© *Academy of Management Journal*
2015, Vol. 58, No. 1, 298–323.
http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amj.2012.0932

DIPLOMAS, PHOTOS, AND *TCHOTCHKES* AS SYMBOLIC SELF-REPRESENTATIONS: UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEES' INDIVIDUAL USE OF SYMBOLS

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Most employees personalize their workspaces with photos, memorabilia, and other items—even in the face of constraints such as rules prohibiting personalization. This prevalent use of objects likely reveals much about intrapersonal and interpersonal processes at work. By analyzing employee interviews and workspace inventories and observations, we discover that the objects with which employees personalize their workspaces (and even the absence of such objects) symbolize who they are and who they want to be. Through their symbolic representations of self, they find common ground (often through shared nonwork experiences), establish a common understanding of employees' work roles, and share personalistic information about the self—all of which contribute to relationship development among employees and their coworkers, customers, and clients. With symbolic representations of self that offer an optimal amount of stimulation, they focus their attention on their goals and values and establish a desired boundary or integration between work and nonwork—both of which contribute to employees' self-regulation. Our findings support the importance of examining micro-level processes related to the physical work environment, as we find that employees shape their work environment in ways that affect both their relationships at work and their self-regulatory functions.

An estimated 70–90% of employees personalize their workspaces (Wells & Thelen, 2002). Using objects such as photos, trinkets, and diplomas, they do so even when faced with limited space (e.g., Brunia & Hartjes-Gosselink, 2009; Donald, 1994) or rules that prohibit such behavior (Elsbach, 2003). In addition to being prevalent, employees' personalization is also likely meaningful. Research suggests that how employees personalize their workspaces reveals their personal and social identities (Elsbach, 2004) and aspects of their personalities, such as how conscientious and extraverted they are (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002). In fact, employees seem to personalize in ways that convey both positive (e.g., "reliable" and "wise") and negative traits (e.g., "bossy" and "undependable") (Gosling et al., 2002).

Considering its prevalence and apparent meaningfulness, personalization has been a scarcely studied topic in the organization sciences. Although limited past research offers some insights into how and why employees personalize, we note several shortcomings. First, past research has tended to take a rather narrow view, assuming that employees personalize to communicate information *to others*, and, more specifically, to communicate information about their status and other distinctions (e.g., Elsbach, 2003; Konar, Sundstrom, Brady, Mandel, & Rice, 1982). Given the importance of how people view and come to understand themselves (e.g., Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Sedekides & Skowronski, 1997), we consider whether employees may have motives for personalizing besides communicating information to others. Additionally, given the complex ways in which people view themselves (e.g., Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Linville, 1985), we argue that employees' per-

We convey our deepest gratitude to associate editor Kevin Corley and to three anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and generous support. We would also like to thank Amy Randel, Corinne Post, Graham Brown, Mathew Sheep, Holly Slay Ferraro, Shalani Khazanchi, Brian Blume, Johan Wiklund, Kim Jaussi, and Mikki Hebl for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

sonalization may convey rich information about identity besides differences. Second, past research examining the outcomes of personalization has focused on distal attitudinal outcomes such as well-being (Wells, 2000) and satisfaction (Konar et al., 1982), or has focused on others' reactions to and interpretations of employees' personalization (e.g., Elsbach, 2004; Gosling et al., 2002). Given research showing that other physical objects (e.g., clothing, blueprints, machines) and other aspects of the physical work environment (e.g., open or non-territorial office spaces) influence employee cognition and behavior (e.g., Carlile, 2002; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Millward, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007; Vohs, Redden, & Rahinel, 2013; Zhong & House, 2012), we consider whether personalization may have more proximal influences on how employees think and behave.

The study of workspace personalization is important because employees' use of material objects likely reveals much about intrapersonal and interpersonal processes at work: as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 1) argued, "To understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things." From the outset, we thought it was likely that employees' personalization represented the self in ways that went beyond the communication of differences (such as similarities or future selves), and were open to the idea that personalization was motivated by reasons beyond communicating identity information to others. Otherwise, we began this study with broad research questions and a dedication to remaining open minded during our data collection and analysis. By taking a broad and open look at workspace personalization, we uncovered several insights about this phenomenon. We discovered that employees' personalization (and, sometimes, their lack of personalization) symbolized not only who they are but also who they want to become, not only differences from others but also similarities to others, and not only who they are at work but also who they are outside of work. We also found that, in representing aspects of the self, personalization could often be distinguished in terms of whether its primary intent was to communicate identity information to others *or* to the self. Lastly, we found that employees' personalization is involved in both interpersonal and intrapersonal processes at work. Namely, the ways in which employees personalized to communicate identity information to others was found to either help or harm their relationships at work. Additionally, the ways in which employees personalized to communicate identity information to the self either aided or impeded their self-regulation by providing or depleting regulatory resources.

Through this paper, we make three contributions. First, and most generally, we contribute to the literature on symbols at work. By articulating how and why employees use symbols (in this case, objects for personalization), we answer the call of Pratt and Rafaeli (2001: 123) for research that "more closely examine[s] how symbols (physical objects and others) are used in everyday interactions to reflect, enforce, and transform how social actors interact with each other." However, we also contribute to the literature on symbols at work by demonstrating that these symbols not only affect interactions with others but also affect the self by providing or depleting regulatory resources. Second, although we did not set out to do so, our study sheds light on workplace relationships—and the ways in which employees establish, further develop, and perhaps even unwittingly inhibit relationships with others at work. Gaining a better understanding of how employees form and strengthen relationships at work is important because the increasingly complex environments in which organizations operate means that work is becoming more interdependent (Grant & Parker, 2009). Third, our study sheds light on how employees regulate their emotion and behavior at work—and the ways in which employees acquire desired identities through goal achievement, value enactment, and work–nonwork boundary management. Gaining a better understanding of how employees can effectively self-regulate is important given self-regulation's central role in learning, adaptation, and goal achievement (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003).

The Present Study

The present study is guided by three research questions: (1) What prompts employees to personalize or not personalize their workspaces? (2) How do employees personalize their workspaces? (3) What are the consequences of personalizing or not personalizing? Given limited theory and research that speaks to our research questions, we adopted a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1964; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to gain a better understanding of why, how, and to what effect employees personalize at work. Although the existing literature on workspace personalization and other related topics fails to adequately respond to our re-

search questions, it served as a starting point for our study, though we did not limit ourselves to previous assumptions or articulations of workspace personalization. Below, we review the research on workspace personalization—as well as research on topics that emerged as being linked to personalization (such as symbols and self-regulation).

DEFINITIONS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions

We define *workspace personalization* as employees' deliberate decoration or physical modification of a work environment. Employees may decorate or modify their work environments through the use of discrete objects such as photographs, certificates, and memorabilia but also through other modifications such as painting the walls. Although employees may personalize in other non-visual ways such as through scent or texture (such as a scented candle or a soft throw), in our study, our participants did not discuss the involvement of senses other than sight (we return to this issue later in the discussion). This definition of workspace personalization is similar to other scholarly definitions in that it considers personalization as being largely meaningful and deliberate (as such it excludes items that are merely necessary for one's job such as a company-issued stapler) (e.g., Sommer, 1974; Wells, 2000). Because we wanted to remain open to multiple motives and purposes of personalization during our data collection and coding, we purposefully defined workspace personalization without reference to the motives that might underlie it or the purposes that it might serve. Thus our definition differs from those that further define personalization in terms of its presumed motivations, such as to mark or defend territory (e.g., Brown, Lawrence, & Robinson, 2005).

We found that employees saw their personalization (and lack of personalization) as being symbolically representative of the self. Thus, symbols are central to our findings. We define *symbols* as physical manifestations that represent some other, often greater, meaning. Consistent with most scholarly definitions, a symbol "stands for" something else (e.g., Gioia, 1986; Morgan, Frost, & Pondy, 1983; Rafaeli & Worline, 2000). Because we are concerned with how individuals use physical symbols, our definition differs from those focused on organizational symbols (e.g., Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Ornstein, 1986) and from definitions that include behavioral and verbal expressions (Cohen, 1976; Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001).

Literature Review

Because we found that the objects with which employees personalize their workspaces (and sometimes even the absence of such objects) symbolize who they are and who they want to be, we briefly review the relevant literature on symbols as representations of self. Additionally, because we found that these symbols are involved in processes related to both employees' relationships at work and to their self-regulation, and, more specifically, their emotion regulation, we also briefly review the literature relating symbols to relationships, self-regulation, and emotion. When possible, we integrate findings related to personalization (although we note that little of the extant research on workspace personalization is of direct relevance here).

Symbols of self. Just as organizational symbols reflect the identities of organizations (e.g., Rafaeli & Worline, 2000), individual symbols seem likely to reflect the identities of the individuals who choose them. We are not the first to suggest that the physical objects individuals possess can serve to represent the self. Several theoretical treatments contend that physical objects may represent the "extended self" (e.g., Belk, 1988), that one's possession of objects can serve to create or complete one's sense of self (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), and that understanding the self and others is aided by examining similarities and differences between stimuli such as objects and people (Hogg et al., 1995).

Research has tended to consider personalization as a way of symbolically conveying identities to others (e.g., Elsbach, 2003; Sundstrom & Sundstrom, 1986). In a study about non-territorial workspaces, Elsbach (2003) found that the inability to personalize meant that employees were less able to convey their personal (e.g., "I am a math whiz") and social (e.g., "I am an accountant") distinctiveness. Other research similarly suggests that employees personalize to communicate identity information such as status (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007) and gender (Wells, 2000) to others. We acknowledge that personalization serves an important role in communicating identity to others. However, given the broad cognitive and behavioral effects of other aspects of the physical work environment (e.g., Carlile, 2002; Millward et al., 2007; Nicolini, Mengis, & Swan, 2012; Vohs et al., 2013; Zhong & House,

2012), we suspected that this process may be more complex than has been discussed in previous research.

Symbols and relationships. Much of the research on symbols and relationships considers symbols as having structural functions, such as establishing patterns of social interaction and defining roles (e.g., Bechky, 2003; Goffman, 1959; Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001). For example, Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, and Mackie-Lewis (1997) found that "appropriate" organizational dress enabled workplace relationships largely by enabling organizational members to enact prescribed role behaviors. One way that symbols do this is by enabling communication between and among role members: Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) found that organizational symbols provide a vehicle for conversation among organizational members—nurses' conversations about their attire facilitated discussions about larger issues such as their philosophies regarding patient care. Although this research is suggestive of personalization having relational implications, the extent to which it can speak to workspace personalization is limited because symbols determined largely (or entirely) by the organization (such as uniforms) seem likely to have different implications than symbols determined largely by individuals (such as personalization). We are aware of no research that has considered whether workspace personalization has relational consequences; however, research and theory suggests that how individuals manage their multiple identities and the boundaries between them affects their relationships (e.g., Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013).

Symbols and self-regulation. Social psychological theories link identity and the symbolic self to self-regulation (e.g., Baumeister & Vohs, 2003; Sedekides & Skowronski, 1997); that is, the process by which individuals establish desired end states, and engage in behaviors and monitor their progress toward these desired end states (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003). Theories such as symbolic completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) and the hot–cold theory of self-regulation (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999) suggest that symbols can prime attention and motivate behavior toward goals. And research in social psychology suggests goals may be activated through the use of symbols (e.g., Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). However, we are aware of no research that has linked workspace personalization to self-regulation.

Symbols and emotions. Several studies have found that organizational symbols evoke and convey emotion. For example, in a qualitative study of Israel's public transportation company, Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz (2004) found that, through a sensemaking process, organizational symbols (specifically, newly painted green buses) evoke emotion and that this emotion can "spill over" and be associated with the organization. In addition, Rafaeli et al. (1997: 27) also linked organizational dress as a symbol to emotion: "[A]ppropriate dress enables organizational members to establish a comfortable emotional state that facilitates their role performance." Similarly, Rafaeli (1989) found that wearing organizational symbols, such as a uniform or nametag, was associated with the expression of role-prescribed emotion.

However, with one exception, research on workspace personalization has linked employees' personalization to their emotion in only the most general sense. Namely, research has linked employee personalization to attitudes that include an affective component: job and workspace satisfaction (Knight & Haslam, 2010; Konar et al., 1982; Vilnai-Yavetz, Rafaeli, & Yaacov, 2005; Wells, 2000). We found one exception: Scheiberg (1990) found that personalization may evoke emotion and that employees may purposefully personalize their workspaces in ways that prompt particular emotions. Although this research is suggestive of personalization having affective implications, it is limited in terms of understanding how personalization may be linked to emotion.

METHOD

Initial Contexts and Sample

We began our data collection with 13 employees at 2 firms: a retail marketing firm and a medical software firm. Included in our sample were 8 (of the 9) employees of the retail marketing arm of a 100-employee marketing and design firm and 5 (of the 6) employees of the software firm. After coding these interviews, we noted that there were similarities across and differences within and between these two firms in terms of personalization. We felt it was possible that the similarities we observed stemmed from characteristics of the firms themselves. First, both firms employed relatively open workspaces and neither had a formal personalization policy. Previous research describing differences in personalization in open and traditional office spaces (Wells & Thelen, 2002) and the impact of formal personalization policies on employees'

personalization choices (Elsbach, 2003; Scheiberg, 1990; Wells & Thelen, 2002) suggested that we diversify our sample to include employees who previously had worked or currently work in organizations with more enclosed workspaces and with formal personalization policies. Second, these two firms used permanent, territorial workspaces (i.e., each employee was assigned a workspace that he or she used exclusively). Because personalization of territorial workspaces is likely to differ in terms of quality and quantity from that of non-territorial workspaces (Brunia & Hartjes-Gosselink, 2009; Elsbach, 2003), we expanded our sample to include employees who previously had worked or currently work in a non-territorial setting. Third, in our initial sample, only 1 of 13 employees saw clients in their workspace with any regularity. Because the degree of interaction with individuals from outside the organization may influence employees' personalization (Scheiberg, 1990), we expanded our sample to include employees who had more frequent interaction with clients in their workspaces. Finally, we saw differences in the type and extent of personalization between those employees engaged in more visually creative work (e.g., creative directors, graphic designers) and those engaged in less visually creative work (e.g., account managers, administrative assistants) both within and between the two firms in our initial sample. Thus, we expanded our sample to include employees engaged in a variety of different types of jobs.

Expanded Sample

Using an iterative sampling process, we added participants based on existing research and the theoretical concepts that were emerging from our data (as described above). Such theoretical sampling is thought to facilitate a richer understanding of study concepts across a range of contexts and conditions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Namely, we sought to ensure that our sample included participants who were currently in, or had recently been in, the following settings or conditions: participants in temporary workspaces and permanent workspaces, participants in shared workspaces and in their own workspaces, participants in less private workspaces (e.g., a cubicle or a desk in a reception area) and in more private workspaces (e.g., enclosed by walls), participants who worked in organizations with explicit rules regarding personalization as well as those with no explicit rules regarding personalization, participants who personalized very little or not at all and those who personalized a lot, and participants who worked in settings frequented by clients or customers. Because we were aiming to add participants in order to meet these criteria, we relied on our personal and professional contacts to identify study participants. We should note that we only personally knew 6 of the 28 people included in the sample, as we relied on these contacts mostly to identify other possible participants. In doing so, we added another 15 employees to our sample (because some participants fulfilled multiple criteria). We continued to add participants until we reached a point of data saturation, when we were no longer finding new information in our data. Specifically, after coding the 21st interview (of the 28 interviews), we arranged no more interviews, concluding those that had previously been scheduled. In total, we interviewed 28 employees from 14 different organizations. As shown in Table 1, they were diverse in terms of age (ranging from early 20s to mid-60s), gender (female, 50%), organizational status (from administrative assistant to company president), occupation (e.g., engineer, realtor, event planner, account manager), industry (e.g., manufacturing, banking, education), and organizational size (from a company with fewer than 10 employees to large multinational organizations). We should further reiterate that our intent here was primarily to achieve a diverse and more representative sample. While previous research has been focused on identifying the effects of different types of workspaces and policies that limit personalization (Elsbach, 2003), we were focused on understanding individuals' motivations to personalize.

Interview Protocol and Procedure

To guide the interviews, we inventoried each employee's workspace with his or her guidance. Based on Wells's (2000) categories of personalization, our inventory sheet consisted of 17 broad categories: photographs, posters, paintings, sculptures, other art pieces, calendars, plants, news/cartoon clippings, paperweights, diplomas, certificates, plaques, bumper stickers, toys/figures, children's drawings, mugs/cups (as display items), and other items. We counted the items in each category and described them with the employee's assistance. The items that employees personalized with included all of the categories on our inventory sheet. Items categorized as "other" included items such as a running race bib, postcards, and fortune cookie

TABLE 1
Description of Interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Policy[a]	Items	Outsiders[b]	Private[c]	Industry
Account Manager 1	F	Mid-20s	No	22	Sometimes	No	Marketing
Account Manager 2	M	Late 20s	No	6	Sometimes	No	Software
Administrative Assistant	F	Mid-60s	No	6	Often	No	Marketing
Branch Manager	M	Mid-50s	No*	19	Sometimes	Yes	Financial Services
Chief Engineer	M	Mid-30s	No	25	Sometimes	Yes	Automotive
Claims Manager	M	Early 40s	No	41	Never	No	Financial Services
Client Services Manager	F	Early 30s	Yes	6	Often	No	Financial Services
Compliance Officer	M	Late 30s	No	9	Never	No	Financial Services
Creative Director	M	Mid-40s	No	20	Sometimes	No	Marketing
Designer 1	F	Late 20s	No	47	Sometimes	No	Marketing
Designer 2	M	Late 30s	No	26	Sometimes	No	Marketing
Designer 3	F	Early 20s	No	44	Sometimes	No	Marketing
Designer 4	F	Mid-20s	No	19	Sometimes	No	Marketing
Director of Communications	F	Mid-30s	No	15	Sometimes	Yes	Software
Director of Operations	M	Early 30s	No	11	Sometimes	No	Software
Director of Sales	M	Early 30s	No	4	Sometimes	No	Software
Event Planner	F	Early 40s	No	41	Frequent	Yes	Education
Grants and Contracts Manager	F	Mid-30s	No	5	Often	Yes	Education
Market Researcher	F	Late 20s	No	15	Never	Yes	Automotive
Member Services Representative	F	Late 20s	Yes*	7	Often	Yes	Financial Services
President	M	Mid-50s	No	24	Sometimes	Yes	Software
Professor 1	M	Mid-50s	No	10	Often	Yes	Education
Professor 2	F	Early 50s	No	11	Often	Yes	Education
Professor 3	M	Mid-50s	No	2	Often	Yes	Education
Program Manager	M	Mid-30s	No	40	Never	Yes	Government
Project Manager	F	Early 40s	No	41	Sometimes	No	Marketing
Realtor	F	Early 50s	No	12	Sometimes	No	Real Estate
Sales and Operations Manager	M	Mid-30s	No	9	Often	Yes	Power/Utilities

[a] "Policy" refers to whether the organization currently has a policy regarding personalization (yes) or not (no), and if the presence of a policy has changed over time (*).
[b] "Outsiders" refers to how often the employee's workspace is visited by those other than coworkers.
[c] "Private" refers to whether the employee's workspace is enclosed by four walls (yes) or not (no).

fortunes. During the interview, we discussed items of study participants' choosing and relied on the inventory sheets and our observations to refer to and discuss other items. We also photographed each workspace from the perspective of someone entering the workspace.

Each author conducted half of the semi-structured interviews. We relied on our broad research questions and a review of the existing literature to formulate our initial set of interview questions. Initially, our interview questions focused on how, why, and to what effect individuals personalized, and what identities they were or were not expressing through their personalization. Among other topics, we asked interviewees about their workspace personalization in general and about multiple specific personalization items. As noted above, our initial interview protocol concentrated on questions surrounding communication and noncommunication of certain identities at work (e.g., "What do the items in your workspace say about you and what you are like?") and how personalization communicated similarity to and differences from others at work (e.g., "How do the items in your office show how you're different from others?"). Themes that emerged from the coding of the interviews from our initial two firms led us to develop a second set of questions that concentrated on how employees' personalization had changed over time, how it differed in their current workspace from any previous workspaces, and about norms and policies concerning personalization. We did not delete any questions, thus ensuring considerable consistency across interviews. Reflecting the iterative nature of grounded theory research, our interviews progressed from being more open ended to more structured. Interview participants were assured that their answers to our interview questions would be confidential, and they read and signed an informed consent form. As such, when participants

referred to themselves or their coworkers by name, we changed their names with names typical to the employee's gender.

Data Analysis

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Additionally, in several cases, we conducted follow-up interviews by email or phone for additional answers or clarification. We used a grounded theory approach to analyze our data, involving an iterative process of data collection, coding, and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In terms of coding the data, we began by independently coding the first 13 interview transcripts to identify first-order codes. After every three to five interviews, we discussed our codes until we reached consensus. We then entered and defined our codes in a coding dictionary and engaged in axial coding, whereby our first-order codes were combined into categories. Finally, we developed a conceptual model linking these categories and theoretical dimensions. Figures 1 and 2 detail the structure of the data, which are modeled on others' data structure diagrams (i.e., Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012).

Here, we provide a specific example of our coding process (as shown in Figure 1). Many interviewees discussed how they personalized so that they had reminders of goals (i.e., first-order code "goal reminders") (e.g., a realtor who displayed photographs of the kinds of houses she hoped to sell, or a designer who displayed a poster with a design she wanted to emulate in terms of quality). Interviewees also mentioned how they personalized to remind them of the values (such as family, friendship, hard work) they sought to embody (i.e., first-order code "value reminders"). We saw these stories of personalization as sharing a common thread of being concerned with reminding employees of their goals and values, thus we combined them into a category called "Serves as Reminders of Goals and Values." Further, we considered this category to be part of an aggregate theoretical dimension we termed "Regulatory Processes" because it represents one of the intrapersonal ways in which employees said their symbolic representations of their selves at work helped them to regulate their emotion or behavior.

As shown in Figure 2, we relied on our photographs, inventories, and observations of employees' workspaces and information from employee interviews to categorize items. Specifically, we found that items employees discussed in the interviews could be categorized in terms of conveying a shared identity, a distinctive identity, a nonwork identity, a work identity, or a future identity—and, in some cases, we cross-referenced these items using the corresponding photos, inventories, and observation notes. For example, for the two firms that comprised our initial sample, we were able to identify items (e.g., family photographs) that were common among employees, which we considered an indication of a "shared identity."

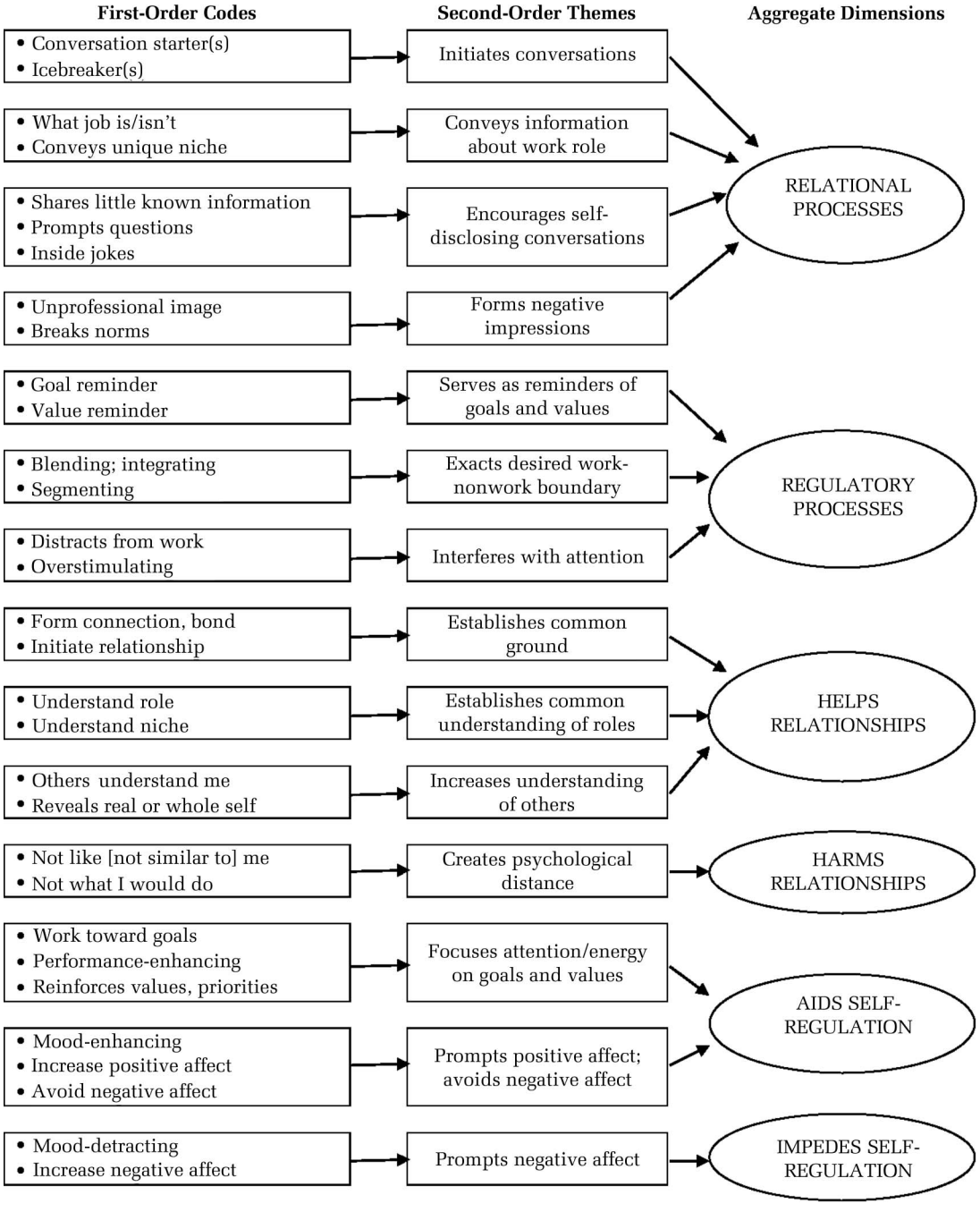
FINDINGS

We found that, in representing aspects of the self, workspace personalization could often be distinguished in terms of communicating identity to others (which we termed symbolic *expressions* of self) or communicating identity to self (termed symbolic *reminders* of self). As shown in Figure 3, the way in which employees personalize to communicate identity information to others can help or harm their relationships at work, and the way in which employees personalize to communicate identity information to the self can facilitate or impede their regulation of behavior and emotion at work. We do not mean to suggest that each personalization item could be categorized exclusively as either communicating identity to self *or* to others. In fact, on occasion, study participants discussed a particular item's effect both on themselves and on others, as in this example: "But that just reminds me and that was a year and a half ago that I went to New Caledonia to work on that. I have it there because it reminds me of both the people, the travel, the bird, but it's also a fun conversation thing for people when they come into my office." Rather, we propose that personalization is often involved in two distinct interpersonal and intrapersonal processes, and, as such, we discuss these processes separately.

Personalization as Symbolic Expressions of Self

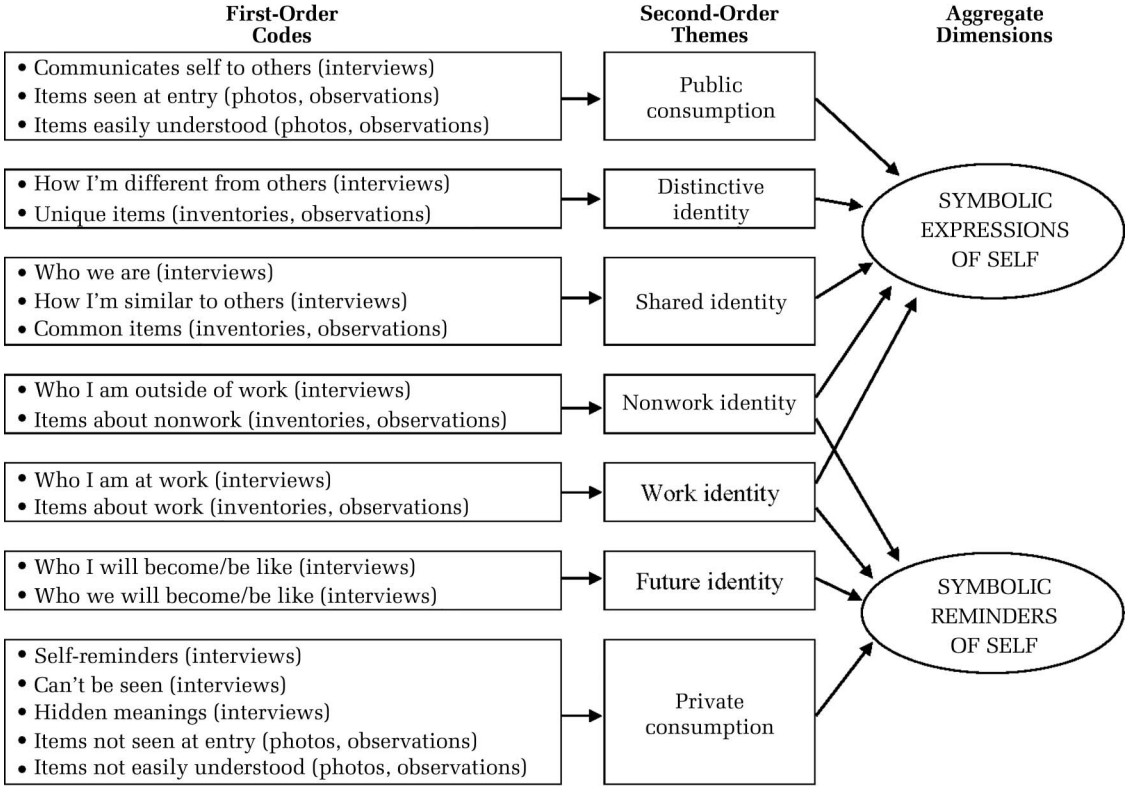
We found that study participants often discussed their personalization as a way of symbolically communicating who they are to others—and, specifically, communicating who they are in terms of differences from and similarities to others and in terms of work and nonwork identities. First, participants often referred to their personalization as conveying the self as unique and distinctive from others. One study participant stated, "I mean, from

FIGURE 1
Data Structure for Processes and Functions



the boats on the bookshelves to cars and pictures of the cars and that kind of stuff—it's me." Others said that aspects of their personalization are "unique to me" and provide a "unique fingerprint on [their] space," and that their personalization "is representative of me," "captures who I am," "reflects my personality," and "provides a sense of who I am." Second, participants referred to some aspects of their personalization as conveying the self as similar to others and as sharing a role or group identity. One participant described trinkets owned by all of her workgroup members that represented her work-

FIGURE 2
Data Structure for Personalization

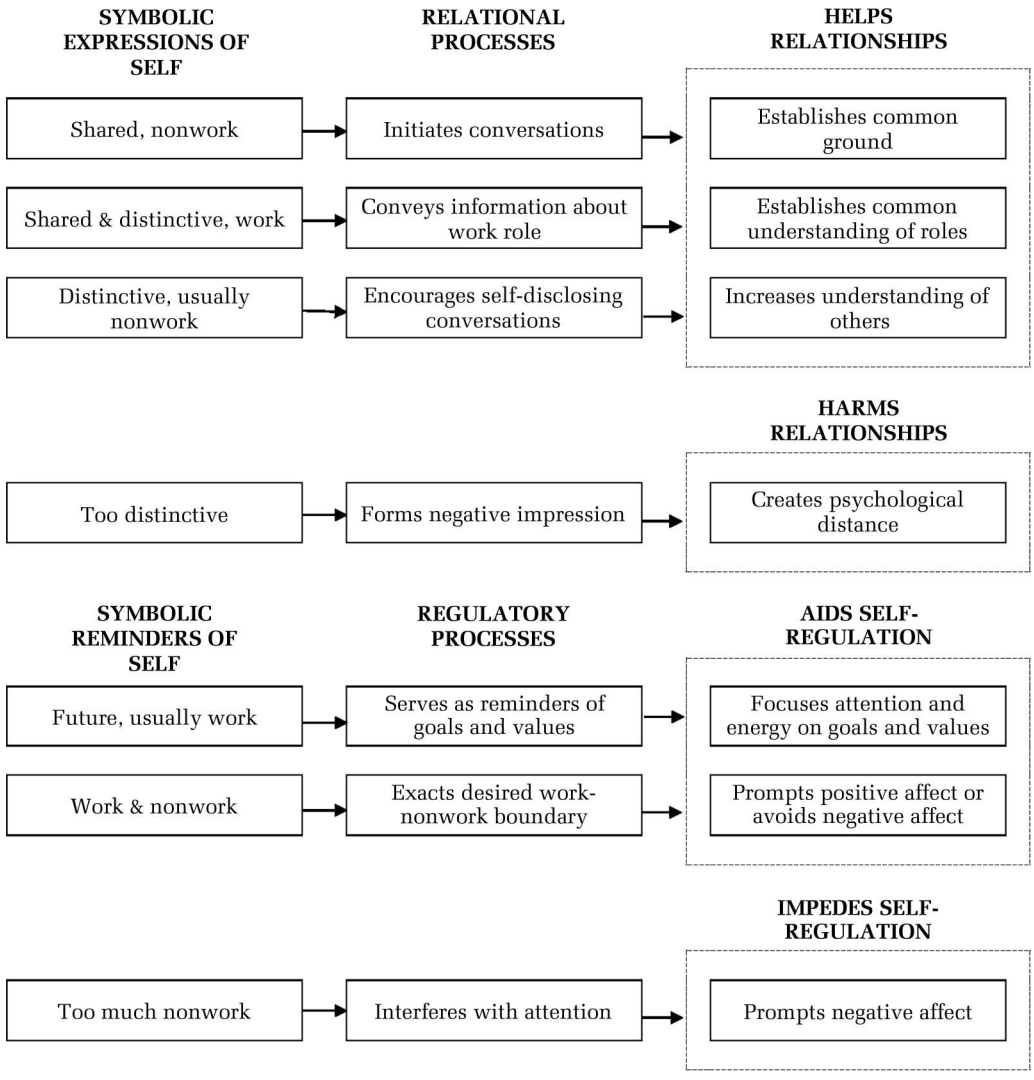


group: "And then the little ladybug thing is something Andrea brought back for everybody in the office so we all have a little ladybug and it's got the 10 dots for each of the 10 of us." Others said that their personalization "reflects our business," "is an engineer-type thing," and represents "who we are," "our teamwork," "our team mentality," and "our little work family." Third, participants often referred to their personalization as conveying work identities. One study participant stated that his and his coworkers' *Star Wars*-related personalization demonstrated that "a lot of us have, you know, that techie background." Others said that their personalization shows that "I am a real estate agent," "I am . . . in a management-type role," and "I'm a designer," and conveys that "I worked at Pfizer," "I worked for GM," and "I am interested in forensic accounting." Lastly, participants referred to aspects of their personalization as conveying nonwork identities. In the words of our interviewees, their personalization indicates "that I have a life outside of work," that [I am] "a cat person," "a dog lover," "a sports fan," "a mom," and "a father," and that [I am] interested in the "San Francisco Giants," "NASCAR," and "boats and nautical stuff." Finally, we should mention that most of these symbolic expressions of self were what we term "public," meaning that the personalization meant to communicate identity information to others tended to be in the immediate view of those entering the employee's workspace, and was clearly expressive of identity such that others could readily interpret the meaning. We discuss this issue—and the one exception—below.

Symbolic Expressions of Self and Relational Processes

Through our interviews, we found that study participants linked their symbolic expressions of self to relational processes. They considered the development and deepening of relationships as an important function of their personalization. More specifically, we found that employees' symbolic expressions of self were related to their relationship development by: (a) initiating conversations with unacquainted others, (b) increasing role clarity at work, and (c) encouraging conversa-

FIGURE 3
Grounded Theory Model Linking Symbolic Self-Representations to Relational and Regulatory Functions



tions that entail self-disclosure. On the other hand, we also found that these symbolic expressions of self could harm relationships by creating negative impressions.

Initiating conversations. Study participants often stated that their personalization serves as a "conversation starter" or "icebreaker." A professor of TV, radio, and film told us how students use his personalization to initiate conversation with him:

> I think when students come in here for this meeting with Professor Cohen and they don't really know me, they take a quick inventory, "What's the guy have on his bookshelves?" So they see books on monkeys and gorillas and birds. It's nice conversation breakers. [*Interviewer*: So they bring it up?] Yes, some students will if there's an interest. So I look at what I have in the office and it really is bits and pieces of what I do—music, and I've got copies of my recordings here, art books, you know from various times in my life that I still seem to go back to—that's really about the extent of it. You know, people get a hit off that and that may tell them a little bit more about what I'm like beyond what they experience with me in the classroom or a social setting.

Another interviewee explained, "It's a conversation starter, you know, like 'oh that's cool' and then there's usually a story and more of an explanation behind it which would be interesting."

Study participants used phrases such as "common ground" or "personal connection" to describe how their personalization—through these conversations—helped them to establish relationships with others. As a realtor put it:

> [Some clients] say, "Oh are those your girls?" and I'll say, "Yeah," and they say, "Oh they're gorgeous, how old are they?" or whatever. It's like a little topic of conversation because usually with a client it's always towards their children so we always talk about them . . . It creates a connection and it creates like a little bit of a bond between us.

An account manager similarly told us that:

> Customers like it [our personalization]. I think, with customers, it shows that you have kind of a human side. It shows that they may even actually identify with the fact that he has a little car and bring up a conversation about them liking Corvettes, too, maybe, or comic strips or something—like a good humor side maybe.

In contrast, a lack of personalization was thought to stifle relationship development, as one participant indicated:

> So, I was really surprised that this big company would have a [no personalization] policy when they're such a relationship-building company. They want to have such strong relationships with customers but they're taking away the personal elements that I think can lend towards building those types of relationships with clients.

As implied above, these conversations helped interviewees to find similarities with others and to establish relationships perhaps because perceived similarities make people feel good about themselves and validate their self-concepts (e.g., Byrne, 1971). We found that, when discussing how their personalization started conversations, study participants tended to refer to items that symbolized nonwork identities or experiences they shared with their coworkers or clients. As one participant described:

> Almost everybody I work with—whether they're from the private side or another public agency coming in—has seen the movie [*Office Space*] and that's [a "TPS report"] another one of the icebreakers I have . . . When they walk in, they see it, and almost everybody, their first time, has made a comment . . . [A] lot of people can relate to it because they have seen the movie and they have lived in the *Dilbert* cube hell.

Photographs or sports memorabilia that represent the often shared experience of being a parent, pet owner, sports fan, or college alumni were frequently said to initiate conversations, as in this example:

> I think most of the things that are in my cubicle aren't too personal. But, you need to develop that relationship with people anyway . . . Because, you know, someone will walk by the cubicle and see, you know, a Michigan mug and it might be a game that came on that weekend and they'll, you know, you just build relationships. It's just not all about work, but, if I have something, you know, that I need to go to them for, we already have that, you know, personal relationship and it's easier to work with. It kind of breaks the ice on certain things.

As indicated in these two quotes (i.e., "when they walk in, they see it" and "someone will walk by the cubicle and see"), this personalization was often quite "public"—that is, displayed in a way that allowed others to immediately see it and its meaning was easily discerned. Based on an analysis of the photographs we took, about 75% of the items interviewees mentioned as serving as conversation starters were within the camera's field of view (i.e., the most natural angle of view for someone entering that workspace). In sum, by conveying "who I am outside of work" and "how I am similar to others," employees' personalization (as symbolic expressions of self) initiates conversations. By establishing commonalities, these conversations provide the building blocks for relationships with others.

Increasing role clarity. We also found that personalization helped employees' relationships with others by establishing a common understanding of employees' work roles. Although we are aware of no research that links personalization to the communication of work role information, we see some corollaries to theory and research linking organizational symbols to role-related information and behavior. Namely, organizational symbols trigger sensemaking regarding role prescriptions and organizational values, rules, and norms (e.g., Adam & Galinsky, 2012; Rafaeli et al., 1997), and, by reducing uncertainty, help organizational members to coordinate with one another on the basis of their common understanding (Gioia, 1986; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001; Rafaeli & Worline, 2000). Here, we extend these findings by linking individual (as opposed to organizational) symbols to workplace relationships through the communication of role information. Study partici-

pants told us that they conveyed information with their personalization (largely without prompting conversations) about their role at work. In the next example, a participant explained that his MBA degree diploma helps to communicate his managerial role and place in the company ranks:

> That there's just one other MBA—Bob and me—so I made a point to bring that [diploma] because I'm in a cubicle but no one else has *that* in a cubicle. There's a difference about this cubicle . . . My MBA degree, for me, makes me different from my fellow cubicle occupants so I'm not staff like sales support staff, I'm management but not C-level, right?

As with this example, we often saw that personalization communicated role information by specifying what roles employees were in and were not in, and we sometimes saw that personalization communicated role information by conveying information about their relative organizational status. In the following example, one of the "non-creatives" in a workgroup explained how her relative lack of personalization communicates her work role:

> I'm not a creative person. I'm a receptionist, secretary, admin, administrative assistant, and, so, it works. I think [that's] the image that people get that I don't have drawings or sketches all over, I don't doodle. I know [my coworkers] sit there and talk and they'll be doodling and stuff like that. I don't have a creative bone in my body.

In contrast, one "creative" said her workspace conveyed that "Oh, this must be one of the creative people that works here." Or, as another "creative" put it:

> I think all of us designers, we like to have little trinkets and things to look at for inspiration whereas I'm more different than say project managers. They have less, their stuff isn't as colorful or creative, and they don't have as many pictures on their desk maybe . . . Since I like to create, I have drawings and photos and stuff that I take and like to display it though. I put that up. There are other people that don't do that or don't have that.

Another way that personalization helped to establish a common understanding of work roles was to convey information about how a particular employee fulfilled a particular niche among coworkers in similar roles. As one participant put it:

> I have so much like work paperwork taped up around, all around me, that I just think it probably is just, you know, "Joan has all the information"—like "Joan is the information person," which it kind of is. So, I think I have the most of it; everyone just comes to me for information a lot of times.

Some other distinctive niches that participants said they filled included being the "go-to person," the "organization person," the "historian," the "record-keeper," and "the analytical one."

Study participants told us that this personalization, by increasing role clarity, helped their relationships at work by building trust and interdependence (e.g., by establishing who to go to for what). For example, an event planner said her displayed thank-you notes let others know "they can trust that, whatever they're doing with me, it won't fall behind." Another participant described how his coworker's personalization communicated his role and helped his relationship with clients:

> You go in there, you know he's not screwing around. There's not much [personalization] but what is there is accurate of who he is . . . Because he is one of the engineers for our products, they want to know that he's organized and he keeps a clean workspace. I think that's important.

Other interviewees noted that their personalization lets others know "that, when push comes to shove, you can get things done in a crunch," that they are "committed to the job at hand," and that, "if you have a question, you ask Joan."

As revealed in the examples above, this personalization was nearly always work related and conveyed both similarities to and differences from others. In addition, we found that personalization that served to increase role clarity was "public"—that is, it was easily visible and discernible. In describing this personalization, participants said that you see it "when you first walk in the door" and that it is "where it's not difficult to see." Further suggesting that this personalization was visible and easily discernible, we often found that coworkers confirmed employees' self-views (e.g., Joan, the self-described keeper of information, was described by others as "on top of it" and "super organized.") In sum, by conveying "who I am at work" and "how I am similar to and different from others," employees' personalization (as symbolic expressions of self) increases role clarity. In turn, this role clarity helps employees to establish more reliable working relationships by building trust and interdependence.

Encourages conversations entailing self-disclosure. Psychological research suggests that self-disclosure facilitates relationship development in part

by prompting reciprocal disclosure from others (e.g., Macintosh, 2009; Tardy & Dindia, 2006). According to participants' accounts, their personalization similarly facilitates relationship development by encouraging conversations that reveal personalistic information about the self; that is, information about the self that is not widely disclosed and known to others. As one participant told us:

> [Some of my personalization reveals] that I do a lot of things that other people in the office would never even think of doing, you know. Nobody's going to go out and race a car, you know. They'd get in their car to drive. It's a tool to get back and forth. I look at it as it's great to drive back and forth to work but it's more fun to go out and put it on a track and race it. So, there's a sense of adventure and, you know, after a weekend they always say, "How was the weekend?" and "What did you do?" and they know I race during the week, too, so, you know, "How'd you do?" They ask the questions . . . They get interested in what you do. They see that you do a lot of things, maybe that you're creative.

Another participant put it:

> I think [personalization] might help kind of bring the company more personally together a little bit because it is more of a personal thing, so, if they weren't there, maybe you wouldn't have those conversations and you wouldn't get to know them as well.

Sometimes this personalization represented "inside jokes," allowing coworkers to share a laugh. In one example, a participant discussed one of her personalization items:

> My "Easy" button, I guess, is just kind of a humorous statement. We always joke that we should change it to something about how you made that extremely difficult because it seems that a lot of people I work with make things harder than they need to be.

Or, another participant described an inside joke surrounding a photograph of him and a coworker running in a race and how it served to deepen their relationship through competition:

> I showed up the day of the race and he didn't really know I was going to run and I beat him . . . We're friends, too, and it's healthy competition but he was kind of upset that I beat him so I ordered a picture from the race that has us running together before I passed him and I put it on his desk as kind of a joke. And, so now there's a little healthy competition between the two of us so, you know, it's just something that was funny.

The coworker in the photograph later told us that he was planning to move the photograph to his friend's desk as a continuation of the joke.

Although there is some degree of overlap with the notion that personalization helps employees to make initial connections with others, we found that employees indicated that their personalization did more than just break the ice. One recurring phrase we heard from participants was that this personalization demonstrated that "I can be myself at work" and that they are now "comfortable" opening up and revealing themselves to others. In many cases, they noted that their personalization changed over time to become increasingly personalistic. For example:

> I think [the items I personalize my workspace with have] changed in that they've, I'm more comfortable in putting up the things that I enjoy or feel comfortable with. I'm less guarded with, maybe, with what other people may think about what I'm putting up.

Others echoed similar sentiments, saying that they added more personalization when they "got comfortable enough," were ready to "open up," and "let them know that I have a family and what's important to me."

Although shared, personal, and highly visible items tended to initiate conversations with new acquaintances (as described earlier), we noted several important differences about the personalization involved in strengthening relationships with those already known and about the process by which this occurred. Items that represented more distinctive, more personal, and less widely known (i.e., personalistic information) aspects of one's identity were likely to help deepen relationships with those they already knew. For example, a participant discussed how a difficult-to-discern map of his family's lakefront cottage was a way for him to "open up":

> And that's the question—"What's this a map of?"—because they see a lot of water and a bunch of land masses. It's actually of Leelanau Peninsula and that's where my family cottage is—on that lake—and I just have a zoomed in map of that area. [*Interviewer*: *So, it's zoomed in enough so people don't* . . .] They don't know it's Michigan. They don't recognize where it is . . . I think it shows that I'm different in that I like to think it just shows in my willingness to open up.

Additionally, employees often noted that these items were located in their workspaces in places that were not immediately seen by others. In just

under half of the workspaces we photographed, the items that employees described as helping to encourage self-disclosure at work were not immediately or apparently visible in the frame of the photograph. In sum, by conveying "who I am outside of work" and, particularly, "how I am different from others," employees' personalization (as symbolic expressions of self) encourages self-disclosure, helping them to better understand one another, and thus establish stronger relationships with others.

Creating a negative impression. In general, we found that personalization (as symbolic expressions of self) is positively linked to workplace relationships. In fact, when our study participants had little or no personalization, their coworkers expressed their discontent—perhaps because it offered little information about the occupant. For example, one participant told us:

> At first, I had nothing in my cubicle. It was just gray and it was just boring and all I had were, you know, things that applied to my job that I would post up to remember and quick access. But then, one of my coworkers told me it's just too boring and they said it was lifeless.

Or, as another told us: "Many colleagues, the first time they walk into this office, comment on how stark it is . . . So the impression that people get sometimes, you know, I may get a weird look." On the other hand, study participants also noted that personalization that was too distinctive (e.g., by breaking norms in terms of the number or type of items) creates negative impressions, and thus harms workplace relationships by creating psychological distance. As one participant put it:

> I need to be very politically correct so I'm not going to post anything, you know, about religion, you know, or politics, things like that. So, there's a way to know what to display because you don't want anyone to think negative things about you that may reflect, you know, in potential bonuses or raises, things like that. [*Interviewer*: Do you sometimes see people display things that you wouldn't?] Yes, all the time. [There's] a lady who, she posts—and there's nothing wrong with it, you know—but she posts, you know, religious quotes and things like that. Being in the workplace, you don't know what denomination a person is, and things like that, so it could be offensive if a customer comes in or a client or things like that. That could put a damper on that work relationship.

When we asked about how they decided how and how much they personalized, interviewees described the precautions they took to not be "politically incorrect" and "offensive," or to be seen as "unprofessional" and "immature" and spending "too much time on the fluff." As participants explained, "I wouldn't display anything, for example, from undergrad 15 years ago. That would maybe not be a good choice" or "I think unwritten rules are you don't want photos of yourself like with your girlfriend in a bikini on the beach, you know, or some other things like anything political. You don't want to hang the big donkey or elephant in your office or things like that."

In contrast to the idea that personalization serves primarily to convey distinctions and status (e.g., Elsbach, 2003; Konar et al., 1982)—and providing additional support for our contention that too much distinctiveness creates negative impressions and harms relationships—we found that some employees used personalization to downplay differences such as undesirable differences or status differences because such differences create psychological distance (rather than common ground). First, some interviewees indicated that they avoided personalization that could convey undesirable differences. In the following example, one participant explained that she did not bring in any photographs of her family, who had emigrated from Iran:

> I typically just remove that completely when I'm at work, you know—just be like everybody else sort of thing because it's easier. You don't need to explain yourself or what that is or what does it mean. So that's completely stripped out. [*Interviewer*: And that's a big part of who you are, too.] Right, my mom came over from Iran. I don't bring any of that into work usually. I don't have anything from my immediate family either because I think it goes back to saying like I don't really want to open up to everybody. And I'm a very open person by nature, too, so I would rather you don't see it so you don't ask about it because I'm not going to lie to you "Oh, blah, blah, blah," you know. I don't want people to get the wrong impressions so I might as well just hide it so then they don't [see it].

Second, other employees said that they personalized to de-emphasize status differences. They wanted to de-emphasize this difference to make themselves more approachable, and help them form stronger relationships with others, in line with theory suggesting that the disclosure of status differences can hinder relationship development (Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, 2009). In the following example, a participant in a managerial role

described how his workspace is meant to de-emphasize the status differential: "I think some places, some desks, can look a little imposing that they're sort of, ah, formal you know? I'm informal . . . I mean I just consider it being myself, [being] equal to other people." Similarly, another participant explained:

> You walk into a CEO's office and it was like a museum. And they really wanted to direct your eyes to certain things and it was like taking a tour of their life. And it was very easy to ask them questions and I said, "Well, when I'm in that position, I don't want it to be about me. If someone walks into my office, I want it to be about them. So, I'm not going to take you on a tour of my life. If you want to know something, I will tell you, but let's spend all our energy figuring out why you are here." Especially if I'm going to be in a position where there's going to be barriers as it is because of my position; let's not create more barriers by saying, "Here's all the things that are me."

Perhaps because it is difficult to have insight into one's own potentially poor decisions, much of what we were able to learn about how personalization can create negative impressions came from employees' discussions of *others*' personalization. As one participant put it:

> I've actually seen somebody that had an NRA [National Rifle Association] bumper sticker hanging up, so there's people that go all out there, and there's always that lady who has like a jungle in her office of indoor house plants. I don't know what that says about her but it's interesting. I think it's usually someone who likes attention and also I think it's somebody who hates being in an office.

Another participant told us: "If you want me to be 100% honest, I think [too much personalization] shows that they have too much time on their hands and they should probably look for more responsibility or tasks to take on." Expressing a similar sentiment, a participant told us:

> Then you have some other people. Sometimes they do cubicle-decorating contests for Halloween or Christmas; I don't participate in those because my mentor told me, "If you're participating in those and you can decorate your cubicle, that means you have no work to do." And it is true in some cases, but some people go all out. Like one lady went to Joann Fabrics and her gray cubicle was covered with fabric so she goes all out.

In sum, our findings suggest that personalization that expresses too much differentiation potentially harms relationships by creating negative impressions and psychological distance from others.

Personalization as Symbolic Reminders of Self

Although past research on personalization has focused on personalization as a means of communicating identity information to others (e.g., Konar et al., 1982; Sundstrom & Sundstrom, 1986), we found that some personalization was intended only for "personal consumption." There are several ways we came to know this. First, in our interviews, study participants often discussed items with meanings that could not be discerned by others, as in this example:

> I think I got the rock when I was hiking on one of the Channel Islands out here so I wouldn't take just *any* rock so obviously it was something that reflects some sort of journey or some sort of special rock. It was taken from an island . . . It shows that I do have some connection with the outside world, you know, outside of my office and, you know, it's just a little reminder. I guess, metaphorically, because it is a rock and what it does is a paperweight—keeps things grounded, keeps me grounded. So, yeah, I would say that. [My coworkers] might say, "Well, that's a very plain paperweight," you know, it is just a rock.

Or, as another participant described:

> Most people look at it [a technical drawing of the dimensions of a boat] and all they see are a bunch of lines. I can look at it and see the shape of a boat and, also, after you get it all lofted like that, that's the pattern that you use for the planks and everything that go into the boat.

Participants noted that some of their personalization had meanings that could not be "actually perceived from seeing it" and that are "nothing that you would perceive by looking at it."

Second, through our interviews, observations, and photographs, we found that some personalization was placed out of others' view. When we inventoried and photographed participants' workspaces, there were often items not in our immediate view. As one participant noted when discussing an item that had a university name and seal and that was placed in a hard-to-see spot: "I'm sort of, I'm proud of being a Syracuse graduate but, to be honest, I don't think I need coworkers to even know it's there." Or, as another said: "I have a ledge in my office, so a lot of my stuff is concealed. My pictures are concealed underneath my ledge. So, unless you

come around my desk or are sitting next to me by my computer or something, you wouldn't see those." Others said they deliberately placed some personalization so that it was "inconspicuous," "hidden," and "doesn't even get seen" by others. Lastly, when comparing the photos to the items discussed in the interviews, we found that over one-third of all items were out of view.

As with symbolic expressions of self, symbolic *reminders* of self (i.e., personalization meant to convey identity to self) also symbolically conveyed interviewees' past and present work and nonwork identities. Additionally, though, we found that symbolic reminders of self also represented desired future selves. For example, here a participant told us about a clock that symbolizes what she would like to be like in the future:

> This clock was a gift from a business person who I admire and respect so much and can only hope that someday I can do as great a job as this person has. This person literally probably spends 16 to 18 hours a day doing all these phenomenal things for business, for the community, service to others, so I look at this and every time I see the time I realize that there's a lot more time than you think. You can get a lot more done than you think you can; so just focus and get it done.

We found only one mention in the extant literature of the idea that some personalization may only be intended for the self—what Gosling et al. (2002) referred to as "self-directed identity claims." Whereas self-directed identity claims served to reinforce currently held self-views, our participants stated that their personalization indicated what they are "striving toward" and "working toward," and that their personalization provided "a guide," "stimulus," "focus," and "a reminder that someday I'm going to do that."

Symbolic Reminders of Self and Regulatory Processes

Through our interviews, we found that employees linked their symbolic reminders of self to regulatory processes. Specifically, they linked their personalization to their self-regulation. Self-regulatory processes concern the regulation of both action and affect (Carver & Scheier, 2011), "such as altering one's behavior, resisting temptation, and changing one's moods" (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003: 197). We found that participants' symbolic reminders of self were related to self-regulation: (a) by serving as reminders of desired goals and values, and (b) by exacting their desired boundary between work and nonwork. That is, these symbolic reminders of self serve as regulatory resources by aiding goal activation and by regulating emotions. In contrast, we found that these symbolic reminders of self potentially inhibit self-regulation by interfering with attention and causing negative emotion. That is, these symbolic reminds of self can deplete regulatory resources by triggering emotional responses and consuming cognitive resources that could otherwise be devoted to goal achievement.

Serving as reminders of goals and values. Study participants often stated that their personalization serves to remind them of their goals and values; as one interviewee told us, "I put it there as a reminder that someday I'm going to do that." Or, as another participant put it:

> That Coldplay poster that's all made up of those words from the Grammys—there's a whole series of them—and that's the kind of design I eventually want to do. It's just things like that in there that remind me of the kind of work that I'm capable of and that I strive towards . . . in a business sense, probably that Coldplay thing is a reminder of where I want to go eventually and then who I want to be.

As another example, a participant told us:

> Sometimes I will post something on a wall that's not maybe just an identity. It might be something that I try and stand for, like a saying, but it's also something I want to keep in front of me so I can continue to use it as a guide, you know what I mean? For example, "Be patient" or something that represents patience because I've just been programmed a certain way and sometimes I need to be a little bit more patient than I am. So, a lot of times if I get something I see that I like, I'll put that on the wall more, not really necessarily as an identity but even more so as a reminder to me so every time I look at this say, "OK, I've got to be patient."

According to participants, these reminders inspired them to focus their attention and energy on meeting their goals. As examples, a realtor said a photo of a lavish staircase reminds her to "strive, trying to be the best that I can, trying to sell some houses and make people happy"; an engineer said an award serves as "a reminder that you always want to do your best whether it's going to be recognized or not"; and an event planner said a weight-loss memento "encourages me not to be a

piggy sometimes." Consistent with self-improvement motives (Sedikides & Strube, 1997), interviewees told us that their personalization serves as a physical reminder of what "I strive for" and "what I work towards." They viewed these goal reminders as "stimulating" and "inspirational," and indicated that it "gets me in the mindset," "keeps me focused," "makes me think of the future," "reminds me to stay grounded," and "inspires me."

As suggested by the examples above, these value and goal reminders often concerned work. In addition, many of the items that employees referred to as reminding them of their goals and values were either out of the line of sight of others (70% of the items described as being about goals and values could not be seen in the photographs) or were items with meanings that others would not be able to discern (as study participants indicated in the interviews). As one participant stated, "There's tracing paper and there's rough sketches and there's color renderings on the wall, and I feel like that showcases, I guess to me, well, I put stuff up to work towards something. I don't know if that is actually perceived from seeing it." Employees described some items as being personally meaningful and inspirational in ways that others would not know unless they asked—that there were "stories" behind the items unknown to others. For example, a bank employee described a small wooden mouse that a client had hand-carved and given to her:

> And then my little mouse is so small and inconspicuous that, that's a sentimental thing to me as well. So, sentimental value. And the mouse to me signifies customers. It's a mouse from a customer. Customers don't hand carve you these beautiful little mice unless you have gone above and beyond.

In sum, by reminding oneself of "who I want to be" (usually at work), employees' personalization serves as reminders of goals and values, and these reminders focus energy and attention on fulfilling desired goals and values, thus aiding self-regulation.

Exacting a desired boundary between work and nonwork. Study participants linked their boundary management (through their symbolic reminders of self) to affect regulation. More specifically, we found that symbolic reminders of self were a way of achieving situation modification, an emotion regulation strategy occurring before emotion is generated and consisting of "active efforts to directly modify the situation so as to alter its emotional impact" (Gross, 1998: 283). More specifically, in terms of affect regulation, we demonstrate that this boundary management is intended to increase positive affect and avoid negative affect. And the avoidance of negative affective states, in particular, serves as a regulatory resource because "regulating emotions after an emotional response has been triggered requires regulatory resources that would otherwise be devoted to cognitive tasks, such as focusing attention" (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003: 206).

We first seek to establish that personalization is linked to affect regulation by showing that employees often used words that were affect laden (such as "comfort," "miserable," "calm," "happy," "stress," and "smile") when describing their symbolic reminders of self and their effects on them—particularly in reference to personalization that helps them to achieve their desired work–nonwork boundary. We initially identified words we considered to indicate affect, and confirmed their emotionality by cross-referencing them with a list of 522 English emotional terms (Storm & Storm, 1987). Although some estimates of emotional words in the English language number several thousands (see Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003), this list includes many of the more common emotional words. To highlight the role of affect, we show these terms in bold when used by interviewees in the next two sections.

Although there are certainly other ways for employees to manage the boundary between work and nonwork, study participants often stated that their personalization (as symbolic reminders of self) was one way that they did so. Consistent with past research (e.g., Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005), study participants varied in terms of their desired boundary, with some participants seeking to integrate their work and nonwork lives by personalizing to remind themselves of their nonwork identities. As one participant put it:

> I'm similar to other people in that I want to have—I'm assuming they are doing it for the same reason—they want to be reminded of family or they don't want their work environment to be purely separated from [family]. You know, work environment is not as **comfortable** or personal as their home environment. It's just a way to make your environment more tolerable on a day to day basis.

Such sentiments were common when discussing personalization related to their nonwork identities, as in this additional example:

> I think a lot of people will tend to put pictures of their family and friends up just because you're in your office 40 or more hours a week so you want to have that moment of **nostalgia** when you look at the photos. So I think it's just a human instinct to make a place that you're foreign to when you start a job or whatever, to make it **comfortable**.

Those who used personalization to integrate their work and nonwork lives often identified it as a source of positive affect (e.g., Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Rothbard et al., 2005). As one participant put it:

> It's pretty **stressful** and we just have a lot of work so we all feel a lot of **pressure** to get it all done and, you know, **please** all the clients. I would think that, if I didn't have that, it would just be saying to me, "We just want you to work, work, work and have no mental break or any kind of break during the day, just focus on work." And I think the mental breaks are important, or just the ability to have, like, a sense of, like, home in the workplace that gives you **comfort**.

As another put it: "If you're having a **stressful** day, you can look at your picture and realize this is only a job, you'll be leaving soon." Participants said these personalization items "[keep] me in a **good** mood, to see like my family, friends on the wall," bring "**happiness** at work," "bring me to a **comfort** zone," "put me in a **good** mood," "brighten my day," have "a **calming** effect," are "my little **calm** spots amidst my chaos," "make me feel better," "make me **smile**," "add, like, a level of **playfulness** and **fun** that just kind of makes me **laugh**," and are a source of "**satisfaction**," "**pride**," and "**comfort**."

Other employees sought to segment their work and nonwork lives by personalizing in ways that reminded them of work identities and by leaving out personalization that reminded them of their nonwork identities. Except in one instance, participants indicated that they avoided nonwork-related personalization to avoid negative spillover from work to nonwork (rather than from nonwork to work), saying that "it saves a lot of **aggravation** at home" and that their time outside of work is "my time." In explaining his relative lack of personalization, one participant told us:

> I think there's a separation between work and to a certain degree between work and nonwork time and [I] kind of like to keep that. I like to go into work and get the job done and then, once it's done, go home and sort of be free of it.

Another participant, also in explaining her relative lack of nonwork-related personalization, told us:

> I've always tried to keep my workspace very—to reflect the way that I work—neat, organized, and reflective of my business world, so that, when I leave here at night, I get to go home to a whole different world—my personal world, so that "separation of church and state" so they don't overrun each other too much because I think it's good to be able to separate even though I might do work at home.

Some employees acknowledged that personalization that reminded them of their nonwork identities would evoke positive emotion in the short term, but that they wanted to avoid allowing their work to spill over into their nonwork lives in the long term. As one participant told us:

> I had a very personalized office before, I had pictures of my kids, my wife, I had things that they made. I had a very homey office and I never spent any time at home. I decided when I, the first position when I was actually the head of a company, I made a decision at that point. I said, "This is only going to get worse unless I make a change." One of the changes that I made is that I said, "Home is going to be home and work is going to be work." So, when I'm at work, I want to feel like I'm at work and not at home at all. So, if I'm thinking about home, or if I'm thinking about my wife or my kids or whatever, I need to either pick up the phone or go home. I don't want to have anything that is going to make me feel better because it's fake. So, if I'm feeling like I shouldn't be there or I should be with someone else, I need to pick up the phone or I need to leave. And, ever since then, I have had nothing personal in my offices and it's worked for me. Because, when I get here, I work and then I leave.

Another participant told us, "I think the point is I'm just not making myself too **comfortable**."

In sum, by reminding oneself of "who I am outside of work," employees' personalization exacts an integrated work–family boundary and prompts positive affect such as "**comfort**" and "**happiness**" for those who desire an integrated boundary. In contrast, by removing reminders of "who I am outside of work" and reminding oneself of "who I am at work," employees' personalization exacts a segmented work–family boundary, and avoids negative affect associated with spillover such as "**aggravation**" and "**[dis]stress**."

Interferes with attention. Although it seems that personalization (as symbolic reminders of self) aids

self-regulation, participants also noted that the extent to which and how one personalizes can interfere with attention and prompt negative affect, thus impeding the regulation of behavior and emotion. Specifically, they indicated that, while some personalization was "**stimulating**" and not "sterile," "**boring**," and "**constrained**," too much personalization representing nonwork identities was "**distracting**," "overwhelming," and "disruptive," and "make[s] my life more complicated than it needs to be." Thus, our findings suggest that employees' personalization may be optimally suited to self-regulation when it provides some stimulation—but not too much. In line with research suggesting that insufficient stimulation is stress inducing and distracting (see Fisherl, 1993, for a review), we found that too little or no personalization was often seen as impeding focus. As one participant told us, "If I was just staring at like a white desk and white wall and gray pinnable surface all day, I mean I would feel very stifled and I would almost find myself **distracted** by the fact that my **comfort** isn't around me." In contrast, we also found that *too much* personalization—especially concerning nonwork identities—distracted focus from work because "it's confining, it's clutter, it's **distracting**." As one participant put it:

> I guess the fact that I don't have a lot of stuff is kind of representative of me as well because I don't feel like my work area would be, I don't think I would be as efficient if I had a lot of clutter . . . I try and keep it to a minimum.

Or, as another participant stated:

> I mean my space is so **overwhelming** it's kind of hard to see the trees through the forest I guess. [*Interviewer*: Do you experience it as overwhelming or do you just think it's overwhelming right now because we've looked at it?] No. I feel like it's **overwhelming**.

In sum, our findings suggest that too much personalization (and, in particular, personalization that conveys nonwork identities) potentially impedes self-regulation by interfering with attention and causing negative affect such as feeling "confined," "**distracted**," or "discombobulated."

DISCUSSION

Our intent in this paper was to provide a more expansive understanding of workspace personalization. Using a qualitative approach including an analysis of workspace inventories, observations, photographs, and semi-structured interviews with a wide range of employees, we found answers to our three research questions regarding what prompts personalization, how employees personalize, and to what effect. In regards to what prompts personalization, we found that physical objects are linked to the social construction of self, consistent with McCarthy's (1984: 225) contention that "physical objects—things—are ever-present reminders of identities and can be employed again and again to confirm our identities to others and to ourselves." That is, we primarily found that employees saw their personalization as symbolically communicating information about the self—and found that employees' personalization was prompted by two often distinct motives: (1) to communicate identity information to others and (2) to communicate identity information to the self. In regards to how employees personalize, we found that these symbolic self-representations conveyed identity in diverse ways, including who they are at work or outside of work and who they are right now or hope to be in the future. Moreover, how and how much employees personalized varied by individual or group factors such as employees' work role (because employees often sought to communicate this role to others and because demands for interdependence prompted personalization to initiate conversations), preferences regarding their work–nonwork boundary, and norms regarding what was acceptable in terms of personalization.

Lastly, in regards to the consequences of personalization, we found that employees' personalization both helped and harmed their workplace relationships and both aided and impeded self-regulation. We found that personalization objects help to form and maintain a sense of self through their own interaction with these objects and through the joint interaction with these objects and others. It is perhaps the constancy and physicality of these physical objects that contribute to employees' stable self-views and that reduce uncertainty for themselves and for others, thus providing a secure foundation upon which to develop relationships and regulate behavior and emotion. Moreover, consistent with a sociomaterial perspective (e.g., Carlile, 2002; Nicolini et al., 2012; Orlikowski, 2007), we find that employees' interactions with material objects (in this case, personalization) shape employees' interactions. As sociomaterial practices, employees' interactions with their own and others' personalization changed with whom and how employees

related (e.g., by shaping work roles, networks, and communication) and shaped their own thoughts and behaviors (e.g., by subordinating some aspects of the self and claiming other aspects of the self).

Contributions to Theory on Workplace Relationships

Our findings make several theoretical contributions—and, in particular, seem to change what is known about identity and the communication of the self and their influence on workplace relationships. First, our findings suggest that employees feel comfort when they are able to convey their authentic selves, consistent with past research findings indicating that the unwilling suppression of the self is emotionally demanding (Hewlin, 2009; Ragins, 2008). However, in conflict with the view of non-organizational identities as representing a way of dis-identifying with the organization (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001), we found that the symbolic representations of non-organizational identities at work allowed employees to feel they could present their "whole self" at work, thus prompting positive affective states (e.g., comfort, happiness) at work and providing a basis for workplace relationships. Rather than being a threat to organizational identification, conveying one's individuality at work appears to help employees feel more comfort with and connected to their organization and its members.

Second, and relatedly, we note that little research and theory exists on workplace relationships (e.g., Liao, Liu, & Loi, 2010), and thus we contribute to the literature on interpersonal relationships at work by finding that objects assist in forming, developing, and maintaining these relationships. We found that employees developed and deepened relationships with others at work through material objects by disclosing some (but not too much and not too differentiating) information about the self to others. Through their symbolic representations of self, they found common ground (often through shared nonwork experiences), established a common understanding of employees' work roles, and shared personalistic information about the self—which, according to study participants, contributed to relationship development among employees and their coworkers, customers, and clients. Consistent with a sociomaterial perspective (e.g., Carlile, 2002; Nicolini et al., 2012; Orlikowski, 2007), employees' material objects allowed them to work across and within organizational boundaries. In contrast, representing the self as too distinctive or with too much disclosure appeared to prevent workplace relationship development because it created a negative impression in others' eyes and created psychological distance. Thus, our results highlight the dialectical tension between privacy and disclosure in establishing relationships. Too little disclosure harms relationships because others may feel there is no common ground on which to establish a relationship or they may experience uncertainty and distrust toward those they know little about (Macintosh, 2009; Petronio, 2002; Reis et al., 2010). Similarly, our study participants indicated that their personalization was a way of revealing aspects of who they are—and that these conversations prompted them to initiate and strengthen relationships with their coworkers, clients, and customers. And, far from being peripheral to the work that needed to get done, study participants stated that these prior conversations—and the information conveyed by their personalization—enabled them to complete work with others perhaps because the established trust between them facilitated work-related information sharing and communication clarity.

Third, our findings contribute to theory on the influence of social groups. Specifically, in existing research and theory, individuals' ability to balance two coexisting and opposing needs—the need for distinctiveness (i.e., as an individual distinct from a social group or as a member of a more exclusive group) and the need for belongingness (i.e., as part of a social group)—has been linked to *intrapersonal* processes such as well-being (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Kreiner et al., 2006). However, our findings extend this research and theory by linking these needs—and their optimal balance—to *interpersonal* processes in terms of workplace relationships. In fact, our finding that employees may experience improved relational outcomes by balancing the extent to which they convey similarities to and differences from others may, in part, explain *why* such a balance improves well-being and is stress-buffering.

Contributions to Theory on Self-Regulation

Our study also illustrates a link between identity and self-regulation—and offers several theoretical contributions on self-regulation. We found that employees' personalization played in a role in their self-regulation by providing reminders that rein-

forced their actual or ideal sense of self. Although the process of establishing a coherent and stable sense of self places considerable demands on the self (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003), our findings suggest that symbolic self-representations may aid this regulatory process by acting as a regulatory resource and by avoiding ego depletion. With symbolic representations of self that offered an optimal amount of stimulation, they were reminded of their goals and values and established their desired boundary (in terms of integration or segmentation) between work and nonwork—which, according to study participants, contributed to their regulation of behavior and emotion. These symbolic representations of self allowed them to focus energy and attention on achieving their ideal self, to experience positive affect (e.g., when employees are reminded of happy moments or pleasing relationships), and avoid or repair negative affect (e.g., by avoiding negative spillover—and the concomitant distress associated with it). In contrast, representing too much of the nonwork self through workspace personalization appeared to impede self-regulation by distracting focus and prompting negative affective states.

Contrary to the implicit assumptions often underlying past research on workspace personalization, we found that employees' personalization was not always intended for consumption by others. Rather, much employees' personalization could not be readily understood (or even seen) by others. It was often the items with "hidden" meanings that employees considered to have special personal meanings for themselves—serving to inspire them, make them smile, and remind them of their personal values. This finding contradicts assumptions of previous research that symbols are intended for public consumption (e.g., Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001) and that personalization serves primarily as a mechanism for communicating information about the self (e.g., status, distinctiveness) to others (Brown et al., 2005; Elsbach, 2003; Sundstrom & Sundstrom, 1986). It contradicts theory on impression management that suggests that processes related to self-as-audience and others-as-audience are isomorphic (e.g., Schlenker, 1986; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1987). Rather, we found the processes related to private and public presentations of self were distinguishable and largely non-overlapping.

Our findings contribute to the literatures on self-regulation more generally, and on emotion regulation more specifically (e.g., Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994). Consistent with theory relating symbols to the self (e.g., Belk, 1988; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), we find that objects can symbolically shape the self into the desired self. Our findings are in line with psychological research suggesting that symbols and salient representations of self can boost self-regulations (e.g., Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Selcuk, Zayas, Günaydin, Hazan, & Kross, 2012; Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012), and provide some evidence about how this is so (namely, by focusing attention and increasing positive affect)—in line with results from studies finding that viewing cute photos (e.g., of kittens and puppies) triggered positive emotion and narrowed attentional focus, prompting improved performance on tasks requiring concentration (Nittono, Fukushima, Yano, & Moriya, 2012). Moreover, whereas research suggests that it can be cognitively demanding to engage in self-presentation (Schlenker, 2003), it is possible that personalization helps to satisfy self-presentational concerns in a way that frees cognitive resources to be devoted to self-regulation. Given the cognitive costs of response-focused emotion regulation (e.g., Richards & Gross, 2000), it may be that antecedent-focused emotion regulation from personalization promotes self-regulation by creating a situation that regulates emotional responses before they occur. Although we found that personalization was linked to self-regulation through intrapersonal processes, it may be that personalization may facilitate goal-directed behavior through interpersonal processes as well. Research suggests that people are motivated to align their selves with their self-presentations when those self-presentations garner positive feedback from others (e.g., Schienker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994).

Contributions to Practice

In addition to having theoretical implications, our findings also have several practical implications. Most notably, our findings seem to suggest that, within reason, organizations would be unwise to put excessive limits on employees' personalization of their workspaces. According to our findings, personalization helps employees regulate their emotions, direct their activities toward goal-related pursuits, and build and develop relationships with others. As such, constraining personalization may well curtail these possible benefits. To expand on one of the practical implications of one of our findings, our results are suggestive of the idea that physical objects may enhance goal attainment.

When combined with other research on how symbols contribute to self-regulation reviewed above, it does not seem premature to suggest that physical symbols that represent desired work goals (e.g., being better at providing customer service or at being creative) may help employees to focus attention and effort on these goals.

This is not to suggest that there are no drawbacks to personalizing. How employees personalize can harm workplace relationships, and too much personalization can be distracting, particularly when it runs counter to employees' individual preferences. For example, employees who limited their personalization did so because they wanted to enact a boundary between their work and nonwork lives. Although this helped to prevent negative spillover, it also seemed to have relational costs—other employees wanted them to personalize more so that they might have gotten to know them better. Our findings suggest that they may reap relational benefits by finding a middle ground—personalizing more so that others can find common ground and feel like they have some insight about them. Although we advise individual employees to find a middle ground, we would argue that forcing employees to personalize comes at a cost—in line with other research suggesting that, when employees cannot enact their preferred boundary management strategy, they are less committed to the organization (Rothbard et al., 2005).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As with all studies, our paper has some limitations. First, as with many qualitative studies, our interview data may be subject to several biases including retrospective biases that are inherent to such data collection efforts. Our interview questions forced our participants to make sense of their past actions, and we cannot be certain that such sensemaking reflects their actual motives or behaviors. For example, we could not verify the extent to which employees' personalization represented authentic aspects of the self. Although people are often motivated to present themselves in authentic ways (e.g., Kwang & Swann, 2010), they often have conflicting motives to misrepresent themselves such as to self-glorify and self-enhance (Schlenker, 2003) (and to self-improve, as supported by our findings linking personalization to goals and values) (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). We found little evidence that participants were misrepresenting themselves with their personalization—or, at least, we found a good amount of consistency between participants' self-views and how others viewed them, and only one participant discussed personalization that was deemed inauthentic:

> He [my boss] has a lot of books. When I go in there and I look at it, I think two things; one, I think, first off, you couldn't have read and comprehended this because you're not using anything here. You know what I mean? And, two, I think it's a lot there for show.

Thus, although our data provided some additional assurances, we cannot rule out that participants' accounts may not be fully verifiable. Therefore, future research should employ other complementary methods and designs to test our grounded theory model—and, in particular, should employ a diverse sample, given our finding that substantial variation within (over time) and between individuals and organizations exists.

Second, we focused on the effects of seeing physical objects related to the self. However, these physical objects could also have other effects that are realized through other senses such as touch or smell. Consistent with Adam and Galinsky (2012), which found that wearing a lab coat heightened attention on a task, it seems plausible that personalization may be similarly physically experienced (e.g., one employee had a soft blanket on her chair). This seems especially likely, given that our participants discussed somatic experiences (e.g., feeling comfort or discomfort) in reference to their personalization. Future research should explore the role of other sensory inputs from symbolic self-representations such as taste (e.g., candies in a bowl), smell (e.g., a scented candle), or touch (e.g., a throw pillow on a chair) on relationships and self-regulation.

Third, although we tried to consider how employees' personalization changed over time, our analysis was not fine grained enough for us to understand the role of these symbolic representations in specific conditions, such as when an employee's identity is threatened. Research suggests that symbols representing a threatened identity can reaffirm the threatened identity (e.g., Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). For example, research in consumer psychology has found that, when their self-views are threatened, consumers are more likely to choose products that affirm the threatened identity, and that doing so restores their confident self-views (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009). Because having a stable sense of self contributes to psychological

well-being (e.g., Kernis, 2005), future research should examine whether the constancy and physicality of symbolic self-representations in personalization help employees to cope with identity threats.

Our study prompts some intriguing ideas for future research. First, because our findings suggest that personalization inspires employees to put forth effort toward desired goals, perhaps by helping them to identify with a future idealized self, future research should examine whether employees have higher goal achievement when their physical space reflects their goals, and whether identity processes may underlie this effect. Second, and relatedly, future research might examine the role of workspace personalization and other physical objects in helping employees to acquire a desired identity. That is, employees appear to "fake it 'til they make it", and it seems plausible that personalization consistent with their aspirational identity may help them to develop this identity. Third, according to employees' accounts, workspace personalization helps employees to initiate and develop deeper relationships with others at work, perhaps because personalization facilitates disclosure—thus reducing uncertainty and building trust, in line with limited research suggesting that physical objects prompt disclosure and build rapport (Ariely, 2010; Macintosh, 2009). However, future research should explore other, alternative ways that employees can facilitate disclosure without the aid of workspace personalization. This may be especially useful for employees who are away from or without a workspace that they can personalize (e.g., salespeople who work away from their workspace or employees without designated workspaces or in an office with an open layout) or for employees who are in open spaces that limit the ability to tailor self-closure through object placement.

CONCLUSION

By exploring one way that employees symbolically represent their past, present, and future selves at work, we were able to uncover new insights into the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes related to these objects. We were able to discover more about how employees develop interpersonal relationships at work and how they engage in self-regulation. Our grounded theory model offers a parsimonious explanation of employees' personalization behavior and its likely consequences, which we hope will guide future research on this topic.

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