LYING FOR WHO WE ARE: AN IDENTITY-BASED MODEL OF WORKPLACE DISHONESTY

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ABSTRACT

While the study of lying within organizations has typically focused on lies told for rational-instrumental purposes (such as lying for economic gain within negotiations), we argue that lying is a relatively common social-functional behavior embedded within ongoing workplace relationships. Drawing from social identity theory, we develop a theory of lying as a socially motivated behavioral response to identity threats at the personal, relational, or collective levels of identity within organizational life. Specifically, we propose that perceived identity threats undermine the unique fundamental identity motives at each level of self, and that as threat sensitivity and threat intractability increase, individuals become more likely to use lying as a threat management response in their interactions with other organizational members. Further, we propose that identity-based characteristics of organizational members with whom threatened individuals interact (i.e. the audience) determine the likelihood that lying will occur, by assuaging or amplifying threats during identity enactment. Thus, by applying an identity lens to examine normatively unethical behavior, we develop a comprehensive model of everyday lying as socially-motivated and identity-based behavior with implications for ongoing workplace relationships.

Key Words: identity, identity threats, ethics, workplace relationships
And none speaks false, when there is none to hear.

--James Beattie, in “The Minstrel”

Lying has long been identified as a critical unethical behavior within organizations, with honesty presented as a minimum moral standard for both society and modern organizational life (Trevino, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014). Indeed, workplace dishonesty can often be devastating, with high profile cases bringing both public embarrassment and severe disruption to organizations. Lying – even about the seemingly mundane – has been implicated as a critical antecedent of organizational corruption (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), and contrary to values of transparency and accuracy. It has been argued that organizational members rely on accurate and timely information to not only make effective decisions but to effectively coordinate and implement those decisions, such that when information is incorrect, inaccurate, or timed inappropriately due to lying, then the organization and its members will suffer (cf. Williamson, 1985). To wit, the extant organizational literature on lying has generally focused on instrumental, non-reciprocal, and/or short-term situations such as lying for one’s own self-gain (Mulder & Aquino, 2013); lying within one-shot negotiations (Lewicki, 1983); or lying to resolve a structural role conflict (i.e. opposing institutionalized behavioral expectations; Grover, 1993a; cf. Burt, 1982).

However, while honesty is generally held as a valued moral norm in society and, thus, lying is typically categorized as unethical behavior (Trevino et al., 2014), we suggest that lies told within organizational settings are often socially motivated – rather than motivated largely for instrumental gains. While the effects of lying within organizations may often be deleterious, the motives for why people lie may often be rooted in less nefarious, more benign, and, at times, even positive intentions. Thus, we believe that positioning lying under the rubric of unethical
behavior is potentially short-sighted and has led organizational scholars to overlook alternative motives for lying behavior. Accordingly, we argue here that lying in organizational settings often serves a social-functional purpose: it is a tool used to uphold identity-based motives when valued identities come under threat. The need for self-enhancement—to view one’s self positively and to be held in esteem by others—is fundamental to social life (Baumeister, Dori & Hastings, 1998), and individuals make sense of their world and their workplaces by constructing a cogent self-narrative about who they are in the present, how they have gotten there, and who they aspire to become (McAdams, 1989; Obodaru, 2012). But just as lying can be used in the workplace to convince others to see us as we see ourselves (e.g., claiming to have read a book relevant to one’s area of expertise that they haven’t actually read), it may also be leveraged to maintain relational and collective identity narratives—employees may lie to buffer valued colleagues from distressing bad news, or to maintain a collective identity in the face of threats. Thus, while lying is often represented as a tactic for self-gain, lying may also be employed as a tool for identity maintenance, intended to protect valued personal, relational and collective identities within the workplace.

We develop a model of everyday lying between organizational members, embedded within on-going work relationships wherein lying behavior represents attempts to manage an identity threat—whether it be at the personal, relational, and/or collective level of self. As Flum notes, “to work is to relate” (2001: 262), and much of organizational life is situated within ongoing dyadic relationships (Sluss, van Dick, & Thompson, 2011; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). We argue that it is within this wide range of daily dyadic social interactions that lying may often be used as a tool for satisfying social identity motives (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; cf. Mead, 1934), thereby maintaining consistency and/or positive regard from the self and from others,
protecting relational partners from harm, and even constructing and maintaining shared meaning of a social collective in the face of uncertainty. While prior work has generated a comprehensive description of strategies individuals may employ to maintain valued relationships and many of these are organizationally relevant (e.g., sharing tasks, use of assurances; Stafford & Canary, 1991), the tactic of dishonesty is surprisingly and conspicuously absent. As such, we seek to broaden the scholarly conversation about lying in the workplace to include less instrumental and likely more prevalent, socially-motivated forms, suggesting that certain kinds of lies may originate not with goals of corruption, but rather with the intention to preserve one’s valued identities and thus uphold normal social functioning within organizational life.

Indeed, prior work within social psychology suggests that lying actually represents frequent and normal (if not normative) psychosocial behavior, with adult samples in diary studies lying at least once per day on average (DePaulo, Kashy, Kikendol, Wyer, and Epstein, 1996). Many of these lies were told with the benefit of others in mind, demonstrating that lying is often motivated by positive social intentions (DePaulo et al., 1996). But critically, this research stream on “everyday lies” does not explore the social antecedents of lying, limiting insight into the social motivations for lying. This work has also largely ignored the relational context within which lies are told, including characteristics of the audience themselves. Finally, research on “everyday lies” has yet to focus on lying within organizational settings, which place specific identity-relevant constraints and expectations on both relationships and identities (e.g., Leavitt, Reynolds, Barnes, Schilpzand, & Hannah, 2012). Organizations set a stage in which the personal, relational, and collective intertwine and interact in a way that is not found within non-organizational social relationships (cf. Johns, 2006), and strong common expectations about appropriateness of behavior become institutionalized within organizational settings (Davis-Blake
& Pfeffer, 1989). Thus, we argue that the pressure to lie may be even greater within organizations than in other social contexts.

Accordingly, our model of everyday lying between organizational members contributes to the organizational literature in three major ways. First, we contribute to the behavioral ethics literature (e.g., Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006) by making critical distinctions between lying, (we argue) an often socially-motivated behavior, and other commonly studied unethical workplace behaviors – cheating and stealing. Indeed, these malfeasant behaviors have historically been assumed to share a common nomological network (Carson, 2009). We suggest that lying can be motivated by unethical intentions to dupe another, but it can also be motivated by social goals for positive identity enactment. While prior research has suggested that employees may adopt facades (i.e., false representations to appear as if the employee embraces an organization’s values) when reward systems encourage conformity (Hewlin, 2003), we argue that dishonesty may often stem from threats that block the enactment of the identities an individual most strongly values. Additionally, while existing research on the moral aspects of the self (including moral identity; Aquino & Reed, 2002) have identified self-relevant phenomena that may lead to differences in moral judgments and behavior (see Jennings, Mitchell & Hannah, 2014 for review), research to date has largely ignored the possibility that identity-related motives themselves can directly inspire lying behavior. Our model situates threatened identity as a central driver of workplace lying.

Second, and alluded to above, we expand the identity threat literature to include a previously non-theorized response to identity threats – lying. Identity threats are defined as “experience[s] appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity” (Petriglieri, 2011: 641). Previous identity threat models allow for extensive “identity
work” and identity exit, through which identities are reconstructed, re-construed, and/or rejected (Petriglieri, 2011; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Instead, our model suggests that many organizationally relevant identities are less mutable and less ‘workable’ than previously assumed (cf. Fiol, Pratt, & O’Conner, 2009). In such cases, identity work or exit is often impossible while maintaining membership within the organization, making lying a potential but heretofore excluded mechanism for threat resolution when other forms of identity work (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006) or passively choosing not to disclose an identity (Ragins, 2008) are not viable options.

Third, our model contributes to the dyadic workplace relationships literature (Sias, 2008; Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008) and approaches lying with dyadic relationships in mind. Echoing what others have suggested before, individuals do not always perceive benefit from being told the “unvarnished truth” (Nyberg, 1993). We propose that lying actually offers a commonly used and heretofore under-explored strategy for navigating, building and maintaining workplace relationships when encounters with interaction partners exacerbate identity threats. For example, while individuals may frequently choose to conceal invisible stigmatized identities (e.g., learning disabilities, HIV-positive status) to maintain workplace relationships (Ragins, 2008), we suggest that lying may be one especially common (and heretofore under-theorized) tactic for “identity covering,” and our dyadic model informs whom one is specifically likely to lie to (i.e., specific audiences with whom interactions amplify identity threats). Because relational and collective identities within the workplace are (by definition) shared with others, our model posits that protecting valued identities may sometimes involve lying to protect others from shared threats.

Our paper unfolds as such: first, we suggest that active levels of identity (i.e., personal, relational, collective) make individuals vulnerable to specific types of identity threats, and that
factors related to threat sensitivity increase the likelihood that identity-relevant events will be viewed as especially threatening. In turn, these particular identity threats jeopardize the individual’s ability to fulfill the specific identity motives associated with the corresponding level of identity (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). We then describe how individuals attempt strategies to manage these identity threats through a progressive combination of identity work (via searching for identity-supporting information or re-construing the identity) and identity exit (shedding the threatened identity in exchange for another). However, if these strategies fail or are bypassed due to situational constraints identity threats may be recognized as intractable, further undermining identity motives. We then suggest that through the process of identity enactment, interactions with others either allow opportunities to self-affirm via other shared identities, or create pressures to lie when the characteristics of the interaction partner (audience) make the identity threat loom large. Thus, our model presents lying as a strategy for identity enactment in the workplace, which identity threats would otherwise diminish.

LYING WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS: REVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Lying, as commonly defined, is “to make an untrue statement with intent to deceive” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2013). We emphasize that this conceptualization of lying focuses on making motivated comissional statements (i.e. prevarications containing knowingly false information), which distinguishes lying from other well-studied omissional phenomena (e.g., organizational silence or withholding; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Scholarly work focused on lying within organizations has encompassed two separate yet somewhat narrow streams: (1) lying for self-gain (within negotiations and behavioral economics literatures) and (2) lying to resolve incompatible structural role expectations. We argue that, while insightful, extant literature has not sufficiently taken into account lying within on-going and mutually negotiated
organizational relationships – leading us to promote an identity-based model of lying within organizations.

Within the negotiations paradigm, relationships are often characterized by an underlying conflict between one’s own interests and those of another party (Lewicki, 1983) – a situation rife with self-interested motivations conducive to lying. Indeed, deceptive negotiators generally outperform those who are less deceptive (Aquino, 1998; Schweitzer & Croson, 1999). As such, negotiation lies (i.e. restricting information available to the other party) are used as tools for garnering power and thus a better payoff (Anton, 1990; Crott, Kayser, & Lamm, 1980; Fulmer, Barry, & Long, 2009; Tenbrunsel, 1998). However, lying within the negotiation context is inextricably tied to the assumption that the individual will not interact with their adversarial counterpart in the future (Lewicki, 1983), and, as such, questions the generalizability of such research to ongoing, organizationally-bound relationships.

Another promising model of lying and subsequent empirical work has focused on the effects of structural role-conflicts on dishonesty. A structural role conflict occurs when institutionalized expectations are at odds in some way such as (1) between one’s personal standards and defined role standards; (2) between time, resources and capabilities; (3) between roles nested within the same individual; or (4) as a function of incompatible policies regarding the role(s) (Grover, 1993a). This stream of research has generally demonstrated that individuals will lie to reduce the dissonance generated by a structural role conflict. For example, when job pressures (i.e. role performance conflict between speed and accuracy) and incentives for dishonesty were high, participants were more likely to over-report their own performance for payment (Grover & Hui, 2005). Similarly, when conflicting role demands between one’s professional and bureaucratic roles were present in one’s work, individuals were more likely to
misreport information to resolve the conflict (Grover, 1993b). Importantly, Grover (1993b) found that strong commitment to one’s profession (i.e., nursing) reduced misreporting to other members of their profession regardless of conflict level, and those higher in organizational commitment were less likely to misreport to their organization. Accordingly, deceit is geared to resolve the role conflict toward the role where commitment is lowest: “…the actor completely fulfills the demands of one role by behaving in accordance with it. The other role demand is not met, but the actor directs the impression that it has been met to the sender of the role.” (p. 482).

As mentioned, Grover’s useful model of lying is built upon role conflicts that are structurally-derived (i.e. structural functionalist role theory; Ashforth, 2001; Merton, 1957). Here, role expectations “are created to fulfill institutional needs…” sans any influence or interaction from the individual role incumbent and/or their partners (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007: 12). However, we suggest that institutionalized expectations represent only one facet of identity. Indeed, Sluss and Ashforth (2007), building on symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Stets & Burke, 2003), describe identity and the subsequent expectations for identity enactment as the person-based, relationship-based, and/or collective-based expectations that are negotiated and surface “from the shared experiences and sensemaking of unique but situated and interdependent individuals” (p. 12) – in our case, the liar and the audience. The meanings of identities are thus constructed and modified via social interaction, and individuals make sense of themselves (as social objects) based upon their ability to enact identities in the company of others. Thus, our identity motive-based model of lying describes how identity threats at the personal, relational, or collective level of self may increase the individual’s propensity to lie to the audience who exacerbates such threats.

We also wish to qualify the common definition of lying to focus on the social (and
organizationally-relevant) nature of lying. First, we limit the scope of our inquiry to interactions with a known dyadic partner (audience)—while email phishing scams, anonymous internet chat room boasts or attempts to swindle an unknown stranger in a negotiations game may all include false statements, we focus on situations where deception is targeted at a specific organizational member. Thus, we argue that much lying behavior can best be understood with the social features of the audience in mind. Second, we argue that while deception describes the outcome of a “successful” lie, the actual motivation for lying is poorly described by the outcome itself. In short, individuals may lie for the purpose of managing an identity threat, and deception is simply how it is done. Our qualified definition does not specify that purposeful lies are intended to be malicious, harmful or destructive (although in practice lies may be), but simply that the outcome is that they deliberately misinform. Thus, we seek to remain relatively agnostic on attributing the perceived moral tone of the lie—whether malicious or virtuous—and focus instead on understanding the social and cognitive drivers of the behavior itself, allowing us to more robustly describe lying within the workplace.

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND LYING WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS

Our model is built upon the assumption that daily organizational life is navigated via the social-self (Hogg & Terry, 2000), and that workplace interactions are greatly characterized by opportunities and pressures for identity enactment (see symbolic interactionism; Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Identities serve as both sources of self-esteem as well as meaning structures which help us make sense of the world (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Social identity (and its related motives) describe (and drive) how we define ourselves, our relationships, and/or the collectives to which we belong (Johnson & Yang, 2010; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010).

In any given context, the working self-concept represents an amalgamation of relevant
identities drawn from a pool of possible selves (Markus & Kunda, 1986). Organizational members “can and do vest their identities in multiple loci in the organization” (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008), including those which are specifically activated by their relevance to the context (e.g., an “Accountant” identity becomes active when discussing an audit project) and those which are chronically accessible to the individual due to self-importance or trans-situational relevance (Johnson & Yang, 2010; c.f. Thatcher & Greer, 2008). Thus, “self” in the workplace is both multiplex and dynamic. The activation of specific identities and related motives helps us rapidly determine which stakeholders we should consider in the moment, as well as the subsequent appropriateness of our behavioral choices (Leavitt et al., 2012).

We suggest, however, that the activation of an identity may also make us painfully aware of our inability to live up to associated expectations when that particular identity is also threatened, and many organizational identities may not be readily dismissed without also exiting the organization. As alluded to above, lying may often be driven by protecting self-interest, which is thus largely compatible with protecting identities that reside at the personal level of self (e.g. high performer, reliable; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). However, in addition to safeguarding personal identities, lying in organizational settings may also occur to insulate the motives associated with relational and collective-level identities.

Thus, we propose, based upon social identity theory, three general types of lies which are motivated by threats to identity. While lying may occur for non-identity motives (such as financial gain or retribution), the three categories of lies we propose are distinguished by the salient identity motives that have been previously theorized to reside at each level of the self (see Cooper & Thatcher, 2010): (1) personal identity lies; (2) relational identity lies; and (3) collective identity lies. First, a personal identity lie is a commissional untrue statement motivated
by the desire to safeguard one’s ability to be different and more capable than others (i.e. Cooper and Thatcher’s motive of positive distinctiveness) and/or increasing one’s positive self-view (i.e. Cooper and Thatcher’s motive of self-enhancement). Second, a relational identity lie is also a commissional untrue statement yet motivated to protect one’s ability to show fidelity to relational expectations (i.e. the motive of personalized belongingness) and/or maintain the welfare of the relational other (i.e. the motive of self-expansion). Third, a collective identity lie is a commissional untrue statement motivated to protect one’s own membership in the collective (i.e. the motive of depersonalized belongingness) and/or protect the collective’s standing and purpose (i.e. the motive of uncertainty reduction). In short, our model places lying as behavioral response designed to resolve identity threats and, thus, preserve identity motives relevant at the personal, relational, and collective levels of identity. Figure 1 presents our full theoretical model.

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Levels of Self-Identity, Motives, and Lying

The conceptual landscape of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1976) – as well as a closely complementary theory, self-categorization (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) – is built upon the premise that individuals define and/or categorize themselves across three levels of self-identity² (Brewer & Gardner, 1996): (1) personal identities (i.e. highly-valued personal characteristics such as dutiful, fun-loving, technically-inclined), (2) relational identities (i.e. self-defining role relationships such as supervisor—subordinate, consultant—client; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), and (3) collective identities (e.g. memberships in groups such as organizations, occupational groups, teams; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In turn, these

² Note that level of self does not refer to unit of analysis. Instead, level of the self is the level of abstraction of one’s self-definition.
self-definitions serve as a foundation for how individuals are socially motivated to think and feel about the organizational context and act in accordance with these self-definitions, self-categorizations, and identities (Ellemers, de Gilder, & Haslam, 2004) – whether at the personal, relational, or collective level of self (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Lord & Brown, 2004; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). While self-affirmation, the desire to see one’s self in a positive light, is one general need served by all three levels of identity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), identities at each level (individual, relational, collective) are also associated with unique motives and goals specific to that level of identity (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). It is when these particular motives are thwarted due to identity threats that we theorize lying is most likely to occur (for examples of these identity threats and lies see Table 1).

Critical to our model, identity threats can come from within the individual (as a result of self-reflection or self-doubt), from external events (e.g., a news story questioning one’s profession or organization), or from within a social interaction (e.g., hearing about another’s accomplishments). Regardless of the source, unmanaged identity threats hinder workplace interactions because they disrupt and/or call into question the ability to enact the identity—identity threats in the workplace are thus navigated in front of an audience. We first generally describe how threats can lead to nuanced lies at each level of identity that are distinct from those told at other levels. Then, we examine when ambiguous events are likely to be seen as subjectively threatening (which we term threat sensitivity), and when the inability to manage such threats will likely lead to lying (which we term threat intractability).

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First, *collective identity*\(^3\) generally refers to one’s self-definition related to membership in a large collective. A collective identity satisfies the needs for depersonalized belonging and/or uncertainty reduction by situating the individual within a categorical group, and defining what it means to be an exemplar member of the collective – that is, a prototype to follow (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). For example, identifying one’s self as a “member of Acme Corporation” gives an employee a sense of place in the world (including the relative status and sense of purpose associated with ACME versus other organizations), as well as a set of prototypical expectations (i.e. which behaviors are appropriate for members of ACME to engage in, and whom they may seek to serve). When a collective identity is salient, one’s goals, attitudes, and subsequent behaviors are generally directed towards the group’s welfare and evaluated by others in comparison to the goals, attitudes, and behaviors of a prototypical group member (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Within organizational settings, collective identities are especially likely to be salient and may be attached to the broader organization (e.g. IBM, Cisco Systems), to the individual’s structural role or professional group (e.g. manager, engineer), or to their workgroup (e.g. project team) (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth, Harrison, & Corely, 2008; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Riketta & van Dick, 2005). However, non-organizational collective identities (such as nationality, religion, or gender) may also be especially self-defining, valued, and central to one’s sense of self across situations, and therefore may be salient within one’s organizational life (e.g., Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010; Markus & Kunda, 1986). Critical to understanding lying within organizations, one’s derived self-worth from a collective identity depends on his or her ability to adhere (and live up) to the shared values and norms of the group (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), and advance the group’s interests and social standing (Hogg & Terry, 2000;

\(^3\) Our discussion of collective identity is focused squarely on self-identity and is at the individual unit of analysis – “who I am in this group.” We do not focus on the organizational level conceptualization of collective identity (e.g. “who are we as a group”).
Johnson & Yang, 2010). The reference for assessing one’s performance within a collective identity, then, is one’s own prototypicality and the wellbeing of the collective. It is when either the individual’s sense of depersonalized belonging or sense of certainty is particularly threatened that we theorize one may be apt to utilize a collective identity lie – in an attempt to either reaffirm their own prototypicality of the collective identity, or to support the collective identity’s prestige and “raison d’être” (see examples in Table 1).

*Proposition 1: Threats to collective identities undermine the identity motives of depersonalized belongingness and/or uncertainty reduction thus increasing the likelihood of collective identity lies.*

Next, *relational identity* refers to self-definition vis-à-vis either a general relational category (i.e. generalized relational identity) such as a “supervisor of subordinates,” or with a specific relationship in mind (i.e. particularized relational identity) such as “coworker to Karen” or “workplace rival of Steve” (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Thus, a self-definition emanating from an individual’s relational identity serves to fulfill, at least partially, the needs of personalized belongingness and/or self-expansion (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Relational identities fulfill these motives by describing our purpose vis-à-vis another person (e.g., a personal assistant is important to the executive he helps) and by assimilating the resources and capabilities of the relational partner in to ourselves (e.g., a mentor feels pride in the accomplishments of her protégé). At the relational level of identity, goals are directed toward the benefit of the relational other, and positive self-evaluations are made upon the ability to live up to person-based and role-based expectations tied to the “nature of one’s role-relationship” (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007: 11). The reference for assessing one’s performance within a relational identity is thus the expansion of the relationship and/or wellbeing of the other. Because relational identities are built upon both the roles and characteristics of the persons involved, they are both
particularistic (i.e., concerned with the well-being of specific people) and idiosyncratic (i.e., peculiar to the individuals involved) and thus allow a level of nuance and richness greater than that found within a collective identity’s prototype (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Here, the dyad-intertwining nature of relational identity suggests the primary goals of a valued relationship will be to (1) maintain one’s perceived ability to live up to or demonstrate fidelity to relational expectations (i.e. personalized belonging) as well as (2) maintain the well-being of the dyadic partner (i.e. self-expansion or including the other in self, Aron & Aron, 1997). Accordingly, we suggest that when one’s identity motive of well-being or self-worth derived from relational identity is threatened, an individual may be more likely to promulgate a relational identity lie (see Table 1).

Proposition 2: Threats to relational identities undermine the identity motives of personalized belongingness and/or self-expansion thus increasing the likelihood of relational identity lies.

Finally, the personal (individual) level of identity is associated with positive distinctiveness and contrasting one’s own skills, abilities and attributes against those of others, with goals directed at self-enhancement (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). In addition, individuals are motivated at the personal level of self to maintain a self-view that is coherent and consistent over time (Swann, 1987; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Personal identity, then, is focused on both enhancing as well as maintaining a consistent (i.e. self-consistency) and positive self-view. When personal identity is salient, individuals are motivated to pursue self-beneficial outcomes, including pay and career development opportunities (Johnson & Yang, 2010). Essential to lying within organizations, self-worth derived from the personal (individual) level of identity hinges on one’s ability to demonstrate that they are different from and more capable than others, as well as successfully advancing one’s own individual standing in a self-consistent manner (Cooper &
Thatcher, 2010). As a result, threats to either of these two personal identity motives – self-enhancement or self-consistency – will generally lead the individual to tell a personal identity lie (see Table 1).

*Proposition 3: Threats to personal identities undermine the identity motives of self-enhancement and/or self-consistency thus increasing the likelihood of personal identity lies.*

**Identity Threat Sensitivity and Intractability: Facilitators of Lying Behavior**

We argue that managing the perceptions of others to protect valued identity motives against identity threats provide a strong and overarching motivation for lying in organizations, as having others view us favorably and as we view ourselves is a fundamental human motive (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). However, not all events that challenge an identity will be interpreted as a threat, and, given that multiple avenues for managing identity threats exist (c.f., Petriglieri, 2011), not all identity threats will lead to lying. Thus, we theorize when individuals are especially likely to interpret ambiguous events as identity threats (which we term *identity threat sensitivity*), as well as conditions under which identity threats are likely to be deemed unmanageable and thus especially salient and distress-inducing (which we term *identity threat intractability*).

**Identity threat sensitivity.** Identity threats describe subjective interpretations of experiences, rather than objective events (Elsbach, 2003). Accordingly, the same event may be interpreted as subjectively benign by one individual, and as highly identity-threatening by another. While the literature on identity threats has not specifically identified under what conditions events are likely to be interpreted as threatening, we describe *identity threat sensitivity* as the likelihood that an individual will interpret an identity-relevant event as an identity threat. We suggest that three factors central to identity help predict when individuals will be especially
vulnerable to identity threats and thus more likely to lie. We argue that threat sensitivity increases as a function of high identification (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), chronic self-identity (Johnson & Yang, 2010; c.f. Thatcher & Greer, 2008), and low social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

First, individuals should be more susceptible to identity threats for those identities which are most central to their sense of self. While identity deals with the meaning associated with identity membership, identification refers to the extent to which one places high importance on and affective attachment to a specific identity in regard to one’s own self-concept (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). While an individual may recognize that an identity does indeed apply to them (e.g., member of an organization, gender, race, or workgroup), they may not find it to be particularly central to their self-concept, self-defining or important to their sense of self-worth (i.e. lower identification). We suggest that strength of identification is actually more critical for understanding when an event will be interpreted as an identity threat than features of the identity itself. For example, a newly enrolled engineering student with no experience or success to date (e.g. no grants or patents) may strongly self-define as an “engineer” to the extent to which he has internalized the values and meanings associated with that identity; by contrast, a successful and seasoned engineer may consider “engineer” as simply what she does for a living, while building her self-concept and self-worth around other available identities in her life (e.g. non-profit board of directors member; fly fishing enthusiast). Thus, events may more likely be interpreted as identity threats when identification is higher rather than lower.

Second, we argue that individuals should be more susceptible to identity threats when a particular identity aligns with their chronic underlying psychological motives for identification. Individuals differ in their trans-situational propensity for self-definition at the personal,
relational, and collective level of identity (Johnson & Yang, 2010; Johnson, Selenta, & Lord, 2006; Selenta & Lord, 2005). This individual difference is known as chronic self-identity (Johnson & Yang, 2010; c.f. Thatcher & Greer, 2008) and affects both one’s self-perception and self-regulation (Lord & Brown, 2004). Thus, some individuals simply have a greater or lesser propensity to construe their sense of self at each level, and would accordingly be more or less compelled by the identity motives associated with each. That is, when individuals chronically define themselves at and come to rely upon one level of identity for making sense of themselves and navigating the world, they should become especially sensitive to threats at that level.

Activation of identities at the various levels of the self (personal, relational, collective) orient the individual toward valued goals, and make salient the associated identity motives. The level of self also aims the individual toward engaging in self-evaluation based upon the corresponding referent (i.e. personal traits, relational expectations, or collective prototypes), goal beneficiaries (i.e. self, relationship, or collective), and the respective identity motives (cf. Brewer & Gardner, 1996) —thus, levels of identity broadly inform us what standards to hold ourselves to, whom our actions should benefit, and what kinds of goals are worth pursuing. Hence, we propose that a chronically accessed self-identity level increases sensitivity to threats and potential for lying at the corresponding level of identity, but not necessarily at other identity levels. For example, Shane, a technology-integration consultant for Accenture with a chronically accessed relational identity, will more than likely perceive a “low client satisfaction score” (i.e. the client is not happy) as particularly threatening. By contrast, Shane may not perceive negative media attention concerning Accenture as particularly threatening, since he does not generally construe himself in terms of collectives (in this case, his organization). Similarly, an employee with a chronically accessed personal level of identity may not be threatened and thus tempted to lie when a negative
rumor is going around about her manager, but may be more threatened and subsequently tempted to lie to cover up a mistake that calls into question her own personal competence or reliability.

Third, we theorize that individuals should be more likely to view events as identity-threatening if they do not subjectively perceive themselves as having multiple alternative identities with distinct boundaries between them. Social identity complexity (SIC) describes an identity structure in which an individual recognizes that their various in-groups (defined broadly, including task groups, social categories, intimacy groups and loose associations) are not fully convergent or overlapping (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). In other words, whereas individuals high in social identity complexity subjectively view themselves as members of many differentiated groups or relationships (“I am A and I am also B”), individuals low in social identity complexity subjectively perceive all of their identities as embedded within a single representation (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). While the construct of social identity complexity has largely been used to explain intergroup relations and attitudes (Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004), it has previously been argued that not investing all of one’s self into a single valued identity may leave an individual better able to cope when a particular identity is challenged (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Linville, 1985). For example, an individual low in social identity complexity might view the in-group of his organization (e.g., Microsoft) as comprised of only individuals who share other category memberships with him (e.g., computer programmer and technology enthusiast). That is, individuals with low social identity complexity may see only one rigidly defined identity where individuals high in social identity complexity see varied interpretations and multiplex distinct identities. Accordingly, we suggest that high social identity complexity should actually reduce the interpretation of events as identity threatening, because the reduced overlap in identity membership suggests that threats are compartmentalized and there is “less to lose” when the
standards set by a particular identity are not upheld. In short, any given identity simply becomes less important to the individual (Brewer & Pierce, 2005). Additionally, we suggest that by viewing the greater membership of one’s total set of identities as more encompassing, higher social identity complexity leaves individuals with greater latitude for evading threats in that there is simply a broader audience who may reaffirm that identity. In sum, those with higher social identity complexity perceive more available identities to retreat into, and should view specific identities as less constrained. For example, a technology company employee low in social identity complexity (who views only programmers and engineers as the in-group of the organization) may perceive significant threat to his organizational identity when a competitor releases a much more advanced product—for the low SIC individual, there is only one narrowly-defined interpretation of his organizational identity, and it lacks independence from his other identities. By contrast, a similar employee high in social identity complexity (who thus defines her organizational membership to include more diverse groups of employees and customers, and who recognizes that his programmer identity is but one facet of his organizational identity) might perceive less threat if the company demonstrates other strengths, such as long term environmental protection or product user friendliness. Thus, we suggest that individuals lower in social identity complexity are more likely to interpret events as identity threatening and are thus more likely to lie, as they have fewer alternative identities or interpretations to retreat into. By contrast, individuals higher in social identity complexity are less likely to perceive identity threats—and consequently will be less likely to lie.

Proposition 4: Identity threat sensitivity (as a function of strength of identification, chronic self-identity and low social identity complexity) increases the likelihood that an identity threat undermines the relevant identity motives, and thus increases the likelihood of lying.
**Threat intractability.** Identity threats create psychological distress, which generally motivate the individual to attempt to mitigate the threat through a series of effortful strategies (e.g., Petriglieri, 2011). Based on extant literature, we suggest three general and iterative strategies that individuals apply in an attempt to resolve a threat to a valued identity *rather than lying*. The three strategies are: (1) identifying refuting information; (2) nuancing the meaning of the identity (i.e. identity work); and/or (3) exiting or replacing the identity. Contrary to assumptions of prior work, we argue that these strategies may not always be successful, and through the process of failed resolution the individual may come to believe that no escape is forthcoming as they ruminate on strategies to mitigate the threat and resolve the accompanying psychological distress. We argue that such identity threats can be characterized in terms of threat intractability, which we define as the belief that an identity threat is unresolvable under present conditions. Further, because the individual expends significant cognitive resources ruminating on the threat, the threatened identity becomes increasingly psychologically accessible. Thus, intractable identity threats loom especially large. We argue that intractable threats are both especially salient and characterized by distress, and thus are likely to be of heightened concern in relevant social interactions.

To specify, individuals go to great lengths to construct positive self-concepts in the face of stigmatized or threatened identities (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) and to counter or manage threats to valued identities (Petriglieri, 2011). Interestingly, most occupational as well as organizational roles (and, by extension, their requisite relationships and prototypical attributes) have some level of potential stigma attached to them and are, therefore, in a constant state of threat (cf. Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006): a self-identified “high achiever” could be labeled a careerist by others; a “supervisor who is relationally committed to a talented employee” may be
accused of cronyism; a talented university researcher may be branded an “ivory tower intellectual” by practitioners in industry. As a result, individuals learn to resiliently respond when “their sense of self is called into question” or threatened (Kreiner & Sheep, 2009: 32). To date, scholars seem to assume that the threatened individual will respond truthfully amidst ‘responding resiliently’ by maintaining the threat (e.g., concealing a stigmatized identity such as sexual orientation; Ragins, 2008) or eliminating the threat (e.g., restructuring the meaning of an identity) (Petriglieri, 2011), suggesting that a positive resolution may eventually be reached. We, on the whole, would agree that individuals prefer to stay on the brighter side of the truth, as normative standards against lying exist in most societies (Bok, 1999). However, organizations (as strong situations) often limit one’s ability to select freely how and when to interpret and/or attribute their work-based identities and the threats against them. For example, professional societies often prescribe very specific guidance for their members’ behavior, and organizations may set standards which narrowly define a “good employee” based upon performance, displayed emotions, or even physical appearance. Thus, traditional routes of ‘identity work’ (restructuring interpretations of the identity) are often not available. As such, identity threats may increase in intractability through attempts to work through them– the threat ironically becomes more and more unavoidable as the individual ruminates on failed attempts at escaping it.

We suggest that the individual will generally pursue these strategies iteratively, moving from one to another if each strategy fails. However, it is also possible that, even after a single attempt at reconciling the threat, the individual may proceed to lie, as a function of the immediacy of the threat context. In general, individuals may be less likely to attempt all three strategies when the threat requires an immediate response (e.g., one’s supervisor is standing at their desk questioning them about their recent performance) versus allowing time for deliberative
processing (e.g., the individual is having a “crisis of meaning” following their 50th birthday). Additionally, we represent these strategies as iterative and cyclical, in that many identity threats may be protracted and occur over the course of weeks or months, such that the individual compares new information and events against the threat in attempting resolution. For example, an individual whose relational identity as a “friend to a coworker” has been threatened may revisit the identity threat strategies while weighing his attempts at reconciliation behavior.

As mentioned, one response to an identity threat would be to simply identify refuting information related to the threat (i.e., the threat can be countered/demonstrated untrue in some domain of the identity). This strategy represents a shallower version of what others have called “identity work” (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). For example, if an instructor is accused of being a “bad teacher” by a student (a threat to a presumably valued role identity), remembering a past record of high student evaluations or teaching awards from previous terms should resolve distress caused by the threat. However, this escape route or strategy is effectively blocked and the intractability of the identity threat increases when (1) no refuting information is available (i.e., the threat is uniformly or objectively true); when (2) there is limited depth of knowledge (e.g., no record of prior teaching), or when (3) information processing demands make counterfactual information inaccessible (e.g., the individual is tired or overwhelmed and doesn’t search their memory for disconfirming information).

Next, individuals may tend to ‘spin the identity’ or perform more extensive identity work (reconstructing the nuanced meaning of an identity; see Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006) in that alternative interpretations of the identity are available when there is low agreement on what attributes populate the identity allowing an individual to choose a more favorable interpretation consistent with their own idiosyncratic sense of self (e.g., being a “professor” can be reframed as
“researcher”, “teacher”, “prolific reader”, or “translation article/book writer”). However, formalization of an identity (specific objectives, professional standards or certifications, and prominent individuals who serve as a standard of comparison) greatly reduces the effectiveness of this strategy. We also note that organizational demands and the specific role expectations often limit the individual’s ability for re-crafting their identities to avoid a threat (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) – increasing intractability. For example, if an individual fails to live up to the obligations of “chemical laboratory technician level III,” institutional forces and the threat’s immediacy likely limit the opportunity for an effective re-construal of the identity.

Third, we suggest that individuals may finally choose to exit (temporarily or permanently) an identity. In short, the individual may reaffirm the self via discounting/distancing from the threatened identity (e.g., Arthur may be a lousy accountant, but he could be an excellent manager of accountants) or leaving the identity behind all together (e.g., when passed-over-for-partner, Arthur decides to take his/her client’s job offer). However, chronic accessibility of the identity or high relevance to the organizational setting potentially reduces the effectiveness of this escape route. For example, a certified public accountant employed within an accounting firm to perform accountancy is unlikely to escape a threat to his professional accounting identity by declaring himself a human resource expert, and not an accountant. Additionally, the accountant in our example may be unable to exit highly salient identities (organizational member, accountant identity) due to a lack of employment alternatives or other factors related to job embeddedness (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). Similarly, identity exit is not possible for stigmatized yet hidden identities. For example, if Arthur developed a hidden disability (e.g. Major Depressive Disorder, which affects the ability to follow instructions and impairs his short-term memory), he is not able to exit this identity and, thus, may lie as a
substitute. Hence, the strength of organizational settings and one’s inability to exit may greatly reduce options and increase the intractability of the identity threat.

**Proposition 5:** Identity threats become intractable when threat resolution strategies including refuting information; identity work; and/or identity exit have not been successful.

**Proposition 6:** Identity threat intractability increases the likelihood of identity motives being threatened and increases the likelihood that the individual will lie to manage the threatened identity motive.

Because identity motives are unique to the three levels of identity (personal, relational, collective), we suggest that threats must generally be resolved in a way that reaffirms the social identity motives associated with that respective level. That is, a threat to a personal level of identity causes distress specifically because it thwarts one’s need for positive distinctiveness and/or self-consistency, and successfully resolving the threat requires affirming that need. While all levels of identity help maintain the fundamental human motives of self-esteem and self-worth (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), the social identity motives associated with each specific level should make affirming the self at a different level of identity (i.e., “crossing levels”) a largely ineffective strategy for managing threats to valued identities at each level. For example, if Greg is accused by Nancy of being an unfair colleague after criticizing Nancy’s proposal publicly in a meeting (a threat to a relational identity and the corresponding goals of personalized belongingness and self-expansion), Greg could counter the threat by recalling a costly favor performed on Nancy’s behalf the previous week (refuting information); by suggesting that good friends should offer candid feedback (identity work); or by downplaying the value of his relationship with Nancy while reaffirming his relationship with another colleague (identity exit). However, Greg would be unlikely to counter the threat by emphasizing his ability to pinpoint risks others can’t (an attribute tied to his personal identity) or commitment to his profession (reaffirming a collective
identity), because doing so would fail to reaffirm the underlying needs for personalized belongingness and self-expansion uniquely met by holding and meeting the expectations of a relational identity (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010).

**Proposition 7:** When faced with identity threats, individuals generally attempt to manage the threat (i.e., utilizing refuting information, identity work, and/or identity exit) within the level of self at which the identity threat occurs (personal, relational, collective).

While identity motives are unique to each level of identity (and thus, would be best reconciled at that level), we acknowledge that some lies may actually transcend levels of identity. First, some threats cut across multiple levels of identity simultaneously—a financial advisor who recklessly loses large sums of a friend’s money by gambling it in a sports book may experience a threat at the collective (profession), relational (friend), and personal (responsible) levels of identity simultaneously. Thus, a lie told to manage a cross-level threat could be designed to affirm all three levels at once (e.g., “I was carefully following the investment strategy of a top hedge fund manager with your best interests in mind, and it didn’t work out”). Second, because self-affirmation is an over-arching need managed through a flexible process (Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), if a lie to protect a specific identity is especially unlikely to be believed (and the level-relevant motive will remain unmet), the individual may still lie to shore up another facet of identity at a different level, to allow for maintenance of a more general positive self-view.

**Dyadic workplace interactions and identity enactment**

While identity is meaningful to the individual for answering the question of “who am I?,” it is especially critical for navigating social interaction. Identity is central for sensemaking and constructing interpretations of complex and ambiguous issues (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Further, organizational members turn to one another for managing
and interpreting events that may undermine shared meaning (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996).

However, interactions with those whom we share valued identities also place demands on us for enactment. Thus, we suggest that such interactions create opportunities for assuaging threats and maintaining our identity-based self-worth, or present situations which exacerbate the pain of unrealized identity motives and consequently make lying more likely.

Much of organizational life occurs in the context of dyadic social interactions with others—conversations with coworkers, supervisors and customers are central to our daily work experiences and the way we view our work (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012). Through interacting with others, shared meaning materializes which both informs and constrains identity (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Critical to our theory of lying, face-to-face workplace interactions allow for the positive enactment of valued identities (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006), and accordingly, afford the opportunity and motivation to lie when identity motives are thwarted.

Two features of identity are especially relevant to dyadic interactions. First, different self-concepts become activated at different times as a function of context (Higgins, 1996; Hogg & Terry, 2000) and because multiple identities are often available in the workplace, subtle cues can be sufficient to bring about the activation of one versus another (e.g., manager/engineer identities among professional engineers in managerial roles; see Leavitt et al., 2012). Accordingly, we suggest that dyadic interaction partners serve as such strong contextual cues, making sets of identities more or less accessible as a function of their relevance. For example, meeting with a consultant’s client is likely to make an identity tied to the consultant-client relationship salient, whereas a collective identity tied to one of the consultant’s other project teams would likely be
less salient within that meeting context. Thus, interaction partners can make a threatened identity highly salient (and consequently, make the threat appear relevant, critical and urgent).

Second, dyadic workplace interactions allow individuals the opportunity to meet their fundamental needs for self-verification, confirming that other’s appraisals align in a coherent manner with how the individual sees themselves (Swann, 1987). Individuals try to actively influence the perceptions of others to ensure that they are “recognized as they believe themselves to be… that others have developed accurate expectations about the focal person” (Thatcher & Zhu, p. 1077). Accordingly, individuals use identity cues and adopt interaction strategies which are likely to confirm their existing self-views to interaction partners (Swann, 1987; Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004). Thus, we suggest that lies can serve as vehicles for convincing others of the veracity of one’s self-views (or ideal self-views), when no real evidence is available to supply.

Indeed, encounters with individuals relevant to a particular identity (other in-group members, members of groups with values contrary to one’s own threatened identity, or the relational counterparts of a relational identity) should cue and activate that particular identity, and such encounters demand identity enactment. Additionally, many relational identities in particular may subsume status and power differences (e.g., supervisor-subordinate) and histories (e.g., valued long-term friend) which may create further pressures on threatened identities--an absentee boss who does not spend sufficient energy developing his employees may be more likely to lie to a faithful subordinate about things done on her behalf; a coworker who is also a long-term friend may be more likely to lie to her colleague about his prospects for surviving an upcoming layoff. We suggest that dyadic workplace interactions can thus either greatly attenuate or exacerbate the psychological discomfort caused by lingering identity threats, with perceived
characteristics of the interaction partner themselves greatly determining whether threats will lead to lying. We argue that self-verification failures in the presence of identity threats generally lead to lying. The interaction partner need not be the source of the identity threat, as identity threats can come from internal (i.e., self-generated) or external sources (Petriglieri, 2011), and may either be ongoing or initiated during the dyadic encounter itself. For example, a software developer might experience a threat to his professional identity due to a midlife crisis (“is this really how I want to spend my life?”), an external event (a report citing that platform-based software is losing market share to simple mobile applications), or by a conversation with a manager (“You software engineers need to learn some people skills!”). Regardless of the source of the threat, social interactions within which the threat is relevant will prompt attempts at self-verification. Indeed, self-awareness necessarily invokes a comparison to some standard (Obodaru, 2012; Duval & Wicklund, 1972), and through the standards made salient by others, identity threats are assuaged or magnified. Thus, both the prototypicality of a dyadic interaction partner for the threatened identity and the number of available shared identities with that interaction partner are critical for determining whether or not lying will occur.

**The audience’s prototypicality of the threatened identity.** Social identities are cognitively represented in terms of prototypes (Turner, 1982), and people assess the prototypicality of real group members with the attributes of prototypes in mind (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). Indeed, social identities are dynamically constructed in the moment to maximize meaning, by identifying category boundaries which highlight key similarities and differences. As Hogg and colleagues (1995) note: “The cognitive system, in seeking to maximize meaning in a specific context, engages whatever categorization is most readily available and best explains or fits the similarities and differences among people.” (p. 261). Thus, when an identity is
threatened, boundaries between in-group and out-group members are drawn around the most salient properties of the prototype for that identity.

Accordingly, an interaction with an individual who is highly prototypical of a threatened identity should make that identity particularly salient and heighten the psychological discomfort experienced from an identity threat, by providing further evidence that the individual is failing to live up to the expectations of that identity (while also narrowing its interpretation). For example, Jim is an assistant professor at a research university, and has recently had his “professor” identity threatened via a series of painful manuscript rejections and a poor third-year review (a threat to a collective-level identity). On the way to check his mail he enters in to a conversation with Susan, another assistant professor who has just won a university award for her research. The category of “research intensive professor” will likely become salient to Jim because the identity is shared and relevant to the current work context (the University), and Susan and Jim will serve as strong contextual cues for a “research intensive professor” identity to each other. Because Susan is highly prototypical, attempts at identity enactment by both parties (i.e., using field-relevant language; talking about research productivity or the publication process) are likely to create additional distress for Jim. Notably, self-verification would not require that Jim appear more prototypical than Susan; rather, the identity threat would be assuaged as long as Susan verified that Jim was sufficiently prototypical of the identity. Accordingly, Jim may enact his professor identity by lying: claiming he has a late-round revision that he has already lost, or inflating the definitiveness of the results of a work in progress. However, if Susan were an adjunct instructor and thus less prototypical of the “research intensive professor” identity, identity enactment might lead to self-verification through the use of truthful statements: Jim may simply say that he’s working hard, collecting data, enjoying his teaching or reading a lot for a project.
Proposition 8: An audience that is prototypical of the threatened identity increases the likelihood that the individual will lie to manage the threatened identity motive.

We also suggest that interactions with high status individuals who are prototypical of identities that are perceived to be in conflict with the threatened identity may also exacerbate the threatened identity motives and thus trigger lying. When a threat suggests that an identity is low-status or lacks value, interactions with non-group members can make between-group differences especially salient and may amplify the threat – thus making lying more likely. Examples may include both organizationally-relevant identities and more broadly expressed social identities (e.g. nationality, education, sexual orientation, and religion). For example, Sally is a Human Resources professional, who has just read an op-ed in a business publication about the relative poor quality of HR professionals. Shortly thereafter, she encounters Jiyao, an accounting executive within the firm who has previously diminished HR for the lack of demonstrable impact on the company’s revenue stream. Because Jiyao makes Sally’s threatened HR identity especially salient, she may inflate the value of the company’s HR office, the rigor involved in becoming a certified HR professional, or “cite” fabricated statistics and nonexistent studies about the role of HR on firm value. Similarly, at the personal level of identity, a male coworker who defines himself as gay may be more likely to lie about his sexual orientation to an audience who is a member of a group that opposes gay marriage – and, vice-versa, the coworker that is a member of a group that opposes gay marriage may be more likely to lie about or “cover” his religious identity to a coworker who is openly gay.

Proposition 9: An audience that is prototypical of identities in conflict with the threatened identity increases the likelihood that the individual will lie to manage the threatened identity motive.

Number of available identities shared with the audience. In any given setting, several identities may be relevant and available at the same time. Because the working self-concept is
populated at any given time from a myriad of possible selves (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987), individuals may have many alternative identities available to themselves in any given setting. Dyadic interactions in the workplace can accordingly occur between individuals who share relatively few common available identities (e.g., the individuals believe they share only their membership in a common organization) or who share many identities likely to be available within the workplace (e.g., two individuals who share a common profession, organization, racioethnicity, and alma mater). With alternative shared identities come additional advantageous opportunities for identity enactment and self-verification within the interaction: “People engage actively in more or less competitive (and more or less successful) renegotiation of the frame of reference in order to achieve a self-categorization that is more favorable for conceptualization of self in that context” (Hogg et al., 1995: 262). We describe sets of identities with relatively independent obligations and standards as loosely-coupled, in that one may be readily shored-up while another is under threat—that is, they are relatively independent within the organizational context. Organizational elements (and in this case, identities) are loosely coupled to the extent to which they maintain “logical separateness” (Weick, 1976). For example, a terrible performance review as a dental receptionist doesn’t preclude one’s standing as a good friend or prolific cyclist. Accordingly, individuals should be likely to avoid threatened identities in workplace interactions when multiple loosely-coupled identities are shared with the interaction partner, as verifying an alternative identity can allow for commonality and self-affirmation (Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995). In contrast, when the threatened identity represents the only available identity in common, cues for identity enactment should amplify the threat, leading to lying. For example, if Bob realizes he has forgotten to pick his son up from school for an important doctor’s appointment (a threat to his relational identity tied to his son)
and then interacts with Phil, a coworker known for his unwavering dedication to his children, the threat to his relational identity to his son will likely be amplified and lying for the sake of self-verification will be more likely to occur (“I spent three hours helping my son with his homework last night!”). But if Bob and Phil share other accessible identities apart from fatherhood (e.g., they are either experienced web developers or fans of a common sporting team), there are opportunities for identity enactment between the two which do not involve the threatened identity, allowing Bob to conceal and manage the threat outside of the interaction. Thus, we propose that sharing multiple available loosely-coupled identities with an interaction partner reduces the distress caused by identity threats, by allowing identity enactment (and the possibility of self-verification) via alternate valued identities.

Proposition 10: A larger number of loosely-coupled (independent) alternative identities shared between the individual and the audience will decrease the likelihood that the individual will lie to manage the threatened identity motive.

By contrast, some identities prevalent in the workplace may share expectations and obligations with other identities, such that a threat to one identity undermines the individual’s claim to another. We describe sets of identities with relatively interdependent expectations and obligations as tightly coupled, in that threats to one identity similarly create a threat to related identities. Organizational elements (in this case, identities) are said to be tightly coupled to the extent to which they share common authority or expectations (cf. Weick, 1976). For example, organizational members at a company with a strong social or environmental mission (e.g., Patagonia, TOMs) would likely find that their activist identity (e.g., behaving in an environmentally friendly way in their personal life) is tightly coupled to their organizational identity as a function of the organization’s context. Accordingly, we argue that sharing additional tightly coupled identities with the audience may actually amplify the threat. For example, if an
unmarried employee at a private conservative evangelical school was expecting a child, her “evangelical” identity could be threatened by violating expectations of premarital abstinence. An interaction with another evangelical coworker (who is prototypical of that identity) would likely exacerbate the threat. Moreover, while loosely-coupled alternative identities allow opportunities for identity enactment that avoids the threat, sharing tightly-coupled identities with her colleague provide no refuge: her organizational identity may be threatened (if a morality clause is in place that corresponds to evangelical values); her “teacher” identity is threatened (as that includes being a “traditional moral role model” within this context); and her “woman” identity may also be possibly threatened (as the interpretation of her gender identity may include chastity in this context). Thus, sharing multiple tightly-coupled identities with a coworker doesn’t provide alternatives for identity enactment, but actually increases the likelihood that the threat will manifest within the social interaction. In this case, the individual would become even more likely to lie to manage the threat.

Proposition 11: A larger number of tightly-coupled (interdependent) alternative identities shared between the individual and the audience will increase the likelihood that the individual will lie to manage the threatened identity motive.

Identity content which may inhibit lying

Our model generally argues that threats to identity can lead to lying, to the extent to which they thwart underlying identity motives. However, certain identities may attenuate lying in general, to the extent to which they lead the individual to internalize specific proscriptions related to lying. Accordingly, we identify a theoretically-driven moderator of our model, related to identity types which have previously been associated with ethical behavior. Critically, we expect that specific identities will only reduce the likelihood of lying to the extent to which they lead the individual to internalize a personal identity which proscribes lying. Further, we do not
suggest that this list is exhaustive, and an individual may internalize a proscription against lying in to their personal identity in the absence of these other identities (i.e., some people may simply prioritize being an “honest” person).

First, research to date has been generally equivocal about the role of religious identity in ethical workplace behavior, with neither depth of participation nor self-reported commitment emerging as especially useful predictors of many types of unethical behavior (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996). However, Weaver and Agle (2002) argued that strongly-internalized religious identities with specific affective role expectations (i.e., affiliation with a religious sect that holds specific ethical accountability demands, as opposed to sects which require only belief) can lead to ethical workplace behavior. We suggest that because some religious identities offer strong proscriptions against lying, integration of such an identity in to the self might mitigate lying. Second, the lion’s share of research on the role of identity and self-concept within organizational ethics has focused on the self-importance of a generalized moral identity (Jennings, Mitchell & Hannah, 2014; Trevino, Weaver & Reynolds, 2006). Briefly, a generalized moral identity is comprised of a set of traits which generally describe a moral actor, including hardworking, generous, kind, fair, loyal, and honest (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Thus, a moral identity may lead the individual to internalize a proscription against lying in to their personal identity. Finally, authors have recently argued that moral content may be nested across occupational identities (Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011), and occupational identities provide actors with shared ideologies and values which can influence moral judgments and behavior (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Leavitt et al., 2012). Consequently, we suggest that some occupational identities may place boundaries around lying as unacceptable behavior.
Although there may be other identities which may inhibit lying, we propose that holding such identities will reduce the likelihood of lying when the individual strongly identifies with them and internalizes a proscription against lying in to their personal identity.

*Proposition 12: Internalizing a proscription against lying into one’s personal identity should reduce the likelihood of lying.*

**DISCUSSION**

Lying, albeit a common behavior (DePaulo et al., 1996), is under-theorized within organizational science for explaining everyday workplace lies. We address this under-specification of lying by (1) conceptualizing lying as socially-functional and socially-embedded workplace behavior; (2) proposing that lying occurs as a response to identity threat; and (3) integrating the underlying identity motives related to levels of identity into understanding dyadic workplace behavior. Further, we provide a social context to lying behavior, in that our model identifies relevant characteristics of the audience which affect the likelihood that dishonesty will occur. This research makes direct theoretical contributions to the workplace relationships literature (Sias, 2008), the behavioral ethics literature (e.g., Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Trevino et al., 2006) and theory on workplace identity (e.g., Petriglieri, 2011; Spears, Doosje, Ellemers, 1997).

**Contribution to the Workplace Relationships Literature**

Heeding the call to address how dyadic workplace relationships influence individual workplace behavior (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008), our model contributes to the workplace relationships literature in several meaningful ways. First, while several strategies for relationship maintenance have been identified and studied elsewhere (Stafford & Canary, 1991), prior research has largely overlooked the possibility that dishonesty represents a commonly-used tactic for maintaining on-going relationships when identities come under threat. Our model suggests
that when individuals fail to maintain the expectations of workplace identities, they may engage supervisors, coworkers and other workplace counterparts through the use of dishonesty.

We believe that lying has been excluded as a relationship maintenance tactic because of an intuitive assumption that the discovery of lies necessarily erodes relationships. Indeed, early researchers on interpersonal trust theorized that trustworthiness could be defined in terms of an individual’s motivation to lie (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). However, the momentary urgency of identity threats may lead organizational members in to dishonesty, without considering the long-range harm they may be causing to relationships.

Relatedly, we would suggest that some workplace identities may actually deprioritize honesty, to the extent to which “protecting each other from harm” is a defining feature of the relationship. As humorist Josh Billings poignantly quipped, “As scarce as truth is, the supply has always been in excess of the demand.” Indeed, we suggest that when an identity threat is actually shared between the liar and the audience (e.g., both are members of a stigmatized profession), a lie might be viewed as equally beneficial and consequently internalized as truth. For example, the recent documentary film “Blackfish” shows SeaWorld employees sharing “facts” about the relative lifespan of wild versus captive whales that are readily disputed by wildlife biologists, but these “false facts” allow organizational members to collectively view themselves positively as members of a conservation organization. To the extent to which identities serve to reduce uncertainty and provide a sense of purpose to a collective (Hogg & Terry, 2000) identity-based lies may actually buffer members against stress during difficult and uncertain times. In this vein, many organizations have pervasive myths and legends with questionable origins or veracity (see Pettigrew, 1979), which serve as useful for reaffirming a collective (organizational) identity. As Napoleon Bonaparte insightfully noted, “History is a set of lies agreed upon.” Thus, false
statistics and rumors which assuage shared identity threats may quickly spread through organizations to the extent to which they are useful to the audience, but with eventual negative consequences. For example, in the weeks immediately preceding the fall of Enron, employees spread the optimistic (but unfounded and untrue) rumor that Chairman Kenneth Lay was to soon be appointed Secretary of Energy, and consequently encouraged their peers to leave their retirement plans over-invested in Enron stock (McClean & Elkind, 2003). Lies may eventually cause the most damage when the audience is motivated to believe them.

**Contribution to the Organizational Ethics Literature**

Our model also contributes to the organizational ethics literature in several critical ways. First, we approach normatively unethical behavior in organizations using a social identity lens. We demonstrate that identity-relevant motives may represent powerful and generally overlooked drivers of unethical workplace behavior. By examining unethical workplace behavior from an identity perspective, we further highlight a meaningful distinction between lying (a social, interpersonal behavior) and other unethical behaviors such as cheating, stealing and misrepresentation (behaviors which are generally covert and intended to go unnoticed). Thus, we present the first model that we know of to explicitly consider social identity characteristics of the audience in regard to lying behavior, and more broadly, one of the first papers to consider the social motives for unethical organizational behavior.

Second, although others (Grover, 1993a; Grover, 1993b) have argued for the distinctiveness of lying from other forms of malfeasance, we offer the first comprehensive model to explain a breadth of everyday organizational lies told to maintain self-concept within organizations (Fu, Evans, Wang & Lee 2008; Bok, 1999). While previous models of lying are most appropriate for describing lying when the interpersonal context is less critical, including
lies told within single-encounter situations such as negotiations with strangers (Tenbrunsel, 1998) or lies told to reduce tensions when structural roles conflict (Grover, 1993a & 1993b); our model is appropriate and sufficient to explain a broad range of social behavior that occurs within ongoing and embedded relationships.

Third, although lying has been identified as a root construct in organizational corruption (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), our model suggests that lying might occasionally offer positive effects within organizational systems, such as protecting a subordinate from the temporary stressors of organizational crises, relaying meaning to organizational members in times of uncertainty, or creating positive effects on goal-striving as individuals seek to make the idealized claims of their lies come true. In this way, lies may actually represent useful counterfactuals (Obodaru, 2012) which motivate individuals to earn or move toward what they have borrowed from better alternative selves.

**Contribution to Research on Identity Threats**

In addition to distinguishing and structuring a heretofore overlooked set of organizational behaviors, our model also contributes meaningfully to the workplace identity threat literature. First, our paper underlines previous theory suggesting that there is a “dark side” to identities and identity maintenance, such that over-investing in identities may actually create significant problems for organizations and their members (Dukerich, Kramer & Parks, 1998). When individuals are allowed no escape from threats to valued identities, they are likely to engage in motivated lying, which may jeopardize both interpersonal trust and effective functioning of organizational systems.

Second, by distinguishing threats across levels of identity, we introduce both contextual and individual differences under which sensitivity to a particular threat is heightened, and an
event is likely to be perceived as subjectively threatening. While prior work has established that identity threats are characterized by subjective interpretation rather than objective features (Petriglieri, 2011), our model clearly identifies conditions under which organizational members may be particularly sensitized to identifying ambiguous events as identity-threatening.

Third, our model of identity threats based upon levels of identity (rather than internal versus external sources of threats; Petriglieri, 2011) specifies the distinct identity motives which are undermined, allowing for more accurate predictions of behavior likely to unfold in the presence of identity threats. This distinction qualifies the extant literature on identity threat resolution: we argue that identity threats are most effectively addressed at the same level of identity (i.e. personal, relational, or collective), since the identity motives (e.g., distinctiveness, personalized belongingness, uncertainty reduction) threatened can generally only be realized at that particular level of identity.

Finally, while the extant literature describes how individuals navigate and negotiate all possible identities, our model contributes to our understanding of threats and identities for which identity exit may not always be a viable option (such as an organizational identity in a town with only one major employer, or a relational identity with one’s long-term supervisor). While some forms of “identity work” may require limited effort (searching for disconfirming evidence against the threat or shoring up an alternative identity), lying may often prove more convenient and less costly (in terms of both cognitive resources and personal consequence) than extensive work to change the meaning of an identity or exiting an identity. While previous work has identified intractable identity conflicts between groups (e.g., management and labor; see Fiol, Pratt, & O’Connor, 2009), we offer the first model suggesting that identity threats can create intractable conflicts within the individual. When no refuting facts are available, there is shared
consensus on the meaning of an identity, and identity exit is too costly, previously-theorized mechanisms for managing identity threats are unlikely to be successful.

Future Research Directions

While our model of lying in response to identity threat provides one initial answer to the question of why organizational members routinely respond to each other in dishonest ways, it also generates additional testable research questions. First, researchers might consider how successful lies might over time exacerbate identity threats. Given that identity work is frequently characterized as an on-going and iterative process (Kreiner et al., 2006), future research on lying within organizations might examine its role within the identity work process with regard to time and temporal unfolding (Mitchell and James, 2001), exploring what occurs as an individual lives with a lie for prolonged periods of time. Relatedly, downstream behavior might be considered with regard to both the plausibility of the lie, as well as how individuals become more or less committed to identities which can only be maintained through dishonesty. While some lies may simply represent borrowing from ideal or future behaviors and thus be readily addressed by “making them come true,” others may require additional lies to protect the original false claim. In this way, living with the knowledge that one has lied may actually generate a new identity threat in its own right.

Relatedly, scholars might consider whether individual differences affect the likelihood that identity threats will be managed through lying. For example, because extraverts are argued to be more concerned with social attention (Ashton, Lee & Paunonen, 2002), they may experience greater negative arousal than their introverted peers when interacting with an audience that makes identity threats salient. Similarly, because individuals operating within prevention focus are more motivated to avoid commissional errors (Crowe & Higgins, 1997), they
may be less likely to lie than individuals operating within a promotion focus, suggesting that trait self-regulatory focus may also be related to lying.

Next, because lying may have long-term systemic impacts on organizational systems (Williamson, 1985; Ashforth & Anand, 2003), researchers should examine whether the potential detectability of lies varies systematically as a function of whether lies are told only about one’s self, or on behalf of another. A growing body of research has identified the powerful motivational effects that come from acting on behalf of another’s interests (Grant, 2007; 2008). For example, women within a bargaining simulation were more likely to negotiate assertively (and concern themselves less with social impressions) when they were negotiating on behalf of others rather than themselves (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010). Because our model focuses on lying as a response to identity threats at three different levels of identity, many of these lies may accordingly target relational partners (friends, coworkers) or collectives (workgroups, the organization, or a profession) as the beneficiary. Future research should specifically explore prosocial motivations for lying, including how prosocial motivations will affect both commitment to the lie and detectability by others. Supporting this notion, recent research has found that knowledge of “prosocial lies” can actually increase trust (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). Thus, future research should examine how ongoing workplace relationships are managed after dishonesty has been uncovered.

**Practical Implications for Organizations**

Our model offers several implications for organizational members. First, we call attention to the fact that lying may be more pervasive than previously realized, as individuals navigate identity threats on a nearly constant basis. Thus, the ubiquity of lies in organizational settings suggests that lying may be normal (if not normative) organizational behavior. While managers
may intuitively maintain heightened vigilance in settings where employees may directly benefit from dishonest statements, managers may default to trust when no instrumental motive for lying is obvious. Thus, we provide further caution that engaged and pro-social employees are still capable of behaviors which may harm the organization (cf. Klotz & Bolino, 2013). By providing cues to activate an alternative valued identity or simply providing positive identity-relevant support before giving negative feedback, sharing disheartening news, or questioning an individual about a violation of personal trust, managers might buffer employees against the threatened identity motive and therefore mitigate lying. Additionally, our model suggests that many common organizational interventions (such as ethics training to steer individuals away from opportunistic behavior) may have limited impact on relational-level and collective-level lying, in that the purpose of such prevarications is sometimes to protect a relational partner or the collective. By recognizing differences in the “types of lies” and conditions under which they occur, managers may be enabled to discern useful and true information from potentially misleading and potentially hazardous prevarications. Finally, our model suggests that when managers detect socially-motivated deception from an employee, they might find an opportunity to constructively leverage the desire to shore-up threatened identities. Rather than punishing or embarrassing the employee, proactive managers might consider how unmet identity motives could be harnessed to improve employee functioning, by providing new goal opportunities to affirm underlying identity motives in a way that benefits the organization.

In conclusion, we argue in this research that inescapable identity threats create a powerful (and heretofore unexplored) motivation for lying in the workplace. Moreover, because lying represents social behavior, identity-based characteristics of the audience themselves may increase the likelihood that lying will occur. Accordingly, we offer a greater understanding of
workplace dishonesty for managers and a new direction for scholars examining organizational ethics and identity: employees do not simply manipulate the truth to gain advantages; they may also lie to socially protect “who they are.”
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**TABLE 1**

SAMPLE IDENTITY THREATS AND LIES IN ORGANIZATIONS BY LEVELS OF IDENTITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activated Level of Self and referent</th>
<th>Identity threat characteristics</th>
<th>Identity Threat and Lie Examples</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **Collective Identity**  
(Collective group as referent)  
*Undermined Identity Motives: Depersonalized belongingness Uncertainty reduction* | **Collective Identity Threat**: Prototypicality called into question (“imposter syndrome”), or well-being and meaning of the group becomes uncertain. | **Threat Example**:  
Manager for a company that prides itself on frugality signed off on his own first class international ticket for a client visit. One of his employees happens to be on the same flight for a different project.  

**Collective Identity Lie Example**:  
“Oh… How embarrassing! The client *insisted* on paying for business class since it was international. I’m as frugal as other members of this organization and would never *pay* for business class.” |

| **Relational Identity**  
(relational other as referent)  
*Undermined Identity Motives: Personalized belongingness Self-expansion* | **Relational Identity Threat**: perceived relational obligations and one’s fidelity to the relationship are questioned, or responsibility for the wellbeing of the relational other is in question. | **Threat Example**:  
Hearing that a valued colleague and friend is underperforming and his job may be in jeopardy.  

**Relational Identity Lie Example**:  
“Bob has been having issues at home recently; we should help cover his load.” |

| **Personal Identity**  
(self as referent)  
*Undermined Identity Motives: Positive distinctiveness self-consistency and self-enhancement* | **Personal Identity Threat**: Not demonstrating competence in specific skills and abilities the individual believes are self-defining or are expected in one’s work environment | **Threat Example**:  
A programmer not finishing a PERL (software programming language) module on time for a colleague because programmer is not up-to-date with latest changes in the language.  

**Personal Identity Lie Example**:  
“The server was down last night for maintenance so I didn’t get to run my code through testing. I will get it to you later today.” |
FIGURE 1
An Identity-Based Model of Lying in Organizations

Factors that increase threat sensitivity:
- Identification (+)
- Chronic Self-Identity (+)
- Social Identity Complexity (-)

Characteristics of audience:
- Prototypical of threatened identity (+) (Prop 8)
- “Antithetical” identities (+) (Prop 9)
- Shared loosely-coupled alternative identities (-) (Prop 10)
- Shared tightly-coupled alternative identities (+) (Prop 11)

Potential threats to:
1. Personal identity
2. Relational identity
3. Collective identity

Goals of:
1. Positive distinctiveness/self-enhancement
2. Personalized belonging/self-expansion
3. Depersonalized belonging/uncertainty reduction

Lies told to audience:
1. Personal lies (Prop 1)
2. Relational lies (Prop 2)
3. Collective lies (Prop 3)

Intractability

Failed identity turnover (Prop 5)
Failed search for quitting information (Prop 7)
Failed identity work (Prop 12)

Internalization of a proscription against lying in to personal identity (Prop 12)
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