ACCOUNTS AND SELF IMAGE: A PILOT STUDY

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The purpose of this thesis is to examine the connection between account choice and self image. We begin with a review of account theory. This will include defining what an "account" is, the various types of accounts that people use, and the sequence in which accounts occur. Next, we examined account research studies. Then, the variable of self image was proposed as an area important in account formation yet largely ignored by researchers. From this
review, it was thought that self image would predict account choice, where individuals with high self image were more likely to accept responsibility for their actions than people with low self esteem. It was also hypothesized that individuals with low self esteem were more likely to offer accounts which would attempt to escape blame for actions more than people with high self esteem.

To test this hypothesis, a simulated job interview was created. Four subjects were asked in the interview to recall an account situation from their past that happened at work (for copy of interview format, see Appendix A). A content analysis of the videotaped interviews followed. Account choices were then correlated to the categories in Benoit’s Image Restoration Model (see Appendix B). The account was then transcribed into text with the use of Buttny’s (1993) Transcription Method (see Appendix C). That category was then compared to the interviewee’s reported level of self image, determined by individual score on the Berkeley Personality Unified Self Image Profile- Work Category, or USIP (see Appendix D).
Account choice did correspond to USIP score. The higher the USIP score, the more likely one would utilize account options that admitted responsibility for actions. Those with lower USIP scores employed account styles designed to avoid responsibility or blame.

Additionally, respondents that had mid level self image scores (neither high nor low) also used account choices that corresponded to Benoit's Image Restoration Model in terms of responsibility. It seems reasonable, then, that the degree of one's self image will likely correspond to the degree of responsibility taken for actions in account situations. The need for future research which would utilize a larger sample of subjects was asserted.

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Accounts and Self Image: A Pilot Study

As soon as people began to fight with words rather than with clubs or fists, they must have tried to defend themselves verbally against the slings and arrows of outrageous verbal assault (Corbett, from Ryan, 1988, p. xi).

People make mistakes every day. These mistakes occur in a variety of ways, from minor incidents (belching at a dinner table, spilling coffee on someone else) to serious breaches of conduct (sexually harassing a colleague, incorrectly reporting personal taxes, murder). Our explanations of those mistakes are called "accounts" (Antaki, 1994, p. 92-93). Although we may regard them simply as explanations, researchers have found that there are a variety of ways in which individuals attempt to ameliorate actions of which others disapprove. The study of accounts has critical implications for how we relate to others as we use and evaluate accounts that we daily encounter.
Definition

For communication scholars, account research begins in the 1960's. J. L. Austin (1962) formulated a category of language which we now refer to as behabitives. Behabitives are reactions to past conduct, and include greetings, thanks, wishes, challenges, and apologies (Austin, p. 159). In 1961, Austin, in his paper, "A Plea for Excuses", speaks of two types of behabitives. Austin asserts that there are two forms of defense that are available to an individual when one has been accused of conducting actions that are "bad, wrong, inept, unwelcome" to another individual (Austin, 1961, p. 124). These options are to either excuse or justify one's behavior.

If an individual uses an excuse, it is an admittance that the action was wrong or inappropriate, while a denial of responsibility for the action that occurred (I was temporarily insane when I killed that person). If an individual uses a justification, it is an admittance that the actor was responsible for the action that occurred,
while a denial that the action was inappropriate (I punched him in the mouth, but he cursed at me first). In any event, the overriding wish of a person in these cases is "to defend his (sic) conduct or get him (sic) out of it" so blame can be escaped or minimized (Austin, 1961, p. 124).

Scott and Lyman (1968) later group these two types of defenses into a single category, known as accounts. They then define accounts as statements that explain "unanticipated or untoward behavior" (Scott & Lyman, p. 46). While this definition may make accounts seem similar to explanations, Scott and Lyman differentiate accounts as consisting only of the relationship between actors within the context of problematic situations (Scott & Lyman, p. 47).

Scope

Buttny (1985) finds that accounts can be found in nearly all areas of communication, from serious settings (the organization, courtroom, or job interviews) to informal ones (conversation among friends). Accounts
research also examines a variety of problematic levels, from minor inconveniences (brushing against someone) to serious problems (marital disputes in therapy sessions). Current studies continue to explore the different areas in which accounts occur, from pick-up lines in bars and nightclubs (Snow, Robinson & McCall, 1991), to excuses regarding teacher-student relations (Tollefson, Hsia, & Townsend, 1991), and even sexual harassment accounts (Hunter & McClelland, 1991).

Accounts are also a field of ever changing domain. While most would place them under the general rubric of aligning actions (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976), other terms include motive talk (Mills, 1940), face threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987), remedial situations or incidents (Goffman, 1967), and fractured social interaction, disruptions, breaches, or social predicaments (Semin & Manstead, 1983). Additionally, while account typologies frequently include excuses and justifications, there are many other remedial strategies that are considered accounts, including disclaimers (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975),
confessions (Gonzales, Pederson, Manning & Wetter, 1990), apologies (Fraser, 1981), and refusals to account (Buttny, 1985).

The discrepancies concerning the domain of accounts often results in confusing terminology. There are two reasons why this confusion is present. First, Fraser points out that accounts constitute an area of research "still in its painful adolescence" (p. 270). It can be expected, then, that various terms will be bandied about for a while before consensus is reached. Second, articles in the accounts field include a variety of scholarly disciplines, including sociology, psychology, linguistics, philosophy, media and communication studies, each grounded in differing theoretical perspectives.

It is also important to point out that accounts are not the sole method of alleviating problematic situations. Other methods are available, such as counterclaims, licenses, and conversational repairs (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 1993) and should be studied outside of the
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Accounts, then, are not the only way to explore conflict within individuals, but serve as "one kind of response to the problematic situation" (Buttny, 1985, p. 60). Newell and Stutman agree, stating that a reliance solely upon accounts "inevitably leaves out other strategies" (1988, p. 268).

Scott and Lyman's Typology

Once Scott and Lyman define what an account is, they provide the first known typology of excuses and justifications. Excuses can follow any of four forms—appeal to accidents, appeal to defeasibility, appeal to biological drives, and scapegoating (Scott & Lyman, p. 47).

An appeal to accident gives an account on the basis that the action which is believed to be inappropriate could not have been avoided. Such excuses would include internal variables (clumsiness) and external ones (car traffic making one late for an appointment).

An appeal to defeasibility claims that the individual is not fully aware of the circumstances involved, or that
one does not have complete control of one's will. An example of the first situation is a policeman who apprehends a person he sees stealing a purse, only to learn later that the "robber" is an actor filming a scene for a movie. Examples of the second type of defeasibility account are drunkenness or lunacy.

An appeal to biological drives admits that the actions were wrong, but excuses them with respect to the offender's culture. Scott and Lyman write that this appeal includes cultural stereotypes of many kinds, such as people of Italian descent being regarded as sexually promiscuous.

The last appeal is scapegoating, where one admits wrongdoing but blames the act upon another individual. For example, a person may admit to hitting another individual's truck, but claims that another person hit his car first, causing him to lose control of his car and then hit the truck that was in front of him.

Scott and Lyman also provide a list of types of justifications-- denial of injury, denial of victim,
condemnation of condemners, and appeal to loyalties (p. 51).

In denial of injury, one claims an action as wrong yet permissible due to lack of harm. This is the case with an individual who parachuted from the sky into the middle of a boxing ring during a title match. When he was later arrested, he claimed that since no one was hurt, he did not deserve to be punished.

In denial of victim, one admits responsibility but claims the other person deserved it. Killing enemy soldiers on a battlefront, shooting in self defense, or claiming the victim to be an undesirable, such as a crook, are examples of this justification.

In condemnation of the condemners, the person admits the act, but justifies it by saying that others commit the same or worse acts without penalty. An example of this type of justification is receiving a speeding ticket and arguing that many others on the freeway were going as fast but were not also given a ticket.

Appeal to loyalty claims that although the action was
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wrong, it served a higher authority of the individual than the law. Many conscientious objectors claim a higher authority (often the Bible's words against murder) than the call to defend one's country in times of war.

Other Typologies

Goffman also addresses the idea of accounts in his notion of remedial work, which has the same goal as accounts, to change "the meaning that otherwise might be given to an act, transforming what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable" (1971, p. 109). Goffman identifies seven responses. First, one can deny the event. Second, one can deny an act's offensiveness (as in justifications). Third, one could admit the act but claim its results as not foreseen. Fourth, one could offer an excuse. Fifth, one can admit carelessness as cause of accident. Sixth, one can apologize for the incident. Finally, one can use a request, a statement asking permission for untoward behavior before an incident. For example, one may ask permission before violating another's personal space in a
crowded area, such as a subway.

Schonbach presented several studies on account taxonomies. His first (1980) was similar to Scott and Lyman, but included two additional categories. The first of these are concessions, including admission of guilt, offer of redress, and/or remorse. The second category is refusals, which include criticism of accuser, denials, and scapegoating. Later, Schonbach expanded his typology to include over one hundred and fifty possible account choices (1990).

Schlenker (1980) offers a similar model which includes excuses, justifications, and defenses of innocence, similar to Schonbach's denial approach.

Tadeschi and Reiss (1981) offered a typology that did not attempt to develop new categories but instead expanded Scott and Lyman's previous ones, including additional justifications and excuses (such as several types of appeals to a higher authority and reputation building).

Semin and Manstead (1983), in an attempt to provide a comprehensive yet simpler mode of examining previous
Typologies, grouped typologies into two sets of theories. One consists of excuses and justifications solely. The other includes additional categories we mentioned earlier in discussion of domain, such as apologies, denial, refusals, appeals of innocence, and others.

**Typology Difficulties**

There certainly has been a large amount of writing on account typologies, and there are still other studies outside of the ones examined in the previous section. While this research helps to attempt to define the scope or domain of accounts, it also presents several problems.

First, the prevailing belief that "more is better" with regard to typologies hinders practical research. It promotes theorists to simply point out additional appeals to loyalty, for example, and label itself as the new, best typology. This attitude will inevitably cause lists to mushroom. (I think one hundred and fifty different excuses and justifications is too much, but at the rate theory is developing, we may have three hundred or more in the near future.)
Such extensive, lengthy lists makes research all the more difficult. As Benoit points out, "their complexity renders them unwieldy" (1995, p. 93). First, with huge lists of offenses, issues such as coding reliability are difficult to achieve. Tests in the field would be hard to manage if one had to sift through nearly a hundred or more possibilities instead of using simpler categories.

Second, since taxonomies are changing frequently, laboratory studies use different types in their experiments and coding. Frequently, research simply uses the newest, or most current, list available. No one, then, can realistically compare these studies to each other because each uses different operational definitions of what excuses and justifications are. Benoit supports this viewpoint, writing, "If one study uses quite different forms of excuse and justification from another study, dissimilar results seem possible if not likely" (p. 49).

In addition, such concentration on the type of account that is given by an offender seems to place the formation of a typology as the crowning achievement in
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research. Instead, one should realize that "taxonomic listing should only [be] a preliminary phase" (Antaki, 1994, p. 49). The present emphasis on lists is limiting account research, while other equally important conditions of the account (accusation, evaluation of excuse, self image of offender, context of situation) are being largely ignored.

All of this points out the need for more standardized, simpler lists of excuses and justifications. Such action will make laboratory research more manageable and promote the development of theory in other areas of the account field. Perhaps the best last word on this subject is by Antaki, who writes of the necessity of "going in the opposite direction from the accounts literature and cutting away the superstructure it has built over Austin's basic distinctions" (1994, p. 66-67).

Account Sequence

Accounts cannot be understood only by description, however. Accounts are also explained in terms of sequences. Schonbach provides a four stage model, which
consists of the failure event, the reproach, the account, and the evaluation of the account (1980, p. 195). A similar model is given by Goffman (described as a corrective interchange) including a challenge, offering, acceptance, and thanks (1971, p. 20-23).

All accounting episodes consist of three minimal moves. Cody and McLaughlin list them as (a) a need for repair (where the actor's wrongful actions are called into question by another individual), (b) the remedy (or account), and c) the acknowledgment (or evaluation of the account) (1985, p. 51).

The order in which these three steps occur is also important, however. The account must always follow the request for repair, and the evaluation must always follow the account (Cody & McLaughlin, 1985; Blumstein 1974).

There are, however, several problems with the account sequence. Labeled as a "canonical form", the account sequence does have its flaws (Cody & McLaughlin, 1985, p. 51). Buttny points out several ways in which the account form may not be followed as it is defined (1985, p. 60).
First, one could discredit oneself (i.e., spill tea on your lap) instead of harming another individual. Second, the person who commits the act may volunteer the account without the presence of a reproach. Third, another party may offer the account on behalf of the offender. Finally, the offender may postpone the account.

Account Research

Types of Research

Experimental research with regard to accounts falls into a few categories. The first of these is where one creates a laboratory environment to test out a principle on subjects (Gonzales, Pederson, Manning, & Wetter, 1990; Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994; Tedeschi, Riordan, Gaes, & Kane, 1983, Ungar, 1981). Here one often attempts to create a minor gaffe incident (spilling coffee, etc) in an effort to create account sequences which can be observed. Most experiments rely on the examination of hypothetical account situations, known as vignettes, which are created by the researcher (Blumstein, 1974; Cupach, Metts, & Hazleton, 1986; Giacalone, 1988; Giacalone & Pollard,
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1990; Hunter & McClelland, 1992; Riordan, Marlin, & Gidwani, 1988; Riordan, Marlin, & Kellog, 1983; Ruble, Boggiano, & Brooks, 1982). Others rely on research from actual account episodes that subjects recall and write down on paper (Felson & Ribner, 1981; Henderson & Hewstone, 1984; Riordan, James, & Runzi, 1989; Travis, McKenzie, Wiley, & Kahn, 1988). Usually these studies are aimed at identifying what type of excuse or justification the subject chose to use in their problematic situation. Finally, a few studies make evaluations based on conversation analysis of actual experiences that are recorded. (Geist & Chandler, 1984; Pollock & Hashmall, 1991, Buttny, 1993). These episodes are usually recorded on audiotape.

Research on Factors that Affect Accounts

Common sense seems to indicate that many of these account types are effective in mediating problematic situations. Goffman agrees, stating that remedial work, or the use of accounts, can "change the meaning" of an act, "transforming" the event into something which is
viewed as permissible (1971, p. 109). However, much of the experimental research seems to indicate that other factors besides the account episode can have an effect on whether an account sequence is viewed as successful or not.

For example, Blumstein hypothesized that the credibility of the offender would be a mitigating factor on the success of the account episode, that an account can only be accepted when the demander "buys" the credibility of the offender (1974, p. 553).

To support this hypothesis, Blumstein had students evaluate six written vignettes, each of which contained an offense, demanded account, and the account itself. The results indicate that the offense itself has no discernable impact. However, the type of account used "explained substantial variation" (1974, p. 556). If the subject believed the offender was sincere, or genuine, they usually accepted the account.

At the end of his research, Blumstein notes that while his results are significant, one major shortcoming
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is that the research depends on written accounts only. He recommends that future research utilize videotaped accounts.

Shields follows up on Blumsein's suggestion, and uses videotape as her instrument in a 1979 study. In her research, she had over fifty subjects, male and female, view a story about a man who tells about a shoplifting episode. Her variables included the type of accounts used (excuse, justification, or confession), the status of the offender (nice versus unkempt clothes), and eye contact with the interviewer (either 80% or 20% of the interview time).

Her findings serve to point out another possible variable in accounting. Shields found that no matter what type of account was used, it did not affect the responsibility people attributed to the offender. What she did find out is that people accepted certain types of accounts with regard to the offender's social status. Shields found that one type of account (justification) correlates well to lower status individuals, while excuses
correlate well to the higher status. Shields concluded that the ability of the account to transform the meaning of the act was "overemphasized" and overestimated (1979, p. 255, 269).

Cody and McLaughlin (1983), studying the use of accounts between strangers, found that the verbal manner in which the account process occurs was more important than the account itself. Their study revealed that the more aggravating the reproach is, the more aggravating the account would be. Conversely, the less aggravating the reproach, the less aggravated the account. So the mood of those involved in an account episode is another variable which can affect an account's success.

Ohbuchi (1994) points out yet another variable, the perceived motive of the offender. In his study, where he administered two written vignettes, he discovered that Japanese schoolchildren were far more likely to accept the offender's account if they believed the act was unintentional.

Finally, who the offender is can play a key role in
understanding acceptance of accounts. For example, a study of teachers indicates that whether a student's academic difficulties are accounted for by factors within or without a student's control, teachers are likely to believe that the student's problems are internal and controllable (Tollefson, Hsia, & Townsend, 1991). Additionally, Ruble, Boggiano, and Brooks (1982) found that women are more likely than men to excuse irritable behavior on the part of a woman when a menstrual excuse is given.

**Methodological Problems with Research**

Account studies are particularly difficult from a research point of view. Two major problems exist: 1) the nonverbal aspects of accounting; and 2) the setting of the research.

The first general problem with account methodologies is the lack of study on nonverbal aspects of account making. Obviously, tests that use vignettes or rely on participant's written record of past experiences are not able to analyze nonverbal behavior because they are
situations not in the present time frame, removed from an occurring account scenario. Also, many of the other studies in this area, particularly conversation analysis, use spoken sound as the basic unit of analysis.

The call for nonverbal behavior analysis is not new however. Scott and Lyman in 1968 called for theory integrating "both verbal and nonverbal behavior" (p. 61). In fact, Buttny contends that nonverbal variables "become crucial in how to interpret interactants' understandings and assessments" (1983, p. 31). The need seems apparent, then, for future studies to analyze nonverbal behavior.

The second general problem with account research concerns the setting in which experiments should be conducted. Buttny writes that Semin and Manstead called for more naturalistic contexts in account research over ten years ago, an assessment that "remains largely accurate today" (1993, p. 29). The majority of studies utilize imagined situations dreamt up by a researcher. This dependence on the imagined or hypothetical instead of realistic situations invites "broad glosses of the
phenomena and must raise doubts about ecological validity” (Buttny, 1993, p. 30).

These doubts exist because researcher imagined vignettes invite less authentic responses (Antaki, 1994, p. 52). When a researcher uses a vignette, they are essentially asking a person what they would theoretically do in a situation. Such studies are incapable of measuring what a person would actually do when placed in a predicament. As a result, one has to admit that “there may be all the difference in the world between being confronted with a situation in a vignette and in real life” (Potter & Wetherell, p. 79). This problem opens the door to possible doubts of the confidence and generalizability of this type of research.

Other laboratory studies, designed to test a subject’s immediate reaction to a problematic situation, are hard to create, because studies attempt to differentiate between account use and the seriousness of the breach. While minor gaffes or accident situations can be initiated and caused inside the laboratory (Gonzales,
Pederson, Manning, & Wetter, 1990), one could not subject volunteers to circumstances designed to "set them up" for serious infractions, such as sexual harassment or killing someone. So laboratory experiments can study minor violations of expectations, but not major ones. At another level of argument, some have argued about the accuracy and feasibility of laboratory studies creating "real world" phenomena (Harre and Secord, 1972, p. 44-46).

On the other hand, naturalistic studies have their own set of problems. First, account situations are not the easiest to find. While one studying initial interactions could simply attend a convention to analyze initial interactions between strangers, a researcher may have to listen to months of audiotape of a committee before an account situation occurs. As a result, field research of natural occurrences of accounts will probably be subject to criticism regarding the sample size of instances that are eventually analyzed. Second, once researchers venture into the field, they subject themselves to myriad other variables that may cause
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concern as to the internal validity of the study.

Both settings, then, seem to have problems inherent with their method of study. This predicament has led many contemporary researchers toward conversational analysis as a methodological tool (Antaki, 1994; Buttny, 1993; Geist & Chandler, 1984; Pollock & Hashmall, 1991).

Conversation analysis is difficult to define (Hopper, 1988), but basically consists of trying to find the order, or sequence, of actions in a conversation. Here, the research goal is to examine the structure of everyday talk, not to manipulate variables so that behavior can be predicted. Buttny writes that conversation analysis seems an ideal match in studying accounts because it “offers the richest vocabulary and analytical tools” for examining situations that occur in social interaction (1993, p. 47).

The use of conversation analysis has some advantages over other methods. First, it studies accounts in a more “naturalistic orientation” (Potter & Wetherell, p. 74) which Semin and Manstead (1983) advocated as a need. At the same time, researchers study their work in a precise
and empirical manner. With this approach, difficulties with internal and external validity are lessened considerably. Additionally, conversation analysis can discover important elements in conversation that are not addressed by other methods. These elements include linguistic features such as delay, stress and the selection of particular words (Potter & Wetherell, p. 93).

The conversation analysis method also has limitations. Conversation analysis cannot be predictive because it is only concerned with the structure of conversation (not variables that cause or affect word choice). In addition, replication of one’s findings is not possible when natural events are examined.

This method of study, where one conversation (or at most, only a few) constitute the sample utilized, also invites arguments that generalizable conclusions cannot be claimed. Buttny, however, argues that a particular example can be argued to have a general claim, and that more conversations can be added until generalizability can
be achieved (1993, p. 50-54).

Additionally, unlike other research methods, which use analysis of variance, chi-square, or other scientific processes of analysis, conversation analysis articles are unable to "show" their scientific procedures. We cannot verify that the researcher listened to a conversation several times, or that the conversation was transcribed accurately unless we have an audio tape of that conversation.

There is also a level of uncertainty in conversation analysis. Researcher's conclusions are based solely on their interpretations of the meanings of the words in a conversation. Since words and phrases can have different meanings, it is always possible that a researcher can incorrectly interpret a statement ("I'm sorry" as irony instead of sympathy, for example).

Finally, conversation analysis is not an easy task. It can be a very time consuming process, since it requires repeated listening of conversations, accurate and precise transcription, and detailed analysis of each word said
Self Image and Accounts

Self Image and Failure Events

Self image is certainly important to people. It is described as a "mental picture" of one's own performance before an audience. The process of achieving and maintaining a positive self image has been viewed as an "important motivational variable throughout the history of psychology" (Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983, p. 28-29).

Self image is a key variable in the study of accounts. By definition, accounts occur when an individual is caught or accused of doing something damaging. When this occurs, one immediately tries to save face, or repair one's image. Schlenker describes this as a compulsion to "cleanse one's reputation" through discourse (1980, p. 71). Once one is criticized, the dual problem of internal guilt and external threat inevitably causes a reaction from the actor (Benoit, p. 69).

When an actor's actions are threatened, his self image is called into question. Actors have to confront
their own actions. This confrontation is never enjoyable, because one “always assumes that they have projected a negative self image of themselves, even if the breach is an unintentional one’’ (Semin & Manstead, p. 38). Additionally, the threat to one’s image increases according to the level of the breach committed, because the more severe the incident is the greater the negative impact for the offender’s image (Schlenker, p. 131).

The negative feedback that occurs when one is accused can affect people differently, depending on their self image. Many researchers have found that negative feedback toward a person with a low self image results in demotivation and poorer task performance (Brockner, 1979; Brockner, Deer, & Laing, 1987; Campbell & Fairey, 1985; Shrauger & Sorman, 1977). Kernis, Brockner, and Frankel (1989) explained these findings by pointing out that low self image people tend to overgeneralize a specific failure event. In other words, one may perform badly on one test and then believe that one is a poor student. In another study, Kernis, Granneman, and Barclay (1992)
found the opposite pattern in high self image individuals. Those with high self image tend to overgeneralize success events, so that one failure event often will have little or no effect on their image.

Repairing Image

To deal with these negative repercussions, a “theoretical stance” is adopted, where one attempts to separate self from actions, and examine the excuse and justification possibilities available that could realign actions with expected behavior (Semin & Manstead, p. 39). Such a division is even more extreme if one uses an apology to account for actions. In these cases, an individual creates “self-splitting”, where a good and bad self are differentiated. Here, the actor admits the actions but claims that they were not a reflection of the true (good) self, but instead by a bad self which no longer exists (Schlenker, p. 154). For example, one may confess to abuse of a family, but claim it was due to an alcoholic addiction (bad self) that no longer exists because of therapy, a support group, or any number of
other reasons.

The attempt to realign corrects, or repairs, the offender's view of the self and, frequently, the accuser's view of the offender's self also. Mehlman and Snyder (1985) found that excuse making serves to "preserve that person's esteem" by "diluting" the impact of negative emotions to the self (p. 1000). Snyder and Higgins (1988) found that individuals that utilize excuses successfully have a higher self image after excuse making compared to immediately after the failure situation. These people also report greater personal happiness and exhibit increased job performance. Individuals that are unable to excuse their actions in failure events exhibit poorer physical health, declining job performance, and a lower self image.

It can be seen, then, that the entire accounting process consists of "the negotiation of identity" (Semin & Manstead, p. 98), and that saving face is extremely important, because it contributes to a healthy self image (Benoit, p. 69).
While there has been some research on self image and failure events, there are several factors that have limited the usefulness of self image research with regard to accounts. First, much of past research on self image examines effects of negative feedback on image but offers no opportunity to account for behavior (Brockner, 1979; Brockner, Derr, & Laing, 1987; Campbell & Fairey, 1985, Kernis, Brockner, & Frankel, 1989; Shrauger & Sorman, 1977). While these studies may offer interesting insight on failure and self image, they do not address how accounts shift and alter self image.

Regarding the small amount of research (only two studies) that presented a failure event, negative feedback, and accounting possibilities for the offender (Kernis, Granneman, & Barclay, 1992; Mehlman & Snyder, 1985), both offered only excuses as a method of aligning actions, and did not offer participants the opportunity to use other accounting possibilities (apology, justification, concession, denial, etc.).

Additionally, self image research has, in my opinion,
operational difficulties with terms. Virtually all research uses different self image scales. General conclusions, then, are as difficult to have confidence in as account research that uses different typologies of accounts.

Several studies also have limitations in dividing their sample into low and high self image categories. For example, Shrauger and Rosenberg (1970) only tested subjects that tested in the highest and lowest quartile of their self image survey. On the other hand, Brockner, Derr, and Laing (1987) simply took the midpoint of their sample distribution and classified those above a certain point high self image and those below as having low self image. In other words, someone who tested 56 could be considered to have high self image, and someone testing 55, a difference of only one point, would have low self image. Problems exist with either approach: either a large part of the sample is ignored (mid range self image) or individuals are classified as one extreme or another.
The Study

It is important to make the case for the centrality of the self in the accounting process because while the previous account studies reviewed address many variables for account use and success (mood, credibility, motive and social status of the offender, etc.), they ignore the role of self with regard to accounts. All of these studies have a common element-- they focus on factors that predispose the evaluator’s opinion toward the success of the account. In the process they are ignoring how one attempts to negotiate one’s identity.

Additionally, we have seen that self image research has two prominent limitations: 1) many offer no account possibilities or only excuses as options, and 2) research is centered on high and low self image categories, and does not study individuals with mid level image scores.

Hypothesis

This leads us to the following hypothesis, that draws upon and also extends previous research: that individuals will offer accounts that avoid blame corresponding to
the degree that their self image is lower than others, and that individuals will accept responsibility and offer apologies corresponding to the degree that their self image is higher than others. Since mid level image accounts have not been studied, it is uncertain which account choice they will employ; they may use a mixture or variety of accounting possibilities.

**Method**

Subjects will consist of graduate and undergraduate students in communication arts classes. Subjects will complete the Unified Self Image Profile (USIP) from the Berkeley Personality Profile. A stratified sample will be created using the four categories of USIP, with one interview chosen for each USIP category. Subjects used will have to have been previously employed.

Subjects will participate in a mock interview for a campus position (resident hall assistant). While the job is fictitious, subjects will be instructed to answer as truthfully as possible. In the interview, the subject will be asked to recall an actual account episode in a
previous job where they were the offender. The interview will be structured with additional probes to follow up on questions if incomplete information is given. The interviewer will use prewritten, structured questions.

All interviews will be videotaped. After the interview, the subjects will be informed of the true nature of the study.

A content analysis will be made of the interviews, and account episodes will be categorized according to Benoit’s (1995) Image Restoration Model. Portions of conversation or account episodes that are transcribed to illustrate and support results will follow Buttny’s (1993) Transcription Model, based on Gail Jefferson’s System.

I define this study as a pilot project, and only the preliminary stage of a more detailed series of studies that should follow it to give greater credibility and validity to any discoveries.

Advantages of method and instruments

There are several advantages in using the mock interview situation. The first advantage of this approach
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is that it examines real account episodes. Instead of attempting to create an embarrassing situation or using hypothetical problems, actual accounts are studied. This fulfills the naturalistic condition Semin and Manstead advocated (1983). Second, the interview situation will serve to disguise the goal of the research, since questions of success and failure on the job are common in interviews. Third, videotaping the interviews will allow nonverbal behavior to be noted.

There are also several advantages in using USIP to measure self image. First, the Berkeley test has been scientifically tested and proven (Harary & Donahue, 1994) while others, such as the Ennagram and Luscher Color Test have not.

Second, it creates a profile instead of a type (found in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Test, for example). With a type, such as introversion and extroversion, a judgment can only be made if your score is toward one extreme or another, while scores in the middle of a scale
cannot be measured. A profile, however, can make a judgment or provide data no matter where a score falls. Use of the profile, then, allows categorization and study of mid level image responses.

Additionally, USIP measures several variables (sociability, responsibility, etc.) so it offers a comprehensive picture of one’s self image. Many other studies may classify a person as high or low self image based on only one of these variables. For example, many researchers use the sociability scale in the California Personality Inventory, and classify individuals based on that one variable alone, instead of looking at the other variables that make up self image.

Finally, the Berkeley test examines self image in different areas, including personal attributes (emotion, intellect), and communication contexts (interpersonal, intimate, and work situations). Each area can have a different score. These distinctions are important because self esteem or image depends upon the context of the individual (McKay & Fanning, p. 6). In other words, one
may have high self esteem at work and also low self esteem in interpersonal relationships. By examining one’s self image in the workplace situation, we can be more specific in our analysis and also explain some possible contradictory problems [a person may say they are sociable in the interview (general high self image) but feels inadequate to be a resident hall employee (workplace low self image)].

This use of Benoit’s Image Restoration Model has several advantages. First, the model shares a key assumption with the writer that “accounts are concerned with face image” and that we have a “desire to have people view us favorably” (p. 50).

Second, the Image Restoration Model is more manageable to use than other typologies. Benoit’s model synthesizes previous “largely independent” rhetorical models, such as Rosenfield’s Mass Media Apology, Ware and Linkugel’s Apologia, and Burke’s theory of guilt, with his own categories (p. 29). The typology is also parsimonious, consisting of five categories (denial, evading
responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification) with only a few subcategories in each.

Third, the model offers options not found in general account typologies. For example, only Goffman mentions corrective action, and no studies include mortification.

The end result is a model with more general options and at the same time fewer categories than any current theory. As Benoit points out, his model offers a typology "more complete than those found in the rhetorical literature while avoiding the extreme detail found in some descriptions of accounts" (p. 74).

At present, Benoit's Image Restoration Model has only been applied to political speeches and organizational public relations incidents, yet Benoit believes his model is a general theory, and asks for its application to situations involving ordinary social actors (p. 166).

Buttny's Transcription Model is useful for two reasons. First, it can illustrate tone, emphasis, pitch, etc., instead of simply showing the words that are said. Additionally, Buttny's model has notations for nonverbal
behavior that are included in transcription, which other methods lack.

Results

Four subjects were interviewed whose scores fell within the range of one of the four categories of the USIP workplace section. The four categories of the USIP point out increasing degrees of worker responsibility. In other words, a person testing in the lowest category is said to not enjoy being tied down by responsibilities; a person testing in the next highest category sometimes has difficulty accepting responsibility; a person testing in the next highest category probably takes responsibilities quite seriously, and a person testing in the highest category values responsibility highly (p. 50-51).

Benoit’s Image Restoration Model is also arranged according to the issue of responsibility. The lowest level is denial (not responsible at all because act did not occur), followed by evading of responsibility (event occurred but my responsibility is lessened because of other factors), reducing offensiveness of event (event
Accounts and Self Image

occurred and one is responsible, but event is not serious problem), corrective action (event occurred, one is responsible, and these are the steps I will take to prevent it from happening in the future), and mortification (event occurred and one is responsible, and an apology is given to seek forgiveness).

A correlation was found between the USIP score of worker responsibility and the level of responsibility in the type of account that an individual offers. Individuals that had low self image scores used account tactics that attempted to escape blame, while high self image respondents accepted responsibility for their actions.

Subject 1, who tested in the lowest USIP workplace category, was the only interviewee that claimed to have never been at fault when asked about accounts at work. Subject 1 responded to the question as follows:

Not that I can remember .hhh ((grins)) from hhh work

hhh I mean I’ve done things(.)I shouldn’t have
done(grins)) in .hhh my life but hhh everyone has
but um(.)not(.)in work. I don't remem- recall ever
doing anything that(.)was out of line that someone(.)
disagreed with(.)or disliked.

This answer seems to suggest only two possibilities. One
could be that the subject had not worked long enough to
encounter an account episode. The other, and more
interesting, possibility is that the subject is unable to
admit that account situations occurred and chooses instead
to deny them. If the second possibility were correct, it
would correlate with the lowest level of responsibility in
Benoit's model (denial).

Subject 2, whose score corresponded to the next
(higher) level, recalled an incident involving a decision
that needed to be made with a complaining customer:

um(.)sometimes when you work, when you work at a
place like Domino's um, there are customers that
will do everything they can hhh to get free food.

This statement indicates that Subject 2 is already
attempting to disclaim the event. Subject 2 then
a couple of weeks ago this person called and he said "you know, I ordered five pizzas and I haven’t GOTTEN them yet" and we couldn’t find the order and since I was in charge and and no one else remembered> it(.) and then I had to make a decision, do I lose this customer or do I give him these five pizzas, and I gave him the five pizzas.

Here the subject is trying to escape blame for the incident by pointing out the need to weigh the interests of the customer in a decision. In Benoit’s model this falls in the next to lowest responsibility level (evading responsibility). More specifically, it refers to the subcategory of motive and intention justification. Subject 2 was claiming the actions were justified and not blameworthy because good intentions were used in the account episode (the value of the customer).

In spite of Subject 2's good intentions, however, the actions were still a mistake. The manager offered the
following response:

You need to be careful or maybe you need to say "OK, now LOOK, we need to see a copy of the receipt, or a copy of the boxes or just SOMETHING to prove that you(.)whatever(.)you know ((gesture toward interviewer))."

Subject 2, then, was successful in escaping blame but still had it pointed out that the actions were a mistake according to strict company policy.

Subject 3, who tested in the third category of the USIP workplace section, explained an incident that occurred while working for a telemarketing company that worked on renewing magazine subscriptions where employees were supposed to follow a script when speaking with customers. Subject 3 recalled the incident as follows:

I remember her name is [omitted](.)and, she was pointing out that(.)"Well, you need to say exactly what’s on the sheet, >the form they gave you,< DON’T deviate from the form um because it um turns people OFF when you’re(.)um telling them about renewal
subscriptions, >and I was like< well, everyone ELSE? is deviating from the form, why shouldn't I> deviate from the form.

Here Subject 3 is not trying to escape blame, but instead is trying to reduce its offensiveness (the next stage in Benoit's model) by minimizing the event, pointing out that others are doing same actions. The supervisor did not accept the account, but instead reacted as follows:

and >she goes like< well JUST stick to the form.

Don't worry about everybody else.

At this point another account option is offered (defeasibility), where Subject 3 claimed lack of information or knowledge. This type of response falls under the category of evading responsibility.

I think at that time: I really wasn't used to that situation >cause I had only been there< like( . )two weeks or something like that.

Subject 3, appearing a little nervous, then offered additional account types that are part of the reducing offensiveness category of Benoit's model. First, the
interviewee tried to use transcendence, attempting to put the action in a different, more favorable context (the company’s goal of productivity and sales).

and at that time when you’re in a situation when you HAVE to ((eyes look from side to side)) make so many [sales] per hour...

Subject 3 then offered a final account option, returning to the original method of minimizing blame, stating:

it’s like >if I deviate here and there< it-it really wouldn’t make a difference((shrug)) because the people(.) they already know what you’re calling for.

Subject 3 used three different options (one twice) to attempt to account for the actions. While one type of account choice did not correlate to the subject’s USIP category (defeasibility), the majority of the responses did correlate to the category of reducing offensiveness of act in Benoit’s model.

Subject 4 tested in the highest level of the USIP workplace section. In relating an incident that occurred while working in a restaurant, the subject began by first
disclaiming future actions.

We were understaffed and everything was kind of hectic. I was just completely and totally stressed out. There were two people doing the job of what should have been four.

The subject then explained that as the pressure and pace increased, people were starting to lose their cool, until I just went BAM((flings arms as if slamming a door)) slammed the microwave((motions downward with arm)) and went to do just something else >and he< just looks at me((shakes head from side to side)) and goes?((grins)) would you treat your refrigerator like that and ah> or something like that((shrugs shoulders)) and uh(.) he got pretty mad at me and I(.) went back and apologized later.

Subject 4 engaged in the highest level of Benoit's model in terms of responsibility (mortification) by apologizing for the actions and asking for forgiveness, which the manager gave.

Discussion
There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this study. First, this pilot study does seem to indicate a possible correlation between the personality of a worker and the level of responsibility one will take in an account situation. It appears that individuals with low self image will attempt to deny or evade responsibility, while those with high self image choose to reduce the offensiveness of an event or apologize for its occurrence. Obviously, such findings are by no means conclusive. Future testing (and especially greater numbers of respondents) are needed before we can put any level of certainty behind our findings.

Perhaps even more encouraging was how the pilot study surpassed the expectations of the hypothesis. It was unknown how mid-range subjects would respond. They may have skewed to one side or another of Benoit’s model. Instead, the account choice correlated exactly over to the image restoration technique used. This bolsters the author’s viewpoint that worthwhile, valuable information is being lost when only extremes of personality variables
are studied and mid range level scores are either ignored or subsumed into two extremes.

Another area of discussion that the results seemed to indicate concerned the use of multiple accounting strategies. Nearly all respondents opened their discussions with the use of a disclaimer, and many used more than one response within a category. Some even used different categories of accounts to respond to a single episode. This practice, of using multiple accounting techniques, is one that (to the best of the author’s knowledge) has yet to be studied.

Indeed, previous research methods precluded such investigation. By giving subjects written vignettes where the respondent is asked to choose one account strategy among several, the researcher prevents the respondent from offering multiple responses. These results would seem to indicate that open ended responses that allow multiple options for corrective action may be a preferable tool or method to investigate accounts in their more natural context.
As to the examination of nonverbal behavior, while it may at times add to the transcript of the subject’s response, it did not appear to be of significant value in this study. Eye contact during recall of success and failure events was not significantly different. Body language was not extremely different, either.

One area in which future research may investigate is reconstructing the account scenario. On several occasions, additional probing questions were needed to discover the “whole” story. Since accounts are concerned with what the offender actually says to the evaluator in the recalled situation, it is important that one records responses as close as possible to the exact words that were said at the time of the offense (not the offender’s feelings, changed opinion now upon further reflection, etc.) without tipping the respondent toward the researcher’s agenda.

If this pilot study is followed by future research, it certainly could be of value in the workplace. The knowledge that individuals with high self image profiles
in the work environment are more likely to admit responsibility for their mistakes could impact superior/subordinate relationships, hiring practices, mediation and the handling of disputes within companies and workers. In any event, it appears that account research still holds true to Austin’s words regarding the topic, that “there’s gold in them (sic) thar (sic) hills” (1961, p. 129).
References


Personality and Social Psychology, 48, 1097-1111.


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R= interviewer
E= interviewee

R: Hello. Thank you for coming in. I'm (R's name), director of personnel for the resident halls at Morehead State University. If you'd please take a seat? (gesture to seat) How are you today?

As you know, we have an opening on our campus for a resident hall assistant, and we're screening applicants for the next few days for the position. I'm going to ask you a few questions about yourself and your interests at school and in your previous employment. All right?
First, let’s talk about your education. What made you decide to come to Morehead State University?

What courses have you enjoyed the most?

Have you decided on a major yet?

If yes- What made you decide to major in (E’s major)?

If no- Are you looking at a few right now?

If no- go on

If yes- which ones and why?

Are you involved in any activities on campus?

(If E looks confused, add “Let me be more specific. Are you involved in any organizations, clubs, sports....?”)

What aspects of your education do you think have prepared you best for this position?

All right, now let’s take a look at your work history.

I see that you’ve been employed before. Tell me a little about the jobs you’ve had.
Which of your jobs was the most enjoyable for you? Why?

All of us have pluses and minuses- what do you think are some of your pluses?

Tell me about a situation at work where you made a decision or did something that was good or noteworthy that someone else noticed.

What was the other person’s reaction? How did they act towards you?

How did you feel about that situation?

Would you handle that situation any differently today?

What do you think your previous employers or supervisors would say are your strengths?

Do you think there are areas in which a supervisor or employer would say you still need improvement?
Tell me about a situation at work where you made a decision or did something that was something wrong, a mistake, that someone else noticed.

What was the other person’s reaction? How did they act towards you?

How did you feel about that situation?

Would you handle that situation any differently today?

Good. As you know, this position involves a great deal of communication with college aged students. Do you like working with young adults? Why?

Resident assistants also need to be dependable and reliable. Do you see yourself as that type of person? Why?

What are some other skills or strengths that you think make you suited for this position?
This job also requires hours at night and on weekends. Is that a problem for you?

Well, that’s all the question I have. We have several other candidates to interview in the next few days. I’ll get in touch with you as soon as we’ve made a decision.

Thank you for your time.

Have a good day.
Appendix B

Benoit’s Image Restoration Model

Denial

Simple denial

Shifting the blame

Evading of Responsibility

Provocation

Defeasibility

Accident

Good Intentions

Reducing Offensiveness of Event

Bolstering

Minimization

Differentiation

Transcendence

Attack accuser

Compensation

Corrective Action

Mortification
Appendix C

Buttny’s Transcription Method

[] Marks overlapping utterances

= Marks no interval between adjacent utterances

(o.o) Interval between utterances timed to tenths of a second

(.) A short, untimed pause between utterances

: Marks the extension of the sound or syllable it follows; the more colons, the longer the sound stretch

? Marks a rising inflection

- Marks a halting, abrupt cutoff

< Marks a rising shift in intonation

> Marks a falling shift in intonation

word Emphasis is marked by underlining

WORD Capital letters mark passage spoken louder than surrounding talk

* * Marks a passage quieter than surrounding talk

> < Marks utterance delivered quicker than surrounding talk
hhh Audible outbreaths including laughter

.hhh Audible inhalations

( ) Transcriptionist doubt

(( ))) Scenic details or description, i.e. (clears throat))
This personality test lists a series of thirty-five statements that broadly describe an individual's personality. On each scorecard, honestly indicate whether you agree or disagree that each statement applies to your personality, or to the personality of the person you are rating, when examined from a given point of view. For each item, circle the number in the left column of the scorecard if you strongly disagree with a statement, or the number in the right column if you strongly agree, or a number in between to indicate varying levels of agreement. For each item, simply circle your choice. Mark only one number per statement on each scorecard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Scorecard 1</th>
<th>Scorecard 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Is outgoing, sociable.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Tends to find fault with others.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is a reliable worker.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Remains calm in tense situations.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Values artistic, aesthetic experiences.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Is reserved.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Is considerate and kind to almost everyone.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Can be somewhat careless.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Is relaxed, handles stress well.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Prefers work that is routine and simple.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Is full of energy</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Can be cold and aloof.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Does things efficiently.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Gets nervous easily.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Has an active imagination.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Is sometimes shy, inhibited.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Likes to cooperate with others.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Tends to be disorganized.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Is emotionally stable, not easily upset.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Has few artistic interests.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Is talkative.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Is sometimes rude to others.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Does a thorough job.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Is depressed, blue</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Is sophisticated in art, music, or literature.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Tends to be quiet.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Is generally trusting.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Is lazy at times.</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Worries a lot.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Is ingenious, a deep thinker.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Generates a lot of enthusiasm.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Has a forgiving nature.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Is easily distracted.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Can be tense.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Is inventive.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Who Do You Think You Are?

Scorecard 3
Unified Self-Image
How you see yourself overall
Do you agree that you are someone who:

Scorecard 4
Ideal Self-Image
How you would ideally like to be
The person you would ideally like to be is someone who:

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Unified Self-Image Profile

Expressive Style  Interpersonal Style  Work Style  Emotional Style  Intellectual Style

35  31.5  28  24.5  21  17.5  14  10.5  7

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