the focus of analysis. According to self-affirmation theory, people strive to maintain a general self of high value, that is, a self that is coherent, competent, effective, good, and so on. Threats to self-aspects or the overall self impair the integrity of this picture and in consequence diminish the feeling of self-worth. The loss of self-worth drives people to engage in restoration. As positive evaluations of single self-aspects serve the higher need for self-worth, threats can be coped with either directly by bolstering the threatened self-aspect or indirectly by bolstering any other self-aspect or even the general self. Breast cancer patients, for instance, can cope with the threat of the illness by affirming their basic values, such as quitting boring jobs or by beginning to write short stories (Taylor, 1983).

The effectiveness of compensating for a threatened self-aspect by bolstering another is determined by their relative

importance. Lewin's (1936, 1938) field theory provides an excellent framework to shed light on these relations. According to field theory, the overall self is a space segregated in multiple fields pertaining to different self-aspects. The various self-aspects are assumed to be separated by walls that differ in their permeability. The permeability of these walls is said to determine the extent of interaction between the involved self-aspects. Following self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988), the relative importance of two self-aspects can be expected to determine the direction and the degree of permeability between walls. If two concepts are equally important, the wall is permeable to both sides (e.g., a college student may value having many friends but also doing well academically). However, if one self-aspect is more important than the other (e.g., being popular more so than being academically successful), the wall between the self-aspects is semipermeable, such that only the more important concept can effectively influence the less important one. Thus, threats to the less important self-aspect can be easily reduced through affirmation of the more important self-aspect. Threats to the more important self-aspect, however, can be addressed by the less important self-aspect only to a very small extent, limiting the person to reestablish general self-worth by directly addressing the specific threatened self-aspect (see also Koole et al., 1999).

**Self-completion theory.** Field theory implies that self-aspects can also become strictly *walled off* (i.e., segregated or isolated) from other self-aspects that constitute the person's overall self. Being walled off should hinder interaction with other self-aspects and in consequence the possibility of indirect compensation. The process of how self-aspects become completely walled off is explicated by self-completion theory (SCT) which developed from Lewin's (1936, 1938) field theory and represents the third perspective on self-worth restoration (Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). SCT posits that in addition to high value, identity-goal commitments (e.g., becoming a successful lawyer) can affect the permeability of walls between self-aspects. According to SCT, self-aspects can turn into *identity goals* (i.e., goals defining the self) when people commit to excelling in these aspects (e.g., the student who likes studying law sets herself the identity goal of becoming a successful lawyer). Thus, the strength of commitment to identity goals becomes crucial. A person is assumed to strive persistently to possess the respective identity if she is highly committed. Importantly, in contrast to other goals (e.g., solving a certain business problem), there is no ultimate attainment of identity goals (Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998). As a consequence, people who are committed to identity goals keep striving to accumulate symbols that indicate goal attainment (i.e., they *self-symbolize*). All socially accepted indicators of possessing the aspired-to identity qualify as such symbols, which include relevant qualifications, skills, and material possessions, but also relevant performances (Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981), positive self-descriptions (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985), and even mere stating of intentions to improve one's standing (Gollwitzer,

Sheeran, Michalski, & Seifert, 2009) or placing a high value on identity-related possessions (Ledgerwood & Liviatan, 2010; Ledgerwood, Liviatan, & Carnevale, 2007). People committed to identity goals are said to experience feelings of incompleteness when they notice the lack of a relevant symbol. These feelings of incompleteness can be restored by acquiring alternative relevant symbols or pointing to the possession of already acquired alternative symbols. In one study (Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996, Study 2), for instance, students who were strongly committed to the identity goal of becoming successful computer scientists were first given feedback suggesting that they lacked a necessary skill (i.e., concept formation). When then given a chance to compensate for this shortcoming in a subsequent task measuring a different necessary skill (i.e., visual search), the incomplete individuals outperformed complete ones (i.e., participants who had received no feedback on the prior task). Apparently, people committed to an identity goal readily engage in compensatory activities (i.e., they self-symbolize) to uphold their claim to possess the aspired-to identity.

Note that SCT suggests that incompleteness is addressed directly using alternate self-symbolizing opportunities within the domain of the identity goal. Over time, this compensatory mechanism may isolate the aspired-to identity from other self-aspects. In Lewin's (1936, 1938) words, this should render the walls around identity goals quite impermeable—gearing the person toward addressing incompleteness directly with self-symbolizing efforts in that very domain. That goal striving can become walled off from external influences is indicated by research of Shah, Friedman, and Kruglanski (2002). Initial evidence for the notion that identity goals can become isolated from the rest of a person's self-aspects comes from research by Ledgerwood, Liviatan, and Carnevale (2007, Study 4). They observed that people strongly committed to the identity goal of being a New York University (NYU) student did engage in self-symbolizing only when made incomplete with respect to this very goal (a faked newsletter had to be read indicating that NYU's reputation was faltering). No such self-symbolizing was observed however when participants' general self-worth was undermined (using the classic self-threat manipulation of having to write about those of their personal values they had failed to live up to; Cohen et al., 2000). Complementary to the Ledgerwood et al. findings, Moskowitz, Li, Ignarri, and Stone (2011) observed that the stimulating effect of an incompleteness experience on the activation level of an identity goal (in this case, the goal of being an egalitarian) could not be reduced by encouraging participants to affirm their general self-worth. This research supports the notion that identity goals can become isolated from the rest of the overall self. However, it did not investigate whether this isolation is dependent on the strength of identity-goal commitment. Further research is needed to analyze the moderating role of identity-goal commitment (i.e., to test whether in the case of weak identity-goal commitments no such isolation can be observed). Thus, the present research not only varies identity-goal completeness in strongly committed persons and then tests whether self-symbolizing is preferred despite the opportunity to affirm

general self-worth. Importantly, it also investigates whether weakly identity-goal committed persons will perceive identity-goal threats as threats to their overall self, and thus prefer to address these threats by affirming general self-worth despite the opportunity to self-symbolize.

### Present Research

We designed an experiment to test whether strong in contrast to weak identity-goal commitment instigates the isolation of identity goals from other self-aspects. Therefore, the present experimental design expands the previous research of Ledgerwood et al. (2007) and Moskowitz et al. (2011) by investigating not only strongly identity-goal committed participants but also participants with weak identity-goal commitments. It is hypothesized that strongly committed participants experiencing a self-threat should differentiate between threats to their aspired-to identity and other self-threats impairing their general self-worth, and then match the remediation to the scope of the threat. Specifically, strongly committed participants who experience identity-related incompleteness should respond to this threat by restoring their aspired-to identity rather than general self-worth. Participants who experience a threat to general self-worth, however, should forgo the opportunity to restore the aspired-to identity but engage in the restoration of general self-worth.

Building on previous findings and deduced from the assumption that the strength of identity-goal commitments determines whether these self-aspects become isolated, it was predicted that in weakly committed participants this specific part of the self is not isolated from the rest of the self (i.e., other self-aspects). Therefore, weakly committed participants, should not differentiate between identity-goal threats and other threats impairing general self-worth, and thus respond to all types of threat the same way; they should restore general self-worth.

Based on a prescreening for their commitment to the identity goal of becoming a successful lawyer, one group of strongly and one group of weakly committed law students were recruited. All participants were given bogus failure feedback on a presumed personality test. The test was presented to half of the participants as highly relevant to the identity of becoming a successful lawyer (identity-goal threat) and for the other half as a general test of social competence (general self-threat). Then, half of the participants were provided an opportunity to restore their general self-worth through the classic technique of expressing an important central value (Steele & Liu, 1983), followed by an opportunity to self-symbolize by claiming their personality profile to be similar to that of a successful lawyer (Gollwitzer, 1986); the other half received these opportunities in the reverse order. We expected participants strongly committed to the identity goal of being a lawyer to self-symbolize (i.e., claiming to possess the ideal personality profile for the aspired-to identity) rather than bolster general self-worth (i.e., expressing an important value) when confronted with negative feedback with regard to social competence as a

lawyer. However, in the case of general self-threat (general negative feedback on social competence) we expected participants to express a central value rather than to claim the successful lawyer's identity. Importantly, weakly committed participants were expected to cope with both identity-goal threat (low social competence as a lawyer) and general self-threat (low general social competence) by expressing a central value. In the case of low commitment to the aspired-to identity of being a lawyer, this identity goal should not be isolated from the rest of the self. Thus, not performing well on the lawyer-related test should—similar to not performing well on a general social competence test—also manage to threaten general self-worth and thus provoke expressing a central value.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 328 German law students were prescreened for their commitment to the identity of becoming a successful lawyer with a 3-item questionnaire: *How important is it for you to pursue a law career?*; *How bad would it be for you if you could not graduate from law school successfully?*; *How happy could you be pursuing a career not related to law?* (reverse coded). Questions were answered on a 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 7 (*very important*); the internal consistency was  $\alpha = .76$ . Following the procedure of Gollwitzer, Sheeran, Michalski, and Seifert (2009) those with a total score of at least 15 (high commitment;  $n = 66$ ; 36 females) and those not exceeding a total score of 12 (low commitment;  $n = 66$ ; 25 females) were contacted within the next days and invited to participate.

### Materials and Procedures

**Design.** The study followed a 2 between (commitment: low vs. high)  $\times$  2 between (threat: identity goal vs. general self)  $\times$  2 within (compensatory effort: self-symbolizing vs. general self-worth restoration)  $\times$  2 between (order: self-symbolizing/general self-worth restoration vs. general self-worth restoration/self-symbolizing) design.

**Threat manipulation.** Strongly and weakly identity-goal committed participants were randomly assigned to two conditions: identity-goal threat versus general self-threat. All participants were presented with a test of social competence composed of 12 social dilemmas; participants selected one of the three provided possible solutions for each (see Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996). In the identity-goal threat condition, this test was presented as measuring the specific social competences and skills typical of successful lawyers. In the general self-threat condition, the test was presented as a measure of general social competence and skills. The experimenter then provided bogus failure feedback on the test. Participants in the identity-goal threat condition were told that the average score among lawyers in the local town was 32 points out of a possible 36. The comparison group for those in the general self-threat condition

was the students of their university in general. All participants were placed in the 21st percentile, with only 16 points out of a possible 36.

**Self-symbolizing.** To test for self-symbolizing, participants were presented with a personality profile task requiring participants to describe their personality in a semantic differential-type questionnaire with 10 personality attributes (e.g., warm–cold, weak–strong). Each pair of attributes was presented on bipolar 12-point scales. To create their unique personality profile, participants had to circle the appropriate numbers on each of the 10 scales and connect the 10 circles with a line. Before answering the questionnaire, participants were shown an ideal profile presumably of a very successful local lawyer. Participants who seek to reassert their aspired-to identity of successful lawyer should show a pattern of responses that more closely resembles the ideal profile (Gollwitzer, 1986). Accordingly, the degree of self-symbolizing was quantified by summing the number of points participants' responses differed from the ideal profile on each of the scales. To simplify interpretation of results, this total sum of deviations was multiplied by  $-1$  such that larger scores represent greater self-symbolizing. The number of positive and negative items endorsed in the presumed ideal profile was equal to ensure that any similarity was not due to opting toward a positive self-description in general.

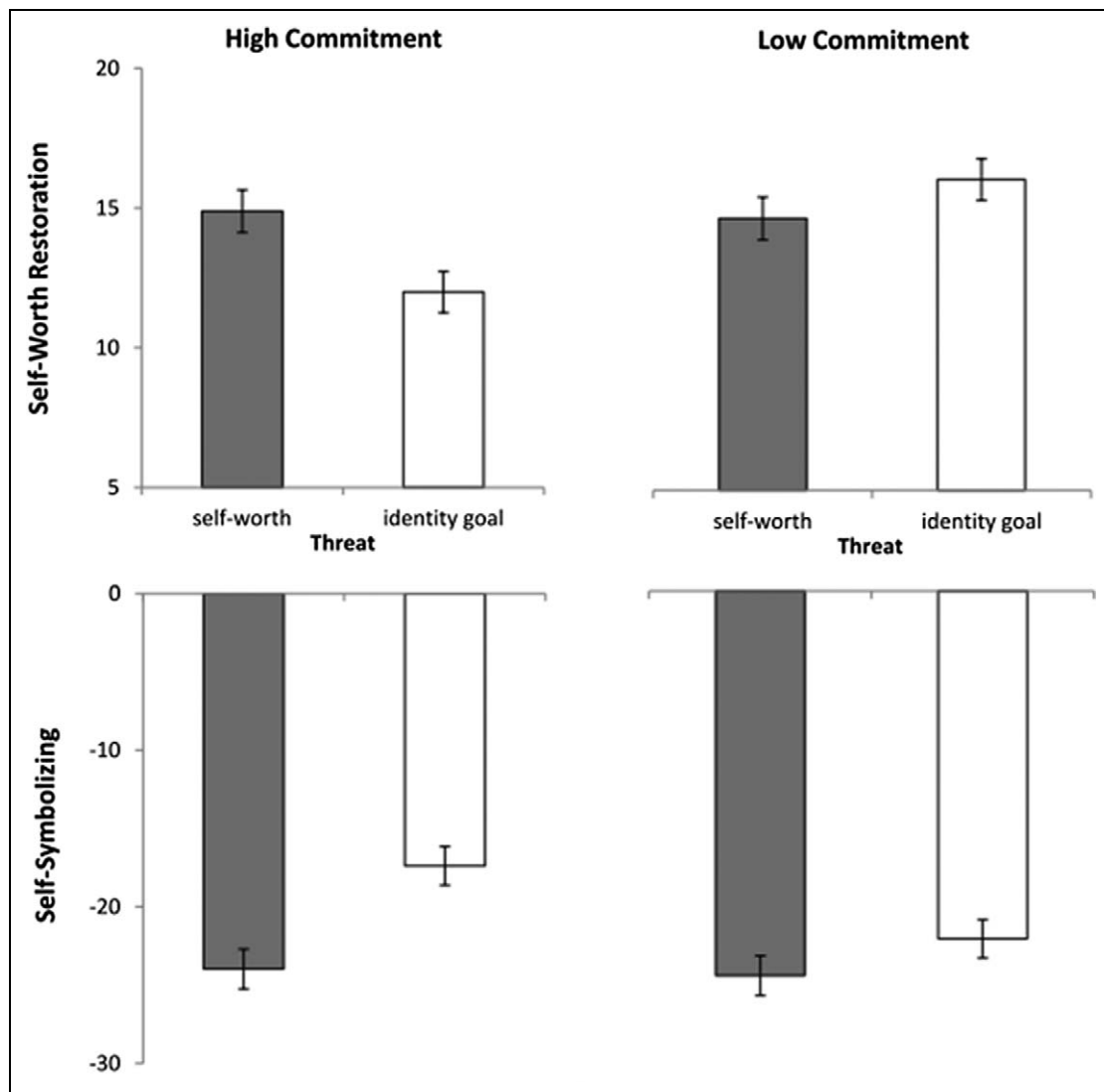
**General self-worth restoration.** We used a value affirmation task described in Tesser, Martin, and Cornell (1996), originally proposed by Steele and Liu (1983). Participants had to choose out of a list the value that was the most important to them and to write a short essay why. The list of values was derived from subscales of the Allport-Vernon Study of Values scales (Allport, Vernon, & Lindzey, 1960). Two judges blind to the experimental hypotheses rated on a 5-point scale dimension (1 = *none or very little*, 5 = *very highly*) for each how personal, self-disclosing, positive, defensive, modest, and generally value expressive each essay was. As the interrater reliabilities between the judges were high (interrater correlations from .73 to .81), the ratings were averaged for each scale and summed to create an index measuring the degree of self-worth restoration ( $\alpha = .88$ ). After completion of all tasks participants were debriefed and paid €3.50.

## Results and Discussion

Both dependent variables (self-symbolizing and self-worth restoration) were transformed to  $z$ -scores across the whole sample to allow for comparisons between groups. One participant who was suspicious of the false feedback was excluded from the analysis. There were no effects of gender, so all subsequent analyses were collapsed across this variable.

A 2 (commitment: low vs. high)  $\times$  2 (threat: identity goal vs. general self)  $\times$  2 (compensatory effort: self-symbolizing vs. general self-worth restoration)  $\times$  2 (order: self-symbolizing/general self-worth restoration vs. general self-worth restoration/self-symbolizing) mixed-design analysis of variance





**Figure 1.** Self-symbolizing versus self-worth restoration by strength of identity-goal commitment and type of threat. Instead of z-standardized scores summarized raw scores are depicted. In the upper graphs, higher scores indicate higher rated value expressivity and thus more self-worth restoration. In the lower graphs, less negative scores indicate more approximation to the ideal profile and thus more self-symbolizing.

(ANOVA) was performed with commitment, threat, and order as between-subjects factors and compensatory effort as a within-subjects factor. The expected Commitment  $\times$  Threat  $\times$  Compensatory Effort interaction was significant,  $F(1, 124) = 9.74, p < .01, \eta = .27$  (see Figure 1), that was not qualified by order,  $F(1, 124) < 1, ns$ .

To clarify the nature of this three-way interaction, we conducted separate analyses for participants in the two threat conditions. First, for participants in the *identity-goal threat condition* a Commitment  $\times$  Compensatory effort ANOVA was conducted. A significant compensatory effort main effect,  $F(1, 64) = 4.37, p = .04, \eta = .25$ , indicating that participants in this condition tend to self-symbolize ( $M = .29$ ) more than restore general self-worth ( $M = -.08$ ), was qualified by a significant Commitment  $\times$  Compensatory Effort interaction,  $F(1, 64) = 18.97, p < .01, \eta = .48$ . Planned comparisons revealed that strongly committed participants experiencing an

identity threat did self-symbolize more than weakly committed participants ( $M = .61$  vs.  $M = -.03$ ),  $t(66) = 2.99, p < .01, \eta = .35$ , and engaged less in general self-worth restoration than weakly committed ones ( $M = -.53$  vs.  $M = .36$ ),  $t(64) = 3.51, p < .01, \eta = .40$ , respectively. As expected, strongly committed identity goal-threatened participants preferred to self-symbolize rather than to restore general self-worth. In contrast, weakly committed identity goal-threatened participants restored their overall self-worth ignoring the opportunity to self-symbolize (see Figure 1, white bars).

Second, for participants in the *general self-threat condition*, a parallel Commitment  $\times$  Compensatory Effort ANOVA was conducted. The observed compensatory effort main effect,  $F(1, 62) = 5.50, p < .05, \eta = .29$ , suggests that general self-threat participants preferred to restore general self-worth ( $M = .08$ ) rather than self-symbolize ( $M = -.30$ ), regardless of their identity-goal commitment (see Figure 1, black bars).

We also conducted separate analyses for levels of commitment to becoming a successful lawyer. For *strongly committed participants* a Threat  $\times$  Compensatory effort ANOVA was conducted. A main effect of compensatory effort,  $F(1, 64) = 6.04, p = .02, \eta = .29$ , indicating that committed participants preferred to self-symbolize ( $M = .17$ ) rather than to restore general self-worth ( $M = -.21$ ), was qualified by a significant Threat  $\times$  Compensatory Effort interaction,  $F(1, 64) = 22.91, p < .01, \eta = .51$ . As expected, planned comparisons revealed that strongly committed participants whose lawyer identity was threatened ( $M = .61$ ) self-symbolized more than those whose general self was threatened ( $M = -.26$ ),  $t(64) = 3.95, p < .01, \eta = .44$ , and subsequently engaged less in self-worth restoration ( $M = -.53$  vs.  $M = .10$ ),  $t(62) = 2.80, p < .01, \eta = .33$  (see Figure 1, left-hand side); this again suggests that for participants who are strongly committed to the identity goal of lawyer, this self-aspect becomes walled off from other aspects of the overall self.

For *weakly committed participants*, a parallel Threat  $\times$  Compensatory Effort ANOVA was performed. The expected main effect of compensatory effort was observed,  $F(1, 64) = 4.79, p = .03, \eta = .26$ , indicating that weakly committed participants reacted to both goal-identity threat and general self-threat by restoring their self-worth ( $M = .21$ ) rather than self-symbolizing ( $M = -.19$ ; see Figure 1, right-hand side). This finding suggests that in weakly committed people an aspired-to identity is not separated from other aspects of the overall self.

In sum, we found that participants highly committed to becoming lawyers preferred to respond to a general self-threat by restoring self-worth rather than self-symbolize the possession of an aspired-to identity. In contrast, these same individuals responded to an identity-goal threat by engaging in self-symbolizing rather than restoring the general self-worth. This pattern of results—unaffected by the order of being provided with an opportunity to self-symbolize and an opportunity to restore one's self-worth—suggests that strong commitment to an identity goal leads to walling off of this self-aspect from other aspects of the overall self.

Individuals who were weakly committed to becoming lawyers showed the same compensatory reaction in response to both identity-goal threat and general self-threat by restoring their general self-worth. This finding suggests that in the case of weak commitment to an identity goal the aspired-to identity is not separated from other aspects of the overall self; rather, it interacts with other aspects in the face of a threat. Stated differently, facing a lack of identity-relevant symbols for such individuals does not produce identity-goal incompleteness, but implies a general self-threat which is most adequately addressed by restoring one's general self-worth.

## Conclusion and Outlook

With the transformation of a self-aspect into an identity goal to which the person feels strongly committed (i.e., being a lawyer), this self-aspect becomes isolated (i.e., separated) from

other aspects of the overall self. Incompleteness caused by an identity-goal threat thus results in striving for identity symbols to restore identity-goal completeness, regardless of available opportunities to restore general self-worth. The opposite is true as well: threats to the general self promote restoring one's general self-worth, regardless of previous opportunities to demonstrate the possession of identity symbols (i.e., to self-symbolize). Our findings also suggest that if one feels only weakly committed to an identity goal, no separation of the aspired-to identity in the overall self takes place and thus a lack of identity symbols does not induce specific feelings of incompleteness; if anything, one's general sense of self-worth is negatively affected. As a consequence, rather than striving for identity symbols a restoration of the general self-worth is opted for. Past research on the differentiation between self-symbolizing and self-worth restoration efforts (Ledgerwood et al., 2007; Moskowitz, Li, Ignarri, & Stone, 2011) did not detect the decisive role of commitment on the choice of one or the other type of self-threat remediation.

Steele (1988) noted that we “must acknowledge the occasional reports that consistency strivings can take precedence over self-enhancement strivings” (p. 280). For example, partner satisfaction in romantic relationships is found to depend on partners confirming each other's (even negative) self-aspects (Swann, 1985). This suggests that consistency needs make people prefer to act in line with a certain self-aspect at the expense of their overall self-regard (Steele, 1988). Our findings add to this observation that strong commitment to an identity-goal points to a further restriction of the general applicability of the principle of self-enhancement. For people with strong commitments to an identity goal, this very self-aspect acquires its own momentum of compensation separate from the state of the overall self.

An intriguing question for future research pertains to the temporal stability of the impermeability of walls created by identity-goal commitments. As identity goals imply the acquisition of a host of identity symbols, striving for an aspired-to identity presents itself as a never ending story (Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998). For instance, people who commit to becoming scientists can claim to possess this identity by all kinds of achievements (e.g., discovering new insights, acquiring new equipment, large offices, publications, editor positions, receiving awards and interviews, mentoring students, etc.), so the walls that isolate it from other self-aspects may persist chronically. It seems wise therefore that falling short with respect to an aspired-to identity goal is responded to by self-symbolizing rather than by attempting to elevate one's general self-worth. This way one at least gets temporal breaks in one's never ending striving for identity-goal attainment.

In line with the conceptual ideas of the multiple self-framework (McConnell, 2011), other questions for future research pertain to the consequences of interrelated identity goals. Imagine that the attribute of having an extensive professional network might be indicative for completeness of the identity goal of being a successful lawyer, but also for the identity goal of being a good social networker. Would pointing

to the extensive social network compensate for incompleteness of both identity goals or just the one that is activated at the moment? And how about personal attributes that are shared by both an identity goal and a self-aspect that is important to the overall self but the person does not feel committed to excel in? Would positive feedback regarding such personality attributes compensate for both identity incompleteness and threatened general self-worth, or are these attributes walled off together with the identity goal thus making them only relevant for engaging in self-symbolizing? Another interesting question pertains to how the state of identity-goal completeness influences general self-worth. Even though identity-goal completeness has to be addressed directly by self-symbolizing, the walled off self-aspect still remains a part of the overall self. Based on this argument it seems possible that the temporary state of identity-goal completeness finds an affective echo in the experienced state of general self-worth.

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### Author Biographies

**Peter M. Gollwitzer** is a Professor of Psychology at New York University and the University of Konstanz. His research focuses on action phases and mindsets, conscious and nonconscious goal striving, implementation intentions, and self-completion theory.

**Michael K. Marquardt** is a Research Associate at the University of Konstanz. His research focuses on goal striving, nonconscious planning, and identity goals.

**Michaela Scherer** was a Doctoral Student at the University of Konstanz. Her research focused on striving for identity goals.

**Kentaro Fujita** is an Associate Professor at The Ohio State University. His research focuses on goal striving, decision making, and self-control.