



## Incomplete professional identity goals override moral concerns



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### ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. Moral identity goals

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

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

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

Liljenquist, 2006) which may serve to protect or “clean” the moral identity when it is threatened (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011).

### 3. Present research

We aim to build on and expand the research at the intersection of morality and self-completion theory in two ways. First, we aim to create a “flip” on previous moral identity goal research. While previous research has examined striving for identity goals in the moral domain, we examined when individuals will prioritize pursuing other (e.g., professional) identity goals over acting morally. Some identities are associated with immoral behavior (Cohn, Fehr, & Maréchal, 2014), and individuals with these identity goals, when made incomplete, may endorse immoral behavior to compensate. In particular, they may admit to previous immoral behavior, and self-ascribe traits associated with immoral behavior, given that these immoral behaviors are perceived as typical of successful others in the field. Second, we aim to further demonstrate that self-symbolizing behaviors are geared specifically at restoring threatened identities rather than at bolstering the self in general. In the present research, we tested whether participants would be willing to self-symbolize by endorsing and admitting to previous immoral behavior (the opposite of maintaining an image of the self as moral and capable) as well as self-ascribing personality traits associated with immoral behavior.

In order to test these hypotheses, we conducted a series of studies that pitted two paths of evaluation against each other for identity goal incomplete participants. They could either endorse actions and traits in line with normative moral standards or endorse actions and traits in ways that restore identity goal completeness. We suggest that if identity goals can override moral concerns, we will further our understanding of how people come to act immorally.

Three studies were designed to test whether people striving for a professional identity goal would endorse immoral actions and traits in order to self-symbolize when other routes for self-symbolizing were not available. All studies followed the typical procedure of SCT research. In a first step, participants committed to a professional identity goal were given identity goal threatening or confirming (bogus) feedback. They were told they lacked or demonstrated relevant cognitive attributes, which are not easily acquired. Subsequently, participants were provided with an opportunity to self-symbolize through the acquisition of an alternative, more readily accessible symbol. However, this symbol required aspiring businessmen to show support for immoral actions (Study 1), aspiring lawyers to indicate that they had performed immoral actions in the past (Study 2), and aspiring students to report that they are similar to a successful individual in their desired profession who possesses traits associated with immoral behavior (Study 3).

### 4. Experiment 1: endorsing immoral business decisions

Experiment 1 was designed to test whether people who experience a threat challenging the possession of their desired professional identity goal would compensate by endorsing immoral actions. Participants were told they were in an experiment comparing business skills and thus the business career potential of students from different majors at the university. In a first step, business students committed to the identity goal of becoming successful business professionals either received bogus negative (identity goal incompleteness) or positive feedback (identity goal completeness) regarding their potential to become a successful business professional. They were then asked to indicate to what extent they supported business experts' immoral solutions to five different business problems. We hypothesized that identity goal incomplete (vs. complete) participants would be more willing to self-symbolize by endorsing the experts' decisions even though participants were informed that these solutions were immoral, which was also verified in a pilot study.

#### 4.1. Pilot study: immoral solutions

A preliminary study tested whether resolving the business decision problems as proposed (e.g., breaking an agreement to make up lost profit) used as the self-symbolizing measure in Experiment 1 would be perceived as immoral by university students. Seventy (42 females) students from various majors (i.e., both business and other majors) with a mean age of 22.60 ( $SD = 5.49$ ) in their  $M = 3.21$  ( $SD = 1.50$ ) semester filled out a paper-and-pencil questionnaire that asked how immoral it would be to solve the five business problems in the proposed manner. For instance, participants answered the question, “What do you think, would it be unethical to break the contract?” on a 9-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*). Compared to scale means, all proposed decisions were rated as immoral, all  $t(69) \geq 5.43$ ,  $ps < .001$ ,  $ds \geq 1.07$ . Comparing the ratings of business majors with students majoring in other fields did not reveal a significant difference,  $F(1,68) = 1.88$ ,  $p = .11$ .

#### 4.2. Method

##### 4.2.1. Participants and design

Forty-two (19 females) business students at the University of Konstanz (Germany) were pre-tested for their commitment to the identity goal of becoming a successful business professional as only those with high identity goal commitment are the ones expected to self-symbolize (Gollwitzer et al., 2009). Directly prior to the study, they answered the question, “How bad would it be for you if you could not graduate with a degree in business?” on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*). Thirty-three (15 females) business students with a mean age of 21.36 years ( $SD = 1.78$ ) in their  $M = 2.55$  ( $SD = 1.17$ ) semester indicated a strong identity goal commitment (i.e., above the middle of the scale) and were thus included in the final sample. Further 3 participants could not be included because of suspicions about our hypotheses as indicated by the funneled debriefing. For those 33 students, Experiment 1 applied a one-factorial design (identity goal completeness, between: incomplete vs. complete). Self-symbolizing (as indicated by the extent of support for immoral business solutions) was the dependent variable.

##### 4.2.2. Procedure

Participants were each given an introductory questionnaire that informed them about the cover story (a study on the career potential of business students) and asked demographic questions.<sup>1</sup> Next participants completed the computerized logical-reasoning test to manipulate identity goal completeness. After participants received bogus feedback on their potential to become a successful business professional, the experimenter handed out the questionnaire with the self-symbolizing measure. The experimenter then distributed the last questionnaire (including the funneled debriefing). Finally, the experimenter debriefed participants in detail about all the aspects of the experiment (especially false feedback).

##### 4.2.3. Materials

Participants were told they were in an experiment comparing business skills of students from different majors at the university.

**4.2.3.1. Identity goal completeness.** To manipulate identity goal completeness, participants then worked on a computerized logical reasoning test that supposedly assessed their potential to become a successful

<sup>1</sup> This questionnaire also included one impression management item, “How bad would it be for you if your peers did not like you?” on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*) to ensure results are not due to pre-existing differences on this measure, and there were none,  $t(31) = 0.23$ , *ns*.

business professional. The test consisted of 12 numeric puzzles and 12 Raven Matrices (Raven, Raven, & Court, 2004). Each numeric puzzle showed a sequence of five numbers that had to be completed by choosing one of several given options. The Raven Matrices presented sequences of geometric images that followed a pattern. These images were arranged in  $3 \times 3$  matrices, leaving space for a final image to complete the pattern; participants had to fill this space by choosing one of several possible choices (Raven et al., 2004). The computerized test presented the numeric puzzles first, followed by the Raven Matrices, each on a separate slide. Possible solutions (i.e., numbers for the numeric puzzles and patterns for Raven-Matrices) were arranged in numbered order from 1 to 8. Participants indicated their preferred solution to complete the sequence or pattern by pressing the corresponding number key on the computer's keyboard.

To manipulate identity goal completeness, the computer then provided participants with bogus feedback on their logical reasoning abilities as measured by both numeric puzzles and Raven Matrices, which they were told indicated their potential to become a successful business professional. To induce identity goal incompleteness (completeness), the computer informed participants that they had correctly solved 5 (10) out of the 12 numeric puzzles, corresponding to the 28th (94th) percentile of all students, and 6 (11) out of the 12 Raven Matrices, corresponding to the 42nd (97th) percentile of all business students. Their alleged overall performance was thus in the 35th (96th) percentile of all students, and they were informed: "Your logical reasoning abilities are in the lowest third (highest fifth) of the sample of all students." To increase the impact of the feedback, the experimenter told each participant that he would immediately check the scores generated by the computer.

**4.2.3.2. Self-symbolizing.** To test whether incomplete participants would be willing to self-symbolize they were asked to indicate how much they favored immoral solutions proposed by "business experts" to solve five business problems. The cover story introduced the questionnaire as a test of business sense, which was described as a valid indicator of the potential to succeed as a business professional, even for those with weak logical reasoning abilities. Participants were informed that beneath each business problem was the solution that was proposed by a business expert panel. They were also informed that students of different majors had rated each of the expert decisions as immoral. For instance, one problem read as follows:

Two banks, *Commercial Investments* and *Continental Transfers*, have entrusted a strategic consulting firm to implement their merger. According to the consulting firm, human resources must be reduced by 10% to successfully complete the merger. The reduction in human resources will occur at a subsidiary company in a foreign country. The banks agreed not to publicize the consultant's involvement in the merger process. However, the banks are now considering risking the cost of breaking the agreement and publicizing the consultant's responsibility through hidden channels. The deflection of responsibility would reduce the likelihood of consumer turnover in the foreign country, and would probably compensate for the cost of breaking the agreement. However, it is expected that this would damage the consultant's image to such an extent that it would threaten the viability of the consultant's business.

Other problems concerned decisions regarding whether a company should engage in lobbying to build a profitable factory in an area in need of environmental protection, whether a successful company should dismiss low-income employees to avoid minor salary cuts for the management, whether a company should expand by building a factory in a country governed by a regime that neglects human rights, and whether a nursery-school administrator should buy cheap but possibly toxic toys instead of more expensive but probably safe toys. For each of five business decision problems, participants were asked to indicate how much they supported the proposed immoral solution. For instance, for the problem described above, they were asked, "How much do you

lean towards breaking the agreement?" Participants indicated the extent of their endorsement (from 0% to 100%) on a 10 cm line to be checked later on by the experimenter.

**4.2.3.3. Funneled debriefing and demographics.** The final paper-and-pencil questionnaire asked increasingly specific questions relating to the general purpose of the study and how parts of the study might be related. Great care was taken to ensure that participants understood that all feedback was bogus and so did not leave the experiment negatively affected by the manipulation.

#### 4.3. Results and discussion

To investigate whether incomplete (vs. complete) business students would be more willing to endorse immoral business decisions, their support for the proposed expert decisions for each of the business problems was entered into a one-factorial Identity Goal Completeness MANOVA. As expected, this analysis revealed a main effect of Identity Goal Completeness,  $F(1,27) = 3.00, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .36$ , indicating that in average identity goal incomplete participants ( $M = 60.80; SD = 19.22$ ) endorsed immoral business decisions to a greater extent than identity goal complete participants ( $M = 47.45; SD = 18.75$ ). Apparently, business students who experienced a threat challenging the completeness of their professional aspired-to identity were willing to compensate by engaging in immoral behavior (i.e., endorsing immoral decisions made by successful businessmen).

### 5. Experiment 2: claiming to act immorally

A possible alternative explanation for the results in Experiment 1 is that feedback suggesting one will not succeed in business, might have threatened participants' belongingness to a social group, namely one of people interested in business. Indeed, when people are strongly identified with groups, they tend to behave in ways that are consistent with the group, and tend to conform to the perceived norms of the group, especially if they are highly identified (Packer, 2008). Note that in Experiment 1, we recruited participants based on their commitment to succeeding as a business student, suggesting they are likely also identified with the social group of other business students, and we gave examples of possible solutions explicitly endorsed by successful businessmen. It is possible that participants endorsed the business solutions that they were presented with, not to compensate for their own identity threat but to conform to explicitly delineated group norms. These different processes could lead to the same behavioral outcome we observed.

In Experiment 2, we sought to remedy this confound. Self-completion theory predicts that incomplete participants will compensate, even in the absence of explicit information about what other group members would do (i.e., with weaker normative pressure to act in the same way as successful group members). Accordingly, we hypothesized that the mere existence of the belief that there is a link between immoral behavior and a particular identity is enough to promote immoral compensation behavior.

For this reason, in Experiment 2, law students committed to the identity of becoming successful lawyers were either made incomplete (bogus negative feedback) or complete (bogus positive feedback) regarding their potential to become a successful lawyer. Previous research has identified a stereotype that characterizes lawyers as competent, but cold, and prone to immoral behavior in work situations, particularly by promoting their own interests above others' (e.g. Carlsson & Björklund, 2010, Slusher & Anderson, 1987). Accordingly, in addition, half of the participants read a description of the immoral behavior of successful lawyers to make this group norm salient; for the other half, no stereotypical attributes of lawyers were mentioned. To test whether participants would be willing to claim to have acted immorally in order to self-symbolize, they were asked whether they generally perform a set

of behaviors in which one promotes one's own interests over others'. We hypothesized that identity goal incomplete participants would claim to perform more of these actions than complete participants. If participants were merely conforming to in-group norms in Experiment 1, this pattern of results should be found only for those who read a description of the stereotype prior to the self-symbolizing opportunity.

### 5.1. Pilot study: immoral behaviors

We again conducted a pilot study to ensure that the behaviors we selected for our self-symbolizing measure were indeed perceived as immoral by students. Seventy students (42 females) with a mean age of 22.60 ( $SD = 5.49$ ) from various majors at the University of Konstanz, Germany, answered a paper-and-pencil questionnaire as a course requirement. The questionnaire first asked, "How immoral are the following behaviors?" followed by questions on whether it is right "...if one does not admit to one's mistakes, in order to avoid negative consequences;" "...if one disparages others behind their backs;" "...if one is not kind and obliging when stressed;" and "...if one is not factual and objective in an argument." Participants indicated their answers on 9-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*). Internal consistency of the questionnaire was adequate, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .63$ . All behaviors were rated as immoral as compared to scale means, all  $t$ s ( $69$ )  $> 4.92$ ,  $ps < .001$ ,  $ds \geq 1.18$ .

## 5.2. Method

### 5.2.1. Participants and design

Seventy-six (51 females) law students at the University of Konstanz (same sample pool as the Pilot Study) were pre-tested for their commitment to the identity goal of becoming a successful lawyer. Directly prior to the study, they answered the question, "How bad would it be for you if you could not graduate as a lawyer?" on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*). Sixty-seven (46 females) law students with a mean age of 21.21 years ( $SD = 2.44$ ) in their  $M = 3.31$  ( $SD = 2.92$ ) semester indicated a strong identity goal commitment (i.e., above the middle of the scale) and were thus included in the final sample (for a similar procedure see Gollwitzer et al., 2009; Longoni et al., 2014). Further five participants could not be included because of suspicions about our hypotheses as indicated by the funneled debriefing. Experiment 2 applied a 2 (Stereotype Reminder, between: reminder vs. no-reminder)  $\times$  2 (identity goal completeness, between: incomplete vs. complete) factorial design, using self-symbolizing (indicated by the number of immoral behaviors participants claimed to perform regularly) as the dependent variable.

### 5.2.2. Procedure

Participants were given the introductory questionnaire, which informed them about the cover story for the study (a study on the career potential of law students) and asked demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, mother tongue).<sup>2</sup> When participants finished the questionnaire, they signaled this to the experimenter, who started the computerized logical reasoning test that would manipulate identity goal completeness. After participants received bogus feedback on their potential to become a successful lawyer, the experimenter gave participants in the stereotype reminder condition the paper with the bogus interview to activate the successful lawyer stereotype, followed by the self-symbolizing measure. In the no-reminder condition, this order was reversed, such that the self-symbolizing measure was followed by

stereotype activation. The experimenter then distributed the last questionnaire, which assessed participants' stereotypes about successful lawyers (several items were used to assess competence and morality) and provided the funneled debriefing. Finally, the experimenter thoroughly debriefed participants before he compensated (8 €) and thanked them.

### 5.2.3. Materials

The experiment took on a similar format to that of Experiment 1.

**5.2.3.1. Identity goal completeness.** To manipulate identity goal completeness, the computerized manipulation procedure from Experiment 1 was implemented with the following alterations: Participants were informed that the logical reasoning test assessed their potential to become a successful lawyer. To induce identity goal incompleteness (completeness), participants received the same test results regarding the number of correctly solved numeric puzzles and Raven Matrices, and the total percentiles as in Experiment 1; the final result read, "Your logical reasoning abilities are in the lowest third (highest fifth) of the population of all lawyers." To ensure feedback was in the plane of social reality, students were told that their initials with their test scores would be listed in an email sent to all participants when the study was finished.

**5.2.3.2. Stereotype reminder.** To make immoral behaviors associated with lawyers salient and appear normative, a paper-and-pencil questionnaire instructed participants to read and summarize a bogus interview, which described successful lawyers behaving immorally in work situations in order to promote their own interests over those of others. For example, the lawyers' behavior was characterized as being ruthless in trial proceedings and malicious in the establishment and use of social networks. Participants in the stereotype activation condition did this prior to the self-symbolizing measure, while those in the no activation condition, read the interview after the dependent measure.

**5.2.3.3. Self-symbolizing.** To test whether participants would self-symbolize by claiming to behave immorally, a paper-and-pencil questionnaire asked them to indicate for each of five different immoral behaviors (targeting the promotion of one's own interests over those of others) whether they usually act this way or not. Behavioral descriptions read: "I always admit my mistakes and bear all the negative consequences" (reverse coded); "I accept all other opinions even if they are not in line with my own opinion" (reverse coded); "I sometimes disparage others behind their backs"; "I am always kind and obliging even when I am stressed" (reverse coded); and "In an argument, I am always factual and objective" (reverse coded). Participants indicated whether they generally behave this way by marking one of the two boxes beneath each description, labeled *is true* and *is not true*. Answers were coded with 1 when participants indicated that they acted this way, otherwise with 0. The total score served as the dependent variable. To avoid arousing suspicion, these items were embedded within a 16-item questionnaire supposedly investigating everyday behaviors (including, e.g., "Sometimes I just throw my litter on the ground" and "I always eat healthily"). In order to ensure that feedback was in the plane of social reality, participants were informed that the experimenter would check their answers for their completeness.

**5.2.3.4. Perceptions of a lawyer.** To ensure that neither the identity goal nor the stereotype reminder manipulation (i.e., reminding participants of the in-group norm) affected the content of beliefs about the competence and morality of lawyers, we included a final survey measuring relevant perceptions of lawyers in the field. In reference to the lawyer described, participants were asked how competent ("How competent do you think the described type of person is as a lawyer?"; "Do you think the described type of person is a successful lawyer?"; "Do you think the described type of person is more successful than most lawyers?"), and how moral they perceived the person to be ("Would others

<sup>2</sup> This questionnaire included one impression management item, "How bad would it be for you if your peers did not like you?" on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*) to ensure results are not due to pre-existing differences on this measure, and there were none,  $F(1,62) = 1.17$ , *ns*.

say that the described type of person behaves immorally?"; "Do you think the described type of person is a good role model when it comes to moral issues?"; "Do you think the described type of person makes morally justifiable decisions?"). All questions were answered on 9-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*).

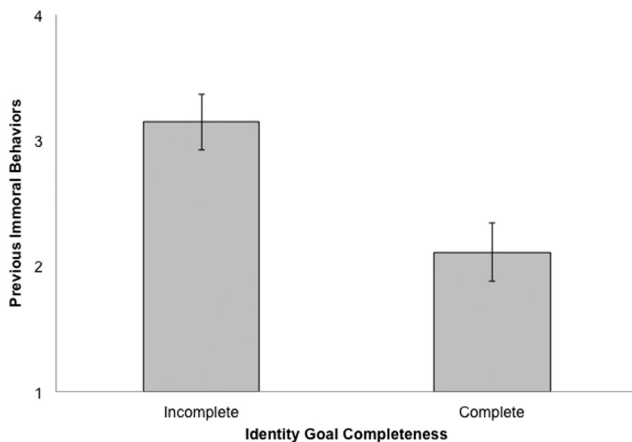
**5.2.3.5. Funneled debriefing.** To probe for suspicions, the final questionnaire asked increasingly specific questions regarding the general purpose of the study, measures, and manipulations, as well as their interrelation, and whether participants had followed the instructions. Great care was taken to ensure that participants understood that all feedback was bogus and so did not leave the experiment negatively affected by the manipulation.

### 5.3. Results and discussion

To test whether law students would be willing to claim to act immorally in order to self-symbolize, the number of indicated immoral behaviors was entered into an Identity Goal Completeness  $\times$  Stereotype Reminder ANOVA. A main effect of Identity Goal Completeness,  $F(1,63) = 10.93, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .15$ , but no main effect for Stereotype Reminder,  $F(1,63) < 1.00, ns$ , and no Identity Goal Completeness  $\times$  Stereotype Reminder interaction effect,  $F(1,63) < 1, ns$ , was observed. Identity goal incomplete participants indicated that they performed more immoral behaviors ( $M = 3.14, SD = 1.22$ ) than did identity goal complete participants ( $M = 2.09, SD = 1.38$ ; see Fig. 1).

To ensure that our manipulations did not affect the content of the successful lawyer stereotype, scores for competence and morality (as measured in our lawyer perceptions questionnaire, all Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s  $\geq .74$ ), were each entered into separate Identity Goal Completeness  $\times$  Stereotype Reminder ANOVAs. Neither main effects nor interaction effects were found for competence, all  $F$ s(1,63)  $\leq 1.99, ps \geq .16$ , or morality,  $F$ s(1,63)  $\leq 2.69, ps \geq .11$ , indicating that the stereotype reminder manipulation contained pre-existing, rather than new, stereotype content, and that the incompleteness manipulation did not alter these pre-existing beliefs either.

As expected, identity goal incomplete participants claimed that they performed more immoral behaviors than identity goal complete participants did. This finding was not dependent on reminding participants of the stereotypical belief that successful lawyers promote their own interests over others'. This pattern of results suggests that participants are indeed compensating for their own personally held identity goals rather than attempting to conform to in-group norms. It seems that if



**Fig. 1.** Number of indicated immoral behaviors depending on identity goal completeness and stereotype-reminder in Experiment 2. Higher numbers indicate more self-ascribed immoral behaviors and thus more self-symbolizing.

participants had been only conforming to behavioral in-group exemplars, then they should no longer claim to have previously performed immoral behaviors when no explicit exemplar to conform to is provided.

Moreover, like in Experiment 1, participants in Experiment 2 are again found to be willing to compensate via behavior that likely does not serve to bolster one's global sense of self. Importantly, incomplete and complete participants did not differ on their beliefs about successful lawyers after self-symbolizing, suggesting that it's not that identity goal feedback altered beliefs about lawyers, but rather that, when one is made incomplete, it is preferred to claim having performed immoral behaviors linked to being a good lawyer than to claim to have been a morally good person.

Experiments 1 and 2 taken together revealed that people striving to become successful business professionals and lawyers, respectively, were willing to compensate for incompleteness (i.e., to self-symbolize) by endorsing immoral behaviors (Study 1), and to claim to have acted immorally in the past (Study 2). In both studies, people self-symbolized by claiming to possess the potential to act immorally (when asked about their support for such behavior in Experiment 1, and when asked about their usual behavior in Experiment 2). We next wanted to investigate whether incomplete people would even be willing to self-symbolize via self-ascribing stable negative personality traits associated with immoral behavior. To test this hypothesis most critically, we recruited younger students with limited exposure to successful prototypes in their desired fields, and who were committed to identity goals that are not necessarily associated with stereotypes of immoral behavior. We then presented them with a personality profile of a successful individual in their field that included both positive and negative traits and asked the participants to indicate how similar they would see their own personality to that of the successful prototype.

### 6. Experiment 3: claiming to possess traits associated with immoral behavior

In Experiment 3, we tested whether people with incomplete identity goals would be willing to self-ascribe stable personality traits associated with immoral behavior in order to compensate for their threatened identity. Critically, we tested both positive and negative personality traits to further rule out other alternative explanations for participants' compensation behavior. Self-completion theory makes the unique prediction that when identity goals are threatened, highly committed individuals will self-ascribe even negative personality traits associated with their desired identity. It seems quite unlikely that participants would be able to affirm their global sense of self by ascribing negative personality traits to themselves. Indeed, it appears to be the opposite of bolstering the self as a moral and competent person. In other words, if the effects observed in Experiments 1 and 2 are indeed due to identity goal striving and not to general self-esteem enhancement, we would expect participants in Experiment 3 to self-ascribe not only positive but also negative personality traits. Moreover, this pattern of results should only be found for those participants who are highly committed to their identity goal.

We also sought to test whether compensation by admission of immoral personality characteristics would be found across different aspired-to identities (in the fields of business, engineering, and the natural sciences) when these traits were presented as part of the personality profile of a successful prototype. Finally, we chose to study high school students who may not have had as much exposure to successful prototypes in their desired field, and especially in fields not strongly associated with stereotypes containing immoral behavior. In this way, we aimed to investigate whether highly committed students with strong identity goals would compensate by self-ascribing stable personality traits when no other means for self-symbolizing are available. In a first step, high school seniors at various levels of commitment to excelling in engineering or one of the natural sciences were made either

incomplete or complete with respect to these aspired-to identities: Participants received either bogus negative feedback (identity goal incompleteness) or bogus positive feedback (identity goal completeness) regarding their potential to successfully major in their desired fields.

To test whether participants would self-ascribe stable personality characteristics associated with immoral behavior in the service of compensation for identity goal incompleteness, a semantic-differential questionnaire was used (analogous to Gollwitzer et al., 2009, 2013; Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985a). In this questionnaire, participants rate themselves regarding the possession of several personality traits. Critically, the questionnaire already shows the profile of the prototypical personality of someone who has succeeded in their aspired-to identity goal. This method allows participants to self-symbolize by presenting their personality as more or less similar to this profile. In the present study, however, the profile depicted an immoral personality. We hypothesized that in order to self-symbolize, identity goal incomplete (vs. complete) participants would still describe themselves as more similar to the successful profile despite the depiction of traits associated with immoral behavior. In line with previous research (e.g., Gollwitzer et al., 2009, 2013), we expected that only identity goal incomplete participants who were strongly committed to their aspired-to identity would self-symbolize in this way, but that participants who were weakly committed to the aspired-to identity would not.

### 6.1. Pilot study: traits associated with immoral behavior

To ensure that the successful prototype profile reflected an immoral personality, we ran a pilot study. Thirty-eight students (17 females) with an age of 17.26 ( $SD = 0.86$ ) from a high school in Southern Germany volunteered to answer a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Participants were presented with the sample personality profile and were asked how likable (“How likeable is this person?”; “Would you like to interact with this person?”; “How much do you like this person?”) and how moral the depicted person was (“What do you think, does this person behave morally in everyday life?”; “What do you think, is this person a good role model when it comes to moral issues?”; “What do you think, does this person make morally justifiable decisions?”). All questions were answered on 9-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*). As internal consistencies were high, mean scores were computed for likability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ ), and morality (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .85$ ). All scores ranged below scale means, indicating that the personality profile reflected an unlikable,  $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ,  $t(37) = 11.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.84$ , and immoral,  $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ,  $t(37) = 6.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.12$ , person.

## 6.2. Method

### 6.2.1. Participants and design

A different sample of eighty-seven high school seniors (47 females) with a mean age of 17.91 years ( $SD = 0.92$ ) who were graduating from the same high school volunteered to participate in the study. Twelve participants were excluded from the following analysis because their responses to the funneled debriefing questionnaire revealed suspicions about our hypotheses or that they did not follow instructions. Experiment 3 applied a 2 (Identity Goal Commitment, between: strong vs. weak)  $\times$  2 (Identity Goal Completeness, between: incomplete vs. complete) factorial design, using self-symbolizing (as indicated by the deviation of participants’ self-described personality profile from that of the allegedly successful prototype) as the dependent variable.

### 6.2.2. Procedure

The participants completed the study in a large lecture hall. After the experimenter greeted the participants, he explained the procedure of the study and informed them about the cover story (high school students’ potential to successfully major in business, engineering, or the

natural sciences). He then handed out the first questionnaire, which included questions on demographics, and identity goal commitment.<sup>3</sup> The experimenter collected the first questionnaire before distributing the logical reasoning test to manipulate identity goal completeness. After participants had worked for 15 min on the logical reasoning task, the experimenter handed out answer keys to groups of three. Participants then calculated their scores together, and thereby received manipulated feedback on their potential to succeed in business, engineering, or the natural sciences in the plane of social reality. With the answer key, participants also received the final questionnaire, including a form on which they were to enter their test score. This was followed by the semantic-differential questionnaire to measure self-symbolizing as well as an extensive funneled debriefing form. All participants were given candy (worth 0.50 €) for their participation and thoroughly debriefed about the experiment, with special care given to ensuring they knew the feedback was bogus.

### 6.2.3. Materials

Different questionnaires were used to assess identity goal commitment and the effectiveness of the completeness/incompleteness manipulation. The completeness/incompleteness manipulation was simplified as compared to Experiments 1 and 2, and the self-symbolizing measure took the form of a personality questionnaire.

**6.2.3.1. Identity goal commitment.** We divided participants into strong and weak identity goal commitment groups using the following procedure. To measure participants’ commitment to the identity goal of becoming a businessman, engineer, or natural scientist, the introductory paper-and-pencil questionnaire asked whether they were planning to major in one of these fields in their upcoming college education. Specific majors were listed, and participants were instructed to mark the subject they planned to major in (i.e., administration and management, business, biology, chemistry, economics, engineering, information technology, life sciences, mathematics, medicine, physics, and psychology; see Gollwitzer et al., 2009, Study 3). When participants did not mark one of the listed majors, they were asked to name their major in a box beneath the list. Participants who marked one of the listed majors were considered to be highly committed (i.e., participants with a high commitment to majoring in business, engineering, or the natural sciences;  $n = 39$ ), whereas participants who did not mark one of the listed majors were regarded as non-committed (i.e., participants with weak or no commitment to majoring in math, engineering, or the natural sciences;  $n = 36$ ). To ensure the validity of this grouping procedure, three commitment items (e.g., “How bad would it be for you if you could not major in [specified field]?”) were answered on 9-point Likert scales with a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of .78 to then compute a mean score for identity goal commitment.<sup>4</sup>

**6.2.3.2. Identity goal completeness.** To manipulate identity goal completeness, participants took a logical reasoning test included in a paper-and-pencil questionnaire that supposedly assessed their potential to successfully major in business, engineering, or the natural sciences. The test consisted of ten numeric puzzles. Each puzzle showed a sequence

<sup>3</sup> To measure participants’ impression management, three questions were asked this time: “How important is it to you to be liked by your peers?” “How bad would it be for you if your peers did not like you?” and “How happy would you be if your peers did not like you?” (reverse coded). All questions were answered on 9-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*). Internal consistency was low. (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .55$ ). Due to pre-existing differences on the impression management scores, however, we ran an Identity Goal Commitment  $\times$  Identity Goal Completeness ANCOVA adjusting for all impression management items, and found the same pattern of results reported,  $F(1,70) = 4.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .06$ .

<sup>4</sup> We decided a priori to include all high school participants in the study rather than exclude those with low commitment to their desired field. All students participated in the study in order to learn about psychological research, and we did not want to stop anyone from participating.

of five numbers and required participants to determine which of four possible numbers would correctly complete the sequence. Participants were allotted 15 min to work on the puzzles. When they were done, participants received a test template to calculate and note their test score on a 10-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 to 10; the numbers from 1 to 6 were framed by a gray box, and the numbers from 7 to 10 were framed by a white box. To provide participants with either negative or positive feedback on their potential to successfully major in the targeted fields, they were told that the test scores in the gray box indicated a low potential for success in the field, while those in the white box indicated a high potential for success in the field. To manipulate the feedback that the participants would receive and thus their identity goal completeness, the number of puzzles that were solvable varied depending on the identity goal completeness condition. To induce identity goal incompleteness through negative feedback, only four puzzles were solvable and six were unsolvable (i.e., none of the numbers presented as possible answers correctly completed the sequence;  $n = 21$  for high and  $n = 19$  for low identity goal committed participants). To induce identity goal completeness through positive feedback, eight puzzles were solvable and only two were unsolvable ( $n = 18$  for high and  $n = 17$  for low identity goal committed participants). To increase the impact of the feedback, students were arranged into groups of three, and each group then received only one answer key, such that participants' would be able to see each others' calculations and bogus test scores.

**6.2.3.3. Manipulation check.** After the identity goal completeness manipulation, two questions served as a manipulation check: "How great is your potential to successfully complete a NTW<sup>5</sup>-major?" and "How good are your logical reasoning abilities in comparison to those of your peers?" These questions were answered on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*).

**6.2.3.4. Self-symbolizing.** To determine whether participants would ascribe an immoral personality to themselves in order to self-symbolize, a semantic-differential questionnaire was used (Gollwitzer et al., 2013; Gollwitzer et al., 2009; Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985a). This questionnaire required participants to describe their personality by rating themselves on several personality traits. The semantic-differential questionnaire consisted of 14 personality-trait dimensions with a positive and a complementary negative personality attribute as dimensional poles (e.g., honest – dishonest, warm – cold, considerate – inconsiderate). Dimensions were presented using 9-point Likert scales; six dimensions showed the positive attribute on the left, while eight dimensions had the positive attribute on the right, and so were reverse coded. To make the task relevant for participants' self-symbolizing attempts, the semantic-differential questionnaire already showed check marks on each dimension connected by straight lines in the background. This profile was introduced as an example that allegedly depicted the prototypical personality profile of people who had successfully majored in business, engineering, or the natural sciences. In contrast to previous studies using this self-symbolizing measure (e.g., Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985a), the prototypical profile reflected an immoral personality, with 10 traits marked closer to the negative attribute pole (i.e., dishonest, narrow-minded, cold, selfish, uncooperative, rough, grim, ruthless, quick-tempered, and resentful) and only four marked nearer to the positive pole (i.e., neat, kind, generous, and respectful). The markings were balanced with respect to the distances from the poles (a maximum distance of two points), as well as the number of reverse-coded scales for positive and negative traits. Differences between participants' ratings and that of the successful example served as the dependent variable, whereby lower scores indicated less deviation and thus stronger self-symbolizing.

**6.2.3.5. Funneled debriefing.** To ensure participants followed directions and to check for suspicion and adherence to instructions, the final paper-and-pencil questionnaire asked increasingly specific questions regarding the general purpose of the study, how the measures might be related, and whether participants followed instructions. Great care was taken to assure participants that all feedback was bogus and so did not leave the experiment negatively affected.

### 6.3. Results and discussion

#### 6.3.1. Manipulation check

Participants in the identity goal incompleteness condition self-reported a lower potential to succeed in the targeted majors ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) and worse logical-reasoning abilities in comparison to their peers ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) than those in the identity-goal completeness condition ( $M = 6.60$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ , and  $M = 6.37$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $t(71) = 6.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.61$ , and  $t(71) = 7.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.78$ , respectively. This pattern of results supports the effectiveness of the identity goal completeness manipulation.

#### 6.3.2. Identity goal striving

To test whether identity goal incomplete participants would ascribe traits associated with immoral behavior to themselves in order to self-symbolize, personality profile difference scores were entered into an Identity Goal Commitment  $\times$  Identity Goal Completeness ANOVA. This analysis revealed the expected Identity Goal Commitment  $\times$  Identity Goal Completeness interaction effect,  $F(1,71) = 3.69$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ . There were no main effects of Identity Goal Commitment,  $F(1,71) = 1.90$ , *ns*, or Identity Goal Completeness,  $F(1,70) < 1$ , *ns*. We also tested whether the observed interaction effect was qualified by an interaction with the valence of the traits ascribed to oneself; no such interaction or any other valence related effect emerged, all  $F(1,71) < 1.47$ , *ns*.<sup>6</sup>

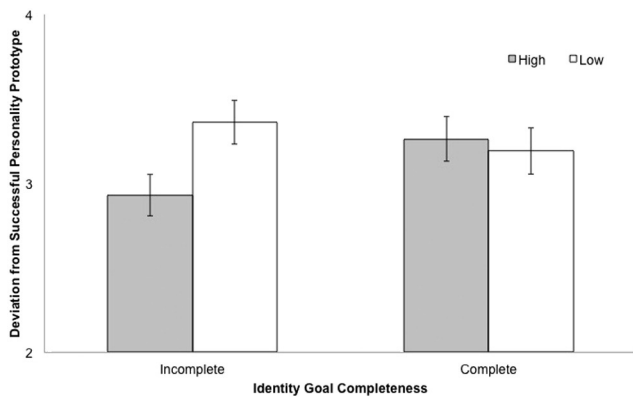
To clarify the nature of the Identity Goal Commitment  $\times$  Identity Goal Completeness interaction effect, planned mean comparisons were conducted. As expected, the personality profiles of strongly committed participants who were identity goal incomplete deviated less from the given prototype profile ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) than the profiles of strongly committed students who were identity goal complete ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ),  $t(70) = 1.85$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $d = 0.44$ , and those who were weakly committed, no matter whether they were in the identity goal incompleteness ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ),  $t(70) = 2.56$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.61$ , or the identity goal completeness condition ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ),  $t(70) = 1.44$ ,  $p = .08$ ,  $d = 0.34$ . No other significant differences were found, all  $t(70) < 1$ , *ns* (see Fig. 2).

Strongly committed, identity goal threatened students presented their personality profile as more similar to the profile of the successful prototype, which contained traits associated with immoral behaviors, than strongly committed participants who did not experience an identity goal threat, and weakly identity goal committed participants whether or not they experienced a threat to their identity. Experiment 3 expands beyond aspiring business professionals (Experiment 1) and aspiring lawyers (Experiment 2) to establish that for a variety of aspired-to identities, if the available route for self-symbolizing is to self-ascribe immoral behavior, this will not stop them from compensating; striving for professional identity goals override moral concerns. This pattern of results suggests that people committed to a certain identity goal, who receive a threat to the completeness of this identity, are more willing to engage in self-symbolizing even if this implies admitting to possess traits associated with immoral behavior. Importantly, these results replicate previous findings (Gollwitzer et al., 2009; Gollwitzer et al., 2013), showing that self-symbolizing is to be expected only among those individuals who are strongly committed to the

<sup>5</sup> This is more or less the equivalent of a STEM major in the U.S.

<sup>6</sup> This analysis however corroborated the already found Identity Goal Commitment  $\times$  Identity Goal Completeness interaction effect,  $F(1,71) = 4.20$ ,  $p = 0.09$ .





**Fig. 2.** Deviation of participants' personality profiles from that of the allegedly successful prototype, depending on identity goal commitment and identity goal completeness in Experiment 3. Lower numbers indicate less deviation from the successful personality prototype and thus more self-symbolizing.

professional identity goal in question, and that self-symbolizing is distinct from general self-affirmation (Gollwitzer et al., 2013; Ledgerwood et al., 2007; Moskowitz et al., 2011).

## 7. General discussion

We investigated whether the need to compensate for threats challenging the completeness of professional identity goals can lead to the endorsement of immoral acts, admission of previous immoral behavior, and self-ascriptions of traits associated with immoral behavior. Experiment 1 found that business students, who have been made incomplete with regard to their professional identity, showed greater support for immoral solutions to business problems than identity goal complete business students. In Experiment 2, law students who have been made incomplete with regard to their professional identity were willing to claim to have behaved immorally, and we were able to bolster claims that participants were compensating for personal identity goals rather than merely conforming to group norms. Experiment 3 added to these findings in two ways: First, we found that people would even go so far as to self-ascribe not only positive but also negative traits (i.e., stable personality attributes) in the service of compensation, prioritizing affirming the threatened identity over the global self. Second, Experiment 3 indicated that self-symbolizing by self-ascribing traits associated with immoral behavior held true for a variety professional identity goals (i.e., math, engineering, and the natural sciences) that do not necessarily possess a stereotype that includes immoral behavior. Taken together, it appears that people are willing to endorse and self-ascribe negative, immoral behaviors and traits that serve to compensate for threatened individual professional goals. This is behavior that could not otherwise enhance a general sense of self or merely serve to conform to in-group norms.

We aim to expand on previous work investigating identity goals in the moral domain by investigating the pursuit of identity goals that may conflict with moral concerns. In the present set of studies, we focused on one particular context that may determine whether an immoral behavior is considered: The incompleteness of a relevant, strongly held identity goal. According to self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), threatened identity goals lead to incompleteness that is then restored by engaging in self-symbolizing behavior. Critically, for some professions, self-symbolizing may be achieved through immoral behavior because immoral behavior is seen as a prototypical part of success in the field. For this reason, we hypothesized that committed but incomplete individuals would be willing to restore identity completeness, even when this required overriding potential moral concerns.

In three experiments, we were able to rule out the alternative explanation that participants self-symbolize in order to restore a positive global sense of self. While affirmation theory posits that people want to maintain a global view of the self as moral and competent, only self-completion theory makes the prediction that participants will endorse immoral solutions and actions and self-ascribe negative personality traits following negative feedback. This is because compensation via self-symbolizing must be specific to the threatened identity goal (Moskowitz et al., 2011). In addition, self-completion theory is different from cognitive dissonance. For the reported experiments, a cognitive dissonance perspective would lead to predictions that are quite different from those derived from self-completion theory. More specifically, when participants have stated beliefs (e.g., stating their strong commitment to a professional identity) that contradict their behavior (e.g., poor performance on an identity-relevant task), cognitive dissonance theory postulates that the participants will have to update their beliefs to match their behavior. To resolve aroused dissonance, one would expect participants to devalue their identity goals in order to reconcile their behavior with their beliefs (e.g., Aesop's fox declaring the unattainable grapes sour). Instead, in our studies participants did not devalue their identity goals but rather chose to endorse immoral actions and negative personality traits to sustain their goal striving (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982).

### 7.1. Future directions

There are many avenues for future research at the intersection of morality and identity goal pursuit. People appear to have identity goals to be morally good (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011; Longoni et al., 2014; Moskowitz et al., 2011), but they may also pursue immoral self-goals or other identity goals for which moral behavior can serve a self-symbolizing role. To start, all of these potential identity goals may provide valuable insights for understanding workplace identity, moral identity, and ethical decision-making in the workplace.

#### 7.1.1. Competing identities

While there is reason to believe that when a stimulus is ambiguous, morality may "win out" in interpretation (Gantman & Van Bavel, 2014), it is possible that the activation of a second, conflicting goal can inhibit accessibility of morally relevant stimuli. Given that the activation of a second conflicting goal inhibits activation to the first goal's relevant means (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002), it is possible that multiple identity goals could conflict and lead to the inhibition of morally relevant stimuli. For example, a person may be highly committed to being a moral person and to being a successful businessman or lawyer, but when the latter is threatened, the professional identity goal inhibits acting on the moral goal, as immoral actions have now become a means to self-symbolize the possession of the professional identity goal. Further research could test this goal conflict hypothesis more directly by activating both identity goals and then assessing possible changes in accessibility and perception of moral behaviors.

#### 7.1.2. Changes in the self over time

It is also possible that identity goal threatened individuals might adopt immoral standards over time. According to self-perception theory (Bem, 1967, 1972), people make inferences about themselves by observing their own behavior. Over the long term, occasions in which people are driven to behave immorally accumulate; this might ultimately lead them to conclude that they possess personality traits associated with immoral behavior. Alternatively, people whose identity goals are frequently threatened for long periods of time may no longer recognize behaviors as immoral as they are repeatedly viewed as means to achieve identity goal completeness. Longitudinal studies may be especially important to test this idea given that professional identity goals can override moral concerns even for individuals who are not yet in their chosen profession (i.e., high school students).

## 7.2. Measures for preventing immoral compensation behavior

We suggest that to prevent people with incomplete identity goals from compensating with immoral behavior, alternative compensation opportunities could be provided. It has been found that the strength of an individual's commitment to the aspired-to identity determines which measures are adequate substitutes for compensation. In the recent study of Gollwitzer et al. (2013), law students either strongly or weakly committed to the identity goal of becoming successful lawyers were made either incomplete or not. It was found that strongly committed identity goal participants self-symbolized in order to compensate, despite a previous opportunity to bolster their general self-worth. In contrast, weakly committed identity goal participants preferred to bolster their general self-worth, despite a previous opportunity to self-symbolize. These results suggest that those who are highly committed to their identity goals are most likely to choose to self-symbolize instead of bolstering the self by other means, and so might be more tempted to commit immoral behavior in order to self-symbolize. Providing moral alternatives for self-symbolizing allows individuals to stay in the field and learn from errors while also avoiding compensatory immoral behaviors. When individuals are able to self-symbolize, they can stay in their desired field after setbacks (Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998). If those individuals are provided with compensatory behaviors that are moral (or at least not immoral), they can not only continue to pursue their identity goals, but they may also eventually become models in their fields who succeed and behave in a moral manner at the same time.

## 7.3. Implications

The present research has important implications for academic psychology as well as the broader social context. First, we think that it will be crucial to understand what prior states, experiences or contexts can co-determine whether an immoral action or trait is endorsed. Such contexts may include threatened identity goals or other relevant motives, such as the belief in a just world (Lerner & Miller, 1978),

Second, we hope these studies further demonstrate that the domain of morality can continue to benefit from classic theories in motivation and goal pursuit (for an overview, see Bargh, Gollwitzer, & Oettingen, 2010; Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2012). For example, approach and avoidance motives may help us understand proscriptive vs. prescriptive morality (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009). In addition, ego-depletion (i.e., a reduced self-regulatory state) has been shown to make moral behavior more difficult (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011). We suggest that revisiting classic motivational principles, such as the way in which goals determine value, may help us understand the broader moral landscape, which is often concerned with action and action control in the service of moral behavior.

This is especially true in workplace settings where individuals are committed to identity goals and are performing goal-relevant tasks in front of their peers. Based on the present line of research, a highly committed professional may be more likely to act immorally after identity-goal relevant failure feedback, an inevitable part of any job. For example, if an investment banker makes a risky decision with other people's money, in his mind, this decision may not have anything to do with morals – instead, it may be a reflection of perceptions of prototypical banking behavior enacted by a banker whose identity goal has been threatened.

## 8. Conclusion

We hope this research will be of interest both theoretically and pragmatically. First, through the lens of self-completion theory we were able to make unique predictions that in the face of negative identity-goal relevant feedback, participants would compensate not by affirming their

global sense of self or devaluing their identity goal, but by endorsing immoral business solutions, admitting to previous immoral behavior, and self-ascribing personality traits associated with immoral actions. Second, in order to understand the events that eventually led to the financial crisis of 2008 (and others like it), we must look not only at potential greed of single individuals or the culture of institutions, but also to the active goals of individuals at any level. Perhaps if we better understand the motivational factors, such as identity goal pursuit, that contribute to large-scale endorsement of immoral behavior, we can better prevent incidents of large-scale fraud. We have made suggestions for providing alternate routes to compensation for professions in which opportunities for identity goal compensation may come in the form of immoral behavior. As we can see from the present research, identity-goal relevant feedback may determine whether or not we are willing to endorse immoral actions, admit to past immoral actions or self-ascribe personality traits that are linked to readiness to engage in immoral actions.

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