

## Symbolic Self-Completion, Attempted Influence, and Self-Deprecation

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A concept of symbolic self-completion states that people define themselves as musicians, athletes, etc. by use of indicators of attainment in those activity realms, such as possessing a prestige job, having extensive education, or whatever is recognized by others as indicating progress toward completing the self-definition. The self-completion idea postulates that when important symbols—indicators of self-definition—are lacking, the person will strive after further, alternative symbols of the self-definition. In the present research two modes of symbolizing completeness were studied: (1) attempting to influence others directly within the self-definitional area; or (2) simple self-descriptions of one's own performance, such that others would be exposed to those self-descriptions. Two correlational studies showed that the less education (Study 1) or on-the-job experience (Study 2) subjects had, the more they desired to influence others. Experimental subjects (Study 3) who were interrupted while writing a positive, self-descriptive statement manifested stronger influence attempts than did subjects who were allowed to finish. Finally, Study 4 examined self-descriptions as a self-symbolizing effort. Incompleteness was varied by means of a salience-of-past-teacher manipulation. When pressure was placed on subjects to characterize themselves negatively within their respective areas, those for whom a positive teacher was salient were the most willing to be negative. The interpretation of these findings assumes that influencing others, as well as positive self-descriptions, can further the individual's sense of having a complete self-definition.

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When people refer to themselves as “physicians,” “rally drivers,” or “guitarists,” it is commonly thought that they possess qualifications corresponding to these titles. When someone introduces himself as a medical doctor and proceeds to describe the extent of his education, we are normally prepared to infer a certain medical competence. And should the guitarist report that he has influenced others’ guitar-playing styles, we are prone to conclude that he is a competent or even gifted musician. More generally, when a person pursuing a given activity can talk about the self positively, or otherwise attempts to gain more recognition for performing that activity, the audience for these words and gestures is likely to conclude that the person is indeed well prepared and competent. But such an inference is often erroneous.

A central observation to be made about the human, within the context of a notion of self-completion, is that very central flaws in the person’s training or performance are “covered over” by what we shall call *self-symbolizing* behaviors. It also follows from the idea, described more fully later, that a person who currently possesses numerous, durable indicators of competence is unlikely to engage in self-symbolizing actions.

The person with a great deal of experience in an activity, for instance, will not endlessly bring others’ attention to various indicators or self-descriptions of competence; such a person will carry out the activity within an atmosphere of modesty and unpretentiousness. On the other hand, the frequent use of open self-aggrandizement, status symbols, “knowing more” than the other, and efforts to influence others may be taken as signs of the individual’s insecurity (i.e., “incompleteness” in the domain of activity).

A core assumption is that indicators (symbols) of completeness are substitutable for one another. The person who can point to symbols that support the self-definition aspired to (e.g., physician) will tend to neglect the pursuit of further symbols. Thus self-symbolizing efforts will be undertaken when the person is lacking in symbolic indicators of the status of “physician,” “guitarist,” or other self-definition.

An investigation by Ross, Bierbrauer, and Polly (1974) illustrates this line of reasoning. When subjects who had served as teacher to a young boy found that they had failed to teach him the correct spelling of a few words, they tended to attribute blame to him—especially if they were inexperienced college students rather than veteran teachers. The results suggest that the veteran teachers, arriving on the scene with a stockpile of symbols of their teacher status, were not dependent on one particular instance of success to further their self-definitions.

### Historical Background

The idea that the potential effectiveness of one symbolic indicator can be substituted for by an alternative symbolic indicator was implicit in the thinking of Lewin (1926) and several of his students. Their analysis of goal-oriented behavior

and interrupted activities is the main conceptual background of this paper. Lewin argues that when an organism establishes a particular goal, a tension system comes into play and remains until the goal is reached or until the organism "leaves the field." Further, should the task be interrupted due to outside forces, the tension system will remain intact, and the psychological effects of that tension system will be detectable even if the person cannot resume the activity immediately. This rather simple principle surfaces in a highly testable, operationalized form in the often-cited work on memory (Zeigarnik, 1927), as well as in the analysis of interrupted-task resumption by three other Lewin students (Lissner, 1933; Mahler, 1933; Ovsiankina, 1928).

We have concentrated especially on Mahler's (1933) research and conceptualizing of the dynamics of substitute activities. In Mahler's research paradigm subjects typically were assigned 4–6 fairly simple tasks, such as piecing a mosaic together, or constructing a tower from building blocks. Described in Lewin's language, the psychological process associated with each task was a specific tension system, which abated only when the task was completed. More importantly, if a task were to be interrupted, the tension system was said to persevere, resulting in subsequent voluntary resumption of the same task.

Mahler interrupted each subject on a number of the tasks, using a variety of creative devices, and following each interruption the subjects were eventually allowed to resume the original task. Approximately 90% of the original tasks were resumed, but there is a more significant feature of the research: Following some of the interruptions Mahler gave her subjects substitute tasks; after working on these they could resume work on the original. For instance, the original task might have been to write out a slogan by piercing the letters of the words into a piece of paper. When this task was interrupted, the experimenter introduced the substitute task, which consisted of completing the slogan by writing it out with a pencil. This kind of substitute activity had a decided impact on the subsequent tendency to resume the original task; the resumption rate was sharply curtailed. In Lewin's terms, the activity was carried to a tension-reducing conclusion via a task that was not identical with the original but served the same tension system.

Thus Mahler points to the concept of substitutability: Given a goal with some finite, objective quality (such as constructing a tower), a whole class of goals would seem to reduce the tension system corresponding to that goal. But a further observation needs to be made, this one stemming from Henle (1944). Henle was of the view that the seemingly concrete tasks found in this Lewinian research were related psychologically to certain "superordinate" goals—such as creativity, industriousness, or intelligence. It is argued that the substitute value of Mahler's alternative tasks was so substantial because subjects were oriented largely toward these self-defining goals—and not exclusively toward the objective goal of "tower completion" or "having written out a slogan by piercing holes."

## Symbolic Self-Completion

A theory of symbolic self-completion can now be spelled out, using the concepts of "commitment to goals," "symbols of completeness," and "social reality."

*Commitment to Self-Defining Goals.* From Lewin's perspective a goal-specific tension remains active only as long as the person is involved psychologically in the pursuit of the goal. Ovsiankina (1928) found that when the task was important personally to subjects, the resumption effects were strongest. For subjects who found the tasks to be personally unimportant (i.e., trivial or arbitrary), the resumption rate was so low that one would be inclined to doubt the presence of a goal-directed tension system.

The foregoing leads us to invoke a boundary condition for the self-completion process. In all the research reported here we have tried to insure an ongoing, goal-oriented process directed toward a self-definition. For one, we have typically asked subjects to name one activity area in which they have a central interest (such as participating in a sport, playing a musical instrument, or studying a subject). Second, we have also established that subjects are continuously active in that area.

How does one recognize a self-defining goal, in contrast to other kinds of goals? "Self-defining" means that people predicate of themselves some quality that corresponds to a sense of control and capability, such as "parent," "athlete," or "artist." Further, and central here, is that these goals are defined by interacting with others (Mead, 1934) and that the sense of progress toward the goal requires social recognition.

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

For the sake of convenience it is possible to view such symbols as falling into three groups, being based on: (a) the background experience or training requisite to the activity; (b) occupying a position or status that furthers the relevant activities; or (c) performance of the act itself. For each of these three categories of symbols the person stands to be recognized as possessing the self-definition that is sought after. In the case of "a" the specific symbol could be education,

in the instance of "b" it might be the position "vice-president," and for "c" one is recognized as being a musician, or lawyer, simply by remaining highly active in musicianlike or lawyerlike actions.

*Social Reality.* Mahler (1933) found that the tension-reduction potential of a substitute task depended largely on whether or not solving the substitute task carried a "social reality." The substitute task had tension-reducing properties only when the solution was announced to the experimenter. Once others acknowledge the person for having solved the problem, having solved it becomes a social fact and thus can serve as a self-defining symbol. This line of thinking can be carried back to Cooley (1902), who states that self-definitions can come into being and remain stable only by virtue of the acknowledgment of others. Thus the sense of progress toward a self-defining goal is dependent on the acknowledgment of others. We will call this the *social reality factor*. We can also talk about a concept of "broadening social reality." Once a person has an indicator at hand, the sense of completeness should be enhanced to the degree that one can inform more people about it, or more generally, enlarge the scope of individuals who would potentially recognize the completeness of the self-definition.

## Research Paradigms

The core of the self-completion idea is that symbols of completeness are potential substitutes for one another. The central implication is that a lack in symbolic support will lead to symbolizing the self as complete—within a particular self-definition. How can this notion be brought to an empirical test? First of all, a definite symbolic lack, over which the person has no control, has to be established. This can be accomplished by experimentally varying the extent of completeness with respect to a given symbol or by employing existing lacks (i.e., comparing individuals who differ a priori in relative completeness). Second, the person must have an accessible means of self-symbolizing, such as the possibility of acquiring new symbolic indicators (e.g., status symbols; prestige affiliations), or by broadening immediate social reality—through social influence, or via self-descriptions promoting the aspired-to self-definition.

In the research to be presented we have provided subjects with a highly accessible way to symbolize the aspired-to self-definition. In the first three studies, subjects were asked to influence others within the area of the pertinent self-definition. To the extent that the aspiring mathematician can convince others of some point regarding mathematics, those others then become part of the social reality that recognizes the person's status as a mathematician. Thus the subjects were given a possibility of broadening the social reality of their self-definition through influencing others. A similar effect has been noted by Fulbright (1966), Geyer (1977), and Izraeli (1977), all of whom view attempted influencing and

wielding of power as attempts to restore lacking competence or security. In Study 4 it is shown that self-descriptions, to be acknowledged potentially by others, can also reflect the striving for self-completion.

## STUDY 1

### Overview

Subjects committed to a variety of different activity areas (football, mathematics, guitar, etc.) were given a questionnaire that dealt with the following: (1) It was important to know whether the person's commitment, hence motivation to be complete in the area, was ongoing. This was operationalized in terms of recency of performance of the activity. (2) Second, relative prior existence of a symbol of completeness was defined operationally through years of relevant formal education. Once these background data had been taken, all subjects wrote a short essay, ostensibly for instructional purposes. They then were asked to indicate: (1) how many different groups of available target audiences they wanted their essay to be presented to; and (2) how many people they thought should read their essay. These two desire-to-influence items are the dependent variables. It was hypothesized that the less education the person has in the relevant area, the more desired influence should be manifested. However, this relationship should hold only for individuals whose commitment to the activity is ongoing. The tension associated with nonattainment should be relatively absent among those who are not actively pursuing the activity (Adler & Kounin, 1939; Kelley, 1951; Ovsiankina, 1928).

There exists no ready operationalization for drawing this committed-noncommitted distinction, as commitment traditionally has been defined through experimentally induced decisions (Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Kiesler, 1971). However, one straightforward definition, based on Lewin's idea of leaving the field, would be recency of the last engagement in the activity. The symbolic completeness idea, not being a parametric model, does not specify numerically how long an activity must be ceased before it no longer holds a tension state, but as it turns out, locating a temporal cutting point is not a difficult problem (reported in the following in more detail).

## METHOD

### Subjects

The subjects were undergraduates from introductory psychology classes, tested in one session. Of the 219 subjects tested, 66 were eliminated due to a criterion that each activity be chosen by at least three subjects. This criterion was imposed

because it was desired to analyze the data of individual activity areas. Thus 74 males and 79 females are reported in the analysis.

## Procedure

The first questionnaire concerned itself with subjects' background and contained the following critical items: (1) A request for subjects to indicate their central activity (Subjects were asked to write down an area of special competence, such as a sport, musical talent, or special area of knowledge); (2) Number of years and months of their training in the activity;<sup>1</sup> (3) How long ago they last performed the activity. This item served to define commitment.

The second form, attached to the first, consisted of printed instructions to write a two-page essay on how to get started and interested in the relevant activity, for the purpose of teaching someone. Subjects were then instructed to start writing, and to take up as much of the two pages as they desired.

Once this material was collected they received the second questionnaire, which asked them to indicate explicitly who should be influenced by what they had written, and how many people should be influenced. The following two items were included: (1) First came a description of a sample of different target groups ("average high school students," "foreign exchange students," etc.) available to the psychology department. It was said that the department intended to give the subject's essay to some of these groups, but that it would be difficult to hand out the essay to every one of the groups. In line with this rationale, subjects were then asked to check just those groups they thought should read the essay they had written; (2) Second, they were requested to indicate the number of people who should read their essay within each category checked. For each category the subject could check any of the following four alternatives: 1-5, 6-20, 21-60, over-60.

## RESULTS

The prediction may be examined in terms of two kinds of correlations: (1) the relationship between amount of formal education in the activity area and number of target groups indicated as influence targets; and (2) the relationship between amount of formal education in the activity area and gross number of people indicated as targets of influence. For the *number-of-target-groups* measure, subjects could receive a score of between 0 and 12. The *quantity-of-people* measure

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<sup>1</sup>Subjects were asked to distinguish between formal education in the school, private instruction, and university education. As the latter two categories contributed very little to total years of education, and as many of the activities named by subjects were never associated with private instruction the analyses reported here are solely in terms of formal education in the school.

was analyzed by assigning a 1 to the 1–5 category, a 2 to the 6–20 category, a 3 to the 21–60 category, and a 4 to the over-60 category.

In order to test the hypothesis, which predicts an inverse relationship between the preexisting symbolic indicator (amount of education) and tendency to influence for committed subjects only, it is first necessary to distinguish between committed and noncommitted subjects. Table 1 divides subjects into committed versus noncommitted, using three different cutting points: 7 days, 14 days, and 30 days. The correlations reported are between: (1) years of education and number of target groups; and (2) years of education and quantity of people. An inspection reveals that the exact cutting point seems to make little difference, in that the correlations for committed subjects are consistently more negative than are those for noncommitted subjects.<sup>2</sup> Note that independently of the criterion for commitment, the correlations for committed subjects are consistently negative and significant for both indices. The differences between correlations found for committed versus noncommitted subjects are significant for the number-of-target-groups index no matter which criterion is used:  $z = 2.36, p < .02$  (7 days),  $z = 2.46, p < .02$  (14 days),  $z = 2.70, p < .01$  (30 days). Slightly weaker results are obtained for the quantity-of-people index:  $z = 1.35, p < .20$  (7 days),  $z = 1.66, p < .10$  (14 days),  $z = 1.70, p < .10$  (30 days). It was decided arbitrarily to conduct our subsequent analyses using the 14-day criterion.

TABLE 1  
Correlations for Committed Versus Noncommitted Subjects, Using Three  
Criteria for Commitment (7, 14, and 30 Days)  
(Study 1)

	<i>Below</i> 7 days ( <i>N</i> = 104)	<i>Above</i> 7 days ( <i>N</i> = 49)	<i>Below</i> 14 days ( <i>N</i> = 111)	<i>Above</i> 14 days ( <i>N</i> = 42)	<i>Below</i> 30 days ( <i>N</i> = 118)	<i>Above</i> 30 days ( <i>N</i> = 35)
Number of target groups	-.34***	.07	-.34***	.11	-.34***	.19
Quantity of people	-.20*	.04	-.21*	.10	-.21*	.13

\*\*\* $p < .001$

\* $p < .05$

Note. "Below" = equal to or below.

<sup>2</sup>Although the kinds of splits illustrated in Table 1 support our choice of recency of performance as an operationalization of commitment, one wonders what happens to a baseball player or football player who has not performed his activity recently simply because it is off-season. The answer, of course, is that the seasonal activities contribute to error variance in using the recency criterion for commitment.



It might also be added that the length of subjects' essays played no role in these findings. When essay length is partialled out of the correlations, none of the  $r$ 's is changed by a factor of greater than  $\pm .02$ .

One also may examine the hypothesis in terms of means. Figure 1 illustrates the results of splitting education at the median (4 years) and then evaluating the impact of education separately for committed and noncommitted subjects. For the dependent variable of number-of-target groups, the interaction between commitment and education is significant,  $F(1,149) = 6.08, p < .02$ , and a comparable pattern emerges for the quantity-of-people variable,  $F(1,149) = 4.02, p < .05$ . For both dependent variables it is clear that the unique cell is constituted by committed subjects who are low in education. The comparisons between that cell and the committed-high education cell are significant for both dependent variables [number of target groups,  $t(109) = 3.71, p < .001$ ; quantity of people,  $t(109) = 2.35, p = .02$ ], as are the comparisons between that critical cell and the noncommitted-low education cell [number of target groups,  $t(72) = 2.64, p < .01$ ; quantity of people,  $t(72) = 2.14, p < .05$ ].

The commitment and amount-of-education variables seem to be independent of each other. No difference is found in education between committed ( $M = 4.2$  yrs.) and noncommitted ( $M = 4.3$  yrs.) groups ( $t = 0.28$ ). In none of the above analyses were there significant gender differences ( $p$ 's  $> .15$ ).

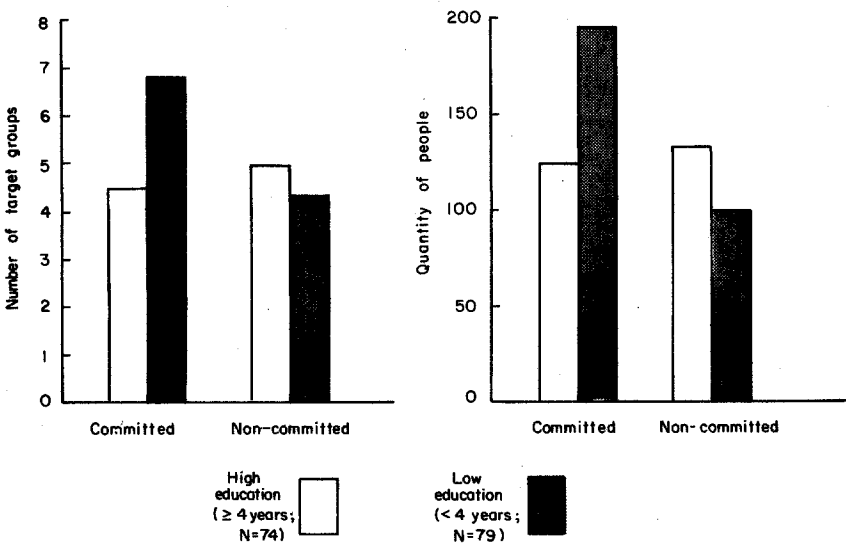


FIG. 1. The effect of education and commitment on tendency to influence: Number of target groups and quantity of people (Study 1). Although the quantity-of-people analysis was performed on the Likert-scale responses (see text), the scale has been transformed to absolute numbers in the figure.

### Analysis of the Separate Activities

The effect of education may also be analyzed within each category of activity, hence the following analysis based on individual activities was performed, using only committed subjects. Table 2 lists the 21 categories of activity together with the Pearson  $r$ 's computed for each category. One additional category (auto mechanics) included in the general analysis is not listed here because it showed no variation in education level. These  $r$ 's were combined after the manner of Mosteller and Bush (1954), also suggested by Rosenthal (1978). Each  $r$  is converted to a  $Z$ , and the resulting mean  $Z$  is tested against 0 using a conventional  $t$ -test. By this method the combined  $r$ 's are significantly different from 0 for both the number-of-target-groups measure,  $t(20) = 2.76$ ,  $p < .02$ , and the quantity measure,  $t(20) = 2.78$ ,  $p < .02$ .

TABLE 2  
Correlations Between Amount of Education and Tendency to Influence  
Listed by Individual Groups

<i>N</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Number of target groups</i>	<i>Quantity of people</i>
(4)	Business	-.89	-.91
(7)	Dance	-.27	-.16
(3)	Drama	-.72	-.69
(5)	English Writing	.61	.64
(3)	French	-1.00	-.99
(4)	Guitar	-.98	-.39
(6)	Mathematics	-.89	-.82
(5)	Natural Sciences	.21	-.21
(5)	Orchestra	-.32	-.24
(4)	Photography	-.85	-.39
(5)	Piano	-.38	-.52
(6)	Singing	-.22	-.33
(5)	Spanish	-.80	-.60
(4)	Baseball	.31	-.25
(8)	Basketball	.21	.35
(6)	Football	-.36	-.57
(7)	Golf	-.01	.39
(3)	Gymnastics	-.98	-.77
(5)	Soccer	.59	.46
(6)	Swimming	.27	-.15
(7)	Tennis	-.43	-.39

## DISCUSSION

### An Alternative Viewpoint on the Results and a Comment on Self-Symbolizing

An alternative way of looking at these effects is from the standpoint that the less educated individuals tend either to be naive about the limits of their abilities or are more excited about their activities owing to novelty. Thus it would not be the lack of support for one's self-definition per se, but an overzealousness coupled with lack of self-knowledge that might lead to attempted influence. Although the existence of this kind of process seems plausible, there are a few facets of the data that do not lend it full support. For instance, the fact of a consistent difference for the commitment variable implies that it is not just naiveté, curiosity, or enthusiasm but, rather, a certain motivation or sense of goal orientation that is necessary for the effects. Of course, it would have been possible that the committed subjects were also the least learned ones; however, the two commitment groups were practically identical ( $p > .50$ ) and relatively high (over 4 years) in level of education.

### A Subsidiary Study with Noninvolved Subjects

We have proposed that a self-definition is composed of mutually substitutable symbols, and the data suggest that if a person is short on one kind of symbolic evidence, striving for an alternative is to be expected. But it would also be useful to know whether people typically view such symbolic indicators, as we have called them, as hanging together in a unit. From the standpoint of our involved subjects, it would be ideal if onlookers (i.e., audiences) assume that there is a completeness underlying the influence effort. Otherwise stated, it is ideal for the involved, incomplete individual if observers would impute high competence as a function of the actively involved person's efforts to persuade.

Hilton, Gollwitzer, and Wicklund (Note 1) gave 50 observer-subjects influence data from Study 1. The observers knew that an essay had been written, that the original subject was a journalist (or whatever specific area), and, most importantly, that the original subject wanted to influence a certain number of target groups and a certain number of people. Given this information the observers had to try to estimate the number of years of education the involved person had accumulated.

The data are again correlations between education and the two influence variables, computed within individual activity areas, and this time the pattern is opposite to that in Study 1: The average correlation between the number of target groups to be influenced and estimated years of education is  $r = .27$ , and the corresponding figure for quantity of people and estimated years of education

is  $r = .30$ . In short, it would appear as if the inverse relationship between lacking in one symbol and compensating by another is to be found only among actively committed individuals. If the person is uninvolved, whether as an observer or by virtue of not being committed, the inverse quality disappears. The noninvolved observers go so far as to assume that these symbols fit together in a positively correlated pattern. This is fortunate for the self-symbolizing person, in that to be seen as trying to influence results in being acknowledged for possessing other parts of the whole that make up the self-definition.

## STUDY 2

The results of the initial correlational study are consistent with the reasoning regarding the inverse relationship among symbols of completeness and are also in accord with the notion of commitment that comes from Lewin (1926). The second study was run as a conceptual replication, but with a format that departed appreciably from that of the first. Rather than gathering subjects with diverse interest areas, subjects with one quasi-occupational interest were collected. These were dormitory advisors at a state university. Again, an aspect of their background was selected as the operationalization of relative completeness/incompleteness, and their subsequent desire to influence was then assessed. The procedure had the following features that distinguished it from the first study: (1) relative lack of a durable symbol was operationalized in terms of years of experience at a specific job—that of dormitory advisor; (2) commitment was defined operationally through subjects' intent to continue in the job; (3) rather than a diversity of interests, all subjects belonged to the activity area "dormitory advisor"; (4) the dependent measure of self-symbolizing was the number of people the subject deemed appropriate to influence. In this case, the objects of influence were constituted by a more concrete, tangible group (i.e., undergraduate advisees).

## METHOD

### Subjects

The subjects were 42 undergraduate dormitory advisors, all from the largest dormitory at the University of Texas at Austin. Their participation was voluntary and anonymous.

### Procedure

An interviewer contacted subjects individually and left them a questionnaire, which they filled out anonymously. The following critical items were included:

(1) to operationalize the presence/absence of an existing symbolic indicator, subjects were asked for their number of years of experience as advisor; (2) commitment was assessed by asking subjects whether they intended to continue with the job: "Would you consider being a Senior Resident Assistant?"; subjects could answer either in terms of "yes," "possibly," or "no"; (3) finally, the desire-to-influence item was highly similar to the quantity-of-people index of Study 1. Subjects were asked simply to write down the ideal number of people that should be under the direction of one dormitory advisor.

## RESULTS

Subjects were divided into committed versus noncommitted groups based on whether they intended to continue with an advising job. Those who checked "no" were placed into the noncommitted group, and those who checked either "possibly" or "yes" were designated as committed. The resulting correlations between years of experience as advisor and quantity of people are as follows. The relationship between the two variables for the 26 committed subjects was negative,  $r = -.36, p < .05$ , as predicted. There was no appreciable correlation for the 16 noncommitted subjects,  $r = -.01$ . The significant correlation for the committed group approximates in its magnitude the correlations of Study 1.

## DISCUSSION

The data replicate the pattern of results of the first correlational study. Subjects who were lacking with respect to what may be called "background security," in this case lack of experience, evidenced the strongest desire for a broad realm of influence. The effect was again found only among subjects whose commitment was ongoing, consistent with the Lewinian contention (Adler & Kounin, 1939; Ovsiankina, 1928) that incomplete activities generate a tension state and impel the person toward completion only if the personal investment has not faded.

## STUDY 3

In the following laboratory experiment we used the approach of the Lewinian school (Lissner, 1933; Mahler, 1933; Ovsiankina, 1928) to create an experimentally defined incompleteness. In that earlier research, subjects were interrupted partway through a task, and their subsequent resumption of that same activity was then assessed. These investigators presumed that an interpolated substitute task could lower the tension state associated with the original task, resulting in decrements in its resumption.

The present experiment is in much the same vein as that early work, although "original task" and "substitute task" have a broader meaning within our theoretical context. Whereas Lissner and Mahler used such activities as putting together cut-up postcards, or building a mosaic out of stones, the activity here is more definitely ego-involving. The "original" task in this experiment, as well as the "substitute" task, are both conceptualized as potential symbolic indicators of completeness. It is assumed, after the manner of Mahler, that the two kinds of task have a dynamic relation to one another. To the extent that one accomplishes the first task, the second is less necessary. Or stated in terms of the present language, to the extent that a person possesses one kind of symbolic evidence, other indicators of that same talent are less necessary.

Subjects in a variety of activity areas (as in Study 1) were first given the opportunity to create a strong symbol, in the sense of writing a description of their involvement in the area, with the expectation that the description would receive an audience. In the midst of their creating that symbol, half of them were interrupted, thus generating an incompleteness with regard to that symbol. It was expected that these interrupted subjects would be the most likely to take advantage of a subsequent opportunity to influence others. This opportunity came in the form of exerting influence on the training of school children, within the subject's own activity area.

The commitment variable was operationalized from a new standpoint. All subjects had a chance to influence others on a topic identical to their own interests, and they had an equal opportunity to influence people on a topic (painting) well-removed from their own interest areas. As they were not committed to painting, the process central here should operate primarily for the critical area. In addition, it was possible to operationalize commitment in the same way as in Study 1 (i.e., recency of last performance), although the number of noncommitted subjects ( $N = 5$ ) did not allow a separate analysis.

## METHOD

### Subjects

A total of 32 male undergraduates, enrolled in an introductory psychology course, participated as part of a course requirement. Subjects were randomly assigned to the two conditions. One subject from the Interruption condition was dismissed because his activity area happened to be the same as the "control" activity area (i.e., painting; to be described later). Five of the subjects, two in the Interruption condition and three in the Control condition, were noncommitted by the 2-week criterion, and their data were set aside.

## Procedure

Subjects were run individually by three experimenters. Experimenter 1 described the experiment as a study of representative college students' interests. The study was said to take only about half the time allotted for the subject's experimental participation, thus he was to assist a graduate student (Experimenter 3) "from the Educational Psychology Department" during the last part of the hour.

The first study was then described in more detail. It was said that a number of essays were to be collected, written by college students, and that each essay should address the history of the subject's interest in his activity area. The experimenter handed the subject a two-page booklet with a formal-looking cover sheet. On the second page the subject found a short statement of consent, and in this context the experimenter explained that a later publication of the ongoing research required some of these student essays for purposes of illustration. The length of the actual essay was to be 200 words, which would take up the second page of the booklet. Experimenter 1 asked the subject to proceed to write the essay. At this same time, in another location, Experimenter 3, who had been informed of the subject's activity area, prepared some "instructional materials" on the subject's chosen topic, to be used in the second phase of the experiment.

*Interruption Manipulation.* When the subject had written approximately one-third of a page, Experimenter 2 entered, and the ensuing conversation made it clear that he was engaged in the same study. In the Control condition he left after 2 minutes, and the subject continued his essay. Once the essay was complete, Experimenter 1 signaled Experimenter 3. But in the Interruption condition the conversation took a different twist: Experimenter 2 asked the first experimenter what area of interest the present subject had selected, then pretended to be surprised and replied that he had already collected three essays on that topic, which was enough from one area. At that point Experimenter 1 told the subject that his essay could not be used and that she would have to discard it. Just as in the Control condition, she then called Experimenter 3, who took the subject to her room.

*The Editing Measure.* Experimenter 3 explained that she and some fellow graduate students in educational psychology were trying to create vocational and recreational interests in young adolescents from a ghetto neighborhood. The idea was to influence these children to pursue some activity independently by teaching them the basic steps for undertaking it. All kinds of activities were ostensibly being considered (e.g., sports, music, art, and even academic areas). The experimenter said that a number of students had already been asked to write instructions that would assist the adolescents in getting a start in the various activities. The experimenter then explained that it had been helpful when other

students, serving as editors, looked the prepared instructional statements over and corrected them prior to their being printed. A finished, typed example was then shown to the subject. It dealt with developing an interest in guitar playing, and the name of the student responsible for the original draft, as well as the name of the student who made the corrections, were typed in the upper right corner of the page. The purpose of this example was to show the subject that by editing an essay on his own topic, he could exert personal influence over a considerable number of people in his activity area.

The experimenter then asked which activity area the subject wrote on in the first study, and said that she would try to find an essay that matched that interest. She looked through a pile of essays and located one similar to the subject's topic, and she also pulled out one on painting. The experimenter then placed the critical instructional statement on top of the painting statement and left the room, giving the subject as much time as needed to do whatever corrections he desired.

*Content of the Two Instructional Statements.* As noted in the foregoing, Experimenter 3 had prepared a relevant statement for the subject to correct while he was still in the first phase of the experiment. No matter what the topic, she always gave the statement the same structure, such that it was of highly marginal quality, leaving considerable room for the subject's improving it and communicating his own approach to the target audience. The irrelevant instructional materials on painting were written according to the same format. Once subjects had finished their editing they were debriefed and dismissed.

## RESULTS

### Equivalence of Groups

The procedure of allowing subjects to indicate their own specialty opens itself to accidental differences between conditions in terms of types of interest area, and one way to examine such differences is to group the interests into the broad categories of sports versus nonsports. The groups were quite comparable: 46% of the Interruption subjects indicated sports as the activity area, and 54% of the Control subjects fell into the sports category.

### The Impact of Interruption on Editing

The hypothesis was evaluated in terms of a simple operational definition of editing. This was the number of words in the target essay scratched out, and the number of words inserted by the subject in those same essays. The greater the extent of editing, the more the subject is putting himself into a position to influence a wide audience of adolescents.



An analysis of variance was performed on the summed words crossed out and inserted.<sup>3</sup> The hypothesis primarily addressed the interruption effect for the critical essay (i.e., the essay relevant to the subject's own activity area), and here the difference is highly significant,  $t(24) = 4.74, p < .0001$ . The corresponding difference for the painting essay is also significant,  $t(24) = 2.54, p < .02$ , but considerably weaker. Not surprisingly, the main effect for interruption, collapsing across type of essay is also significant,  $F(1,24) = 21.40, p < .001$ . And the interaction between type of essay and the interruption variable is of borderline significance,  $F(1,24) = 3.03, p < .10$ , reflecting the finding of the strongest difference for the critical essay (see Fig. 2).

## DISCUSSION

The major results are in keeping with the interruption and substitution studies of the Lewinean school, yet with a quality that captures the more general, ego-

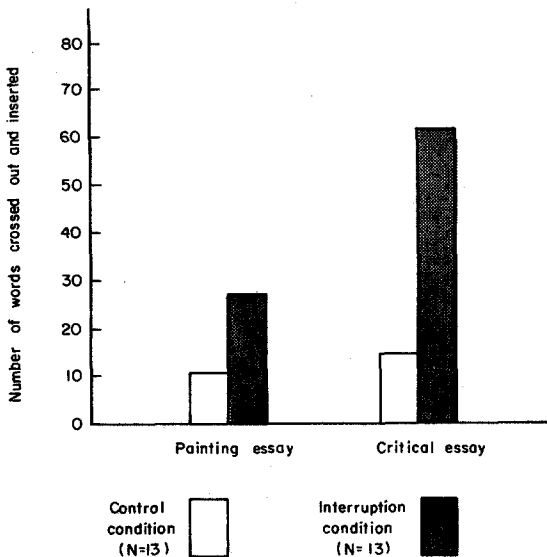


FIG. 2. Editing: Mean number of words crossed out plus words inserted (Study 3).

<sup>3</sup>The number of words crossed out and number of words inserted were highly correlated ( $r = .66, p < .001$ , for the critical essay;  $r = .46, p < .01$ , for the painting essay), thus the two-component index is a reasonable summary of the data.

involving phenomenon we wish to talk about. By the present conception, completeness in an important activity area can be symbolized in a variety of ways. If a self-symbolizing effort is interrupted, that tension should then carry over into whatever alternative symbolic route is offered. In this case that alternative, or substitute symbolic activity, was the desire to influence others. And the differences in patterns of data for the critical and painting essay suggest again that commitment is a vital issue. The interruption manipulation tends to have a stronger effect on editing of the critical essay, thus it would appear that the variable of commitment can be operationalized in alternative ways. In this case, of course, the conclusion must not be overdrawn, as the relevant interaction was slightly short of an acceptable significance level.

One might be tempted to describe the aforementioned chain of events in terms of "frustration-aggression" (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). The interruption manipulation was an ideal empirical definition of frustration, in the sense of breaking off goal-oriented activity. To complete this analysis, however, we would have to assume that rewriting someone else's composition constitutes an aggressive act. The editing, by this reasoning, would be construed as an act of displaced aggression against an innocent, nonprovoking bystander. At the same time, another possible interpretation of the editing measure is that it reflects the subject's desire to *help* the person who so clumsily wrote the essay, thereby simultaneously helping the adolescents from the ghetto—the target group of the essay—as well as assisting Experimenter 3. But assuming that our dependent variable is a valid index of aggression, the present results would be surprising in light of the accumulated literature on attempts to find a frustration-aggression relation. Citing numerous research programs and commentaries on the Dollard et al. hypothesis (Bandura, 1969; Buss, 1963, 1966; Kregarman & Worchel, 1961; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976), Zillman (1979) concludes that a blocked goal-oriented reaction, by itself, is unlikely to produce aggression. At a minimum, some element of attack would be necessary (Buss, 1961; Zillmann, 1979). In short, the present paradigm is not one that should have been appropriate for inducing aggression.

#### STUDY 4

This experiment deals with another sort of gaining social reality for a self-definition (i.e., a positive self-description). To the degree that a person lays claim to being proficient or gifted in an area, and is recognized for that self-description, that instance of broadened social reality should contribute to self-completion. But there is a complementary phenomenon—the reluctance to be recognized as incapable, untrained, or not prepared. The self-symbolizing in this case goes in a direction opposite to that we have thus far discussed. Once a social reality is imparted to a negative self-description, the person loses symbolic

completeness, and of course there should generally be no desire to describe the self negatively. But more important—given that people are put under pressure to manifest modesty, failure, or incompetence, those who have a strong background of existing symbols should be more ready to allow a negative self-description. Their background of symbols lends a security that allows some self-descriptive liberties.

The present study was designed around this thinking. The manipulation of completeness differed markedly from the earlier one and consisted simply of a salience variation. Some subjects' attention was brought to bear on the best teacher in their activity area, whereas other subjects were made to focus on the worst teacher. Following this manipulation, all subjects were requested to write a self-description, to be shown to others, indicating that they had performed very poorly on a test in their relevant activity area. Their level of negativity was then taken as the main dependent variable.

There is a further way to examine the incompleteness process within this context. Based on the study by Ross et al. (1974), we have reason to think that teachers with inadequate experience in their professions are more self-serving when asked why their students fail. It was found that novice teachers were more likely to blame failure on a student than were veteran, classroom teachers. We could then surmise that experience itself constitutes an indicator of self-completion, and that for an experienced person, the possibility of describing oneself positively in every instance is not a compelling need. Accordingly, in Study 4 we subdivided subjects according to whether they had previously taught the activity. This enabled us to test the hypothesis that the people who had taught would more readily describe themselves negatively. Finally, it was also possible to examine the effect of commitment again, defined after the manner of Study 1.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Thirty female and 29 male undergraduates participated as subjects. Seven of these were excluded from the final data analysis. They either failed to name a former teacher or refused to describe the only teacher they had encountered in their area of interest in the requested negative terms.

### Procedure

When subjects arrived at the designated classroom, in groups of approximately 15, they were met by a male experimenter. He handed out a questionnaire on which subjects indicated a special activity area. It also asked subjects how many days ago the activity was last engaged in, whether they ever taught in their area

of interest, and how many teachers they had studied under in this area. When all the subjects had finished this questionnaire, the experimenter asked them to work on the "Teacher Description Form."

*The Teacher-Salience Manipulation.* The instructions on the first page of this form explained that teachers differ in their effectiveness and likability. Half of the subjects were then asked to think of the person who qualified as the best teacher they had encountered in their activity area. The other half was asked to think of their worst teacher. Then they began writing an essay on that person, that was supposed to answer questions related to whether the teacher was interesting, enthusiastic, well qualified, and so forth. Subjects were told to fill about one page. The purpose of asking them to elaborate on the traits of their teachers was simply that of maximizing the positive (or negative) teacher's salience.

*Measurement of Self-Deprecation.* When subjects had finished they were asked to make a self-descriptive statement characterizing their performance on a test—one they did not actually take—measuring competence in their activity area. The experimenter handed out a "Performance Feedback Sheet for the Basic Abilities Test." Subjects recorded their area of interest, name, sex, age, and, finally, they filled in the blanks of the following statement: "(name) performed worse than % of the undergraduate sample that had taken this test." The experimenter explained that he would need these fabricated test results to create failure expectancies for forthcoming subjects who would actually be tested in their areas of competence. The experimenter made it understood that negative statements (i.e., high percentages), would serve the proclaimed purpose the best. The experimenter accepted responsibility for showing the test results to the forthcoming subjects.

*Manipulation Checks.* Prior to debriefing, subjects responded to the following questionnaire items (nine-point answer scales): "How secure do you feel in your area of interest when you think of the teacher you just described?" and "How good is the teacher you described in the teacher description form?"

## RESULTS

### Equivalence of Groups

There were no significant differences between Best-Teacher-Salient and Worst-Teacher-Salient conditions on any of the following measures: recency of engaging in the activity; teaching experience; and number of teachers encountered (all  $t$ 's  $< 1.0$ ). The proportions of subjects indicating "sports" and "nonsports" did not differ between conditions: 46% sports in Best-Teacher-Salient condition, and 45% sports in Worst-Teacher-Salient condition.

### Effectiveness of Manipulation

*T*-tests were performed on subjects' reported security in their activity areas and on the perceived quality of the described teacher. The teacher subjects wrote about was rated more positively in the Best-Teacher-Salient condition than in the Worst-Teacher-Salient condition,  $t(39) = 17.80$ ,  $p < .001$ . And writing about the best teacher elicited stronger feelings of security concerning the area of special interest than did writing about the worst teacher,  $t(39) = 2.02$ ,  $p = .05$ .

### Effects of the Salience Manipulation on Self-Deprecation

The prediction of reduced self-deprecation after writing about one's worst teacher holds only for committed subjects. The 2-week criterion was employed as in Study 1, and the results for the committed subjects may be seen in the left half of Fig. 3 (experimental variation). The mean difference in the self-deprecation measure was significant in the predicted direction,  $F(1,39) = 7.56$ ,  $p < .01$ . Interestingly, the data for noncommitted subjects show a reversed pattern, and the interaction between teacher salience and commitment is significant,  $F(1,48) = 9.02$ ,  $p < .005$ . However, as there were only 11 noncommitted subjects, the primary focus here, as in Study 3, will be on the committed group.<sup>4</sup>

### Prior Teaching Experience and Self-Deprecation

About half the subjects indicated that they had previously taught in their activity areas. A 2 (previously taught versus no prior teaching experience) by 2 (best versus worst teacher) analysis of variance was performed on the dependent measure for committed subjects only. A significant main effect was found for teaching experience,  $F(1,37) = 6.37$ ,  $p < .02$ , indicating that subjects who had not taught showed less self-deprecation than subjects with prior teaching experience (see right half of Fig. 3).

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<sup>4</sup>Subjects were run in four sessions, with both conditions and both levels of the have-taught variable represented in all sessions. There was no main effect for session on the self-deprecation measure ( $F < 1.0$ ), nor did session interact with the salience manipulation ( $F < 1.0$ ). Finally, it is also relevant to note, still with respect to the self-deprecation measure, that the average of the individual standard deviations for the four sessions ( $s = 26.82$ ) was not appreciably different from the standard deviation computed for all subjects analyzed together ( $s = 26.64$ ). This should not be surprising, in that subjects were separated from one another sufficiently that mutual influence would have been very difficult. In short, it would appear that the fact of having run subjects in sessions did not affect the assumptions one would want to make in performing statistical analyses on the sample as a whole.

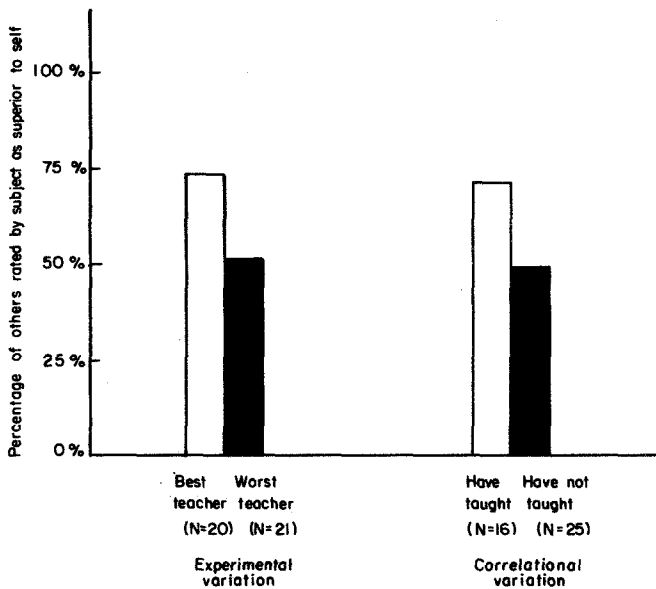


FIG. 3. Impact of experimental and correlational variations of completeness on self-deprecation (Study 4).

## DISCUSSION

The present study is especially poignant in illustrating a simple, direct derivation from the theory. A self-description of oneself as inept in a particular instance is rendered possible because of a preexisting, salient symbol of completeness. People who have been asked to dwell on a high caliber teacher are able to bring themselves to forego a further symbol of completeness (positive self-description). This effect, whether referred to as modesty, magnanimity, or simply self-deprecation, is interesting in that the self-description does not directly reflect the underlying condition of the individual. Instead, the preexisting evidence for one's competence is *inversely* correlated with the subsequent self-description. The effectiveness of this salience manipulation would suggest that it might generally be possible to lull someone into a feeling of completeness, or alternatively, to shake the person's security of self-definition, just by making salient select portions of the individual's background. This should not come as a surprise, given the accumulated evidence on the inordinate impact of one recent or salient self-relevant event (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Taylor & Fiske, 1978).

The impact of teaching experience is interesting because of the implication

that the influence variable, which was the dependent measure for Studies 1–3, can just as readily be used as a predictor variable. If one has taught, thus had a formal impact on others, it is possible to forego to some extent a positive self-description.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In order to place these results into proper perspective, it is important to distinguish this framework from other kinds of psychological states that might possibly characterize the present paradigms. The following two ideas are discussed here because components of them resemble facets of self-completion research. These two are: (1) the ubiquitous idea of self-presentation; and (2) cognitive dissonance theory.

### Divergent Antecedents of Public Self-Descriptions

As the concept of self-presentation has been treated in social psychology or sociology (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, *in press*; Schlenker, 1975), it is generally thought that the immediate social milieu creates a pressure on people to present themselves in a way that will gain approval, respect, or generosity from those present. For instance, Schlenker (1975) dwells on the notion that people try to appear positive, but also consistent in the eyes of others. More generally, Jones and Pittman (*in press*) delineate numerous forms of self-presentation, ranging from projecting an image of integrity, to efforts to gain power over the other through strategic self-presentation.

The concept of self-symbolizing rings a bell of “presenting to others.” However, a central distinction should be drawn between the present endeavors and what is otherwise referred to as “self-presentation.” In the present framework self-descriptions are viewed as originating in the dynamics of the individual. They are said to result from patterns of personal history, or from experimentally induced symbolic incompleteness. The governing variables within the previous self-presentation work have been viewed largely as constraints of the immediate situation. Thus it is predicted that the person will try to look positive in others’ eyes, or modest, or consistent, or powerful, depending on the strategy set off by the situation. The crucial distinction is that over and above such social constraints, one may characterize the self-symbolizing individual as governed by dynamic processes that originate prior to the self-presentational context. Indeed, it is even possible to demonstrate that relatively incomplete individuals will present themselves in ways contrary to self-presentational cues, given that the cues call for self-descriptions that are not conducive to generating completeness (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, Note 2).

## Post-Decisional Processes Versus Self-Symbolizing

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) is, just as the present notion of self-completion, a concept about compensation or overcoming of obstacles. In the case of dissonance theory the process focuses strictly on a conflict between a behavioral direction (recent decision) and a disparate (dissonant) set of cognitions. The context is one of having just decided, and the consequences of the decision should be foreseeable and freely chosen (Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). In contrast, the self-completion concept talks about constructing a self-definition via relevant self-symbols; the domain is not limited to that of a single, post-decisional period (cf. Studies 1 and 2). Further, a symbolic lack does not require volition in order to trigger self-symbolizing, as is illustrated in Studies 3 and 4. The manipulations of these studies have the no-choice quality that has been shown to suppress dissonance effects (Cooper & Brehm, 1971; Lepper, Zanna, & Abelson, 1970; Linder, Cooper, & Wicklund, 1968). Further, Study 4 employs self-descriptions as a dependent variable; this measure has never been a part of dissonance-theory derivations.

The central difference, then, is one of scope: Self-completion deals with a long-range endeavor, a process that involves the extended accumulation of symbols and that gains a motivational momentum when the individual falls short on symbolic dimensions. Dissonance theory, quite in contrast, focuses on the specific, one-time decision and holds its analysis to the short run.

## Conclusion

The present research points to a special conception of the human being. The starting point is a commitment to a self-definition, and once people fall short on a symbolic dimension they move toward substituting an alternative symbol of completeness for the lacking one. According to this conception the human is impatient in regard to defining the self, unwilling to tolerate insufficiencies on important dimensions of the self-definition. Thus given an acute lack of symbolic support, individuals reach out, on dimensions of interpersonal influence or self-description, oriented toward gaining a broader acknowledgement for their status as journalists, guitarists, Spanish speakers, and so forth.

Accompanying this phenomenon is an apparent willingness on the part of noninvolved bystanders to assume that such self-symbolizing efforts stem from a basic competence. The observer study (Note 1) that we reported in conjunction with Study 1 implies that involved self-symbolizers are indeed gaining broader recognition by turning their efforts to influencing others; the greater the attempted influence, the more relevant training is imputed to the person by observers.

The directions to be taken in new research have to do with questions of salience—touched upon here in Study 4—and with the broad issue of the relative importance and longevity of various classes of symbols. The present research



is viewed as a starting point, as illustrating a conception that may be a fundamental human process.

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