HITTING ROCK BOTTOM AFTER JOB LOSS: BOUNCING BACK TO CREATE A NEW POSITIVE WORK IDENTITY

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Although people often value work identities, events sometimes threaten these identities, creating situations where individuals struggle to overcome the identity threat. Building on the theories of identity and escape from self, we develop a "rock bottom" model of generating a new positive work identity. Specifically, individuals who eventually hit rock bottom come to realize that the identity has been lost, which can lead to a path to recovery or to a path to dysfunction. The path to recovery involves escape through identity play and the oscillation between disciplined identity play and identity refinement/validation. The path to dysfunction involves escape though cognitive deconstruction. Regulatory focus is important in distinguishing between those who engage in identity play to generate possible new positive identities (i.e., promotion focus) and those who engage in cognitive dysfunction (i.e., prevention focus). A deeper understanding of why some recover and others languish provides an opportunity to develop interventions that facilitate recovery from work identity loss.

In the years preceding his injury, Aaron told us, he would introduce himself to new people by saying, "I'm Aaron; I'm a Marine." After his injury, Aaron reported that he would not introduce himself to new people, because he "didn't know what to say." The career that informed his most closely held beliefs about who he was had been terminated the instant that bomb exploded in Iraq (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011: 501).

Without any guidelines on how to shed the old self, without any instruction or training for the new, the downwardly mobile remain in a social and cultural vacuum. . . . Catastrophic [career] losses create a common feeling of failure, loss of control, and social disorientation. Most people . . . long for the "golden days" to return; some genuinely believe they will. Those who have sunk far below their original social status simply don't know where they belong in the world. This is the core of what it means to "fall from grace": to lose your place in the social landscape, to feel that you have no coherent identity, and finally to feel, if not helpless, then at least stymied about how to rectify the situation (Newman, 1988: 11).

Work identities are often highly and centrally valued by individuals (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). These work

identities build up over time through the accumulation of experiences and feedback, which provide insight into individuals' "central and enduring preferences, talents, and values" (Ibarra, 1999: 765; see also Schein, 1978). Although individuals typically value work and its related identity, sometimes events lead to the termination of that identity altogether (Ebaugh, 1988; Latack & Dozier, 1986; Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995), requiring them to completely re-create that aspect of the self. In recent research scholars have explored identity play as a mechanism for transitioning to new identities (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006; Savin-Baden, 2010; Schrage, 2013; Winnicott, 1975), since it frees individuals from the requirements of behavioral consistency to explore concepts of a future self (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006).

Early theorizing on identity play (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) has suggested that play requires a relatively safe space for individuals to try out and explore possible identities (Ibarra, 2003; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007), yet an "involuntary career transition, sparked by an unexpected job loss, may not provide sufficient psychological safety to allow for identity play" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010: 20). Indeed, those experiencing

work-related losses often feel grief—the negative emotional reaction to the loss of something important—and enter into a period of liminality (Ashforth, 2001), in which they "struggle to establish a 'new normal' around the changed sense of self" (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). This type of loss can threaten individuals' sense of self as they experience a disconnect between present and future work identities and must somehow "take stock, re-evaluate, revise, re-see, and re-judge" their work identity (Strauss, 1997: 102). While important, transitioning work identities is difficult in terms of both giving up an old identity and creating a new one.

In this article we ask how and why some individuals use identity play to create a new positive work identity after identity loss, whereas other individuals languish (or worse). While we acknowledge variance in how salient, multiple, central, and meaningful work identities are for individuals' overall identity (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Meister, Jehn, & Thatcher, 2014; Miscenko & Day, 2016; Zikic & Richardson, 2016), we focus on how individuals respond to the loss of what they believe is a highly valued work identity—an identity that is not easily regained or replaced and the loss of which they appraise as threatening. *Work identity* refers to a "person's work related self-definition, i.e., the attributes, groups, roles and professional/occupational experiences by which people define themselves in a work role" (Ibarra, 2005: 2). A work identity is more positive when the identity content is imbued with virtuous attributes, is regarded favorably, changes in a way that is more developed/ideal, fits better with internal or external standards, is balanced between inclusion and differentiation, and/or connects various facets of the self (Dutton et al., 2010). Our objective in this article is to propose two divergent paths in individuals' response to suffering a work-identity failure, as well as to propose how identity play facilitates the path toward the creation and adoption of a new positive work identity after the loss of a previous identity. Building on the identity literature and the theory of escape from self (Baumeister, 1990, 1994), we develop a "rock bottom" model of generating a new positive work identity. Hitting rock bottom occurs when negativity is brought to a climax by the formation of links among the negative features of one's current life situation and a belief that the future is likely to "contain much of the same" (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005: 1182),

fundamentally undermining "commitment to a role, relationship, or involvement" (Baumeister, 1994: 282). In developing the model, we make three primary contributions.

First, although work identities are relatively stable (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978), they can be lost in entirety (Newman, 1988, and as illustrated in the opening quote). Researchers have made a substantial contribution to the identity literature by explaining how individuals effectively respond to identity threats through protecting (Crocker & Major, 1989; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002), restructuring (Burke, 2006; Deaux, 1991), or abandoning (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988) their threatened identity. In this article we acknowledge the importance of these forms of identity work but also acknowledge that protecting, restructuring, or abandoning is unlikely to be effective when the threatened identity is central to the individual's self-definition (Petriglieri, 2011), or was well established (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), and when there are few—if any—readily available alternative identities (Bromley & Shupe, 1979; Rudy & Greil, 1987; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). We explore how the abovementioned conditions can lead to hitting rock bottom and how, with the subsequent full realization that the identity has been lost, the seeds are sewn for recovery.

Second, Roberts, Cha, Hewlin, and Settles (2009: 163) called for more research on the "catalyzing events that prompt individuals" to develop positive and long-term identities. Although loss (and loss-related emotions) can stimulate emotional and cognitive processing that can have adaptive or maladaptive outcomes (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014), we build on the theory of escape (Baumeister, 1990, 1991, 1994) to explore how hitting rock bottom provides the psychological conditions for some to engage in identity play, which is instrumental in creating a new positive work identity (i.e., recovery including an identity that is more positive than the one lost), whereas others languish. Indeed, although recent research has explored the importance of identity play (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Savin-Baden, 2010; Schrage, 2013) and the conditions that foster it (Ibarra, 2003; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Winnicott, 1975), we extend this research by linking the emotions related to losing one's job (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014) to eventually hitting rock bottom (i.e., loss of emotions and decreased self-awareness [Baumeister, 1990])—and thereby the creation, for some, of the

conditions for identity play. Furthermore, we explore how the use of disciplined imagination impacts the effectiveness of the alternatives generated through identity play in facilitating recovery.

Third, implicit in the literature on work identity is that individuals seek to modify identities in such a way that they become more positive (Ibarra, 2003; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Building on this assumption, Dutton and colleagues (2010: 281) developed a typology of sources of positivity in work identities (i.e., virtue, evaluative, developmental, and structural) and called for future research to explore other factors that shape the "evaluation, structure, and development" of positive identities that contribute to "individual flourishing" (2010: 283). More recent research has explored the "liminal space" that exists between expiring and new work identities (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). In this article we extend the abovementioned research in three important ways: (1) We theorize about divergent paths after hitting rock bottom over job loss. It is not so much the number of negative emotions but the *formation of associative links* between events and emotions that stimulates a method of escape. (2) We move beyond the notions of protecting, restructuring, or abandoning a threatened identity (Burke, 2006; Crocker & Major, 1989; Deaux, 1991; Ellemers et al., 2002) to investigate how identity play (as a means of escape), disciplined imagination, and identity refinement and validation can lead to a new positive work identity. (3) We make explicit important mechanisms that provide the mindset for identity play and explain how an individual's regulatory focus—orientation based on needs, goals, and the importance of particular outcomes (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 1997, 1998)—can lead to alternate identity outcome paths (both functional and dysfunctional). Specifically, when individuals are promotion focused—that is, they have a need to grow, a need to develop the ideal self, and a sensitivity to the presence or absence of positive outcomes—they are more likely to engage in identity play as a functional path. However, when they are prevention focused—that is, they have a need for security, a need to develop the ought self, and a sensitivity to the presence or absence of negative outcomes—individuals are more likely to engage in cognitive deconstruction as a dysfunctional path. Differences in regulatory focus come from differences in the types of emotions experienced, chronic characteristics, or differences in the social context.

## A ROCK BOTTOM MODEL OF GENERATING A NEW POSITIVE WORK IDENTITY

Building on the theories of identity (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Meister et al., 2014; Petriglieri, 2011) and escape from self (Baumeister, 1990, 1994), we develop a rock bottom model of generating a new positive work identity in the context of work-identity loss. As illustrated in Figure 1, individuals who experience job loss that threatens an identity that is valued and not easily regained or replaced can eventually hit rock bottom. Hitting rock bottom can lead either to a path of recovery—which involves escape through identity play and the creation and adoption of a new positive identity—or to a path of dysfunction—which involves escape though cognitive deconstruction. Regulatory focus is important in distinguishing between those who engage in identity play to generate possible new positive identities (i.e., promotion focus) and those who engage in cognitive dysfunction (i.e., prevention focus). The positive role of identity play in recovery is magnified by both disciplined imagination and identity refinement and validation.

Hitting Rock Bottom and the Realization of a Lost Identity

Job loss can lead some individuals to conclude that their life situation is more negative than positive. This conclusion results in the feeling that they have hit rock bottom—a crystallization of discontent characterized by the formation of "associative links among a multitude of unpleasant, unsatisfactory, and otherwise negative features of one's current life situation" (Baumeister, 1991: 281–282). The impact of hitting rock bottom is substantial, suggesting a threshold has been reached in providing "a large mass of negative features" that are strong enough to "undermine a person's commitment to a role, relationship, or involvement," while unrelated misgivings or negative feelings are not sufficient to undermine that commitment (Baumeister, 1994: 282).[1]

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[1] People likely differ in the negative features of their lives, the creation of associative links between these features, and, thus, the nature and timing of hitting rock bottom. Future research can explore individual differences in the formation, nature, and timing of hitting rock bottom, especially as it relates to identity loss.

FIGURE 1
A Rock Bottom Model of Generating a New Positive Work Identity
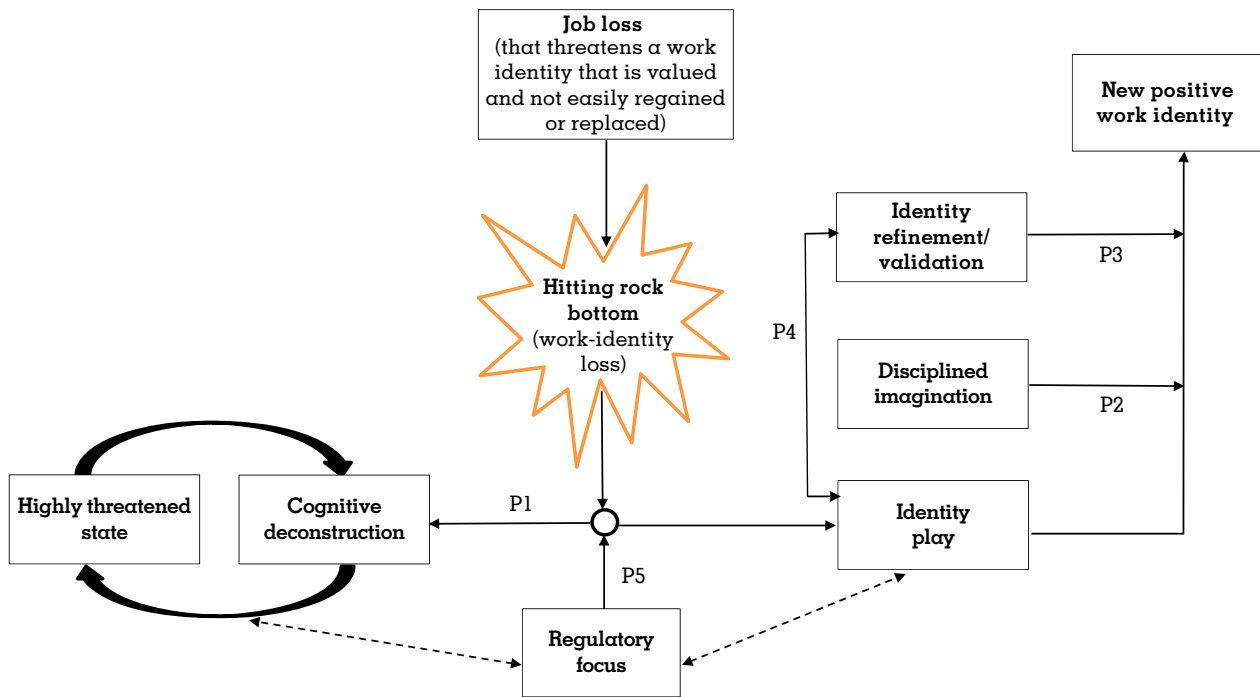
For example, an entrepreneur may see negative events (e.g., missed sales forecasts, supply chain issues) as isolated events that are normal obstacles in achieving success. However, after the crystallization of discontent, the entrepreneur sees these same events as part of a broad pattern of failure associated with the entrepreneurial role.

Despite attempts to protect themselves from negative feedback associated with their life situations, there comes a point when people can see "bad days turning into bad years" and believe that the future is likely to "contain much of the same" (Bauer et al., 2005: 1182). This feeling of hitting rock bottom—by forming associative links between the negative aspects and the outcomes of their lives—is an event creating a broad pattern of problems (Baumeister, 1994) that brings negativity to a *climax*, where commitment to a role is altered in a fundamental way. For example, people have experienced hitting rock bottom over discontent with religious groups (Jacobs, 1984; Wright, 1984), marriage (Vaughan, 1990), and criminal behavior (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

Although the importance of a work identity for individuals' overall identity varies depending on its centrality (among nonwork identities), social context, and other factors (Gecas, 1982; Meister et al., 2014; Stryker, 1968), we focus on situations where the threatened work identity is highly valued and not easily regained or replaced and the challenge to the individuals is considerable (Meister et al., 2014; Newman, 1988). Hitting rock bottom creates an emotional crisis that is a highly negative state from which people want to escape (Jacobs, 1984; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Vaughan, 1990; Wright, 1984). Under such conditions, individuals are likely to view their lives in a radically different way, drastically altering their perspectives on the roles, commitments, and relationships that constitute their lives (Baumeister, 1994; Maitlis, 2009). For example, a failed executive may need to alter relationships with her groups of friends (e.g., limit or eliminate more expensive activities), financial commitments (e.g., sell expensive homes, live in a lower-cost neighborhood), and community memberships (e.g., give up country club membership), which can have a dramatic impact on her everyday life (Newman, 1988). In contrast, hitting rock bottom is unlikely when the lost job is not highly valued and is easily regained or quickly replaced and when its loss is not perceived as highly threatening—that is, there is no

crystallization of discontent from which people need to escape. Take, for example, a consulting analyst who is let go but sees his lost job as an opportunity to exit the high-stress environment of management consulting and to transition to a corporate role. While a positive work identity has been lost, which could cause a degree of negative emotion, it was not a highly valued work identity for this particular individual.

For the purposes of this article, we establish as a boundary condition for the model that a highly valued work identity is lost. We then theorize about the consequences of that loss and the pathways to restoring a positive work identity. In doing so we build on the notion of escape to theorize about responses to identity loss—namely, escape through cognitive deconstruction or through play, to which we now turn (see Table 1).

Escaping Identity Loss Through Cognitive Deconstruction

Some people experience the crystallization of discontent of hitting rock bottom and escape through *cognitive deconstruction* (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2003). Individuals can attempt to escape the disconnect between their current and desired work identities by reducing self-awareness and meaningful thought—in other words, they can place themselves in a "numb state" (Dixon & Baumeister, 1991). Similarly, cognitive deconstruction (after hitting rock bottom) is characterized as an emotionless state (Pennebaker, 1989; Twenge et al., 2003) in which individuals actively avoid emotions (Baumeister, 1990; Stillman et al., 2009). Cognitive deconstruction removes meaning from awareness and "blots out threatening implications. . . . it is a refusal of insight and a denial of implications or contexts" (Baumeister, 1990: 92). This state of cognitive deconstruction is different from the emotions of work-related losses felt before hitting rock bottom. Individuals in a deconstructed state are primarily aware of the self and their situation in terms of a constricted time perspective that is narrowly focused on the present (as opposed to the past or future), a focus on concrete action and sensations at a superficial level (as opposed to broader ideas at a higher level of abstraction), and a focus on proximal goals (as opposed to distal goals of the past or about the future; Baumeister, 1990; Twenge et al., 2003). Through cognitive deconstruction, individuals are able to avoid thoughts

of loss and thereby avoid the negative affect generated by the loss of their work identity (see Pennebaker, 1989, 1993).

Furthermore, because a deconstructed state removes focus away from developing meaning about a situation, and because inhibitions only exist in the context of meaning (Baumeister, 1990), inhibitions are removed (Baumeister, 1988; Baumeister & Boden, 1994). When a cause (e.g., trying to recover a lost work identity) is conceived of as hopeless, some individuals withdraw all effort to "protect the self against the demoralizing effects of further failures" (Baumeister, 1997: 165). This withdrawal can result in an accelerated disassociation from meaning as individuals begin to believe that "one's own acts are irrelevant to one's outcomes" (Baumeister, 1997: 164), or that loss results from some global and stable deficiency in themselves (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). Without inhibitions, there are few sanctions for rule breaking and few standards on which to judge oneself (Higgins, 1987). Thus, individuals can deny the implications of past actions and/or situations that may have breached rules or standards and may have led to identity loss. Therefore, the lack of a work identity is no longer salient to them, and they are able to escape; they gain "respite from a terrible state of mind" (Baumeister, 1990: 91).

Cognitive deconstruction therefore provides relief from the discontent associated with identity loss; however, it does not offer solutions for long-term functioning. For example, recent studies have explored the impact of career-ending injuries for musicians (Maitlis, 2009) and Marines and soldiers (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011)—injuries that generated intense negative emotions for those individuals (as they approached rock bottom). In both studies, some of these individuals were fixated on the loss of a former identity, paralyzed by the realization that they could no longer perform (musicians) or continue in an established role (Marine/soldier). The highly threatened state resulted in some of the individuals seeking an escape through cognitive deconstruction, including the use of drugs.

Although deconstructed cognition provides relief from identity loss, it is difficult to maintain this cognitive state for an extended period given its association with dysfunctional behaviors, such as disinhibition (Vohs & Baumeister, 2002), passivity (i.e., avoiding responsibility or self-assessment; Ringel, 1976), lack of emotion (Williams & Broadbent,

TABLE 1
Response to Work-Identity Loss

		Identity-Escape Response			
Career Role	**Crystallization of Discontent**	**Cognitive Deconstruction**	**Emotionless State**	**Identity Play**	**Positive Identity**
Entrepreneur	Failed venture (Shepherd, 2003)	Entrepreneur's thinking is narrowly constricted to the present, making reflection on the past and possibilities of the future a virtual impossibility	Individual experiences extreme depression, anxiety, hypertension, and suicide ideation (Singh, Corner, & Pavlovich, 2007)	Entrepreneur uses the present to experiment with various "potential" future identities by attending classes she has always been interested in and testing new career options	Entrepreneur takes a position in a corporate role, where her entrepreneurial experience facilitates innovative ideas
Creative (musician)	Career-ending injury (Maitlis, 2009)	Musician is fixated on the loss of her performer role as a musician and is unable to even consider alternative careers; she clings to the notion that recovery from the injury is possible despite all evidence to the contrary	Individual has a lost sense of self ("Who am I if not a musician?"), loss of physical energy, and even a desire to die (Maitlis, 2009)	Musician begins to consider alternatives, ranging from closely related (e.g., music instructor) to substantially different (e.g., a professor teaching a different subject but applying similar principles of work) careers	Musician finds opportunities to be creative in different ways, including writing and teaching, as well as sharing ideas in settings more intimate than previous performance venues
Graphic designer	Job termination (Garrett-Peters, 2009)	Graphic designer feels a profound threat to self-concept and a sense of self-betrayal ("But I thought I was good at this; I thought that was who I was"); his emphasis is on lost relationships and the need to repair them despite being lost	Individual has a lost sense of creative self, resorting to activities such as reorganizing cabinets that enable maintenance of a "numb" and emotionless state (Garrett-Peters, 2009)	Graphic designer engages in other creative activities, such as preparing a home to be sold, doing home projects, volunteering with religious groups, and looking for opportunities to help people think creatively; he explores how creative skills could be applied in broader business context of sales or marketing	Graphic designer recognizes broader implications of creative capabilities and applies them in both nonprofit volunteer settings and in a new role in marketing and sales

(Continued)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

		Identity-Escape Response			
Career Role	Crystallization of Discontent	Cognitive Deconstruction	Emotionless State	Identity Play	Positive Identity
Soldier/marine	Career-ending injury (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011)	Military veteran is trapped cycling between an emotionless and a negative emotional state, focusing on how he is trapped in the present, unable to realize previous identity as a soldier	Individual experiences a loss of self-concept (cannot introduce himself because he does not know what to say), depression, and suicidal thoughts (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011)	Military veteran experiences positive emotions by playing with a variety of new identities, including corporate, education, or volunteer roles that utilize the skills he gained in the military	Military veteran realizes that a form of camaraderie is available in other organizations, and some of the skills he learned are applicable in the new environment
Executive	Career-ending firing and downward mobility (Newman, 1988)	Executive's loss of career results in loss of home, loss of access to high-profile social groups, insecurity, and clinging to a hope that a new executive position is just around the corner, leaving the executive in a "social and cultural vacuum" where he concludes that he is the source of all problems (Newman, 1988: 7, 10)	Individual experiences a loss of self-concept (declines social visits), becoming relieved by isolation since the strain of keeping up appearances is exhausting; he feels abandoned and as if he had "no real relationships . . . nothing"; he experiences depression and suicidal thoughts (Newman, 1988: 5)	Having lost the advanced-path executive job and its associated benefits (social recognition, etc.), executive is free to explore other values: social values, community, family, and so forth; he explores roles on nonprofits (advisor, board member) and government roles where experienced managers are needed; he explores how to translate his skills to that environment	Executive realizes that the high-paying position had negative side-effects and finds fulfillment and other values in a new career where he gets challenging work, albeit for a lower salary while working in an NGO; this discovery expands his self-concept and develops into a positive identity

1986), and irrational (as opposed to meaningful) thoughts (Neuringer, 1972). As such, periods of an emotionless state are punctuated by periods of highly negative emotions (Baumeister, 1990; Wegner & Vallacher, 1986). These spikes in negative emotions are especially dangerous since individuals are not capable of accurately appraising the consequences of extreme actions, such as self-violence (Baumeister, 1988) and even suicide (Baumeister, 1990). Furthermore, because individuals have limited self-regulatory resources (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), the effort needed to maintain themselves in a deconstructed state is draining (Kashdan & Breen, 2007; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005), leading to greater lethargy and passivity (Baumeister, 1990; Twenge et al., 2003), to perceptions that time is dragging (Twenge et al., 2003), and to less authentic social interactions (John & Gross, 2004; Kashdan & Breen, 2007). For example, a failed executive might resort to a numb state that involves abusing alcohol, engaging in menial tasks at home, and watching soap operas. However, this state might be periodically disrupted when acquaintances comment about possible jobs and ask why the executive has yet to land a new position. This reminder could (temporarily) dislodge the individual from the numb state, generating extreme negative emotions that lead the individual to engage in destructive behavior and/or attempts to regain the numb state (e.g., alcohol).

Therefore, because deconstructed cognition does not provide for "meaningful" action toward an envisioned future, indulges fantasies that are disconnected from reality, is punctuated by extreme negative emotions, and is difficult to maintain for an extended period, individuals are stuck, moving between an emotionless state (when some relief—though unsustainable—is achieved) and a highly negative emotional state (in which their identity is highly threatened; Baumeister, 1997). Neither state provides the emotional, cognitive, or social basis for creating a new positive work identity. The recovery process has stalled (or not even really begun), and individuals experience chronic dysfunction (Baumeister, 1994; McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000).[2]

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[2] Baumeister's escape theory proposes that "suicide becomes appealing when the troubling thoughts, feelings and implications are neither adequately shut out by cognitive deconstruction nor removed by consoling high-level interpretations" (1990: 93).

Based on the above reasoning, we offer the following.

> *Proposition 1: Those who use cognitive deconstruction to escape the emotional crisis of identity loss—from rock bottom—make little progress toward the creation of a new identity for recovery.*

Recovering from Identity Loss Through Identity Play

While identity loss can lead to adverse outcomes, it can also provide a unique opportunity for individuals to *reboot* not only their careers (Zikic & Klehe, 2006) but also their core work identity through identity play. The notion of "play" bears some similarities to deconstructed cognition in that it provides an escape (albeit a very different type) from the present reality (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Specifically, play provides an opportunity to withdraw "from the reigning order and the necessities of the present and offers spaces for imagination, for creation, and for everyday creativity" (Hjorth, 2005: 392; see also Kark, 2011). While similar in its ability to offer escape, play offers a healthier path by initiating processes for generating a new positive work identity.

Identity play involves generating and engaging provisional identities to test whether they represent future identities (i.e., viable alternatives; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), with *provisional identities* being temporary conceptualizations of the self that need to be "refined with experience" to become enduring (Ibarra, 1999: 767; see also Ibarra, 2003). Importantly, identity play is *not goal directed* but, instead, is focused on discovery, enjoyment, and "rehearsing future possibilities" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010: 12; see also Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Miller, 1973; Sutton-Smith, 2009). These identities are "trials for possible, but not yet fully elaborated" work identities (Ibarra, 2005: 3). Identity play is an ideal context for developing and exploring provisional conceptualizations of the self as it resides contextually at the threshold between a current reality and future possibilities (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010: 11; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). At this threshold, identity play enables individuals to explore alternatives without entirely committing to them in the present (Schrage, 2013; Winnicott, 1975, 2001, 2005). Individuals are likely to be quite creative through play when reconsidering various elements of a prior identity that can be repurposed or when developing new provisional

concepts of the self entirely. For example, a failed corporate executive might play with a variety of roles, including sitting on the board of a nonprofit desperate for experienced managerial guidance, exploring government positions or running for office, working with start-ups, and so forth. Similarly, a failed entrepreneur might explore how skills learned in starting a business could be applied in a corporate setting, take standardized exams to be considered for law school, or engage in other low-risk exploration activities. In these cases hitting rock bottom opens up opportunities to actively explore future possibilities.

Play needs to occur in an environment conducive to exploring, discovering, and testing new behaviors (Schrage, 2013; Winnicott, 1975, 2001, 2005). This environment is less about a physical place and has more to do with a mindset—a mindset prepared to suspend or violate normal rules without concerns over outcomes, such as sanctions or exclusion (Glynn, 1994; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), or concerns over "strings being attached" to behaviors (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Identity play also shifts the focus away from the past (e.g., prior mistakes) and present (e.g., experiencing loss), thus freeing one's identity from the pressure and constraints of social validation (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Winnicott, 1975, 2005). However, in contrast to cognitive deconstruction, during identity play, one does not exclude meaning making from the process but, rather, actively explores a range of possible *future* selves (Holzman, 2009), which facilitates identity generation and recovery.

First, after hitting rock bottom, individuals shift their focus away from the negative consequences of identity loss in an attempt to escape the present (Jacobs, 1984; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Vaughan, 1990; Wright, 1984), which can help reduce negative affect (Baumeister, 1994). Through the reduction of negative emotions (Fredrickson, 1998), play provides individuals an escape unconstrained by a narrowed focus of attention on well-rehearsed actions (e.g., identity protection or restructuring). As a future-oriented escape, identity play emphasizes a focus on positive outcomes in the aftermath of hitting rock bottom—outcomes that are potentially controllable and assist in generating a new positive work identity. For example, an entrepreneur whose venture has failed might escape the negative feelings generated by thinking about the failure by playing with new career options, focusing on multiple positive future outcomes (e.g., going back to school, securing a stable corporate job with great benefits, exploring the nonprofit sector). This future-oriented positive focus could be reinforced as the entrepreneur thinks, "I never would have explored these options had the venture continued."

Second, to escape the emotional crisis of hitting rock bottom, individuals can shift their focus from specific goals and outcomes to general processes. For example, an injured military veteran no longer focuses on the goals and stages of achieving a higher military rank and "what might have been" but, instead, focuses on new possibilities, such as managing a small business, working with other veterans on a start-up, volunteering to speak to groups of individuals who are suffering from setbacks, and so forth. This escape provides an enabling condition for identity play that is process oriented (Glynn, 1994; Miller, 1973)—focused on means versus ends such that activities are circuitous and exploratory as opposed to linear and directed (Miller, 1973). With a process focus, identity-play activities are not governed by strict rationality or a drive for efficiency. Rather, they enable pleasure associated with the journey and decision-making guidelines, "including intuition, emotion, and taking a leap of faith" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010: 13), all of which facilitate creativity and expression (Isen, 1999; Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987). Indeed, although enjoyment is a key driver of play (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), being present in the task can itself generate positive emotions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006), such as enjoyment. The generation of position emotions can undo remaining negative emotions (Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000) and further broaden attention and cognitive processes (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005), thereby promoting the creative generation of alternative identities from identity play.

Third, to escape the emotional crisis and "meaning vacuum" of hitting rock bottom, individuals can focus less on distal goals (or, for that matter, past unmet goals, such as those associated with identity loss) and more on proximal activities (i.e., what options they can imagine or experiment with in the near future). Identity play involves proximal activities and actions related to trying provisional identities as possible identities, which later leads to the discovery of principles and skills "that are relevant in reality beyond

play" (Senge, 1990: 314; see also Miller, 1973, and Sutton-Smith, 2009). This type of play involves activities that explore low-risk explorative conceptualizations of future identities (Brown & Starkey, 2000), a process that continues until the individual discovers an identity (likely provisional in nature) that is positive (Dutton et al., 2010) or at least has the potential to be positive (Maitlis, 2009). For example, after a musical performer (i.e., creative professional) experiences the loss of her musical career, she might experiment with a range of diverse identities, including local music store employee/manager, teacher, music performance reviewer for local news outlets, blogger about career transitions, volunteer, government worker, nonprofit worker, and so forth, by visiting different locales and "trying on" these identities. In a sense, escaping the emotional burden caused by the crystallization of discontent enables her to "play" by providing the time and freedom from distal goals (i.e., meeting conductor demands, succeeding in live performances) to explore new options. Although the focus is on immediate trials (Phillips, 1995), conceptualizations of the self—generated through play—are tested in terms of projections into the relatively immediate future. Unconstrained by distal goals, the individual is free to form and pursue proximal goals, such as forming and testing provisional identities enacted in identity play.

Finally, although fantasy in a cognitively deconstructed state of escape can be damaging (Baumeister, 1990), fantasy as an input to identity play can be highly constructive. Identity play "generally unfolds at the threshold between fantasy and reality, or the boundary between dreams (i.e., the possible selves in our heads) and reality (i.e., concrete possibilities available in the given world at any given time)" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010: 15). Therefore, fantasy is not sufficient for identity play; it requires flirtations across the dream-reality boundary (Phillips, 1995). The problem with fantasy in a cognitively deconstructed state is that there is no reality tied to that fantasy, so it is of little help in generating identity alternatives. However, playing out identity fantasies is a means to creatively explore (Brown & Starkey, 2000) or flirt with notions of a provisional future self that genuinely matter in reality (Phillips, 1995), which can enhance the likelihood of creating a positive identity. For example, a failed executive might take two weeks to work with a local nonprofit, playing out the fantasy of working in the social or public sector as a possible new identity.

From Open Identity Play to Discipline

The relationship between play and generating a new positive work identity likely depends on the extent to which the cognitive process engages in *disciplined imagination*. Disciplined imagination is a process of artificial selection in which discipline is introduced through the "consistent application of selection criteria to trial-and-error thinking" and imagination is generated through the "deliberate diversity introduced into the problem statements, thought trials, and selection criteria that comprise that thinking" (Weick, 1989: 516). Disciplined imagination involves (1) problem statements, (2) conjectures (i.e., thought trials), and (3) selection criteria. The construction of these elements of disciplined imagination likely impacts an individual's ability to generate plausible outcomes—in this case, a plausible new identity worthy of subsequent identity refinement and validation. Without a sufficiently plausible new identity, identity refinement is likely not engaged and the individual continues to play, thereby delaying recovery.

First, disciplined imagination involves a *problem statement* that clarifies not only the anomaly to be explained but also the "set of assumptions that can be confirmed or disconfirmed" (Weick, 1989: 521). That is, the problem statement highlights the nature of the perceived disconnect *and* what it means to have solved the problem. Play can trigger disciplined imagination by providing a basis for redefining the current situation to generate a unique, different perspective of the problem faced (Basadur, 1994; Runco & Sakamoto, 1999). Indeed, framing a problem in a unique way is a critical step toward generating creative solutions (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976). When play is used to redefine the situation so as to pose a problem in a unique way, it provides a problem statement that is a more useful input to the rest of the disciplined imagination process. However, when play does not generate a unique perspective for the problem, the problem statement is less likely to trigger the disciplined imagination necessary to generate a plausible new work identity. For example, a soldier who experienced a career-ending injury might ask himself in which contexts his specific skills as a soldier could be applied to provide a unique perspective or advantage.

Based on the above reasoning, we offer the following.

> *Proposition 2a: Those who use identity play to escape the emotional crisis of identity loss—from rock bottom—make more progress toward a new positive work identity when they generate and use more (rather than less) unique problem statements.*

Second, disciplined imagination involves *thought trials*—the generation of conjectures in the form of "if/then" statements. These thought trials are more useful (e.g., in moving toward a more plausible new work identity) when they are both numerous and heterogeneous rather than limited and homogenous (Weick, 1989). That is, having more thought trials that are more independent of each other generates an outcome that is more informative, and it facilitates the winnowing of provisional identities (Navis & Glynn, 2011). Play can generate numerous and heterogeneous thought trials. Specifically, it can trigger divergent thinking—"the ability of individuals to develop original ideas and to envision multiple solutions to a given problem. It involves thinking 'without boundaries' or 'outside the box' (Thompson, 2008: 226)" (Gino & Ariely, 2012: 446). Divergent thinking has been associated with ideational fluency and ideational flexibility (Sternberg & O'Hara, 1999; Torrance, 1995), which generate numerous and heterogeneous thought trials, respectively. Play can also involve mental transformations (Dansky, 1999; Runco, 1991; Singer & Singer, 1990) that provide different perspectives through the "association, contribution, and transformation of existing memory structures; metaphoric production; imagery; analogical thinking; and broad and flexible idea categorization" (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 94; Ward, Smith, & Finke, 1999). Both divergent thinking and mental transformations, when used in play, provide a basis for producing the number and heterogeneity of thought trials necessary for a disciplined imagination process to generate a new positive work identity.

However, play based on minimal divergent thinking or on mental transformations is less likely to generate the sort of thought trials that are most useful for moving toward a new positive work identity. For example, an injured musician might pursue limited thought trials of careers that most closely resemble her former career (i.e., working in a local music shop, opening a music studio, etc.), rather than considering a broader range of possible work identities, such as working as a creative professional in corporate marketing, becoming a motivational speaker (using performance skills), designing and manufacturing musical instruments for people with disabilities, and so forth, when engaging in thought trials.

Based on the above reasoning, we offer the following.

> *Proposition 2b: Those who use identity play to escape the emotional crisis of identity loss—from rock bottom—make more progress toward a new positive work identity when they use numerous and heterogeneous thought trials than when they use few and homogenous thought trials.*

Finally, disciplined imagination involves the choice of *selection criteria*—the means by which "a conjecture is selected or rejected include judgments of whether it is interesting, plausible, consistent, or appropriate" (Weick, 1989: 520). Consistent with thought trials, disciplined imagination involves numerous and heterogeneous selection criteria applied to "testing" provisional identities. For example, a failed executive might settle on a number of criteria, including pay requirements, risk, involvement in the community, and so forth, to facilitate further identity testing. Having numerous and diverse selection criteria means that those conjectures meeting these criteria are more likely to form the basis of a plausible new positive work identity. When a conjecture is selected, it is retained for further use (Weick, 1989), which, in the case of identity play, could lead to refinement, social validation, and movement toward a new positive work identity. Importantly, the selection criteria need to be applied consistently; otherwise, the series of conjectures provides fewer opportunities to accumulate information for sensemaking purposes (Weick, 1989).

Play can reduce the likelihood of prematurely closing the process through avoiding narrow selection criteria (Dansky, 1999; Singer & Singer, 1990). However, not all play generates diverse selection criteria or the consistent application of selection criteria. Some play has detailed and narrow rules for selection (e.g., most sports [McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, 1989]). Other forms of play are known to have shifting selection criteria (e.g., improvisational play [Barrett, 1998;

Nachmanovitch, 1990] and "galumphing" [Miller, 1973]), which diminish the "discipline" of disciplined imagination.

Based on the above reasoning, we offer the following.

> *Proposition 2c: Those who use identity play to escape the emotional crisis of identity loss—from rock bottom—make more progress toward a new positive work identity when they use numerous, heterogeneous, and consistent selection criteria than when they use few, homogenous, and inconsistent selection criteria.*

From Identity Play to Identity Refinement and Validation and Back

Identity play can create potential new work identities, but before one of these can be enacted fully, it will likely require refinement and social validation. Beyond the testing involved in thought trials as part of disciplined identity play, individuals appear to engage in a deeper analysis of a potential identity conjecture by evaluating it against internal standards of self-beliefs (Ibarra, 1999; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987) and external feedback from others' reactions to their possible adoption of the role (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Meister et al., 2014; see more below on social validation). This (internal and external) feedback is a source of information about the fit between the new identity and its corresponding role (Bandura, 1977; Weick, 1979). To the extent that there is a gap between the emerging notion of the new work identity and the role the individual performs when engaging in this work, *refinement* is necessary to "close the gap." That is, the identity must be tailored to fit the new work role (Deaux, 1991; Erez & Earley, 1993).

In a study of physician residents, Pratt and colleagues (2006: 248) found that refinement involves three types of identity customization. To close a large gap between recognizing a new work identity and performing its corresponding role, physician residents used splinting—"a temporary identity to use until the identity developed and became stronger (and then could be cast aside)" (Pratt et al., 2006: 248)—or patching—using one identity to cover holes or deficiencies in the new identity's correspondence with the work task (Pratt et al., 2006). For smaller gaps (perhaps

resulting from the effective use of splinting or patching), individuals appear to further refine the identity through enriching. That is, while the basic notions underlying the new identity remain the same, the individual gains a deeper, richer, and more nuanced understanding of the identity (Pratt et al., 2006). These refinement mechanisms are a means of identity adaptation (Ibarra, 1999).

However, the gap can also be closed (and fit achieved) by changing the nature of the work role to bring it into closer coherence with the new identity. For example, Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) found that individuals engage in job crafting to redefine and reimagine their work roles to bring those roles into closer alignment with what they believe is meaningful work (at least vis-à-vis their identity). In referring back to the example of a musician with a career-ending injury, she could seek to refine the new identity in music pedagogy by limiting its scope. For example, she might decide to limit herself to high-potential or adult students with lofty performance-related goals, as opposed to beginner students. Similarly, she might focus corporate training on executives in creative industries. These refining actions or imaginations are likely to increase alignment with a desired work identity.

As a new identity is refined, it also needs to be *socially validated*. Indeed, identity construction is recognized as involving interaction in the social context (Ibarra, 1999; Meister et al., 2014; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Van Maanen, 1998). That is, individuals can "try on" their new identity and, as such, make identity claims in a social context. These claims associated with the new identity stimulate a reaction by others—who accept, reject, or renegotiate this new identity (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Ibarra, 1999). Importantly, this stage of validation comes after periods of less directed, more free-flowing exploration of potential identities, during which social validation played little to no role. For example, a failed entrepreneur might explore the idea of working in various government organizations, such as the Small Business Administration. He might initially avoid sharing this idea while going through the early stages of exploration. However, after recognizing the plausibility of the idea compared to other options pursued during play, he might then seek social validation. Therefore, this social interaction provides information about remaining holes, asymmetries, or deficiencies in

the new emerging work identity and the need for further refinements (McNulty & Swann, 1994; Meister et al., 2014).

Not only does social interaction validate a new work identity, but it can also help in further refining the identity. By sharing a new identity, the individual receives feedback and the audience can also help coproduce a more plausible version of the identity by reinforcing certain aspects, interjecting new information, and helping find middle ground (Boje, 1991; Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Polletta & Lee, 2006). In particular, role models are a critical source of social validation for a potential new work identity (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006). To the extent that a new identity is socially validated, it can be adopted as a positive identity. To the extent that a new identity is not socially validated, it can be discarded or further refined and tested for social validation. For example, the injured musician might seek validation and guidance from her instructors or role models, allowing her to coproduce this new identity in pedagogy while simultaneously providing validation and legitimacy. This social validation would likely ease the transition to a new identity and serve as an ongoing source of identity reinforcement and support.

Based on the above reasoning, we offer the following.

> *Proposition 3: The generation of a new positive work identity is enhanced for individuals who engage in more refinement and social validation of the provisional identities generated through play than for those who engage in less refinement and social validation.*

The above identity refinement and validation can be facilitated by periodically re-engaging in identity play. For example, identity play may facilitate the use of splinting to overcome a major "boundary crossing" (Pratt et al., 2006; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) between the identity and its corresponding roles. Given that splinting involves the use of a temporary identity until the new identity becomes stronger (Pratt et al., 2006), the challenge is to "find" a temporary identity that provides the necessary splint to enable the primary identity to develop. Just as identity play can help generate potential new identities, it is also likely useful in generating potential "splints" as part of the refinement of a focal new identity.

Similarly, refinement through patching requires the generation of one identity to patch up the holes or deficiencies with the current new identity (Pratt et al., 2006). Generating the "patch" can be facilitated by identity play. For example, a failed entrepreneur who pursues a "traditional" corporate employee identity might experience deficiencies from lacking an entrepreneurial role. To patch this deficiency, he might volunteer to take on project-style work to lead and "own" the project. In taking on these assignments, he could select the team and work with relative independence within the broader corporate structure. While not perfect, these patches likely facilitate the entrepreneur's transition to the new corporate employee identity.

Even enriching the new identity can be facilitated by identity play. That is, identity play can provide an exploration of the identity in perhaps more extreme circumstances, which provides a basis for a deeper, richer, and more nuanced understanding of the identity. An individual could play with adopting different role models, combinations of different role aspects, and/or combinations and recombinations of various roles. For instance, an injured veteran might combine a stable role of taking a job with a small business, which would have relatively few ties to former work identities, with a more risky work identity as a motivational speaker for other injured veterans or those who have experienced hardship. Playing with the identity of a motivational speaker will likely expose the injured veteran to others who experience struggle, providing greater depth and meaning to both the lost identity and the nuance and (potential) importance of the new identity.

Identity play can also be useful in engaging the social context to refine the identity to achieve social validation. For example, play can involve others, and through this social play, rules and boundaries can be created and adjusted (Barrett, 1998; Nachmanovitch, 1990) as a process of interpersonal negotiation. "Playing with others" to coproduce an outcome can help refine the new identity to achieve social validation. For example, a failed executive might engage family members (Newman, 1988) and those encountered during identity play in developing new versions of an emerging identity. The coproduction could result in a more nuanced version of the identity, as well as better acceptance within new professional and/or social communities. When a potential new identity (generated through identity play) is rejected by the audience, the individual can return to identity play to generate a new potential identity to be refined and socially validated.

Based on the above reasoning, we offer the following.

> *Proposition 4: Individuals who oscillate between identity play and identity refinement/validation make more progress toward a new positive work identity than those who do not oscillate between identity play and identity refinement/ validation.*

Up to this point we have primarily focused on *what* paths individuals might take in the aftermath of work-identity loss. We now turn to *why* one path is taken over another and why there is likely variance in success among those who pursue a new positive work identity.

Hitting Rock Bottom: A Path to Recovery or Dysfunction

Given the divergent responses to the experience of hitting rock bottom (Baumeister, 1990, 1991, 1994) and to work-identity loss (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014), we use a self-regulation perspective— specifically, regulatory focus theory—to theorize about why some individuals, after hitting rock bottom and experiencing work-identity loss, engage in cognitive deconstruction, whereas others engage in identity play to create a new positive work identity. Building on the hedonic principle that people approach pleasure and avoid pain, regulatory focus theory (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 1997, 1998) explains how people differ in the processes by which they approach pleasure and avoid pain. In particular, people differ (relative to others and across situations) in the needs they seek to satisfy, the goals or standards they are trying to achieve, and the psychological situations that matter to them (Brockner & Higgins, 2001). These differences are reflected in two self-regulatory foci: (1) promotion focus—when "people's growth and development needs motivate them to try and bring themselves into alignment with their ideal selves, thereby heightening the salience (or felt presence or absence) of positive outcomes" (Brockner & Higgins, 2001: 35)—and (2) prevention focus—when "people's security needs prompt them to bring themselves into alignment with their ought selves, thereby increasing the salience (or felt absence or presence) of negative outcomes" (Brockner & Higgins, 2001: 35). The differences in regulatory foci are likely to influence the path individuals take after hitting

rock bottom by shaping the extent to which they engage in identity play. Specifically, identity play provides an opportunity to explore options to identify and develop positive conceptualizations of possible identities, and it provides feedback about the sustainability of these possibilities (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Because promotion-focused individuals have a need to grow and develop to explore their ideal self (i.e., their hopes, wishes, and aspirations), they are sensitive to the presence or absence of positive outcomes (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Higgins, 1997). Therefore, there appears to be a regulatory fit between a promotion regulatory focus and the task of play (including identity play). Engagement in the task (in this case identity play) is likely strengthened when there is regulatory fit (Higgins, 2006). For example, an injured military veteran who is promotion focused might recognize the value of exploring new options despite his lost career, considering play an outlet to "see what is out there" and to identify what might be. Perhaps this individual has behaved this way in the past when faced with other challenges or obstacles.

In contrast, identity play is likely to be a regulatory nonfit for those with a prevention focus. A prevention focus emphasizes security needs, an ought self, and the absence of negative outcomes. Play, however, requires one to abandon the need to feel secure in order to explore risky alternatives of provisional selves and to take action that could generate negative feedback about the authenticity of the hypothesized identity. For example, an injured military veteran who is prevention focused might avoid trying new roles due to the perceived risk that a new role might result in failure. This attitude could stop the veteran from playing with (or even seriously considering) new versions of a self as he focuses instead on preventing additional losses by avoiding taking any risks. Given a regulatory nonfit (Higgins, 2006), it is likely that prevention-focused individuals will have weakened engagement in this playful task.

Furthermore, identity play involves generating hypotheses about possible future identities and playing with them (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Identity play can be more successful to the extent that individuals generate more and diverse hypotheses and keep an open mind about them while exploring them. When they are promotion focused, individuals have been found to generate more distinct alternatives (Crowe & Higgins, 1997), including alternative hypotheses when performing an ambiguous

task (Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001) and alternatives that are more creative (Friedman & Förster, 2001). It appears that a motivation to have hits and avoid errors of omission encourages these individuals to be creative in generating conjectures. They are also more willing to switch to a new activity, or a new hypothesis (Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999). In contrast, when they are prevention focused, individuals tend to be more repetitive so as to avoid errors of commission (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 1989), to take more time, and to "stick to as few alternatives as possible and repeating ones already used" (Crowe & Higgins, 1997: 125). These differences likely lead to differences in engaging in identity play.

In combining the arguments above, we offer the following propositions.

> *Proposition 5a: Individuals who are more promotion focused are more likely to engage in identity play to escape the emotional crisis of identity loss—from rock bottom—than are individuals who are less promotion focused.*

> *Proposition 5b: Individuals who are more prevention focused are more likely to engage in cognitive deconstruction to escape the emotional crisis of identity loss—from rock bottom—than are individuals who are less prevention focused.*

Movement Between Identity Play and Cognitive Deconstruction

Although theorizing about the antecedents of a regulatory focus is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that even though regulatory focus has an intrinsic, enduring, stable, and chronic component (Higgins, 1998; Wallace, Johnson, & Frazier, 2009), this does not necessarily mean that those with a prevention-focused dispositional tendency are doomed to languish in a dysfunctional state (i.e., a continuous cycle of cognitive deconstruction and appraisals of high threat). Specifically, individuals can experience situational or contextual regulatory effects (Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008; Stam, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010) that influence their *regulatory state*—the combination of their chronic regulatory focus and the temporary shift caused by contextual factors—at a specific point in time (i.e., temporary shift in regulatory

focus), as well as their subsequent actions. Therefore, individuals may vary in their regulatory state, which helps explain a response to identity loss at different points in time, depending on the circumstances surrounding that loss and their perceived prior experience with self-regulation (Pham & Higgins, 2005).

First, when facing an uncertain situation (e.g., uncertainty about their work identity), people generally take cues from others on ways to think, feel, and act (Bandura, 1977; Brockner & Higgins, 2001). By modeling the thinking, feeling, and behaviors of role models who have a promotion focus, individuals can become promotion focused (and the same is the case for prevention focus). Second, regulatory focus can be influenced by language, symbols (Brockner & Higgins, 2001), and feedback (Förster, Grant, Idson, & Higgins, 2001) such that when the work-identity loss (and the possibilities of identity play) is framed and/or interpreted in terms of gains and nongains, the individual is more likely to adopt a promotion focus. However, if the work-identity loss (and the possibilities of identity play) is framed and/or interpreted in terms of losses and nonlosses, the individual is more likely to adopt a prevention focus (see Roney, Higgins, & Shah, 1995, and Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998). Finally, broader environmental contextual events, such as disasters or economic crises, can influence an entire community's focus on either promotion or prevention (Brockner, Higgins, & Low, 2004), which, in turn, likely influences individual responses to work-identity loss within this context.

As such, we would expect some degree of movement between identity play and cognitive deconstruction, depending on situational or contextual factors over time. For example, a promotion-focused military veteran might begin playing with a new identity as an entrepreneur and consider possible ideas to implement. He might then encounter resistance from close friends who are concerned about the risk associated with creating a new venture, which could alter his regulatory state toward a more prevention-focused orientation, resulting in a longing for his previous identity (Marine) and a desire to escape that longing, which he attempts through cognitive deconstruction. Later, he might make additional adjustments that allow him to regain a promotion focus and thereby re-engage in identity play.

DISCUSSION

Work identities are highly valued and built up over time, but they can be lost (or taken away). Such a loss necessitates the generation of a new positive work identity. In this article we build on notions of identity loss, psychological escape, and self-regulation to theorize about why some who hit rock bottom are able to generate a new positive work identity while others languish. This "hitting rock bottom" model of generating a new positive work identity provides a number of new insights, particularly regarding conditions and processes for the generation and adoption of a new positive work identity through identity play and work.

First, work identities are relatively stable (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978), thus enabling individuals to take incremental steps in effectively managing certain identity threats (Crocker & Major, 1989; Petriglieri, 2011). However, some threats are so severe that individuals must recreate a work identity altogether (Newman, 1988), a situation that restructuring or protecting the threatened identity is unlikely to resolve. In this article we theorize that following the loss of a work identity, individuals can create a new identity through disciplined identity play as an important precursor to effective identity refinement and social validation. During disciplined identity play, individuals identify a provisional identity (or identities) that they can then formally test, refine, and socially validate. This theorizing extends our understanding of the precursors of identity play and identity refinement/validation under conditions of work-identity loss. Furthermore, this theorizing clarifies differences between goal-oriented identity generation and less structured but disciplined identity play and demonstrates how these differences can be crucial in possible future identities. While we do not expand on the likely variation in positive identities (since this was beyond the boundary conditions of this article), the theorizing here lays the groundwork for subsequent research to explore how variance in identity play (as discussed here) influences the quality and longevity of a new positive identity.

Second, research on identity change has primarily focused on incremental adaptations to maintain a positive work identity (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006; Van Maanen, 1998). An exception is the work on identity play, in which

scholars argue that individuals engage in a trial of possible future selves that can generate possible provisional identities (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). In the current model we build on the notion of hitting rock bottom—in the form of a crystallization of discontent—to explain responses to identity loss that integrate models of identity refinement with identity play. Specifically, we theorize that after some job losses there is a deterioration in the individual's functioning that counterintuitively creates conditions (i.e., hitting rock bottom) conducive for identity play, which, in turn, requires identity refinement and social validation to achieve a new positive work identity. Importantly, we argue that while hitting rock bottom is a negative experience for individuals, and therefore not what one would assume to be a "safe place" for play, it can provide an important basis for some to engage in identity play, allowing them to launch a new identity from the context of identity loss.

Third, in building on the theory of escape (Baumeister, 1997) to explore how hitting rock bottom can facilitate new identity creation, we provide insights into the role of identity play in searching for a long-term positive work identity (Roberts et al., 2009). By delving deeper into regulatory focus theory, we argue that a constellation of contextual factors likely influences individuals' self-regulation focus, which, in turn, influences their mode of escape after hitting rock bottom. This builds theory that emphasizes the social nature of identity formation and growth (Ibarra, 1999, 2003) and the ways in which individuals incorporate responses from family, friends, and the economic environment when forming or altering work-related identities (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006).

Finally, by extending the work of Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014), this article offers a number of important distinctions. First, rather than focusing on increasing identity discrepancy's generation of negative emotions, we focus on the role of hitting rock bottom—a crystallization of discontent arising from making associative connections between the various negative aspects of the situation—whether identity discrepancy is increasing or not. Second, rather than focusing on a loss orientation (i.e., "who I was") and its oscillation with a restoration orientation, we focus on alternate paths after hitting rock bottom in which a commitment to understanding "who I was" has been undermined and the individual has realized his or her identity has been lost; both paths

attempt to escape thinking about "who I was." Indeed, hitting rock bottom can provide the conditions necessary for identity play and, thus, the generation of provisional identities as an important step toward a new positive identity. Finally, rather than building on regulatory focus theory to explain the range of information for generating a new positive work identity, we build on regulatory focus theory to explain why some individuals, after hitting rock bottom, engage in cognitive deconstruction as a dysfunctional path, while others engage in identity play as a functional path.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Beyond the regulatory focus arguments made here regarding why some individuals pursue play and other individuals cognitively deconstruct, other perspectives are likely to shed further light on these divergent paths. For example, extant research on the antecedents and obstacles to play has suggested three possibilities. First, individuals likely vary in their degree of psychological "space" for engaging in play. Given individuals' different possible reactions (Bonanno, 2004) to identity loss, perhaps those with more psychological space will engage in identity play as the basis for recovery, whereas those who lack this psychological space will escape through cognitive deconstruction (similar to Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Specifically, some individuals may be more psychologically inclined *following* an identity loss to engage in identity play activities, during which they utilize the psychological space between their inner psyche (i.e., where future identities can be imagined) and external reality (Winnicott, 1975, 2005). Furthermore, future research might also explore how individuals can shape or influence their self-regulatory state, since this would likely help influence the development or priming of a psychological space for identity play. For example, future research could explore factors that result in a more promotion-focused regulatory state, perhaps helping prevention-oriented individuals become (at least temporarily) more promotion focused to avoid cognitive deconstruction and escape through identity play.

Second, beyond individual differences, the availability of institutionalized tools for identity transitions is also likely to impact whether hitting rock bottom leads to identity play or cognitive deconstruction. This could include activities like scenario planning, which is a complex game, as opposed to the more structured activity of strategic planning (Brown & Starkey, 2000). In the scenario-planning process, individuals "experiment and 'intently' envision different possible scenarios, forcing themselves to challenge existing cognitive assumptions" (Brown & Starkey, 2000: 112). In a similar sense, institutional tools for identity transition might include career guidance, postmilitary acclimatization, job-shadowing programs, or other possible solutions for facilitating the exploration of new identities and helping people gain inclusion in new, temporary, and/or tangential (Ibarra, 1999, 2003) possible roles (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001; Irvine, 2000; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The challenge here is not to engage the usual tools of identity maintenance or refinement but to provide different tools tailored to promoting and engaging in identity play.

Third, our main focus in this article was on two primary pathways in response to hitting rock bottom, since this is a critical first step in theorizing. However, we anticipate that future research can offer contributions by exploring the possible variation in the positive identities created after individuals hit rock bottom. Are there patterns of identity play that result in new identities that are positive but significant downgrades (Newman, 1988) from a previous identity? Are there specific career types that are more difficult to escape, such as professional athletes or other high-profile, celebrity-status work identities? Are there different processes or activities (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) of play for different groups of individuals, and do those influence outcomes? Does the length of time in play (Greil & Rudy, 1984; Winnicott, 1975) influence the types and/or longevity of positive identities generated? What role (and in what form) do social support and resource reserves fulfill in allowing individuals the time and psychological space to play?

Finally, a variety of environmental factors could reduce the likelihood of identity play, including the cultural stigma of failure (Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000; Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999), the cultural unacceptability of identity change, and a lack of alternative identities within the broader social and economic context (Sommer, Bae, & Luthans, 1996). For example, if an individual experiences identity loss in a country that has strict social roles (e.g., individuals are "assigned" careers and

social roles early in life) where alternative roles are unavailable, the individual may be less likely to participate in identity play, or engaging in identity play may not lead to a new positive work identity.

The model has a number of practical implications. We would obviously prefer that an individual (perhaps oneself, a loved one, or a friend) who has hit rock bottom be on the functional path to a new positive work identity, rather than on the dysfunctional path of cognitive deconstruction. We may be able to help people who have hit rock bottom pursue this functional path by stimulating in them a promotion focus (through framing and/ or priming [Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Roney et al., 1995]). Such attempts could be achieved through formal organizational efforts (e.g., career transition organizations and counseling services for unemployed), as well as informal efforts (e.g., family and social network interactions). These attempts to stimulate a promotion focus may also be useful for shifting those on the dysfunctional path of cognitive deconstruction to a functional path toward a new positive work identity. We may also be able to help those who have hit rock bottom progress toward a new positive work identity by helping them discipline their identity play—to generate more unique problem statements, more numerous and heterogeneous thought trials, and more numerous, heterogeneous, and consistent selection criteria. In addition, we can help the individuals to oscillate between identity play and identity refinement so as to move toward a new positive work identity.

But as we speculate on some potential practical implications of our model, we do want to highlight the serious consequences of these implications; the dysfunctional path of cognitive deconstruction can lead to serious psychological problems, and even suicide. We hope that future research further investigates the implications of our model presented here.

CONCLUSION

In this article we highlighted that hitting rock bottom can drive some toward cognitive deconstruction but can also provide the realization of an identity lost and the conditions necessary for engaging in identity play to create a path toward a new positive work identity. We identified regulatory focus as an important factor in driving individuals toward identity play as opposed to cognitive deconstruction, and disciplined identity play driving individuals toward a positive work identity rather than continuous play. We hope that future research extends this study, especially research that delves deeper into why hitting rock bottom facilitates identity play for some and cognitive deconstruction for others and the means and mechanisms of movement between the two. A deeper understanding of why some recover and others languish provides an opportunity to develop interventions that facilitate recovery from work-identity loss.

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