

Research Article

Group-Identity Completion and the Symbolic Value of Property

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ABSTRACT—*Building on symbolic self-completion theory, we conceptualize group identity as a goal toward which group members strive, using material symbols of that identity. We report four studies showing that the value placed on such material symbols (e.g., a building) depends on commitment to group identity, the extent to which a symbol can be used to represent in-group identity, and situational variability in goal strength induced through group-identity affirmation or threat. Our results suggest that property derives value from its capacity to serve as an effective means in the pursuit of group-identity goals. Implications for inter-group conflict are discussed.*

Property lies at the heart of many conflicts. At the interpersonal level, divorcing couples fight over who will keep what, and siblings often argue over a family inheritance. At the international level, Jerusalem, Kashmir, Kosovo, and countless other regions loom at the center of intractable conflicts in which each side views the area as core to its identity, and values that area enough to repeatedly choose violence and the chance of securing it over a peaceful settlement. Clearly, the high perceived value of these properties can present a barrier to conflict resolution. In the present research, we set out to examine the social sources of such valuations by considering property as a symbolic means by which group-identity goals are pursued.

Researchers have suggested that individuals view personal belongings as extensions of the self (Belk, 1988; McClelland, 1951) and value them accordingly (e.g., Beggan, 1992; Belk, 1988; Carnevale, 1995). Symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981) further posits that individuals use material possessions and other indicators as socially recognized symbols of their identity to communicate this identity to others. According to this theory, personal identities or self-definitions

can be viewed as goals that individuals willfully pursue through *self-symbolizing*—that is, acquiring or emphasizing characteristics of the identity in question. Research suggests that when an identity is important but under threat, individuals engage in compensatory self-symbolizing by seeking socially recognized indicators of the desired identity (Braun & Wicklund, 1989; Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Identity symbols such as material possessions are therefore valued as potential means by which to fulfill activated personal-identity goals.

We propose that group identity may likewise be considered a goal. Just as individuals strive to attain all the qualities of a chosen personal identity (Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998), group members may want their group to possess all the defining features of the group identity. Furthermore, we suggest that group members seek to communicate their group identity to others through socially recognized symbols, just as individuals self-symbolize to communicate personal identities. Group members should therefore value property that serves as a symbolic means by which a group-identity goal can be pursued. Thus, whereas a symbolic self-completion account suggests that individuals value personal attributes or objects insofar as they help to symbolize a personal identity, a group-completion account broadens this focus to suggest that group members should value attributes or objects possessed by the group as a whole insofar as these can serve to communicate the group's identity to others.¹ In the research reported in this article, we tested this notion by examining whether the value placed on property symbols is influenced by (a) the level of commitment to a group-identity goal, (b) the extent to which the property is capable of symbolizing group identity (how “good” it is as a symbol), and (c) situational variation in the strength of a group-identity goal (e.g.,

¹A related but distinct idea is that individuals strive to acquire or emphasize characteristics of personal identity that the group values. Given that one's in-group is an especially important audience (e.g., Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), it may influence both which identity goals one pursues and what symbols one considers particularly good indicators of the desired identity. Although these issues are beyond the scope of the present research, which focuses on group property and group identity, they deserve further study in the future.

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threats to group identity that trigger increased striving toward identity completion).

STUDY 1

If group members seek to symbolize their group identity in striving toward their identity goal, an individual's level of commitment to the goal should influence the extent to which the individual values property as a group-identity symbol. As a preliminary test of our theoretical perspective, we conducted a correlational study to examine whether commitment to an in-group identity (New York University, NYU) and the value placed on a potential symbol of that identity (a building related to NYU's history) are positively related.

Method

Twenty-nine NYU undergraduates (24 females) participated for course credit. At the beginning of the semester, subjects responded to seven items measuring commitment to an NYU identity goal (see Table 1) using a 6-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). Responses to these items were averaged to form an index of commitment to in-group identity ($\alpha = .84$).

Several weeks later, subjects received a seemingly unrelated questionnaire that pictured a townhouse in lower Manhattan. To give the building symbolic potential, the survey noted that "one of the founding fathers of New York University lived in this townhouse at the time NYU was founded." Subjects read that their opinions would help inform future NYU decisions regarding the building, and were asked to indicate the value of the townhouse on a scale from \$1 million to \$15 million.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, commitment to NYU identity correlated positively with estimated value of the townhouse, $r(27) = .42, p < .05$. This result suggests that as commitment to a group-identity goal increases, the value placed on symbols of that group identity increases as well. Although correlational, this result provides

TABLE 1

Items Used to Assess Commitment to a New York University (NYU) Identity

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1. I feel proud to be a student at NYU.
 2. When someone praises NYU, it feels like a personal compliment to me.
 3. I have a sense I personally belong at NYU.
 4. Being a student at NYU says a lot about who I am as a person.
 5. Being a student at NYU has very little to do with how I feel about myself. (reverse-coded)
 6. I speak highly of NYU.
 7. I cannot think of another university that I would rather attend.
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initial support for the notion that property may serve the willful pursuit of group identity, and derive value accordingly.

STUDY 2

If property indeed serves as a means to pursue group-identity goals, the perceived value of property should depend not only on level of commitment to these goals, but also on the extent to which the property is able to communicate or symbolize the group identity. In other words, a good means of group-identity completion should be valued more highly than a poor means. Study 2 was designed to experimentally test this prediction in a realistic conflict setting involving important group identities. We examined the value Israeli students placed on a building when it was linked with in-group (Israeli) or out-group (Palestinian) history. We hypothesized that the potential identity symbol would be devalued when it was associated with out-group history (making it a poor symbol of in-group identity), compared with when it was associated with in-group history (making it a good symbol of in-group identity); we expected a control condition in which the building's history was not mentioned to show an intermediate level of value.

We also included a condition in which property was linked to both in-group and out-group histories, as it often is in intergroup conflicts. A straightforward attitudinal account (e.g., Heider, 1946) suggests that anything related to a disliked out-group should also be disliked, and hence devalued. In contrast, we suspected that linking an in-group symbol to out-group history would threaten in-group identity and increase the need to symbolize. Threats to individual identity have been shown to increase the perceived value of personal possessions as identity symbols (e.g., Beggan, 1992, Study 3; see also De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005; Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998). Thus, linking property to both in-group and out-group history should inflate its value as a group-identity symbol.

Method

Ninety-eight Israeli students from the Open University (83 females) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (link to Israeli history: present vs. absent) \times 2 (link to Palestinian history: present vs. absent) factorial design.

Each subject received an "Opinion Survey" describing a historic building located in western Jerusalem. For half the subjects, the building was linked to Palestinian history by noting that the Palestinians' first national conference took place there in 1919; this manipulation was crossed with a manipulation linking the building to Israeli history by noting that the 23rd Zionist congress took place there in 1951.

Subjects were informed that Israeli citizens' opinions were being solicited to better inform authorities about people's interest in the building. They were asked to rate how valuable the

TABLE 2
Results From Study 2: Mean Value of the Building as a Function of Its Historical Linkage to the In-Group and Out-Group

Historical linkage			
None (<i>n</i> = 24)	Palestinian (<i>n</i> = 28)	Israeli (<i>n</i> = 25)	Both (<i>n</i> = 21)
6.67 (1.61)	4.46 (2.47)	6.48 (2.02)	7.67 (1.43)

Note. Standard deviations are given in parentheses. For simplicity, the 2×2 factorial design is presented here as a single factor.

building was, in their opinion, using a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*).²

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics appear in Table 2. A 2 (link to Israeli history) \times 2 (link to Palestinian history) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the property's estimated value³ as the dependent measure revealed a main effect of linkage to Israeli history, $F(1, 94) = 14.27, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$. Overall, subjects valued the building more when it was associated with Israeli history ($M = 7.07$) than when it was not ($M = 5.56$). This main effect was qualified by a two-way interaction between linkage to Israeli history and linkage to Palestinian history, $F(1, 94) = 18.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$. Pair-wise comparisons confirmed that value decreased when the building was linked to Palestinian history only, compared with when it was linked to Israeli history only and when no historical linkage was mentioned, $t(51) = 3.23, p < .01$, and $t(50) = 3.74, p < .01$, respectively. As expected, linking the building to out-group history made it a poor identity symbol, and it was devalued accordingly. The building's estimated value did not differ between the Israeli-history-only and no-history conditions, $t < 1$, which suggests that simply locating the building in Jerusalem may have been sufficient to make it a potential symbol of in-group identity, even in the absence of any explicit historical ties.

Interestingly, the building had the highest value when it was linked to both Israeli and Palestinian history, $t_s > 2.19, p_s < .05$, for all comparisons. This result is consistent with the notion that such dual linkages threaten in-group identity and trigger increased striving toward the group-identity goal. However, from a symbolic group-completion perspective, it is also plausible that because the link to Israeli history happened to be dated later than the link to Palestinian history, the dual-link condition represented a case in which Israeli identity had "won out" over out-group identity. If so, the building may have been perceived

²We used a Likert-type scale to measure value in this study because our lack of familiarity with the housing market in western Jerusalem made it difficult to appropriately construct and center a monetary scale.

³Although our dependent measure was highly skewed, squaring the variable to normalize it yielded similar results; for simplicity, we report analyses using the original variable.

as a particularly potent symbol of in-group identity and valued accordingly.⁴ Our next study addressed the effect of threat on value more directly.

STUDY 3

In Study 3, we sought to build on the previous studies in two ways. First, the results of Study 2 demonstrated that subjects devalued a symbol linked to out-group identity. However, because the building was located in an Israeli neighborhood in all conditions, we could not determine whether property linked to in-group history is valued more highly than property with no relation to in-group identity. Our perspective suggests that group members pursuing a group-identity goal should indeed value property more when it symbolizes group identity than when it does not. Thus, in Study 3, we sought to provide a better test of this hypothesis by manipulating whether the property in question could be used to symbolize in-group identity.

Second, we sought to experimentally manipulate the strength of a group-identity goal by directly threatening group identity. Given that the pursuit of personal-identity goals is strengthened by threats to personal-identity completion (see, e.g., Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981), we reasoned that threats to group identity should similarly affect the pursuit of group-identity goals. In contrast, given that affirming identity completeness leads to decreased self-symbolizing at the individual level (see Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998, for a review), we reasoned that group affirmation should subdue or even eliminate striving toward the group-identity goal. Furthermore, insofar as group members use socially recognized symbols of their group identity in pursuit of their group-identity goals, such objects should derive value from their symbolic potential only to the extent that a group-identity goal is being pursued. Thus, we hypothesized that for NYU students, value would be higher for an identity symbol (a building related to NYU history) than for a non-identity symbol (a building unrelated to NYU), and that this difference would be greater under conditions of group threat than under conditions of group affirmation.

Method

Seventy NYU undergraduates (43 females) participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Four subjects failed to follow directions or suspected that the two parts of the study were linked; analyses were conducted on the data from the remaining 66 subjects (40 females). Subjects were randomly assigned to one cell in a 2 (threat: affirmation vs. threat) \times 2 (symbolic potential: none vs. NYU history) factorial design.

Subjects completed two ostensibly unrelated surveys in a packet of questionnaires. The first survey introduced a new on-line newsletter for New York youth and explained that the creators were asking students around the city to read several

⁴We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this alternative.

columns and provide feedback on whether each one was interesting. One of the columns contained the identity-threat manipulation. Subjects in the group-affirmation condition saw a column describing NYU's reputation as excellent and steadily climbing, whereas subjects in the group-threat condition saw a column describing NYU's reputation as faltering.

The next survey pictured a townhouse located in a neighborhood unassociated with the university. To manipulate symbolic potential, we varied the description of the building so that half the students saw information linking the townhouse to NYU history, whereas half saw no further information. Subjects were then asked to indicate how valuable they considered the townhouse to be, on a scale from \$1 million to \$15 million.

Results and Discussion

A 2 (threat) \times 2 (symbolic potential) ANOVA revealed a marginal main effect for symbolic potential, $F(1, 62) = 2.84, p < .10, \eta^2 = .04$, indicating that overall, subjects valued the property somewhat more when it was related to NYU history and thus possessed symbolic potential ($M = 9.23$) than when it was not ($M = 7.99$). This effect was qualified by the expected two-way interaction between threat and symbolic potential, $F(1, 62) = 4.15, p < .05, \eta^2 = .06$. Table 3 reveals that after group threat, subjects valued the building more highly if it was related to in-group history than if it was not, $F(1, 62) = 6.55, p < .05, \eta^2 = .10$; however, after group affirmation, value placed on the building did not differ depending on whether or not it was linked to NYU's history, $F < 1$. Thus, as expected, when group-identity goals had been heightened because of threat, the value placed on property was greater when that property could symbolize in-group identity than when it could not. After affirmation, group-identity goals were subdued, and no additional value was placed on a property for its symbolic potential.

STUDY 4

The results of Study 3 support the notion that the value placed on property because of its symbolic potential is influenced by the strength of a group-identity goal. However, it is unclear whether such shifts in value would result from any sort of threat or

TABLE 3

Results From Study 3: Mean Value of the Townhouse as a Function of Its Symbolic Potential and Group-Identity Threat

Group-identity affirmation		Group-identity threat	
Control condition ($n = 19$)	Building linked to NYU history ($n = 16$)	Control condition ($n = 16$)	Building linked to NYU history ($n = 15$)
8.29 (2.04)	8.03 (4.72)	7.69 (2.20)	10.43 (2.25)

Note. Standard deviations are given in parentheses. NYU = New York University.

affirmation, or whether the effects obtained resulted from the pursuit of a group-identity goal in particular. For example, it is plausible that threats generally increase preferences for self- or group-relevant objects, or that the results of Study 3 reflect a general motivation for global self-esteem that is reduced under conditions of affirmation. Although the need to feel good about group identity and the need to feel good about individual identity are clearly related (see, e.g., Sherman & Kim, 2005), our perspective suggests that group-identity threat should uniquely predict heightened valuations of an in-group symbol. If the value placed on a property derives in part from its potential to serve as a means in pursuit of group-identity goals, then factors influencing the strength of a group-identity goal—but not a self-enhancement goal—should affect the value placed on that property. Thus, in Study 4, we sought to show that whereas threatening or affirming NYU identity influences the value NYU students place on an NYU identity symbol, threatening or affirming the self does not. We also included a no-threat, no-affirmation control condition for comparison.

Method

Seventy-seven NYU undergraduates (56 females) completed the study materials, which were embedded within a series of unrelated questionnaires, for course credit. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of five conditions: group-threat, group-affirmation, self-threat, self-affirmation, and control.

Subjects in the group-threat and group-affirmation conditions read the same newsletter columns used in Study 3; subjects in the control condition saw only an identity-irrelevant column. The self-threat and self-affirmation manipulations were adapted from Cohen et al. (in press). Subjects first ranked a list of 12 values or qualities (e.g., artistic skills, sense of humor) in order of personal importance and then wrote a description of a time when they lived up to (self-affirmation) or failed to live up to (self-threat) their most important value. Such manipulations have been shown to influence ego-defensive processes (e.g., Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000; Cohen et al., in press; see also Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000).

Subjects in all five conditions then completed the townhouse survey from Study 2 in which the building was linked to NYU history, and indicated how valuable they considered the townhouse to be on a scale from \$1 million to \$15 million.

Results and Discussion

A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of condition on the building's estimated value, $F(4, 72) = 3.10, p < .05, \eta^2 = .14$ (see Table 4). Planned comparisons confirmed that whereas threatening (vs. affirming) group identity heightened the value placed on the group-identity symbol, $t(30) = 4.47, p < .001$, threatening (vs. affirming) the self did not, $t < .4$. Moreover, comparisons with the control condition indicated that the value placed on the townhouse was heightened in the group-threat

TABLE 4
Results From Study 4: Mean Value of the Townhouse as a Function of Threat/Affirmation Condition

Condition				
Control (<i>n</i> = 15)	Group threat (<i>n</i> = 16)	Group affirmation (<i>n</i> = 16)	Self- threat (<i>n</i> = 16)	Self- affirmation (<i>n</i> = 14)
10.70 (2.98)	12.69 (2.74)	9.13 (1.63)	10.19 (3.36)	9.71 (4.26)

Note. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

condition, $t(29) = 1.94$, $p = .06$, and lowered in the group-affirmation condition, $t(29) = 1.84$, $p = .08$. In contrast, the value of the building did not differ between either the self-affirmation or the self-threat condition and the control condition, $t_s < .75$. These results provide additional support for a symbolic group-completion account of how group-identity symbols are valued, suggesting that it is pursuit of a group-identity goal, and not a more general response to threat or the need for global self-esteem, that drives the value placed on specific group-relevant symbols.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of these studies demonstrate that the value placed on potential group-identity symbols varies depending on personal and situational factors influencing the strength of a group-identity goal. In Study 1, we found that level of commitment to an NYU identity goal predicts the value placed on a building related to NYU history. In Studies 3 and 4, experimentally manipulating the strength of a group-identity goal by threatening or affirming NYU identity significantly influenced the perceived value of a building related to NYU history. Additionally, Study 4 provided evidence that this effect was driven by a specific goal of group-identity completion: Experimentally manipulating global self-esteem needs by threatening or affirming the self did not influence the perceived value of the NYU identity symbol. Furthermore, property is valued according to its symbolic potential: less when symbolic potential is low, as when the property is related to out-group history (Study 2), and more when symbolic potential is high, as when the property is related to in-group history (Studies 2 and 3). Together, these findings provide converging support for the proposition that group identity, like personal identity, can be conceptualized as a goal toward which group members willfully strive, and that such goal striving is reflected in the value placed on potential symbols of group identity.

These results expand the literature on symbolic self-completion (see Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998, for a review), suggesting that individuals are motivated to pursue not only personal-identity goals, but also group-identity goals, and that both kinds of goals are pursued through the means of identity symbolization. Furthermore, the results suggest that indicators (such as property) may derive value from such goal pursuit to the extent that they provide a good means by which to pursue

identity goals, and to the extent that those goals are activated and important for a given person at a given moment. This evidence for group-identity completion adds to current understanding of group identity as a psychological construct. Although group identity can certainly provide an important source of self-esteem (see, e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986), it can also act as a goal in and of itself.

Our perspective has implications for intergroup conflict as well. Whereas researchers and practitioners often view competition over scarce resources as central to conflict (e.g., Follett, 1940; Sherif & Sherif, 1953), our results complement and extend other identity-based accounts (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986) by suggesting that a resource may sometimes be an indivisible and irreplaceable symbol of group identity. Negotiations over property must therefore take into account not only the instrumental value of a given resource, but also its symbolic value. Conceptualizing group identity in terms of goal pursuit further suggests that threats to group identity, which often proliferate in settings of intergroup conflict, can further inflate the value placed on group-identity symbols. Thus, in some situations, successful conflict resolution may depend on managing conflicting identity goals (see, e.g., Kelman, 1999), reducing threat to existing identities, and creating new, inclusive identity symbols.

One particularly interesting implication of the present findings is that the perceived value of identity symbols may fluctuate depending on situational factors, such as temporary threats to group identity. Third parties intervening in a conflict over property may therefore wish to look for—or perhaps create—“good” identity days, when a group identity is under relatively low threat. Insofar as an intervention can reduce threats to group identity and address the identity goals of a given group, the perceived value of contested property should deflate, thereby reducing a critical barrier to successful conflict resolution.

Our results also suggest new avenues of research. First, although value is itself an important variable in conflict resolution, future research should explicitly examine the practical implications of group-identity completion for important real-world outcomes, such as willingness to compromise in a negotiation situation. Second, tangible indicators of group identity, such as buildings, monuments, flags, and even areas of land, are well suited as symbols, providing group members the opportunity to define their identity, express it to others, and maintain it across time (see also Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003). Shared-reality theory (e.g., Hardin & Higgins, 1996) suggests that the expression of identity to others may be a particularly important function of such symbols. Future research should more closely examine the extent to which symbols must be socially recognized (e.g., Gollwitzer, 1986)—and by whom they must be recognized—in order to fulfill needs to symbolize group identity.

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