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# FORGONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN: TOWARD A THEORY OF FORGONE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

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**Through an inductive, qualitative study, I developed a process model of how people deal with professional identities they have forgone by choice or constraint. I show that, when forgone professional identities are linked to unfulfilled values, people look for ways to enact them and retain them in the self-concept. I further identify three strategies that people use to enact foregone professional identities: (1) *real enactment* (i.e., enacting the forgone identity through real activities and social interactions either at work or during leisure time), (2) *imagined enactment* (i.e., enacting the forgone identity through imagined activities and interactions, either in an alternate present or in the future), and (3) *vicarious enactment* (i.e., enacting the forgone identity by observing and imagining close others enacting it and internalizing these experiences). These findings expand our conceptualization of professional identity beyond identities enacted through activities and interactions that are part of formal work roles, and illuminate the key role of imagination and vicarious experiences in identity construction and maintenance.**

“From the tip of every branch, like a far purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn’t quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which of the figs I would

choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest.”

(Plath, 1971: 77)

The fig trees of contemporary careers have countless branches. Never before have people been so free to determine who they want to be (Baumeister, 1997), and the repertoire of potential professional identities they can envision for themselves seems limitless (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Schwartz, 2004; Twenge, 2006). This means that, increasingly, the number of professional identities that people forgo throughout their careers far outweighs the number of professional identities they actually hold. So how do people deal with these roads not taken? Do they eventually just forget them? Or do they continue to agonize over them, as Sylvia Plath implies?

Identity scholars largely agree with the former perspective. For example, classic theories of identity development, such as Erikson’s (1963, 1968, 1975) identity theory and Marcia’s (1966, 1980) ego identity status theory, explicitly state that committing to a chosen identity and forgetting the forgone alternatives is a necessary part of growing into mature, well-adjusted adults. Similarly, Yost, Strube, and Bailey’s (1992) evolutionary theory of identity sees identity development as a process of generating possible selves, selecting one, and discarding the others. Management studies of professional identity appear to have embraced the same perspective, albeit implicitly, since

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they have focused on the professional identities that people actually hold, and have shown little interest in the professional identities that people forgo (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006, 2009; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006).

Yet the very freedom and abundance of choice that make forgone identities more likely to exist also make them less likely to be forgotten. The more career options and the more freedom to choose among them, the higher the expectation of finding a career that expresses our “complete selves at work” (Kinjerski & Skrypnik, 2004: 27). When such ambitions collide with reality, people are prone to think about the parts of themselves they did not get to express and therefore to wonder about the identities they missed out on (Schwartz, 2004). Indeed, in the 1950s, studies asking “What would you do differently if you could live all over again?” showed that only about 40% of people had forgone options that they thought about frequently and over many years; since then, this percentage has increased steadily, reaching 70% in the 1980s, 90% in the 1990s, and virtually 100% in the 2000s (see Roesse & Summerville, 2005, for a meta-analysis). While some of these thoughts may be mere counterfactual musings, a recent theory paper argued that some forgone identities are so powerful and feature so prominently in people’s minds that they become internalized in the self-concept as “alternative selves”—images of who the person would have become by actualizing forgone identity options (Obodaru, 2012). Moreover, the paper theorized that alternative selves, though imaginary, can have a real impact on emotions, self-understanding, satisfaction with one’s career and life generally, and the motivation to make a career change.

This poses an intriguing puzzle: on the one hand, identity research assumes that people do not care much about the professional identities they missed out on; on the other hand, in a world where FOMO (i.e., “fear of missing out”) is an official word in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and a quintessential component of the zeitgeist, this assumption seems tenuous. This conundrum reveals a set of unanswered questions with substantial theoretical implications for identity research. Are some forgone identity options indeed retained in the self-concept? If so, *why* would people want to hold on to them? And *how* would they do so—how does one hold on to a professional identity without actually holding the associated work role? These are the research questions at the core of this paper.

To answer them, I conducted an inductive, qualitative study examining the forgone professional

identities of 380 individuals of various ages, occupations, and nationalities. I found that when forgone professional identities are linked to unfulfilled values, people do not forget them, but rather try to retain them in their self-concept, and therefore look for ways to enact them. I also found that people are remarkably resourceful when enacting forgone identities. Someone who never held a job as a professional musician, for instance, who knows full well that he or she will never be a professional musician, is not job crafting to include music, and does not have much leisure time to play music, *can still see himself or herself as a musician*, by imaginarily enacting this identity or by experiencing it vicariously through close others who enact it. The process model developed in this paper, explaining why and how people enact forgone professional identities, has important theoretical and practical implications.

In terms of theoretical implications, the model significantly changes our understanding of professional identity and identity enactment. First, the model urges identity scholars to look at the entire fig tree of a person’s career rather than just at the branches representing the work roles the person actually takes on. Professional identity is currently conceptualized as an identity enacted through a formally held work role (Schein, 1978). But if people can define themselves not just through the identity options they actualize but also through those they forgo, then we need to expand our conceptualization of professional identity if we are to fully capture how people see themselves in relation to work. Second, the model urges identity scholars to take a closer look at how people use imaginary and vicarious processes to fuel and sustain their identities. Identity enactment is currently conceptualized as “acting out” an identity; that is, engaging in activities that manifest the identity and that allow it to be socially validated (Bartel & Dutton, 2001). The constructs of imagined and vicarious enactment developed in this paper suggest that restricting our understanding of identity enactment to real activities and interactions may have obscured some of the complexity and malleability with which people craft their sense of self.

In terms of practical implications, this paper offers advice on dealing with “the tyranny of freedom” (Schwartz, 2000) or “the tyranny of happiness” (Elliott, 2003) brought on by the abundance of career options and the pressure to “be all you can be” that pervades the Western world. When choice, chance, or circumstance push people onto one branch of their career fig tree and force them to relinquish the rest, it can be helpful to understand why they may

feel motivated to hold on to a forgone professional identity and how they might do so effectively.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### The Self-Concept, Selves, and Identities

The self-concept is a complex cognitive structure containing all of a person's self-representations (Higgins, 1996; Markus, 1977, 1983). The self-concept contains multiple selves, and each of these selves contains multiple identities (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Oyserman & James, 2009). First, the self-concept includes the *past self* (i.e., "Who I was"), the *current self* (i.e., "Who I am now"), *desired possible selves* (i.e., "Who I hope to become in the future"), *feared possible selves* (i.e., "Who I fear becoming in the future"), *ideal selves* ("Who I would ideally want to be"), *ought selves* ("Who I think I should be"), and *alternative selves* ("Who I would have been if something in the past had happened differently") (Albert, 1977; Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Obodaru, 2012). Second, each of these selves can contain *personal identities* (i.e., idiosyncratic characteristics and personality traits), *social identities* (i.e., social categories and groups to which the person belongs), and *role identities* (i.e., social roles the person holds) (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

### Identities and Roles

Management studies of professional identity have drawn primarily from identity theory (Stryker, 1980, 1987, 2008; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1982, 1994), and have defined "professional identity" as the set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which a person defines herself or himself *in a work role* (Schein, 1978; emphasis added). According to identity theory, roles and identities are inextricably linked. Rooted in symbolic interactionism (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), this theoretical perspective views roles and identities as two sides of a coin, with roles looking outward toward the social structure, and identities looking inward toward the self-definitions tied with a role (Barley, 1989). In fact, in identity theory, identity is often referred to as "role-identity," to emphasize the "intimate relationship between role and identity" (Stryker & Serpe, 1982: 206). A "role-identity" is an internalized set of self-representations linked to a specific social role (e.g., occupational, organizational, or family role); in essence "a role-identity provides a definition of self-in-role" (Ashforth, 2001: 6).

A person's multiple identities are arranged in a salience hierarchy; the higher its rank within this hierarchy, the more important that identity is to the person and the more likely it is that the person will try to enact that identity in as many situations as possible (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Studies confirm that people rank their identities in order of importance (e.g., Callero, 1985; Deaux, 1991), and that this ranking is influenced by and influences enactment (e.g., Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Thoits, 2012). According to identity theory, therefore, the key building block of identity construction and maintenance is enactment.

### Identity Enactment

"Identity enactment" refers to "acting out" an identity, or claiming the identity by engaging in behaviors that conform to role expectations and that allow the identity to become manifest; if others who observe these behaviors grant the person's identity claim, the person can internalize the identity and see it as self-defining (Bartel & Dutton, 2001). The assumption that an identity can only be sustained through enactment pervades identity studies. For example, people need to compete in chess tournaments to sustain the professional identity of a chess player (Leifer, 1988), people have to enact their way to a new professional identity by trying out provisional versions of this identity (Ibarra, 1999), and people who want to be leaders must claim and be granted a leader identity by their followers (DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009). Enactment is the fuel without which identity engines simply do not work. If identity is the answer to the question "Who am I?" the answer is "I am who I enact."

This assumption implies that identities that are not currently enacted cannot be seen as currently self-descriptive. Professional identities held in the past are no longer enacted, and therefore cannot describe who the person is now (Ebaugh, 1988). Professional identities the person aspires to hold are not enacted yet, and so they are not self-descriptive either; the very notion that the person may hold a certain identity in the future implies that the person does not hold that identity now (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012). Finally, professional identities the person could have held but does not are also not currently self-descriptive, because they are not currently enacted (Obodaru, 2012). This is why identities that are part of past, possible, ideal, ought, and alternative selves have been conceptualized as *self-comparisons*; that is, aspects of the self that do *not*

currently define the person (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997; Obodaru, 2012). Their role is to provide an evaluative and interpretive context for understanding the current self (e.g., “How am I compared to the way I was?,” “How close am I to the person I aspire to be?”).

### A Restricted View of Professional Identity

The tight conceptual links between identities and roles, on the one hand, and identities and enactment, on the other hand, have restricted the way we understand and study professional identity as *an identity that people currently enact through activities and interactions that are part of their formal work role*. The vast majority of studies in our field adopt this view (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007; Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Koerner, 2014; Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006, 2009; Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012; Leavitt, Reynolds, Barnes, Schilpzand, & Hannah, 2012; Nelson & Irwin, 2014; Petriglieri, 2011, 2015; Pratt et al., 2006; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Thatcher & Zhu, 2006; Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2013).

Only a handful of studies go beyond the boundaries of this narrow conceptualization. Some studies, for instance, show that people can see a professional identity as currently self-descriptive even when they are not currently enacting it, as is the case of retirees and unemployed individuals who continue to define themselves through a past professional identity (e.g., Dorfman & Kolarik, 2005; Riach & Loretto, 2009). Other studies show that professional identities can be enacted through activities performed at work but that are not part of a formal work role, as is the case of people enacting their professional identity by displaying personal artifacts at work (e.g., Byron & Laurence, 2015; Elsbach, 2003). To expand our understanding of professional identity we need to build on these findings and systematically study identities that are seen as currently self-descriptive professional identities even though they are not currently enacted through activities and interactions that are part of formal work roles.

### Forgone Professional Identities

One such direction is to examine identities attached to forgone work roles. If we adopt a restricted conceptualization of professional identity, forgoing

a work role implies that the person cannot construct a professional identity attached to it. To illustrate, when people forgo a career in music, they cannot enact this identity in a formal work role and therefore cannot see themselves as professional musicians. However, if we are willing to expand our conceptualization of professional identity, we remain open to the possibility that, even when people do not hold a certain work role, they may be able to hold the identity attached to it. For example, people may enact a musician identity by crafting their current jobs to include music, or they may play music in their free time. Initial support for this possibility is offered by Berg et al.'s (2010) study of “unanswered callings,” which found that people try to incorporate occupations they feel drawn to pursue but chose not to into their work through job crafting and into their free time through leisure crafting. Similarly, Vogel, Rodell, and Lynch (2016) showed that employees who experience a lack of value fit with their employer cope by engaging in job and leisure crafting. Whether job and leisure crafting can actually allow people to enact an identity and see it as self-defining, however, remains an open question, as is the question of whether job and leisure crafting are the only means of enacting a forgone professional identity.

The forgone professional identities that are enacted and therefore retained in the self-concept would be retained as part of alternative selves (Obodaru, 2012). This component of the self-concept comprises all the self-representations of who a person would have been if something in the past had happened differently, including the self-representations of who the person would have become by taking on a forgone work role. In other words, alternative selves can comprise forgone professional identities, along with other types of forgone identities, such as identities related to personal roles. The theory paper that introduced the construct of alternative selves did not fully address the question of what motivates people to retain images of who they might have been in their self-concept. Moreover, Obodaru (2012) conceptualizes alternative selves as self-comparisons, leaving open the question of whether they may serve other functions besides providing a benchmark for the current self. The current study not only provides a first empirical look at alternative selves, but also addresses these unanswered questions.

### METHODS

In this study, I adopted a grounded theory approach to analyzing qualitative data, for two reasons.

First, this research design is highly appropriate for generating new theory (Dey, 1999; Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Locke, 2001). Second, forgone professional identities are subjective self-representations, precisely the type of phenomena for which grounded theory is most suited (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), as its purpose is not to test hypotheses about an objective reality but to generate theoretical insights about how people subjectively interpret reality (Suddaby, 2006).

The data consisted of 347 responses to an open-ended survey question and 33 in-depth semi-structured interviews. The survey study, originally conducted for a different purpose, provided an unexpected insight, which then spurred the collection of additional data through interviews. I describe these two components of the data separately; however, following the model pioneered by Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006, 2009), in analyzing the data, I treated the two components as one unified dataset rather than as two separate studies, because the interviews built on the theme I initially saw in the survey responses, thus providing richer descriptions of the same phenomenon of interest.

### Survey Data

The first component of the data consisted of 347 responses to an open-ended survey question. The original purpose of this study was to test hypotheses linking the comparison between alternative selves and current selves to outcomes such as career and life satisfaction. Since I wanted to test these hypotheses on a diverse sample, I used Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT; [www.mturk.com](http://www.mturk.com)).<sup>1</sup> All respondents were based in the United States, 65% of them were women, and their age varied from 17 to 69, with the average being 32 years old. Respondents varied in terms of education (55% held a bachelor's degree or higher) and employment: 60% were employed (e.g., IT manager, nurse, legal secretary, teacher, accountant), 11% were self-employed (e.g., freelance graphic designer, piano studio

owner, glass artist), and 29% were unemployed (full-time students, homemakers, and retirees).

Respondents were asked to describe their alternative selves (see question 2 in Appendix A).<sup>2</sup> Seventeen respondents (approximately 5%) reported that they had no alternative self. Typical responses included: "I have no such image about how my life could have been different," "My career would probably be the same as I do enjoy working with the insurance company I am currently with," and "I do not have an image of an alternative life." The other 330 participants provided descriptions of their alternative selves; these responses generated 101 pages of double-spaced text.

Although the original hypotheses focused on alternative selves serving as comparison points for current selves, while reading these responses, an unexpected theme grabbed my attention: alternative selves seemed to also serve another function—namely, to allow the person to retain in their self-concept and to see as currently self-descriptive professional identities they had forgone. The idea that a person who does not occupy a certain work role could still internalize the associated role identity was intriguing. To verify this emerging insight, a research assistant and I independently performed an initial coding to see how many alternative selves contained forgone professional identities, and found that 52% of them did.<sup>3</sup> I thus decided to pursue this theme further. This initial coding also suggested that gender and occupation might affect the forgone professional identities that people are likely to have. For example, participants who had forgone ambitious careers for the sake of their family were all women, and many of the participants who had forgone financially rewarding careers were currently

<sup>2</sup> The remaining questions were not included in the analyses for this paper; they were numerical questions that probed the importance of alternative selves (e.g., "On a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), please indicate how much you agree with the statement 'I often think about this alternative self'"), the comparison between them and current selves (e.g., "On a scale ranging from 1 (*much worse*) to 5 (*much better*), how does your life overall compare with the life you would have if you had become your alternative self?"), and participants' job, career, and life satisfaction.

<sup>3</sup> The overall percentage of agreement between myself and the research assistant was 95%. The other 48% of alternative selves were focused on personal relationships (e.g., "If I had married someone else"), health (e.g., "If I had not gotten sick"), or traumatic events (e.g., "If I had not gotten into an accident").

<sup>1</sup> AMT has been shown to be a reliable subject pool for social science research (Behrend, Sharek, Meade, & Wiebe, 2011; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). For examples of recent published articles using data collected through AMT, see Adam, Obodaru, and Galinsky (2015), Adam and Shirako (2013), Duffy and Autin (2013), Hennes, Nam, Stern, and Jost (2012), Lewis and Bates (2011), and van Wolferen, Inbar, and Zeelenberg (2013).

working in creative professions. Consequently, in selecting interviewees, I used these two dimensions as an initial basis for theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### Interview Data

The purpose of the second wave of data collection was to probe deeper into this emerging theme. I decided to perform in-depth semi-structured interviews, as they are particularly effective at uncovering people's sense of self and identity (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). I enrolled the help of the general manager of a Romanian headhunting company and asked her to randomly select from the company's résumé database 20 people who varied in terms of gender and occupation. Following the model adopted by Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006, 2009), I thus combined "theoretical sampling" (in that I sampled participants who varied in gender and occupation because the first wave of data collection suggested that these dimensions might be relevant to theory building) and "random sampling" (to alleviate bias in the selection process and examine the perspectives of a variety of people, which helps build "ecological validity"; Lee, 1999: 152). A company representative invited these 20 people to participate in a research study about identity; all of them agreed to be interviewed. After this second round of data collection, I engaged in another round of data analysis. Since several interviewees attributed forgoing work they were passionate about to living in a developing country, in the third round of data collection, I sampled interviewees with a variety of nationalities. I conducted this third round at a European business school, approaching doctoral students, faculty, and staff members through a mix of personal contacts and cold calls. All the people I contacted agreed to be interviewed. The final sample consisted of 33 people (16 men and 17 women) who varied in terms of age (from 21 to 67; the average age was 35) and nationality (American, Brazilian, British, Dutch, Indian, Iranian, Irish, Romanian, South African, and Spanish), and who worked in a wide range of occupations, including academia, accounting, administration, consulting, human resources (HR), IT, marketing, and psychotherapy. Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics of this sample.

The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was designed to develop the insight I had glimpsed from the survey responses, by focusing on alternative selves constructed around forgone professional

identities. I started by asking interviewees to tell me about their career trajectories so far. I then focused on the key career forks-in-the-road they had described, and asked whether they thought about the work roles and professional identities they had forgone. I used a series of questions to verify whether the forgone professional identity an interviewee provided was indeed part of an alternative self and not a spontaneously generated counterfactual (e.g., I asked how frequently they thought about it, how important it was to their sense of self, and if they talked about it with others). Nine interviewees (around 27%) mentioned two forgone professional identities, and I asked them to focus on the most important one. Six interviewees (about 18%) did not have an alternative self constructed around a forgone professional identity; they described forgoing a certain work role, but they rarely thought about it and felt it had no significance for their sense of self. In the final stage of the interview, I asked interviewees about their future career plans. Apart from this structured portion, which allowed for standardized comparisons across interviewees, I also asked additional questions to pursue interesting comments in more detail. For instance, whenever an interviewee mentioned daydreaming about their forgone professional identity, I asked broad follow-up questions (e.g., "Can you tell me more about this?"). All interviews were conducted face to face and, with one exception, were tape-recorded and transcribed (and, when necessary, translated into English); in the remaining case, the tape recorder malfunctioned so I took notes during the interview. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 2 hours, with an average of 53 minutes, and generated 394 double-spaced pages of text.

### Data Analysis

I followed the procedure for developing grounded theory outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and refined by them and others (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2008; Glaser, 1978; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I started by constructing memos based on a list of broad codes, which matched the open, exploratory study design (e.g., "has/does not have an alternative self," "functions of the alternative self"). The memos included portions of the data and their assigned codes, as well as notes with my reflections on these emergent codes. At this stage, several insights caught my attention, such as that the forgone professional identities at the core of alternative selves were seen as linked to specific values. Moreover, I started noticing

**TABLE 1**  
**Demographics of the Interviewees**

Interviewee	Age	Nationality	Current professional identity	Forgone professional identity
Adele	21	Romanian	Receptionist (HR services)	Teacher
Kate	22	Romanian	Sales representative (Consulting)	Psychotherapist
Alice	23	Romanian	Psychotherapist (Private practice)	Consultant
Adam	24	Romanian	Consultant (Consulting)	Clinical psychologist
Emma	25	Romanian	HR assistant (Manufacturing)	Teacher for children with special needs
Sadie	25	Romanian	Client service representative (Advertising)	Psychotherapist
Vera	26	Romanian	HR manager (HR services)	Fashion designer
Jane	27	Irish	Research staff (University)	Field agent for a humanitarian organization
Kevin	27	Iranian	Doctoral student	Bank employee
Max	28	Romanian	Marketing manager (IT services)	Anthropologist
Andrew	28	American	Doctoral student	Rhodes scholar
Sam	31	Romanian	Accountant (Consulting)	Farmer
Josh	31	Romanian	Logistics supervisor (Public administration)	Manager/University graduate
Nora	31	American	Doctoral student	Musician
Henry	32	Romanian	IT director (IT services)	Basketball player
Erin	32	Romanian	HR manager (Consulting)	Psychotherapist
James	32	Spanish	Postdoctoral fellow	Engineer
Spencer	33	Indian	Doctoral student	Professional cricket player
Noah	33	Brazilian	Doctoral student	Computer programmer
Jen	33	Spanish	Postdoctoral fellow	Writer
Lucy	34	Romanian	HR manager (Pharmaceuticals)	Teacher
George	37	Romanian	HR manager (Consumer goods)	Consultant
Oliver	38	Romanian	National sales manager (Pharmaceuticals)	Doctor
Evelyn	38	Romanian	Marketing manager (Pharmaceuticals)	Doctor
Olivia	38	Romanian	Hospital manager	Doctor
Audrey	39	Romanian	HR manager (Advertising)	Doctor
David	40	Romanian	Coordinator (Public administration)	Academic
Peter	44	South African	Program director (University)	Entrepreneur, non-profit organization
Vivian	48	American	Research staff (University)	Lawyer
Julia	48	British	Faculty assistant (University)	Writer
Rose	52	Romanian	Financial controller (Bank)	Judge
Jack	66	Dutch	Faculty	Biologist
Mark	67	American	Faculty	CEO of family business

that participants employed various strategies to keep their forgone identities alive, and that some of these strategies did not entail enacting the identity through activities and social interactions, but rather day-dreaming about the identity and experiencing it vicariously. I re-coded the data with these themes in mind. For example, I extracted all the portions of data describing values linked to forgone professional identities. The size of these portions of data varied from short paragraphs to entire pages of text; as a rule, I erred on the side of inclusiveness so as to capture the richness of the context surrounding a conceptual category. I constantly compared newly coded text with previously coded text (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Throughout this process, I entered every new code and its meaning into an emergent coding dictionary that guided and facilitated subsequent rounds of coding. Whenever a new dimension emerged, I went back to the data to search for evidence of it.

Following Elsbach (2003), Hollensbe, Khazanchi, and Masterson (2008), and Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz (2004), I used the threshold of two instances in separate interviews to decide whether to include a conceptual category in the analysis, a threshold low enough not to exclude a viable category but high enough to avoid including an idiosyncratic phenomenon mentioned by a single interviewee. I performed ten rounds of coding, constantly moving between the data and the emergent set of conceptual categories to make sure the emerging theory accurately captured the phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During data analysis, I read on a broad range of topics (e.g., identity, careers, mental simulations, vicarious experiences) to identify how existing research can refine the theoretical insights emerging from the data, and how these insights might contribute to existing research.

Determining theoretical saturation is a difficult process, based on “a combination of the empirical



limits of the data, the integration and density of the theory and the analyst's theoretical sensitivity" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 62). I based my assessment of saturation on the following signal: in the later coding iterations, no new codes were added to the dictionary based on the last five interviews, suggesting I had reached a point where additional data did not necessarily provide additional insight but rather a repetition and confirmation of existing insights (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis evolved from a theory of alternative selves as a vehicle for retaining forgone professional identities in the self-concept to a broader process model of how people deal with their forgone professional identities. Once the model was finalized, I went through the data one last time to systematically and thoroughly look for confirming and disconfirming evidence for it, and to ensure that no relevant codes were missed. Also, to check the reliability of the coding procedure, I asked two research assistants to code the interview data. The overall percentage of agreement was 81%. Table 2 presents the data structure, including first-order codes (the ideas expressed by participants), second-order codes (the emergent abstract concepts), and the aggregate themes.

## FINDINGS

I present the findings using the two-order approach developed by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012), which includes both first-order data (i.e., the survey participants and interviewees' own words) and second-order data (i.e., the concepts and relations I abstracted from the first-order data). I start by summarizing the theoretical model, then define the novel constructs of forgone work role and forgone professional identity, and, finally, I go through each step of the model in detail, interweaving the two orders throughout (i.e., outlining the model while simultaneously using thick description from the data to illustrate it). All participants' names are pseudonyms.

### Summary of the Model

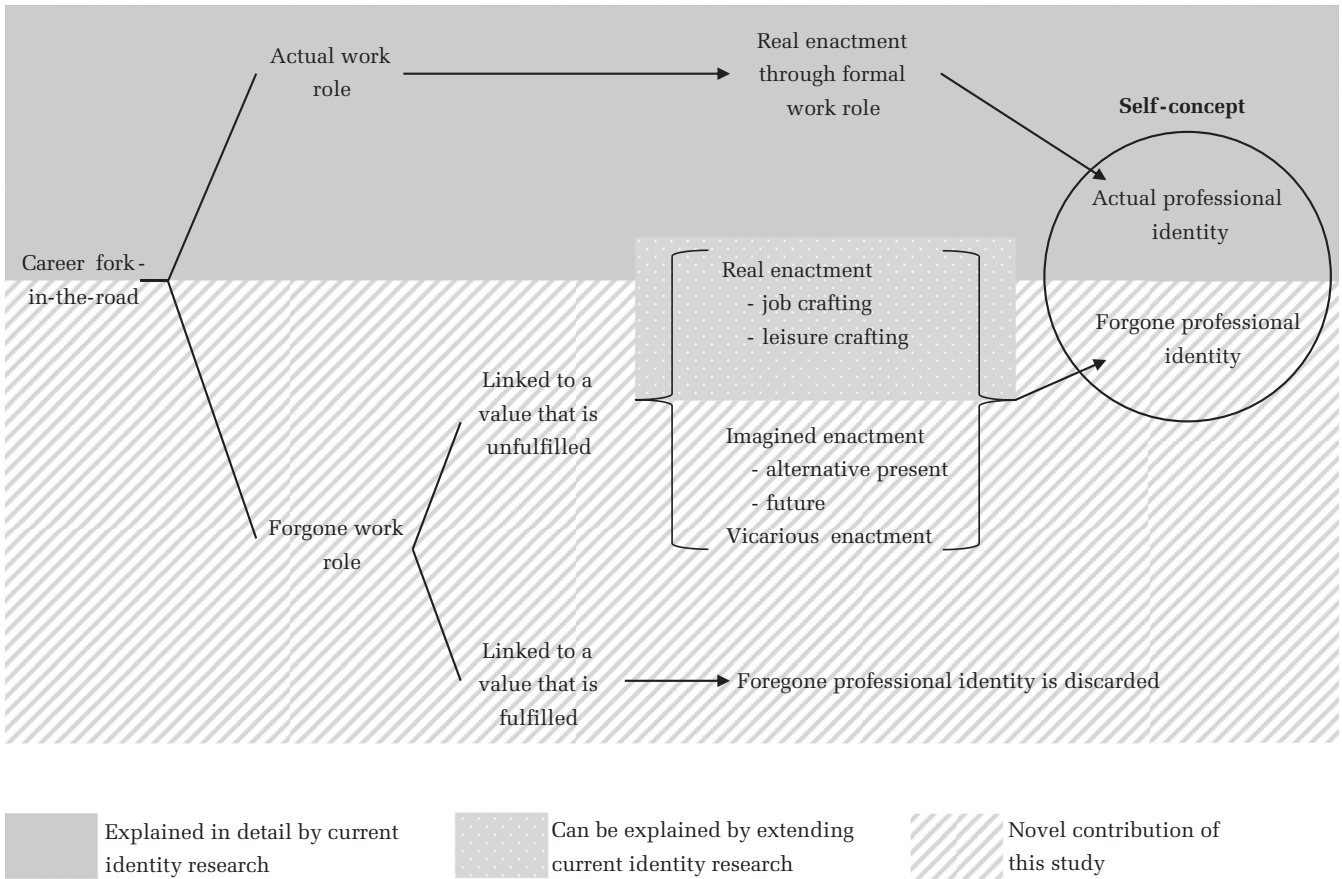
Figure 1 illustrates the model and shows which of its elements can be explained by existing research and which elements are novel and represent the key contributions of this study.

The starting event in the model is a career fork-in-the-road, when people take on a certain work role

**TABLE 2**  
**Data Structure**

First-order Codes	Second-order Codes	Aggregate Themes
Who the person would be in a forgone work role seen as adventurous, risky, nonconformist	Forgone professional identity linked to openness to change values	<b>Forgone professional identity</b>
Who the person would be in a forgone work role seen as safe and conventional	Forgone professional identity linked to conservation values	
Who the person would be in a work role seen as oriented toward helping others	Forgone professional identity linked to self-transcendence values	
Who the person would be in a forgone work role seen as high status and/or financially rewarding	Forgone professional identity linked to self-enhancement values	
The value attached to the forgone professional identity is currently unfulfilled	Unfulfilled values	<b>Motivation to enact a forgone professional identity</b>
Sadness, pain, fear, frustration, melancholy, confusion, restlessness, etc., experienced when thinking about letting go of the forgone identity or when attempts to hold on to a forgone professional identity are thwarted	Negative emotions	
Crafting one's job to include activities and interactions that enact the forgone professional identity	Real enactment	<b>Enactment of a forgone professional identity</b>
Enacting the forgone professional identity as a hobby	Imagined enactment	
Daydreaming about enacting the forgone professional identity in an alternate present		
Daydreaming about enacting the forgone professional identity in the future		
Observing and imagining close others enact the forgone professional identity and internalizing their experience	Vicarious enactment	

**FIGURE 1**  
**Process Model of Letting Go of and Holding on to Forgone Professional Identities**



and forgo another. While some people devote less and less thought to the forgone work role, others continue to think about it and long to find ways of enacting the identity attached to it. The difference lies in the values linked to the forgone professional identity: people can easily let go of forgone identities linked to values that are fulfilled, but, when a forgone identity is linked to an important value that is unfulfilled, people will search for strategies to bring this identity to life. Unsurprisingly, one strategy consists of enacting the forgone identity through real activities and social interactions, either by crafting one’s job to include such activities and interactions or by engaging in such activities and interactions during one’s leisure time. Beyond this *real enactment*, however, people also engage in *imagined enactment* and *vicarious enactment*: they can imagine themselves enacting the forgone identity in an alternate present, they can imagine themselves enacting it in the future, or they can observe and imagine close others enacting

it, and these fantasies and vicarious experiences are sufficiently strong to make the forgone identity feel real and self-descriptive. People can employ one or several of these enactment strategies, changing course over time. I present below three typical examples of participants who had experienced this process.

Alice had worked for several years in consulting, and, despite her success, came to a fork-in-the-road moment when she decided to change careers and become a psychotherapist:

In the last month on the job, I had record sales, all my projects went great, everything was perfect. Except I knew I had to follow my calling ... I felt that things were not OK and that I simply had to try ... This was my dream, I wanted to do something, anything that relates to psychotherapy ... Making the decision ... seemed highly impractical, I was giving up a career and a salary ... Almost everybody I talked to told me this was a bad idea ... It was terribly hard to give up a successful path, that was an important part of me,

the ambitious successful young business professional; but then there was this other side of me that also needed to be expressed.

Alice was happy with this decision, had no regrets, and had “full motivation and determination” toward developing her professional identity as a psychotherapist. And yet, she found herself thinking more and more about the forgone option of continuing to develop her consulting career and the “ambitious successful young business professional” identity that came with it. At first, she tried to shrug off these thoughts, but they became increasingly frequent and intense:

During the first week or so after quitting my job, I was thinking about this a lot, but, every time such a thought came into my mind, I would push it away, I tried to think of something else, so I clearly tried to put boundaries around it, I thought “not this week.” After that, it started growing in intensity. At the beginning, I thought, “this is what I want to do, I won’t think of anything else,” but then, little by little, these thoughts became more intense.

At the time of the interview, more than one year after she had quit her consulting job, she was enacting her forgone consultant identity through leisure crafting and imagined enactment, which allowed her to feel that this identity was still self-descriptive: “That role was still a part of me, I guess it still is, I could not detach completely.”

At the time of the interview, Kevin was pursuing a PhD at a prestigious university. Because he had dreamed about this career for many years, he referred to the fork-in-the-road moment when he found out that he had been accepted as his “day of destiny.” The news had made him “so happy, very, very happy.” If he had not been accepted, he would have pursued a career in banking in his home country. He called this forgone professional identity “the second me,” and, two years into his PhD studies, he still thought about it “almost every day.” He described it as follows:

I would have been this very conservative guy. I would have become my dad, basically. I wouldn’t have seen so much of the world, I wouldn’t have seen so many people and so many ideas and different worldviews . . . I can imagine this other guy could have been happier, could have forgotten about all this, go out, focus on life, get a wife, have children, spend time with my family, my mom and dad, you know, have actually real fun.

Along with pursuing his academic career, he was imaginarily enacting his conservative banker identity as well. He knew that this “second me . . . is not real, first, and it cannot be realized, second. It is a totally imaginary creature.” Nevertheless, this imaginary creature was part of his sense of self: “I live with it, it lives with me . . . I see that path, and I see my own path as well.”

Rose had always dreamed of becoming a judge:

Ever since I can remember, ever since I was a little girl, I always wanted to be a judge. I used to be a judge even as a kid, when I was playing with my friends, whenever there was a fight, my friends would call on me to arbitrate . . . So, as far as I could define myself at 18–19 years old, at this age you rarely know with clarity what you want, but I knew that I hated injustice with all my being . . . I may have been influenced by my father, who also wanted to fight for justice, he was very serious when he talked about injustices around us. I also lived through a time when there was a lot of injustice.

[*Note: Rose grew up in communist Romania.*]

She failed the law school admission exam, but then tried again the next year, and then the next: “I took the entrance exam for law school five years in a row, but always failed. I don’t know why, I studied so much.” She would have kept trying, as “my inner structure has a lot of ambition,” but she eventually decided to forgo her dream for the sake of her family: “I finally gave up because I had started a family, and so I needed to be practical . . . I found a job in a company as a stenographer.” She loved her children a great deal, but she was “bitterly disappointed” about not having realized her dream. At the time of the interview, almost 30 years after the fork-in-the-road moment when she had decided to forgo the option of becoming a judge, she was still holding onto this forgone identity through imagined enactment. Asked if she regretted not becoming a judge, she responded:

Yes, absolutely. But this has always been a part of me anyway. I wish it had become my profession, because I know I would have been very good at it. It’s strange, I know, but for some reason I know I would have been good at it . . . My whole life this has been an obsession for me and it left a mark on the way I see the world.

The model that emerged from the data describes the process these participants went through in trying to hold on to a forgone professional identity and explains why they did so and how. Before articulating the model, it is first necessary to define the novel

constructs of “forgone work role” and “forgone professional identity.”

**Forgone Work Role and Forgone Professional Identity**

I define a “forgone work role” as any work role (i.e., an occupation or a specific job) that a person could have formally held but decided or was forced to end or to forgo. I will use the three examples described above to illustrate each element of this definition. First, a forgone work role can be as broadly defined as an occupation (as was the case for Rose) or as narrowly defined as a specific job in a specific organization (as was the case for Alice). Second, a forgone work role can be forgone either by choice (Alice and Kevin) or because of an external event (Rose). Third, a forgone work role can refer to a role that was never formally occupied (Rose and Kevin) or to a past role that was discontinued (Alice). Figure 2 depicts this last distinction further, by illustrating the possible combinations of past, current, and forgone work roles that can result from a career fork-in-the-road.

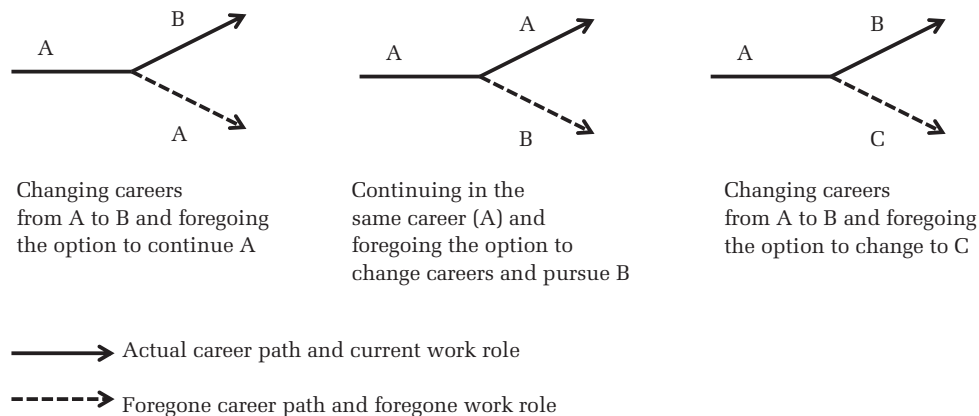
Building on Schein’s (1978) definition of professional identity, I define “forgone professional identity” as the set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which a person defines herself or himself in a forgone work role. For example, Alice’s forgone professional identity was the “ambitious successful young business professional” who continued to advance in her consulting career, Kevin’s was the “very conservative” bank employee, and Rose’s was the person who became a judge “to fight for justice.”

As explained in the literature review, forgone professional identities are the work-related components of alternative selves (Obodaru, 2012). Alternative selves can include both work related and non-work related forgone identities; for example, Kevin’s alternative self contained a forgone professional identity as a bank employee along with several forgone identities related to family (i.e., he would have likely been a husband, a father, and a son who spent more time with his parents). Alternative selves do not necessarily include a forgone professional identity; some may be entirely comprised of personal role identities (e.g., “If I had married someone else. . .”). The construct of alternative self is thus broader and subsumes that of forgone professional identity.

**Values Linked to Forgone Professional Identities**

When Alice, Kevin, Rose, and the other participants who had held on to their forgone professional identities described these identities, when they explained why they could not let go of them, and when they recounted why they had considered pursuing their forgone work roles to begin with, their stories were filled with references to values. “Values” are broad, trans-situational goals that drive the attitudes and behaviors of most people across cultures (Schwartz, 1992). The values that participants linked with their forgone professional identities fell neatly into Schwartz’s (1992) typology of four universal values: (1) openness to change, (2) conservation, (3) self-enhancement, and (4) self-transcendence. *Openness to change values* emphasize independence, curiosity, and adventure; *conservation values* emphasize conformity, safety,

**FIGURE 2**  
**Past, Current, and Forgone Work Roles**



and resistance to change; *self-enhancement values* emphasize achievement, power, and pursuing one's own interests; and *self-transcendence values* emphasize altruism, benevolence, and caring for others. Below, I provide examples of how participants saw these values reflected in their forgone professional identities.

**Forgone professional identities linked to openness to change values.** Forgone identities linked to openness to change values were based on forgone work roles perceived as risky and adventurous (such as starting an entrepreneurial venture or a job in a foreign country). As Adele put it, these forgone professional identities captured the “explorer, adventurous, learning, and growing side.” For example, Nora had been passionate about music from an early age:

I started dancing at age 3, I started playing piano at age 4, I started singing at age 3. And, outside of school, that's pretty much what I did growing up. I participated in conservatory competitions with the piano, and, in dance, I took many lessons, ballet, modern, I had recitals and things like that . . . But I made a conscious decision I would not do it for a living . . . Particularly when you . . . come from a family where you grow up a certain social class, your parents want you to do something practical with your life . . . Being financially independent is important to me.

Although she had decided to forego pursuing a career in music, she was unable to let go of her musician identity and struggled to find ways of making it “a more central part of my life.”

**Forgone professional identities linked to conservation values.** Forgone identities linked to conservation values were based on forgone work roles seen as safe and conventional, as illustrated by Kevin. Similarly, James had made an occupational choice that was seen as highly eccentric:

All the people said the same . . . if you are good at school, you have to be an engineer or something that will help you make a living. . . . I wanted to study fine arts or philosophy, and people were saying “but for what?” So . . . in Spain, to study what you want, you need good grades; if you have a 9, you can go to engineering school, and if you have a 5, you can go to philosophy university, where nobody wants to go. So, if you have a 9, you have to go to engineering, even if you don't like it, because everybody is like “oh, you have a 9, you have to go to engineering,” especially if you are a man. If you are a woman, you go to law school . . . And philosophy is like, it's empty, you

study philosophy, you are going to work as a waiter or cleaning the streets.

Nonetheless, he had decided to go off the beaten path and got a PhD in the philosophy of art. His forgone identity captured the person he would have been if he had conformed to everyone's expectations, “the other part of me,” the traditionalist with an engineering career:

If I did what all the people around me expected, I would be living in my old village doing the same thing every day. All of my friends do that . . . All of them live in the same village, they go drink coffee in the same bar we used to go to 20 years ago . . . They won't understand my thesis or things like that . . . They know the other part of me . . . If I had stayed, I think I would be a different person . . . Life would have been simpler . . . But . . . I need to move, travel, see the world.

**Forgone professional identities linked to self-transcendence values.** Forgone identities linked to self-transcendence values were based on forgone work roles seen as oriented toward helping others (such as doctor, teacher, social worker, or police officer). In the words of Max, these forgone identities were “oriented towards others, towards social problems.” For example, Emma explained that, “I score very high on altruism in personality tests, and I would like to make a difference, to have the satisfaction of knowing that I have changed someone's destiny.” The fork-in-the-road in her career came when, fresh out of university, she had to choose between “a job specialized in psycho-pedagogy in dealing with children with special needs” and “an offer from an HR company.” Primarily for financial reasons, she had decided to accept the latter. Her forgone professional identity was the unrealized potential, the “person who could coordinate a center for children from poor backgrounds”:

There are several potentialities within us, only one part gets realized, and we tend to define ourselves only through that. . . . And yet, even though my work persona is very coherent and I see the direction for development, there is also in me the person who could coordinate a center for children from poor backgrounds.

**Forgone professional identities linked to self-enhancement values.** Forgone identities linked to self-enhancement values were based on forgone work roles seen as ambitious, financially rewarding, and high status (as illustrated by Alice). They represented, as Max put it, “more selfish motivations.” For example, Andrew had gotten very close to

receiving a Rhodes scholarship—he got to the last round of interviews in the selection process. This scholarship had been extremely important to him: “Short of my parents’ love, nothing else meant more to me”:

If you win it, you get two years at Oxford, two years on whatever you want to study at Oxford, they pay your tuition, they pay your living expenses. But, more than that, it’s so prestigious that you basically are almost guaranteed a job in any high-status firm, high-status school, and so it’s a really big deal. If you get that, it can really shape your life . . . If you worked in international development and policy, it’s this automatic mark that helps open so many doors, not just in terms of getting into schools, but getting jobs, getting internships, all kinds of things are available. And your network is unparalleled at that point . . . I’m not saying it’s little league [*referring to his current job*], but it’s, like, the impact that you can have is so much smaller.

### Motivation to Enact a Forgone Professional Identity

Values featured prominently in participants’ accounts of why they wanted to hold on to their forgone professional identities. Specifically, participants were unable or unwilling to let go of forgone identities that were linked to *unfulfilled values*, because they saw these identities as embodying something they wanted and did not have. Their accounts were highly emotionally charged, and they described an array of *negative emotions* they experienced whenever they even considered letting go of such a forgone identity. Below, I present examples to illustrate how participants placed values at the core of their motivation to hold on to a forgone identity, and how they described the emotional component of this motivation.

**Unfulfilled values.** Participants who rarely thought about their forgone professional identities saw these identities as linked to values that were fulfilled through their current professional identities. In contrast, participants who had retained their forgone professional identities saw these identities as linked to values that were unfulfilled. To illustrate this distinction, I describe below two participants with similar career forks-in-the-road and similar forgone identities; one was motivated to retain this forgone identity, the other was not.

Both Oliver and Olivia had planned to become doctors and had attended medical school. For both, the doctor identity was related to self-transcendence values. As Oliver explained, “I think, for me, this

interest for medicine is related, on the one hand, to a larger interest in science, and, on the other hand, with a humanist orientation and a desire to do good.” Similarly, Olivia said, “I wanted to become a doctor in order to help people, and I have been doing that since I was 14 years old, I went to a nursing high-school.” For both, however, being a doctor became a forgone professional identity, by choice. While attending medical school, Oliver started working in pharmaceutical sales, a decision he described as “purely financial.”<sup>4</sup>

It was a very hard decision to make. At the foundation of it there was clearly a financial reason . . . And an important trigger was the fact that the general manager of the pharma company had a great intuition, he felt that I was going through doubts, he “read” me, so he gave me a perk I was not supposed to have yet, namely a company car. He felt I was making a decision, and he knew a 25-year-old boy will respond to a free brand new car. I was indeed very impressed . . . The final decision of staying in pharma was very difficult emotionally. . . . It was a turmoil that lasted a year and a half.

Olivia also abandoned her medical career to focus on hospital management; importantly, however, she saw this career change as an opportunity to better fulfill her self-transcendence values:

When you say you want to leave medicine for something else, people’s reaction is very strong; your family, friends, are all shocked . . . The pressure, at least in the first month, was enormous. My husband threatened to divorce me. But I knew what I wanted very clearly . . . Having had the chance to study the health care system, both the public and the private one, I concluded that, until the system is improved, I won’t be able to help people the way I want to. So I wanted to go into management, so that I could help more people at once, not just ten or so patients a day.

At the time of the interviews, both Oliver and Olivia were highly successful in their chosen careers: he, the national sales manager for a top pharmaceutical company; she, the head of a private hospital. Yet only Olivia felt that she had fulfilled her self-transcendence values, and this allowed her to let go of her forgone identity: “I am a manager” is how she defined herself. Asked if she ever thought about her forgone doctor identity, she shook her head and said simply: “It’s not my

<sup>4</sup> In Romania at the time of the interviews, doctors did not earn high salaries.

profession anymore.” In contrast, for Oliver, self-transcendence values were unfulfilled. He saw his current professional identity as linked to self-enhancement rather than to self-transcendence; as he repeated throughout the interview, he felt he had “sold out for financial advantages.” Unlike Olivia, therefore, he could not let go of his forgone identity as a doctor, and, even though almost 20 years had passed since the “turmoil” of his decision to leave medicine, he was still trying to find ways to avoid “giving up a part of myself, the image I formed of who I would become . . . if I had remained in medicine.”

As long as the value linked to a forgone professional identity was unfulfilled, participants wanted to hold on to this identity. As soon as the value became fulfilled through the current professional identity, this motivation diminished. An illustration of this evolution is provided by Spencer, who had forgone his dream of becoming a professional cricket player:

I played professional cricket. I played mostly in school. I then went to the World Series. I played professionally for 4 years, since I was 14 until I was 18. That was a decision that had social interdependencies written all over it; you know, my family said, “sport is not going to take you that far in life, it’s time to do something more educational, you should pay more attention to your studies.”

For several years, he had difficulty letting go of this forgone identity: “I was too young at that stage, so I don’t exactly remember, but the feeling couldn’t have been too positive, you know, you dream of being a cricket star.” To hold on to his forgone identity, he employed leisure crafting: “Cricket was one of my favorite pastimes.” At the time of the interview, however, he was preparing to move to a foreign country for a faculty position at a prestigious university. He was extremely happy with his career and saw his current professional identity as fulfilling all his important values, including the openness to change values he attached to cricket. Consequently, he rarely thought of his forgone identity anymore: “I don’t think about it . . . The past can be used for learning, but thinking ‘what if’ is more for the future.”

**Negative emotions.** The motivation to hold on to a forgone identity had a strong emotional component. This emotional component was visible in the data in two ways. First, participants described a host of negative emotions they feared they would experience if they let go of their forgone identity. For

example, Adele said that, “If I give up entirely the developmental side of me I would become very bored with myself and incomplete.” This perception was echoed by Kate, who stated that she needed “the link with more esoteric issues” that her forgone identity provided in order “to be okay with myself.” As another example, Max described the feelings associated with thinking about letting go of his forgone identity as “a bit of a strange feeling, it’s like melancholy.” Jane described it as “almost like a fear thing.” Participants also mentioned sadness; for instance, Erin admitted, “It does make me sad sometimes,” and Kate said, “It’s sad to give up your passion.” Participants also mentioned frustration; for example, Henry said:

Basically, you dissolve . . . you leave a part of you there, and there, and there, and then you get to a point where you ask “who am I?” . . . My state was one of frustration, because I felt as though I have potential and I am not using it.

Second, participants described the negative emotions they experienced when their attempts to hold on to their forgone identities were thwarted. For example, Andrew used the term “struggle” to refer to his attempts to hold on to his forgone identity as a Rhodes scholar: “There’s no relationship between my life now and what my life would have been. So that’s why I struggle, because I believe that I could make my life closer to that.” For several years, he searched in vain for a career that would allow him to bring his forgone identity to life:

“If I were to tell you the number of alternative careers that I considered, then we would be here for ten hours . . . I’m the only person I know who’s taken, in the United States, every single graduate admission exam. So I’ve taken the one for medical school, I’ve taken the one for law school, I’ve taken the one for graduate school, the GRE, and I’ve even taken the GMAT.”

This unsuccessful struggle “caused a lot of confusion . . . I fundamentally was very restless.”

Following their career fork-in-the-road moments, participants usually thought that their forgone professional identities would simply fade away. Once they had forgone a work role, they expected that the professional identity associated with this role would no longer occupy their thoughts, and were surprised to find that this was not the case. As Alice, quoted above, recounted, even though “every time such a thought came into my mind, I would push it away . . . little by little these thoughts became more intense.” Similarly,

Noah described trying to distance himself from his forgone identity as a programmer and focus instead on his doctoral studies:

At some point, I could distance myself from it, when I just quit my job and I was really into learning more about psychology, so, for some period of time, I just cared about learning about psychology and behavior. But it came back.

Eventually, participants could no longer ignore their thoughts about unfulfilled values and their negative emotions, and started looking for ways to regain contact with the forgone identity. At that point, as Henry explained, “You feel a sense of urgency: ‘I must do something, I must change something’... You first need to have this feeling that something must be done.”

### Enacting Forgone Professional Identities

Holding on to a forgone identity was, as Peter put it, about “ownership—do you externalize it or do you internalize it, do you make this part of your identity?” To keep a forgone identity alive therefore meant to “own” it, to see it as a real and self-descriptive part of the current self. To achieve this, participants enacted their forgone identities in three ways: *real enactment* (i.e., enacting the forgone identity through real activities and social interactions, either at work or during leisure time), *imagined enactment* (i.e., enacting the forgone identity through imagined activities and interactions, either in an alternate present or in the future), and *vicarious enactment* (i.e., enacting the forgone identity by observing and imagining close others enacting it).

**Real enactment.** Participants described engaging in real activities and interactions that expressed the forgone identity, either at work, through job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), or during their leisure time, through leisure crafting (Berg et al., 2010).

Job crafting refers to enacting the forgone identity at work, by creating, including, and prioritizing activities and interactions that express this identity. For example, Vivian dedicated extra time to tasks in her current job as a researcher that activated her “lawyer persona”:

Here at [name of employer], sometimes, when we’re talking about intellectual property ... or when we have to write release forms ... people always say “Oh my God, you write those things so well!” you know,

the contracts and agreements, and I say, “Yeah, well, you know, that’s my lawyer persona. I always wanted to be a lawyer, this is my chance!”

Noah also provided vivid examples of crafting his current job as an experimental researcher by including activities that enacted his forgone computer programmer identity:

The programming stuff is something that I like to do, I enjoy it ... I keep doing this stuff, at home or when I do experiments. So this experiment I told you about, we call it “life changing choices,” I programmed it in Microsoft technology to do it online. So I started to, after I ran this experiment, I started to do more experiments online and program everything and I realized how much time I was spending on the programming rather than the experiments, the research itself.

Leisure crafting refers to enacting the forgone identity in one’s leisure time. For example, Henry’s basketball player forgone identity dominated his leisure time:

This remained a passion of mine, and I try to feed it with various “surrogates,” so to speak: I watch basketball games, I play from time to time, I like to be connected to the world of basketball. ... So I compensate somewhat. This keeps me in balance.

Similarly, Erin enacted her forgone psychotherapist identity as a hobby, with her friends, which was enough to “keep this part of me alive”:

I admit I would love to do therapy, but for now it is just a hobby ... I do therapy with my friends, informally, when they have problems, I try to help them. So I keep this part of me alive. I know it is important, I can see around me how few people feel that they are truly seen and heard and they crave that ... So, yes, this is a theme that re-appears in my life. I frequently talk to a friend of mine who is going through a very tough time, and I literally feel like a therapist.

One of the more exotic illustrations of leisure crafting was provided by Jack, who had a forgone professional identity as a biologist: “I should have been a biologist. I should have been, you know, sitting somewhere in Africa, observing some chimpanzees, that’s what I should have done. ... I think I would have been very good at that.” His main hobbies—hunting and fishing—helped him enact this identity, and he talked about them with great passion: “I am a hunter, I like observing animals, I can sit for hours in a tree and look at them ... I really like to go fishing, you know, just listen to the river.”



**Imagined enactment.** I define *imagined enactment* as enacting an identity in one's fantasies and daydreams, through imagined activities and social interactions. Similar to real enactment, in imagined enactment the person engages in behaviors consistent with an identity, performs activities that manifest this identity, and has others witness and validate these behaviors and activities as representative of this identity. Unlike real enactment though, in imagined enactment these behaviors, activities, and validating interactions take place entirely in the person's imagination.

Participants engaged in this type of enactment frequently: "all the time" (Nora), "fairly regularly" (Peter), "there were many moments" (Alice), "almost every day" (Kevin). Tom, a musician who was touring full time, wrote "There isn't a day I don't think about what my life would be like if I pursued school instead of music". When describing this type of enactment, participants used words like "dream", "daydream", "imagine", "imaginary", and "fantasy". They were well aware that imaginary enactment was just that, pure imagination. For instance, Henry quipped: "It is a fantasy... it is my perspective, it is my sand castle that I have built as I like, and it is possible that it has nothing to do with reality, so all I am doing is enjoying soap bubbles." Nevertheless, these "sand castles" and "soap bubbles" provided participants with an intangible yet powerful way to experience their forgone professional identities.

The data revealed two types of imagined enactment: imagining oneself enacting the forgone identity in an alternate present and imagining oneself enacting the forgone identity in the future.

Participants created in their imagination an alternate version of the present in which they were occupying their forgone work role and enacting their forgone professional identity. In essence, they imagined being their forgone identities in a parallel reality. For instance, Nora succinctly and eloquently described using this type of enactment to retain her forgone musician identity: "All the time I daydream about performing. I actually have a list on my iTunes of songs that I want to learn ... In my other life, I am a rock musician."

These fantasies were not occasional, short-lived, counterfactual musings (e.g., "I wonder what my life would be like if I had taken that other job?"), but, rather, elaborate and vivid mental scenarios. For instance, here is an excerpt from Vivian's description of her daydreams:

I'm not saying that, if I could change anything, I'd be a lawyer ... but I can see that parallel life ... I would have been much more focused, probably much more ambitious in a political way. Possibly, if that had gone well, the next step would have been some kind of office, some kind of political office, or director of a political action committee, and then some kind of legislative staffer or something like that, definitely involved in politics, a policy-maker.

As Vivian put it, imaginarily enacting one's forgone identity meant seeing "that parallel life" in one's mind. Similarly, Jane had created a detailed image of what her life would be like if she had realized "the other side of my personality" and worked in a humanitarian organization:

I have one specific organization that I've always admired enormously, which is the Committee of the Red Cross, who work in conflict areas ... I would be in the field, working as a delegate, you know, negotiating with governments, this is the kind of work that they do. And this is the kind of work that I would be particularly interested in ... That's the image that I have.

For Audrey, her forgone professional identity—her "doctor persona"—permeated her mental simulations even at unexpected times; she recalled a training session during which she was asked to choose an occupation from the past that she would then have to role play, and she chose a doctor:

I remember once during a coaching training we were asked to think of a person from the past that would best represent us. And I thought of an ancient doctor, you know, the doctors of hundreds of years ago, who were half scientists, half magicians. This was the character that best represented me.

Participants also created in their imagination a future in which they would be occupying their forgone work role and enacting their forgone professional identity. In essence, they imagined being their forgone identities in the future. For instance, Noah's plans for the future all centered on his forgone programmer identity:

I still think this is something that is possible ... I can start a business mixing my skills in computer science and marketing. ... I think, for example, in a computer science department, maybe they want someone with a behavioral perspective. There is a field called human-machine interface, or human-machine interaction. So, you study how people interact with computers. ... There is a lot of database marketing, or data mining; you use data from internet usage or shopping and try to find patterns.

Similarly, Adele planned to realize her forgone identity as a teacher by becoming a corporate trainer: “I am considering becoming a trainer. This is what I hope will happen, because I really do like to teach . . . This would be the perfect combination for me, to work in HR and also teach HR courses.” Erin had forgone her therapist identity, a decision she attributed to living in Romania, where being a therapist was not financially viable: “I would have to do what I like for very little money . . . I would have loved being a therapist, I would have loved the work, but I could not have managed it financially.” This is why she was considering emigrating to Canada, and, although she had not yet summoned the courage to do it, this was still one of her hopes for the future:

My husband and I decided three times and then changed our mind three times about emigrating to Canada. And this is one of the motivations behind it, the idea that there I could be a therapist . . . It is still a dream for the future . . . I see myself doing this. I would like to try it.

Participants explained that imagining themselves enacting a forgone identity in an alternate present or in the future allowed them to “get back in contact” with it (Lucy) and to make it “a part of me” (Alice, Evelyn, Rose; they all used the same words). Thus, even though these fantasies are, as Kevin called them, “totally imaginary creatures” describing an imaginary person living an imaginary life in a parallel reality or in a yet-unrealized future, they allowed participants to inhabit a forgone identity and see it as real and self-descriptive. For example, Nora explained how fantasizing about her forgone identity as a musician “keeps alive” this identity:

I think, for me, an alternate self is not a concrete job, it’s more like that spirit, that vision of me in that pure spirit, that true spirit, the exact opposite of my current lack of interest and involvement . . . I could have been a musician . . . but, more importantly, I could have been a better expression of my true spirit, and that’s the imagery, and that’s what makes it so appealing . . . I think alternative selves and alternative life paths aren’t just concrete decisions, but also the fantasy that keeps them alive, those are my daydreams, those are the things that, this is where I go when things get hard, this is where my humanity, my spirit, lies. It definitely influences my ability to cope.

Similarly, Max stated that daydreaming had allowed his anthropologist forgone identity to continue to “live in me at an unconscious level”: “The ‘what if’ person is part of my present trajectory. I like


anthropology, I am attracted to that, I am now on a different path, but, in some ways, I am still carrying that persona with me.” Vera also described how imagined enactment had preserved her forgone fashion designer identity “in a little box inside”:

I think it is part of me, it’s one important side of me . . . I put it in a little box inside, but it’s still there, I feel it’s there, even though I am not doing anything about it now . . . There are many moments when this side of me comes out. It’s there, even though I am not always aware of it. It’s funny, once I thought the option was closed, I focused exclusively on the path in front of me—or so I thought . . . It’s interesting to realize how present it still is.”

Imagined enactment is remarkably powerful: Some participants, *using only imagined enactment*, had managed to hold on to their forgone identities for decades. Rose, for instance, still felt that her forgone judge identity “has always been a part of me” almost 30 years after she gave up her dream of becoming a judge. Similarly, Audrey said:

“It’s been 20 years and I still think about it . . . Something of that person still lives in me . . . I still have in me the doctor persona, the me who wanted to be a doctor and help people, even though I’m not sure it’s conscious, not always. I can’t control it, it’s just there.”

Apart from imagined enactment, another novel enactment strategy emerged from the data: vicariously experiencing one’s forgone identity through close others who enact it.

**Vicarious enactment.** I define “vicarious enactment”  observing and imagining close others enacting an identity and internalizing this enactment as one’s own. As Sadie put it, “When I meet my friends who have chosen the other path and who talk about it, this is when I get into their skin a bit.” Participants talked about close others who were working in the role they had forgone (or a related work role) and were thus enacting their forgone professional identities. Jen, for example, had a partner who embodied her forgone identity as a writer:

One thing that I admire from him is that he has done [it], he has followed his passion, and he’s not making money, but he’s really passionate, he talks about Nietzsche and he’s like “Ahhh.” And something that I am thinking is that I was not so brave to follow my goal, my thing. I see him as I would like to be . . . And I think that’s important, at least to start reaffirming my alternate identity.

She was not a writer herself, but she was in a close relationship with one, which meant seeing him write, reading his manuscripts, watching him interact with other writers, and discussing his work experiences on a daily basis. She witnessed him enact a writer identity and appropriated this enactment to “reaffirm” her own writer identity. As another example, Vera talked about her younger brother and the experience of seeing him “being exactly what I could have been”:

My brother loves dancing, so this seems to be a family thing, though our parents were not artistic. And he actually does this for a living. He’s younger than me, and he’s really talented. He exemplifies for me what I would have been if I had pursued my passion. I helped him get a normal job in a company; he gave up after two months, said it wasn’t for him. He postponed university, because he toured with his dance crew, he went abroad several times. So life is funny, I can see him being exactly what I could have been.

“Seeing someone else be who I could have been”—this expression encapsulates vicarious enactment, and it was used by virtually all participants who reported this enactment strategy (e.g., “I look at them and I think I could have been exactly like that” (Adele); “I see him, and I think ‘This is who I could have been’” (Jen); “Seeing him and talking to him, I realized that it would have been very likely that I would have become exactly like him” (Lucy)).

The possibility to vicariously enact a forgone identity was so appealing that, for some participants, it seemed to drive the choice of spouse or close friends. For example, Noah remarked that most of his closest friends were programmers; in fact, he was closer to people from a computer science program he had attended but did not finish than with people from the business program from which he had actually graduated:

I am more connected now to the computer science group than to the business school. So even my master’s group, which was a very small group, we were just six students, and we worked together all the time, I don’t keep in touch with them much. But my computer scientist friends, all the time. . . . So it’s funny that, even though I didn’t graduate, I still keep in touch with them.

As another example, Jen explained that her previous relationships were boring and “difficult” because her previous partners were similar to her rather than embodying her forgone identity:

My previous boyfriends and so on were . . . from business, but, at the end, I was not admiring them and

it was not working. I was bored when they started talking, and they were talking about business at night, and the department, it was like “pfff.” I don’t want to be 50 and talk about the company.

Adam described a similar experience. He had forgone a career in clinical psychology to pursue HR. He had dated three women since that career fork-in-the-road, and all of them were working in jobs related to his forgone identity: “It is interesting to realize that all my serious relationships have been with women who work in fields related to psychology.” His current girlfriend had worked in HR and “is transitioning more and more towards psychotherapy”; as he aptly put it, “she is my mirror image.” Through her, he could experience his forgone identity: “I love talking to her about her work, it draws me into that world and helps me stay connected to my dream of having a private practice.”

### Factors Influencing the Use of Enactment Strategies

Participants used one or more of these real, imagined, and vicarious enactment strategies. For instance, at the time of the interview, Noah was holding on to his forgone identity as a computer programmer through job crafting (real enactment), daydreams about the future (imagined enactment), and a circle of close friends who were working in IT (vicarious enactment); he is quoted above to illustrate all three enactment strategies. A comprehensive investigation of all the factors that can influence which enactment strategies a person is likely to use is well beyond the scope of this paper. However, I present below some initial evidence pointing to three potentially relevant factors: (1) characteristics of the forgone identity, (2) individual differences, and (3) situational constraints.

First, certain *characteristics of the forgone identity* can inherently limit the ways in which the identity can be enacted. Forgone professional identities of high status and prestige, for instance, rarely lend themselves to real enactment. An illustration is provided by Andrew, who found it impossible to sustain his forgone identity as a Rhodes scholar through job or leisure crafting; as he explained: “Once that path is gone, it’s gone. It’s just that kind of path.” In such situations, imagined and vicarious enactment are the only routes to retaining a forgone identity. As another example, some forgone professional identities become closed options at a certain age; when participants realized that they would never be able to take on the forgone work role in the

future, imaginary enactment of this future also became an unfeasible strategy. Henry, for instance, quoted above, knew that he could never become a professional basketball player, and therefore did not daydream about enacting this forgone identity in the future but only in an alternate present. Similarly, imaginary enactment in the future was unavailable to Vera, who knew she would never become a fashion designer:

Ever since I was little, I've loved drawing; not nature or anything, always clothes. My parents were aware of my passion; they saw me, but they did not guide me or encourage me on this path. As I was growing up, I became increasingly aware of how much I like this as an activity, transposing my ideas onto a sheet of paper was extraordinary for me. . . . I should have gone to a specialized school for that, find out how far my talent would have taken me . . . Now I realize that it's too late; if you want to pursue a career in art, you need to start early.

Second, *individual differences* can play a role in a person's choice of enactment strategy. One individual difference reflected in the data was the distinction between "segmenters" (i.e., people who prefer to keep work and nonwork separate) and "integrators" (i.e., people who prefer to integrate these domains) (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999; Kreiner, 2006; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Some participants explained that they wanted to keep their forgone professional identities separate from their actual jobs, and these segmenters expressed a strong preference against job crafting. For example, Nora avoided including her forgone musician identity into her current work as a researcher because, "Writing about music or researching about it, I'd rather not have it at all. For me, it's like drinking Diet Coke. It's about keeping it pure, it's just not satisfying." In contrast, participants who were "integrators" voiced the opposite view. For example, James described a segmenter friend of his who used leisure crafting, and explained that this strategy would not work for him:

He's the guy that I compare with. . . . He now has a good position in a bank. But, I think he's like a good man; but, for him to go to work, five days a week, means nothing. He does things like a robot, and then, in the weekend, he lives. But, for me, I can't do it. For me, the things that I do in my work are part of me.

Third, participants mentioned several *situational constraints* that restricted their use of certain enactment strategies. For example, some participants stated that they had no leisure time, and therefore could not engage in leisure crafting. In the words of

Julia, "Just surviving, you know, day to day, there's no time." Some participants lacked the autonomy to craft their jobs. For instance, Adam had hoped that recruitment interviews would be an opportunity for crafting his current job in HR to enact his forgone identity as a psychotherapist by talking to people "so that they truly open up." His employer had insisted that interviews had to be "all about business," and had curtailed his attempts at crafting these interactions:

Here, of course, the interviews are very different . . . The business style of interviewing is very direct and focused on behavior . . . My colorful, playful, humor-based style was very strong when I began this job; now, I have lost it a bit, I have too often been told to "shut up" and "just work."

Finally, some participants did not know people who embodied their forgone identities, and could therefore not employ vicarious enactment. One illustration was provided by Spencer, who stated:

Since I am away from my home country, away from the place where I got educated, I'm less likely to interact with people from my past. So, if I was in Singapore working, I may give a different answer, as I would interact with them more regularly. So, I think these situational factors are important.

Situational constraints can shift over time. For example, for several years, Jen had used leisure crafting to enact her forgone writer identity:

I started doing a workshop for young writers, and I got things published there and I had a community . . . It was very motivating to have people, because all of us were reading our work on a weekly basis, and we were commenting on that, and I liked that. And I adored saying to other friends that I'm doing a writing workshop and that I started publishing or that I am going to festivals . . . I was feeling so well doing this literary work, so having this balance, exploring it and having something to do with it, not forgetting it but not doing it 100% . . . I was very happy in Barcelona, because I was able to balance, because I had lots of time that I could spend with this hobby. And I was starting even to name myself as a writer.

She had plenty of leisure time to enact this forgone identity, she had a community of peers who validated it, and thus she could hold on to this identity and "name [herself] as a writer." Once she moved to a different country, however, this enactment strategy became unavailable:

Here, I don't have the group; I cannot start the group because I don't speak the language, I cannot write in

French. So, this was completely cut when I moved here. And this is something that for me is very difficult; it's something that I'm missing a lot.

Although she was still writing as a hobby, it was only "a bit, not regularly," so she had to find other ways to enact her forgone identity; as quoted above, she found a partner who allowed her to experience her forgone identity vicariously.

## DISCUSSION

The development of a professional identity is often described as a process of "closing doors"—a progressive narrowing of potential identity options (e.g., Gottfredson, 1981, 2002; Johnson & Mortimer, 2002). This paper, however, suggests that foregoing a professional identity is often more akin to a process of trying to keep a door open, then closing it a little, opening it again, and eventually closing it entirely, or, in some cases, keeping it perpetually open. The process model developed in this paper explains why some forgone professional identities are retained in the self-concept through real, imagined, or vicarious enactment. This model expands our view of professional identity and identity enactment, with key theoretical implications for identity research.

### Expanding Our Conceptualization of Professional Identity

As outlined in the literature review, most studies of professional identity focus on identities enacted through activities and interactions that are part of formal work roles (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006, 2009; Ladge et al., 2012; Pratt et al., 2006). The current study finds that people can also define themselves through occupations and jobs they do not actually hold, a finding with powerful theoretical implications.

First, this idea challenges identity scholars to broaden the way we study professional identity to include the forgone professional identities that are retained in the self-concept. As Adam, a participant in this study, eloquently explained: "The self is only partly visible; there is a lot that is shadow, which includes things we could have done but did not." Although these "shadow" identities would probably not come up in a study focused on formal work roles, they may nonetheless be seen as currently self-descriptive professional identities, and they may influence people's thoughts, emotions, and behavior. Without studying these forgone identities, we

cannot fully capture how people see themselves in relation to work, and cannot understand situations in which people "seem securely to be one sort of person, but yet another comes bursting to the surface—in a suddenly voiced opinion, a fantasy, a turn of interests, or a private activity" (Gergen, 1991: 69).

Second, this idea challenges theories of identity development that disparage attempts to hold on to forgone identity options. Classic theories in this field argue that choosing one identity and committing to it implies forgetting the forgone alternatives, and that doing so is crucial to becoming a well-adjusted adult (e.g., Erikson, 1963, 1968, 1975; Marcia, 1966, 1980). This perspective sees any desire to hold on to forgone identities as a sign of immaturity (Schachter, 2002). In contrast, the current findings suggest that this desire can be driven by a quest to fulfill important values, rather than by a puerile inability to fully commit to any one identity option.

Third, understanding why people hold on to forgone professional identities can contribute to our knowledge of how identities and values are related. Values are seen as "intimately bound up with a person's sense of self" (Feather, 1992: 112), but, although this link is often stated (e.g., Gecas, 2000; Schein, 1978), it is rarely explained (Hitlin, 2003; Rohan, 2000). The theory developed in this paper argues that a value can be fulfilled by enacting an identity. This idea has implications not only for identity research, but also for research on values. Most studies focus on what people *do* to fulfill important values (for reviews, see Bardi, Calogero, & Mullen, 2008; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Schwartz & Bardi, 1997), but the theory developed in this paper suggests that fulfilling values may not always be about doing something, but about *being* something.

### Expanding Our Conceptualization of Identity Enactment

As outlined in the literature review, the current conceptualization of identity enactment is limited to real activities and social interactions (Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Giddens, 1991; Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). The current paper expands this view to include imagined and vicarious enactment. These two novel constructs have profound implications for how we conceptualize alternative selves and possible selves, as well as for a host of identity constructs and theories that are inherently linked to enactment, such as identity salience and identity change.

First, alternative selves and possible selves have been conceptualized solely as self-comparisons. The

assumption has been that, since these selves are not currently enacted, they cannot be currently self-descriptive—that is, they cannot be self-definitions. This is why the theoretical paper introducing the construct of alternative selves posits that their only function is to provide a comparison point for the current self (Obodaru, 2012), and why most studies of possible selves focus on the consequences of comparing them with the current self (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). By showing that imagined enactment can make people feel like they *are* their alternative or possible selves, the current paper changes the way we think about these selves, as not only self-comparisons, but also self-definitions. This change forges a new link between the constructs of *desired possible selves* and *positive fantasies*—that is, positively experienced mental images of future desired events (Oettingen, 1996). Positive fantasies have been shown to decrease the motivation to achieve a desired future, because they allow people to mentally enjoy this desired future in the present (e.g., Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen, Pak, & Schnetter, 2001). Several organizational studies also noted that employees fantasize about a future with more meaningful work or a life of affluent leisure, and speculated that these fantasies are a way to perpetually postpone changing the status quo (e.g., Costas & Grey, 2014; Hochschild, 1997; Kunda, 1992). The construct of imagined enactment aligns with the fundamental premise of these studies—namely, that daydreaming allows people to mentally experience a desired future in the here and now—but regards such daydreaming not as a deterrent from identity enactment, but, rather, as a form of identity enactment. In other words, it regards positive fantasies as imaginarily enacted desired possible selves.

Broadening our view of alternative and possible selves beyond seeing them as self-comparisons is not meant to diminish the importance of their function as comparison standards; similarly, the idea that close others can be loci for vicarious identity enactment is not meant to diminish the importance of social comparison processes. People can engage in two modes of thinking about counterfactuals, the future, and close others: an evaluative mode of thinking in which people use them as comparisons, and a reflective “as if” mode of thinking in which people vividly simulate that they are real or that they are part of the self (Markman & McMullen, 2003). I saw evidence for both these modes of thinking in the

data; I focused on the latter because it is a way to enact a forgone identity, whereas the former is not. Here is an excerpt, for instance, from Andrew’s comparison of his forgone identity as a Rhodes scholar to his current identity as a PhD student:

For that path, I was willing to make so many more personal sacrifices than I am willing to make now. Now I’m, like, now there’s stuff that I just won’t do, because I want my life to be more enjoyable. But, there, I would have sacrificed my own personal comfort . . . I want to be successful in my current profession, but this could never drive me in the same way, I could never be as passionate about it.

This mode of thinking did not seem to make his forgone identity feel currently self-descriptive; if anything, it emphasized the differences between who he was and who he would have been. Similarly, some participants thought in a comparative way about close others who enacted their forgone professional identities. For example, Vivian had a sister who personified her forgone lawyer identity, but she compared herself with her rather than using her for vicarious enactment:

When I look at my younger sister, I think, you know, talk about sibling rivalry, “You did it, you managed to do what I wanted to do” . . . She’s the person who I wanted to be . . . We do get along fine, but, you know, when I see her, I get frustrated.

More research is needed to understand the factors that determine when people use alternative and possible selves as self-comparisons, and when they daydream about them being realized, as well as to understand the consequences of these two processes.

Second, imagined and vicarious enactment impact any identity construct or theory that is inherently linked to enactment. For instance, the notion of “identity salience,” defined as the importance a person ascribes to an identity, is most often measured as the self-reported likelihood that the person would enact that identity through real activities and interactions in a variety of contexts (e.g., Merolla, Serpe, Stryker, & Schultz, 2012; Owens & Serpe, 2003). The current findings, however, suggest that some identities might be highly important to the person even though they are not enacted through real enactment but rather through imagined or vicarious enactment; these identities and their true significance for the person cannot be captured by the current conceptualization and operationalization of identity salience. For another example, expanding our view of identity enactment

can significantly alter how we study identity change. An influential theory in this field is Ibarra's (1999) theory of provisional selves, which argues that people act their way into becoming someone else, by enacting different provisional versions of themselves and seeing which version feels most authentic and receives the most social validation from important others. The current paper suggests that people might also be able to *imagine* their way into becoming someone else, an idea that awaits future research.

Beyond theoretical contributions to various areas of identity research, the constructs of imagined and vicarious enactment forge exciting connections to the vast and ever-expanding literatures on mental simulations and vicarious experiences. First, the construct of imagined enactment links research on identity to research on mental simulations. The idea that imagining oneself enacting an identity is an experience powerful enough to make that identity feel real and self-descriptive is a bold theoretical statement for identity research. This statement, however, resonates with a vast body of work showcasing the startling power of imaginary states. For example, hundreds of studies in sports psychology show that, when athletes train in their imagination, *without any overt physical movement*, they significantly improve their skills and performance (for meta-analyses and reviews, see Driskell, Copper, & Moran, 1994; Feltz & Landers, 1983; Guillot & Collet, 2008; Hinshaw, 1991). Many athletes report that they can actually feel muscle twinges when they imagine themselves performing an action (Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998), and, indeed, a growing number of neurophysiological studies confirm that imagined actions and executed actions share the same structures in the brain (e.g., Decety, 2002; Decety & Grèzes, 2006; Meister, Krings, Foltys, Müller, Töpfer, & Thron, 2004). Mental simulations have also been studied in medicine, where numerous benefits of patients using mental imagery have been documented, including faster recovery (e.g., Bell & Murray, 2004), decrease in pain (e.g., Gagan, 1984), and reduction in physical symptoms associated with a variety of illnesses (e.g., Epstein, Halper, Barrett, Birdsall, McGee, & Barron, 2004; Goodwin, Lee, Puig, & Sherrard, 2005). Finally, an emergent research stream on mental simulations shows that people have "imagined interactions," or fantasies of communicative encounters with others (Honeycutt, 2003), and that such fantasies can enhance understanding of self and others and provide emotional catharsis (Keaton, Gearhart, & Honeycutt, 2014).

Second, the construct of vicarious enactment links research on identity to research on vicarious experiences. Self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986), which contends that people can include close others in the self-concept, and simulation theory (Goldman, 2006), positing that people understand and react to the mental and physical states of others by internally replicating them, constitute the conceptual platform for a massive body of work documenting a wide variety of vicarious experiences. For example, people can see a close other's attributes as their own (for a review, see Aron, Mashek, & Aron, 2004), and can experience a close other's emotions (e.g., Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Jackson, Brunet, Meltzoff, & Decety, 2006; Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002). Imagining a close other's behavior can elicit the same neural and embodied responses as performing the behavior oneself (e.g., Decety & Grèzes, 2006; Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005; Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004), and observing a close other's behavior can result in inferences about one's own attributes as if one engaged in that same behavior (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007). Finally, taking the perspective of another person leads to taking on their attributes (Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996; Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). For example, taking the perspective of a professor improves performance on an analytic task, while taking the perspective of a cheerleader decreases it (Galinsky, Wang, & Ku, 2008).

### Contributions to Research on Careers

The theory developed in this paper also offers two key contributions to research on careers. First, many studies show that certain career options make it difficult to fulfill certain values. For example, pursuing one's calling often hinders the fulfillment of self-enhancement values, a phenomenon referred to as the "double-edged sword" of meaningful work (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Many creative workers, for instance, live out the myth of the "starving artist" (e.g., Anheier, Gerhards, & Romo, 1995; Faulkner, 1983; Giuffre, 1999) because their compensation is "well below that commensurate with their skills and levels of educational attainment" (Ross, 2000: 6). The current model provides a conceptual framework for understanding how people deal with not being able to fulfill an important value through their actual job, a framework that can integrate relevant findings from a multitude of disparate studies. For instance, studies show that

people who cannot pursue work they are passionate about often express that passion through hobbies (e.g., Berg et al., 2010), that people who cannot fulfill their self-transcendence values in their jobs are more likely to do volunteer work (e.g., Grant, 2012; Rodell, 2013), and that risky hobbies such as gambling, skydiving or driving fast automobiles are often a compensatory mechanism for safe and boring jobs (e.g., Dubin, 1992; Gecas, 1994; Vardaman, Allen, Renn, & Moffitt, 2008). The current model suggests that all these findings tap into the same experience of people using leisure crafting to hold on to a forgone professional identity and thus fulfill the associated value.

Second, the current paper showcases the importance of studying not only the career options that are actualized, but also those that are forgone, thus echoing and reinforcing a nascent trend developing in careers literature. For example, although research has traditionally focused on the experience of pursuing one's calling, scholars have recently started exploring the experience of forgoing one's calling (Berg et al., 2010; Duffy, Allan, Autin, & Bott, 2013; Duffy & Autin, 2013). The model presented here provides insight into the identity dynamics underlying the experience of forgoing one's calling, explaining why and how people might retain the forgone professional identity predicated upon their calling, and thus how they can pursue a calling outside of a formal work role.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

The current study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results and that might guide future research. First, the theory developed in this paper is a process model at the individual level of analysis, a type of theory that is surprisingly rare in management journals (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013). I developed this theory using retrospective accounts, and, even though this type of data are suitable for generating process models (Van de Ven, 2007), a longitudinal study tracking people's experience from a career fork-in-the-road onward would be better suited at capturing how the process of forgoing professional identities unfolds over longer periods of time. For example, the use of enactment strategies might evolve in predictable patterns over a person's life span (e.g., imagined enactment in the future might often be used by young people—"I will work in investment banking, make money, and *then* found my non-profit"—but might not work for older individuals).

Second, the sample included in this study is quite diverse in terms of age, gender, occupation, and nationality; however, I did not use these dimensions of variance to their full theoretical potential. For example, even though the initial wave of data collection suggested that gender and occupation might play a role in the types of work roles that people are likely to forgo, and I was therefore careful to include these dimensions in subsequent sampling, I did not explore in depth the differences between these subgroups within the sample. Future research is needed to fully explore how the phenomena described here vary in terms of these and other individual differences. For example, the highly elaborate mental scenarios described by the participants who used imagined enactment are potentially indicative of a personality trait called "fantasy-proneness" (Wilson & Barber, 1983). People who are high fantasizers have vivid and rich imaginations and spend a lot of time in the mental worlds they build (Bacon, Walsh, & Martin, 2013; McCrae & Costa, 1997), and may thus be more prone to use imagined enactment compared to low fantasizers.

Third, future research could not only uncover important nuances in the core constructs presented in this paper, but also fully document their variance. For example, the enactment strategies identified here might not constitute an exhaustive set. On this note, Schultze and Leahy's (2009) findings that people can integrate their *Second Life* avatars into their sense of self point to the possibility that virtual enactment is another potential form of enactment. Fourth, the current paper explores the experiences of people who had to forgo a professional identity and either discarded it or retained it in their self-concept. Future research should also explore the experiences of people who never had to forgo a professional identity. For instance, people with a strong sense of calling may simply never consider a different profession. As a priest interviewed by Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006: 1047) put it: "I'm a priest. . . . I can't imagine not being one. I have no idea what I would do if I wasn't a priest."

Finally, all the novel constructs developed in this paper (i.e., forgone work role, forgone professional identity, imagined enactment, and vicarious enactment) require a lot more research before we fully understand the intriguing colors and shades they bring to people's identity canvas. Are there qualitative differences between identities enacted through real as opposed to imagined and vicarious enactment? Do professional identities enacted in formal work roles "feel" different from forgone professional



identities enacted through job or leisure crafting? What are the outcomes of holding on to forgone professional identities, beyond value fulfillment? For instance, do people who retain a forgone identity have higher self-complexity? Indeed, some participants stated that their forgone identities allowed them to express and honor multiple facets of who they are. Nora, for instance, said that her forgone identity allowed her to feel like “a better expression of my true spirit” and to see herself as “multidimensional.” Including a forgone identity into one’s self-narrative might generate what Bernstein (1994: 9) called an “instinctive gratitude to what frees us from the too strictly plotted, the too seamlessly coherent story.”

### Practical Implications

Managers who understand the meaning and importance of forgone identities would be better able to probe and uncover their employee’s unfulfilled values, unrealized potential, and dreams for the future. Such discussions could not only help chart employees’ career development paths within the organization, but can also direct, encourage, and fully harness employee job crafting (Grant, Berg, & Cable, 2014; Grant & Parker, 2009), as well as leisure crafting—a rarely tapped yet powerful source of creativity (Davis, Davis, & Hoisl, 2013). Managers could also benefit from understanding the collective dynamics that may arise when a significant number of their employees have similar forgone professional identities and employ similar enactment strategies. For instance, many people enter investment banking in pursuit of financial goals and dream that they will soon make a career change to professions they are passionate about (Courtney & Thompson, 1996; Michel, 2007). Such a context can create a collective dynamic whereby many employees have forgone professional identities that they imaginarily enact in the future. These employees are likely to report having low organizational identification and commitment, and managers might try to “correct” this trend by discouraging them from fantasizing about leaving the organization. The current findings suggest, however, that such fantasizing might allow employees to enact desired professional identities and thus *decrease* the likelihood of them actually leaving the organization.

The current findings also have significant practical relevance for individuals managing their careers. The cultural imperative to “be all you can be” that pervades the Western world makes it that much

harder to choose only one branch of Sylvia Plath’s fig tree and relinquish the rest. As a French proverb says, “To choose is to die a little,” and foregoing an identity can indeed be seen (and felt) as a subtle form of self-murder. Indeed, career counselors have reported an increase in the difficulty of making career decisions among young people due to their unrealistically high expectations (Van Vianen, De Pater, & Preenen, 2009). This difficulty, although often ironically referred to as “the tyranny of freedom” (Schwartz, 2000) or “the tyranny of happiness” (Elliott, 2003), is extremely real in its experience and consequences. Gergen (1991) alerted us that the tensions between expectations and reality that permeate contemporary careers pose new challenges to people’s sense of self, including what he called “multiphrenia”—the splitting of the person into a multiplicity of selves as a response to the multitude of options available. Scholars have therefore called for research on the impact of such phenomena (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Answering these calls, the current paper offers advice that can help people understand why they may want to hold on to a forgone identity and how to do so effectively.

Many people may experience confusion and ambivalence about wanting to hold on to a forgone identity. Such ambivalence stems from the perception that this motivation implies regret about their choices and unhappiness with their current life. As Josh, one of the participants in this study, explained: “There is something about fully accepting what I chose, even if that decision may not have been the best. Asking ‘what if’ questions would imply that I do not accept that past me, and that I am not happy with who I am now.” Similarly, Henry, another participant, admitted: “I believe that these introspective ‘what would have been if’ fantasies belong mostly to people who are unhappy, who are not satisfied with themselves, who do not have a high opinion of themselves.” The same idea is reflected in maxims such as “Don’t cry over spilled milk,” “What’s done is done,” and “Never look back.” This paper, however, shows that unfulfilled values, not regret, drive the motivation to hold on to a forgone identity. Some of the forgone professional identities in the data were indeed seen as better than the person’s actual professional identity and were therefore associated with regret, but some were seen as worse and were associated with relief; most, as illustrated by Kevin, were seen as a combination of elements that are better (e.g., “I . . . could have been happier”) and elements that are worse (e.g., “I wouldn’t have seen so much of

the world”) compared to the actual professional identity. The idea that what drives people to retain a forgone identity is not regret, but, rather, a desire to fulfill an important value, can aid people’s ability to understand and to accept their motivation to retain a forgone identity.

People may also benefit from realizing that, even if they have to give up a career option, they do not necessarily have to abandon the corresponding identity and values, and that they have a range of enactment strategies they can use. Even if people lack autonomy to job craft, cannot dedicate any time to hobbies, do not have close others who personify the forgone identity, and are well aware that they will never be able to realize their forgone identity in the future, they can still imaginarily enact their forgone identity in an alternate present. Some people may experience ambivalence about engaging in imagined enactment, but the current findings suggest that these are not mere fantasies, they are meaningful fantasies, and that what might seem like a frivolous pursuit or a nonproductive use of one’s time is in fact a way to expand our understanding of ourselves, such that who we have not become and who we can never be become central parts of who we are.

## CONCLUSION

Famed psychoanalyst Adam Phillips surmised: “The unexamined life is surely worth living, but is the un-lived life worth examining? It seems a strange question until one realizes how much of our so-called mental life is about the lives we are not living, the lives we are missing out on, the lives we could be leading but for some reason are not” (Phillips, 2013: xi). The current paper is a first step toward developing a theory of why and how people try to live out their “un-lived lives.”

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Please tell me about your career trajectory so far.
2. Many people, when thinking about important turning points in their life, wonder how things could have happened differently. A certain event could have turned out differently (e.g., “If I had failed that exam...,” “If I had gotten that promotion...”). Or maybe you could have made a different decision at some point (e.g., to choose a different occupation, to marry someone else). Subsequent events would then have unfolded in a different way, taking you on an alternative life path.  
For some people, the alternative is better than the actual life—these are paths people regret not having taken (e.g., “I wish I had pursued a different career”). For others, the alternative is worse than the actual life—these are paths people are relieved they did not take (e.g., “Thank God I did not marry that person”). Do you have such an image of what your life might have been if something in the past had happened differently? If you have more than one such alternative, please think about the one that is most important to you. Please describe this alternative life, and be as detailed as you can. How would your life overall, your career, your family, and your hobbies be? Most importantly, how would you, as a person, be now?
3. How often do you think about this alternative self? Are there specific moments/events/encounters that make you think about your alternative self?
4. How important is this alternative self to your sense of self? If you were to write a book about your life story, would your alternative self get a chapter?
5. In order for someone to really know you, how important is it for them to know about your alternative self?
6. Do you talk about your alternative self with others? Whom  the people you have told about your alternative self? Please tell me about your relationship with them. How did they react when you told them about your alternative self?
7. If you were to juxtapose this alternative life onto your current life, how do they compare?
8. Do you have among your acquaintances people who personify who you might have been? If so, please tell me about them and about your relationship with them.
9. Please tell me about how you envision yourself in the future—who you would like to become and who do you fear becoming?
10. Is there anything I have not asked you but that you think is relevant, especially in regards to your alternative self?