When Intentions Go Public

Does Social Reality Widen the Intention-Behavior Gap?

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ABSTRACT—*Based on Lewinian goal theory in general and self-completion theory in particular, four experiments examined the implications of other people taking notice of one's identity-related behavioral intentions (e.g., the intention to read law periodicals regularly to reach the identity goal of becoming a lawyer). Identity-related behavioral intentions that had been noticed by other people were translated into action less intensively than those that had been ignored (Studies 1–3). This effect was evident in the field (persistent striving over 1 week's time; Study 1) and in the laboratory (jumping on opportunities to act; Studies 2 and 3), and it held among participants with strong but not weak commitment to the identity goal (Study 3). Study 4 showed, in addition, that when other people take notice of an individual's identity-related behavioral intention, this gives the individual a premature sense of possessing the aspired-to identity.*

Are scientists more likely to write papers if they tell colleagues about this intention than if they keep the intention private? It is commonly assumed that whenever people make their intentions public, the behavioral impact of these intentions is enhanced (e.g., Staats, Harland, & Wilke, 2004). These effects are postulated to be a consequence of multiple processes. Research on persuasion techniques points to one of these processes (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). It is argued that a publicly stated behavioral intention commits the individual to a certain self-view (e.g., "I am a productive person") with which the person then acts consistently. Indeed, individuals with a higher need for consistency show stronger public-commitment effects (Cialdini, Wosinka, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999). The second process is referred to as accountability (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Making intentions public is said to make a person accountable to the addressed audience, and research has shown that various ac-

countability-related features of the audience (e.g., competence, power) and the individual (e.g., identifiability, expectations of having to explain oneself) affect the strength of public-commitment effects.

Both of these lines of research focus on intentions in which the specified behavior is a desired outcome in and of itself. Lewin (1926) and his colleagues (e.g., Mahler, 1935; Ovsiankina, 1928), however, argued that people often construe behavioral intentions in more general terms, thus allowing substitution of means for attainment. For instance, consider a student who has started an assigned math task with the intention to successfully solve the required addition problems. During the process, this student may construe the intention as being to demonstrate mathematical skills, and this conceptually broader intention may also be reached by solving subtraction problems (i.e., by substitute activities). Ovsiankina and Mahler observed that a substitute activity engenders a sense of having reached the conceptually broader intention, given that performance of the substitute activity has been witnessed by other people (i.e., has become a social reality). On the basis of this line of thought—which we explicate in the framework of self-completion theory (SCT; Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982)—we propose that social recognition of an identity-relevant behavioral intention may have negative effects on its enactment.

SCT proposes that people who are committed to identity goals (e.g., becoming a good parent, scientist, or craftsperson) can undertake a variety of activities to claim goal attainment. For a scientist, such activities, or *identity symbols*, include engaging in professional duties (e.g., giving lectures), making positive self-descriptions (e.g., "I discovered a new principle!"), exerting identity-relevant social influence (e.g., advising students), and acquiring skills and tools that facilitate striving for the identity goal (e.g., programming skills, computers). However, failing to perform an identity-relevant activity or facing the lack of an identity symbol produces a state of incompleteness (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). To restore completeness, the individual makes efforts to acquire alternative identity symbols (e.g., describing oneself as having the required personality attributes:

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Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985; engaging in identity-relevant activities: Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996; showing off relevant status symbols: Harmon-Jones, Schmeichel, & Harmon-Jones, 2009). Using opportunities to affirm one's general self-integrity or to bolster one's self-esteem is not sufficient to offset incompleteness regarding an identity goal; rather, it is necessary to acquire specific identity symbols (Ledgerwood, Liviatan, & Carnevale, 2007).

SCT research has also shown that an individual reaches a higher level of completeness when his or her identity-relevant activities are noticed by a social audience (Gollwitzer, 1986). Moreover, research has shown that incomplete individuals are more concerned with finding an audience for their identity strivings, compared with complete individuals (Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996). Positive self-descriptions made in public qualify as powerful identity symbols (Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982), and having an audience for behavioral intentions that specify the successful performance of an identity-relevant activity should have the same symbolic impact. The implication is that when other people take notice of a stated identity-relevant behavioral intention, this should engender completeness regarding the superordinate identity goal, and thus reaching the identity goal by actually performing the intended behavior should become less necessary. In other words, people should be less likely to translate their identity-relevant behavioral intentions into action when other people have taken notice of those intentions. We conducted four experiments entailing a variety of identity goals and behavioral intentions to test this hypothesis.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we asked college students committed to becoming a psychologist to form identity-relevant studying intentions. After either taking notice of these intentions or ignoring them, we assessed how effectively the students enacted their intentions over the subsequent week.

Method

Forty-nine psychology students (38 women, 11 men) at a German university were recruited after introductory lectures. Participants were informed that they would take part in a survey about the study intentions of first-year psychology students. A first questionnaire assessed commitment to becoming a psychologist using the following items:

- "How important is it for you to find a psychology-related job?"
- "Suppose that you could not finish your studies of psychology successfully. How much would that bother you?"
- "How happy would you be in a job that is not related to psychology?" (reverse-coded)

Participants responded to these items on 9-point scales ranging from 1, *not at all*, to 9, *very much*. Responses were averaged to

form a scale ($\alpha = .80$). Next, participants were asked to write down their two most important study intentions for the forthcoming week (e.g., "I will take my reading assignments more seriously," "I intend to study more statistics").

In the *social-reality* condition, the experimenter read through each participant's reported intentions, presumably to ensure that the participant had understood the instructions. In the *no-social-reality* condition, participants were told that the page of the questionnaire on which participants had written down their behavioral intentions had been wrongly included in the study, and that this page would be discarded (i.e., the students' intentions remained unnoticed).

One week later, all participants were sent a second questionnaire via e-mail. They had to first write down the two behavioral intentions they had listed the previous week. Then, they indicated on exactly which days of the past week they had acted on each intention. Finally, participants were asked to bring their completed questionnaire to the experimenter's office, where they received payment (€5) or course credit.

Results and Discussion

Overall, participants were highly committed to the identity goal (range = 6–9; $M = 7.32$, $SD = 1.64$), and there was no significant difference in commitment scores between the social-reality condition ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 1.64$) and the no-social-reality condition ($M = 7.43$, $SD = 1.08$), $F < 1, p > .32$, $d < 0.16$. We analyzed the number of days participants acted on their intentions in a 2 × 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) with social reality as the between-participants factor and the two specified behavioral intentions as the within-participants factor. Results showed a significant main effect of social reality, $F(1, 47) = 4.38, p < .05, d = 0.60$; participants whose intentions remained private acted on their intentions on more days of the week ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.83$) than did participants whose intentions were noticed ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 0.78$). No other effects were significant.

An apparent strength of Study 1 is that the observed negative effects of having one's intentions noticed cannot easily be attributed to emotions that might accrue from the experimenter's behavior (e.g., pride). Such affective responses should vanish quickly, whereas the effects on behavioral enactment in Study 1 were evident over a period of 1 week. An obvious weakness of this study, however, is that enactment of intentions was assessed via self-report.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, therefore, we observed actual enactment of intentions. Participants were law students who formed the behavioral intention to make use of identity-relevant educational opportunities. This intention was then either noticed by other people or ignored. We then observed the degree to which participants

acted on their intention when such an educational opportunity was actually provided.

Method

Law students at a German university were approached after a lecture and asked to fill out a three-item commitment questionnaire adapted from Study 1 (7-point answer scales were used this time). Only participants with high commitment to becoming a successful jurist (score ≥ 5 on each item; $\alpha = .76$) were invited to take part in the study ($N = 32$; 13 women, 19 men). The students received €5 for their participation.

Participants were greeted individually and informed that the experiment consisted of two independent parts. The first was introduced as an assessment of students' willingness to intensify their study of law. Participants were asked to answer a four-page questionnaire. On the first page, the following critical intention item was presented: "I intend to make the best possible use of educational opportunities in law." Participants responded on a 9-point scale ranging from 1, *definitely not*, to 9, *definitely yes*. In the *social-reality* condition, after a participant completed the questionnaire, the experimenter looked at this item and asked whether the number circled on the answer scale was the one the participant actually wanted to circle. Then the experimenter dropped the questionnaire into a box. In the *no-social-reality* condition, participants were simply asked to drop the questionnaire into a prepared box. As the questionnaire was anonymous, it was clear to participants in this condition that the experimenter would never be able to link the expressed intentions to individual participants.

The experimenter then turned to the supposed second part of the experiment, which concerned the development of a computer-based study package for law students. New study materials were needed, so she had prepared 20 different criminal law cases. Participants were asked to help her find which cases to select for the package by trying hard to solve each case. The students were given 45 min to work on the prepared cases (plus the time needed to finish the case they were working on when the time limit was reached), but they were told that they could finish earlier if they wished. The time participants spent working on these cases was used to assess how successfully participants translated their intention into behavior.

Results and Discussion

Only participants who intended to make the best possible use of educational opportunities (score > 5) were included (30 out of the 32 original participants). Participants worked on the law cases for less time if this behavioral intention was noticed than if it was ignored by the experimenter ($M = 41.52$ min, $SD = 4.42$, vs. $M = 45.65$ min, $SD = 2.92$), $t(29) = 3.26, p < .01, d = 1.10$. Thus, law students—all of them highly committed to the identity goal of being a jurist—who had stated the behavioral intention to take advantage of educational opportunities in law acted less

intensively on this intention when it was noticed by the experimenter than when it was ignored.

STUDY 3

Studies 1 and 2 were both conducted with participants who were highly committed to the identity goal in question (i.e., psychologist in Study 1, jurist in Study 2). As only individuals who are highly committed to an identity goal can be expected to experience self-completeness by accumulating identity symbols (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), it follows that noncommitted individuals should not show reduced intention enactment whenever their identity-related behavioral intentions are noticed by other people. Study 3 tested this hypothesis in two ways: First, we compared students who wanted to become clinical psychologists and those who wanted to become other types of psychologists to determine whether they differed in how social reality affected their enactment of behavioral intentions in the service of the identity goal of clinical psychologist. Second, we assessed the strength of participants' commitment to the identity goal of becoming a clinical psychologist. We decided to assess rather than manipulate strength of identity-goal commitment, as strong identity commitments are not easily created on the spot, but often take years to develop (Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998).

Method

Sixty-three psychology students at a German university (40 women, 23 men) participated for course credit. They were informed that they would take part in two independent studies. The first study was described as exploring students' willingness to intensify their studies and involved answering several short questionnaires. The first questionnaire assessed commitment to the identity goal of becoming a clinical psychologist. The first item asked, "There are different fields of specialization in psychology. Which one are you trying to pursue?" Response options were "child," "industrial," "clinical," "experimental," "mathematical," and "undecided." Participants who answered "clinical" were assumed to possess this identity goal, whereas the others were not. We assumed that strongly committed individuals would be willing to take on hardships (e.g., moving to another town) en route to attaining an identity goal (Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998), and the subsequent strength-of-commitment item asked, "Would you switch universities in order to receive an optimal education in your field of interest?" Participants responded to this question using a 5-point scale ranging from 1, *No, I would never do that*, to 5, *Yes, I would do that for sure*.

A second questionnaire (one item per page) was introduced as an inventory concerning ways of intensifying one's studies. The critical behavioral-intention question was the only item on the first page: "I intend to watch videotapes of therapy sessions to learn more about therapeutic techniques." The response scale for this item ranged from 1, *definitely no*, to 5, *definitely yes*.

Upon completion of this questionnaire, participants in the *so-cial-reality* condition were told that because of incomplete responses of prior participants, only the question on the first page of the questionnaire could be analyzed. The experimenter then studied that page, tore it off, and handed the remaining pages back to the participant. In the *no-social-reality* condition, the experimenter gave the same cover story about missing data, but applied it to all the items on the questionnaire; then she returned the entire questionnaire without looking at it.

Finally, the experimenter introduced participants to the second experimenter, who told them that she was trying to find out the extent to which making eye contact affects the quality of an interaction. She explained that she had prepared a video showing a conversation between a therapist and a client. Participants' task was to count the instances of making eye contact and to rate the quality of interaction after each minute of the conversation. Participants were told that the video lasted 40 min, but they should feel free to stop the video whenever they wanted.

Results and Discussion

Thirty-one participants indicated that clinical psychology was the field they wanted to pursue; 32 participants indicated other fields. Because only participants with strong behavioral intentions were of interest, we excluded 6 participants (2 aspiring clinical psychologists and 4 no-goal participants) who scored 4 or less on the item "I intend to watch videotapes of therapy sessions to learn more about therapeutic techniques." A 2 (clinical-psychologist identity goal: present vs. absent) × 2 (social reality: present vs. absent) ANOVA on the amount of time spent watching the therapy video yielded the predicted interaction effect, $F(1, 53) = 3.95$, $p = .05$, $d = 0.95$; only the performance of aspiring clinical psychologists was affected by social reality. As expected, aspiring clinical psychologists whose behavioral intention to study videotaped therapy sessions had been noticed by the experimenter invested less time in watching the video than did aspiring clinical psychologists whose intentions remained unnoticed ($M = 29.51$ min, $SD = 6.72$, vs. $M = 34.22$ min, $SD = 7.19$), $t(28) = 1.82$, $p = .04$ (one-tailed), $d = 0.68$. None of the other comparisons were significant (all $ts < 0.15$, $ps > .88$, $ds < 0.06$).

In an additional analysis, we examined whether strength of commitment to the identity goal, as measured by the mobility item, moderated the effect of social reality among the aspiring clinical psychologists (weak commitment ≤ 3, strong commitment ≥ 4). A 2 (strength of commitment: strong vs. weak) × 2 (social reality: present vs. absent) ANOVA revealed a main effect of social reality, $F(1, 25) = 5.50$, $p < .03$, $d = 0.94$, that was qualified by a significant interaction with strength of commitment, $F(1, 25) = 5.04$, $p < .04$, $d = 0.90$. As expected (see Table 1), participants with a strong commitment to the identity goal of becoming a clinical psychologist spent less time (more than 11

min less) studying the videotaped therapy session if they were in the social-reality condition than if they were in the no-social-reality condition, $t(11) = 5.02$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.96$; in contrast, participants with weak commitment to the identity goal spent close to the same amount of time studying the therapy session no matter whether they had or had not received social recognition for their behavioral intention to study videotapes of therapy sessions (there was only a 13.2-s difference between groups; $t = 0.09$, $p = .93$, $d = 0.04$).

TABLE 1
Mean Time Spent Studying the Videotaped Therapy Session (in Minutes) in Study 3

Commitment to identity goal of clinical psychologist	Social reality	
	Present	Absent
Strong	27.95 (3.11)	39.17 (4.51)
Weak	30.68 (3.62)	30.90 (6.24)

Note. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

STUDY 4

SCT (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) postulates that public recognition of an identity-relevant symbol engenders a sense of having attained the aspired-to identity goal (i.e., self-completeness). As Studies 1 through 3 suggest that identity-relevant behavioral intentions do qualify as identity symbols, it follows that social recognition of such intentions should also lead to a heightened sense of completeness. In Study 4, we tested this hypothesis with law students committed to becoming successful jurists.

Method

Twenty-four first-year and second-year law students (10 women, 14 men) from a German university participated in this experiment in exchange for €5. They were recruited at the end of a law seminar.

Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants met the experimenter and two other students (actually confederates) who were described as fellow law students. The experimenter explained to each group that he was conducting a study on law students' intentions to advance their careers and then asked participants to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised two items. The first item measured participants' commitment to becoming a lawyer: "How important is a successful career in law to you personally?" Responses were made on a 7-point scale ranging from 1, *not at all important*, to 7, *very important*. The second item asked participants to write out their three most important behavioral intentions with respect to the goal of becoming a successful jurist (e.g., "I will read law periodicals regularly"). The importance of each intention also had to be

rated on a 7-point scale. Once participants had completed the questionnaire, the experimenter asked them to either rate the attractiveness of 10 pictures of landscapes (the *no-social-reality* condition) or tell him and the rest of the group what intentions they had written down (the *social-reality* condition). In the social-reality condition, the participants always reported their intentions first; the confederates then reported behavioral intentions derived from prior participants.

Next, a second questionnaire was handed out. This questionnaire showed a 14-cm line, above which were aligned five pictures of the same member of the German Supreme Court wearing the characteristic attire. The pictures varied in size, ranging from small (1.5 × 1 cm) to large (3.6 × 2.4 cm). These size gradations provided a visual analogue of the extent of possessing the identity of being a jurist. Participants responded to the item "How much do you feel like a jurist right now?" by marking the respective point on the line. This self-assessment manekin (SAM) rating procedure facilitates quick, nonreflective self-evaluations (Bradley & Lang, 1994).

Results and Discussion

The commitment of students in the social-reality condition ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 1.49$) did not differ from that of students in the no-social-reality condition ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 0.67$), $t(21) = 0.17$, $p = .68$, $d = 0.07$. Ratings of the importance of the listed intentions were high and also did not differ between conditions ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 0.55$, vs. $M = 6.00$, $SD = 0.55$), $t(21) = 0.42$, $p = .87$, $d = 0.18$.

We first checked the validity of our measure of felt completeness. Indeed, more semesters of law education was associated with stronger feelings of completeness as a jurist ($r = .54$, $p = .005$). In a hierarchical regression analysis, the social-reality manipulation was significantly associated with feelings of self-completeness even after number of semesters of law education had been taken into account (βs = .29 and .45 for education and condition, respectively, ps $< .05$), and inclusion of this variable enhanced the fit of the model ($\Delta R^2 = .17$, $\Delta F = 5.72$, $p < .03$). As we predicted, participants felt closer to the identity goal of becoming a jurist when their behavioral intentions were recognized than when those intentions remained private (Ms = 4.19 and 3.10, respectively).

CONCLUSION

When other people take notice of one's identity-relevant behavioral intentions, one's performance of the intended behaviors is compromised. This effect occurs both when the intentions are experimenter supplied and when they are self-generated, and is observed in both immediate performance and performance measured over a period of 1 week. It does not emerge when people are not committed to the superordinate identity goal.

Other people's taking notice of one's identity-relevant intentions apparently engenders a premature sense of completeness regarding the identity goal.

Fishbein (1980) and Ajzen (1991) showed that the strength of a behavioral intention determines how well it is translated into behavior (Webb & Sheeran, 2006). Moreover, a substantial literature on moderators of intention-behavior relations (e.g., certainty, temporal stability) has developed (Cooke & Sheeran, 2004; Sheeran, 2002). Interestingly, however, previous research has not explored what psychological processes may intervene between the formation of a behavioral intention and its enactment. The present studies indicate that the simple matter of identity-relevant behavioral intentions becoming public undermines the realization of those intentions.

The present research is also unique in its attempt to bring back Lewin's work on intentions as it applies to the actual realization of intentions. Most of the current research based on Lewin's (1926) goal theory focuses on the activation level of the mental representation of a person's intention (following Zeigarnik, 1927). For instance, research has shown that the accessibility of goal-related constructs is increased as long as the goal is active, that goal fulfillment inhibits accessibility of goal-related constructs, and that these effects are proportional to the strength of commitment to the goal (Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005; Goschke & Kuhl, 1993; Marsh, Hicks, & Bink, 1998).

Our findings are also important from an applied perspective. Given that the effect is limited to committed individuals—those who are most eager to reach their identity goals—an important question is how these individuals might try to escape this effect. Future research might address this question by exploring various routes. First, might it suffice to increase the need for consistency (Cialdini & Trost, 1998) by attending to relevant norms? Or is it also necessary to increase perceived accountability (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999) by considering relevant attributes of the audience (e.g., power) or by specifying one's behavioral intention in a particular way (e.g., spelling out specific frequency or quality standards vs. stating only that one wants to do one's best; Locke & Latham, 2002) so that the audience can more easily check on its enactment? Second, might it also be effective for one to furnish a behavioral intention with a plan for how to enact it—that is, to form a corresponding implementation intention (e.g., "If situation X is encountered, then I will perform the intended behavior Y"; Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006)? As such if-then plans delegate the control of a person's behavior to situational cues, the intended behavior should be executed when the critical cue arises, whether or not the expression of the behavioral intention had been acknowledged by other people. Third, recent research by Fishbach and her colleagues (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Koo & Fishbach, 2008) suggests that interpreting a behavioral performance in terms of indicating commitment to a goal enhances further goal striving, whereas conceiving of a performance in terms of progress toward

a goal reduces further goal striving. This implies that a behavioral intention worded to indicate a strong commitment to the identity goal (e.g., "I want to write a paper to become a great scientist") should be less negatively affected by social reality than a behavioral intention that implies progress toward the identity goal (e.g., "I intend to write a paper, as is done by great scientists").

Finally, from a goal-systems (Kruglanski et al., 2002) or goal-hierarchy (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987) perspective on action control, it stands to reason that any striving for goals—and not just identity goals—that can be attained by various behavioral routes (means) is vulnerable to the negative effects of social reality on the enactment of behavioral intentions. If a person is highly committed to a superordinate goal, and if public recognition of a behavioral intention specifying the use of one route to the goal engenders a sense of goal attainment, then the enactment of this very intention should be hampered. Recent research by Fishbach, Dhar, and Zhang (2006) is in line with this reasoning, showing that success on a subgoal (e.g., eating healthy meals) in the service of a superordinate goal (i.e., keeping in shape) reduces striving for alternative subgoals (e.g., going to the gym).

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