The Best Imitation of Myself: Communication and the Arbitrary Construction of the Self

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The current notion of the self embodies terms like: negotiable, malleable, multiplicity, manageable, and unfixed. This phenomenonological trend is exploding through various mediums as diverse facets of the individual are portrayed and venerated though effectively unchecked. Due to the arbitrary construction and contextualization of the self, tainted through a distant medium, individuals have been left to interpret sign and symbol through whatever means available. The virtual self, as designed for and connected to many computer-mediated mediums – including Facebook, is a negotiable entity connected to but not restricted by the actual physical self. While identity has long been considered a psychological endeavor, it is fundamentally a communicative process that reveals these fastidious under workings. This is "the best imitation of myself."

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I juggle one handed
Do some magic tricks and
The best imitation of myself
Maybe I'm thinking myself in a hole
Wondering, who I am when I ought to know
Straighten up now time to go
Fool somebody else, fool somebody else
Last night I was east with them
And west within
Trying to be for you what you wanna see […]
I do the best imitation of myself
Yes it's uncanny to see
You'd really think it was me
The best imitation of myself
The best imitation of myself (Folds, 2002, Best Imitation of Myself)

The roots of communication have grown deep and flourished, in spite of the harsh winds of skepticism that have blow steadily for years. This arduous evolution has produced a brazened tree adorned with tantalizing fruit. The discipline of communication has experienced its fair share of trials, but these trials have bolstered the discipline as a whole. One of these trials has been in the area of identity.

Identity is an established area of academic inquiry, but it was not until recently that the implications of certain communicative aspects of identity caught the scholar's eye. The development, negotiation, and dissemination of the self are the most noteworthy areas of research being studied at this point in time. While the "self" may still be a transient initiative, as it currently understood, for the purposes of this investigation, the stance on identity will be that it is an entity connected to but not limited by the individual. The "self," as this investigation will demonstrate, is the embodiment of our identity; while the two terms are not synonymous, they are integrally related as one directly affects the other. This is "the best imitation of myself."

A Glance into Communicative Identity Literature

There are many themes and tangents that will be uncovered as a brief delve into this literature is taken. The identity subject matter has been blossoming for many years now. There are many branches stemming from this growing area of research. This literature review will focus on two primary areas identity literature and a weighty implications portion. The two areas of focus will be: 1) the core of communicative identity literature – which will include the construction of identity, negotiation of identity, and a glimpse into a few a few identity specific theories and 2) an application of literature as an original syntheses of identity is attempted looking at computer-mediated communication – including a look at hyperpersonal interaction/communication and the implications for the Social Penetration Theory in a computer-mediated realm.

Core Sample: An Overview of Identity Literature

Construction of Identity

The appropriate first theme for analysis will be that of identity framework. Cryssochoou (2003) argues, "Identity has now left the exclusive framework of the scientific universe and has become part of common sense. Like scientists, people use identity as an explanatory concept for motivations and actions" (227). Cryssochoou agrees with Moscovici (1998, 2001) that identities and specific aspects of identity will eventually become social knowledge, but this shared "picture" does not simply relegate each individual as having the same understanding but that a similar "social knowledge" will be shared with the "community". Thus identity becomes part of the "public domain" (227). The three issues that fascinate Cryssochoou are: defining identity, how identity is studied, and why identity is linked to social actions (226). Identity is a complex issue, which compels the inquisitive mind to further exploration.

The next aspect will be Edwards' (1990) claim that the sensitivity of an individual to feedback will determine the self-concept of that individual – a "person's sense of self is derived in communication as a result of the feedback received from others" (101). Edwards uses previous studies to build her case and develops the idea that, "individuals perceive others using the frameworks with which they perceive themselves" (102). This notion is encouraged by "Individuals actively seek[ing] support for their self-concepts through a process of self-verification" (102). Edwards shares how symbolic interactionists contend that "the self is derived in social interaction, with individuals taking roles in response to the feedback they receive from others" (103). Cooley (1902) went about this in a different fashion and introduced the "looking glass self" which arose in response to the opinions of others about the self (103). Mead (1934) extended this notion, proposing, "the structure of the self is a reflection of the entire social process" (103). "Each interaction partner calls forth a different 'self' as a result of the unique responses that are communicated by the other" (103). In Markus' (1977, 1983) terminology, "individuals who have had more communication experiences and/or received more feedback should possess more self-schemata as a result of their interactions with others" (103). Edwards concludes her findings with this thought: "some individuals have more 'self' to disclose in the development of interpersonal relationships" (109).

Another contributing factor to the construction of identity would be Dong (2007) who makes the case that emotional intelligence plays a significant role in the construction process. Dong argues, "self-esteem is individuals' perception of themselves" (1). His primary claim is: "Emotional Intelligence is individuals' capability to perceive, express, understand and regulate their emotional responses both within themselves and in others. An individual with high emotional intelligence is able to communicate with others easily and smoothly" (1). Dong continues: "emotional intelligence is linked to two competences: personal competence and social competence" (2). Zeidner, Matthews, and Roberts (2004) agree with Dong's assertion that emotional intelligence serves as the foundation for your view of self, including construction and management, and of others – Goleman (1995; 1998) would also agree (371-399).

Hogg and Reid (2006) appear to be the first individuals to bring about the idea of self-categorization. They claim that self-categorization "not only transforms self-conception and generates a feeling of belonging and group identification, but also transforms how we actually feel and behave to conform to the group prototype" (11). Hogg and Reid continue: "Social categorization lies at the core of the social identity approach" (9). This process has the ability to transform an individual and affect nearly everything connected to the individual.

The last theme for analysis under identity construction will be Noy's thoughts on self-change. Noy (2004) suggests, "identity is constituted through narrative performance" (115). Noy cites Freeman (1993) who claims "an inquiry into the telling and making of identity contends that narrative of personal experience is nothing short of the 'inroad into the phenomenon of self-understanding and selfhood'" (Noy, 2004, 116). Noy also agrees with Gubrium and Holstein (2000) that "we talk ourselves into being."

Noy believes "self-change—one particular form of the many forms of narratives of personal experience—is one in which the individual articulates identity through the performance of a dramatic moment or episode in her or his biography, one that generated a major enduring change" (117). As Gubrium and Holstein (2000) argue, the self is currently "big business, the stock-in-trade of a world of self-constituting institutions, which increasingly compete with each other for discerning and designating identities." This is big business; who is profiting?

Negotiation of Identity
The understanding that the identity is negotiable – it is malleable, manageable, and/or modifiable – is not necessarily an endeavor specific to communication. The roots are mostly seated in psychology, but the change can be charted directly through communicative practices. This negotiation process has its feet in communication but the heart and mind are in psychology.

Swann (2005) refers to the negotiation of identity as "behavioral confirmation" (69). He suggests that it is through the "process of identity negotiation perceivers and targets interactively forge agreements regarding the identities of targets" (70). It is the "target's contribution" to the identity negotiation process that possesses staying power (70). Swann demonstrates that a favorable evaluator will ultimately have a positive self-concept and, conversely, an unfavorable evaluator will have a high negative self-concept (71). The core of Swann's research seeks to prove how other people's expectations about one another affect the view of self – how others influence the identity. Collier (1988, 1997, 1998; Collier & Thomas, 1988) would agree: "identity is co-created in relationships to others and emergent in communication. An individual's identity is created through internalization and negotiation of ascribed identities by others."

Karasawa, Asai, and Tanabe (2007) suggest that individuals would rather focus dyadic interaction on differences as opposed to similarities. Their claim is essentially that stereotypes influence dyadic conversation. In their research, Karasawa, Asai, and Tanabe found that stereotypes are shared intergroup attitudes (526-27). They also discovered that dyadic relationships prefer to discuss inconsistencies – thus focusing on differences rather than similarities (527). The discussion of "self" comes as a result of understanding the group norms (526-29).

McFarland (1984) actually took psychological approach to the construction of the self. He gives the example of the boy who had lived in a dungeon all his life (Kaspar Hauser) and how he needed to be treated gently and how he constructed his identity – fascinating story (233). McFarland suggests "Self-concept is the realization and conceptualization of that which constitutes self and that which constitutes other than self" (231). McFarland cites Brooks who suggests that, "one's perception of self is the product of interpersonal interaction […] but the data

one uses in intrapersonal communication to define his [or her] concept of himself [or herself] is often data derived from interpersonal communication situations" (234). This is the basic idea that Mead (1934) was trying to present when he expressed that, "language process is essential for the development of the self" (135). Lastly, Dance and Larson (1976) expand on this idea and propose that the development of self-concept results from the information of intrapersonal communication, which is based on interpersonal interactions (65-66).

Identity Specific Theories
There are several identity specific theories that have arisen out of this identity conundrum, but all of them seem to be in the early phases of development and few of them have gained recognition as a vital communication theory. The three choice theories for investigation will be: Craig Scott's Social Identity Theory (SIT), Michael Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), and Helge Thorbjørnsen, Per Pedersen, and Herbjørn Nysveen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).

Scott (2007) asserts, "It is through communication with others that we express our belongingness (or lack thereof) to various collectives, assess the reputation and image of those collectives, that various identities are made known to us, and the social costs and rewards of maintaining various identities are revealed" (124). Scott explains how the "integration of SIT and communication in identity-based research is especially promising for better understanding vital issues related to identification and organization […] Thus, this essay seeks to build on the emerging, but still under- developed, role of communication in SIT-based work on identity and identification in the organization." (124). This theory is noted as needing further development as Scott explains, "Surprisingly, applications of SIT have historically paid relatively little attention to the role of communication as it relates to identification processes" (124). In the conclusion of his article, Scott comments: "The objective is not to replace existing organizational identification work in communication with SIT, but to supplement that work" (133). Maybe there are better theories out there, or ones yet to be created.

Hecht (1993) explains his development of the Communication Theory of Identity: "The basic premise of the new theoretical stance is that identity is inherently a communicative process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages are exchanged" (78). He continues and explains, "even when identity is largely symbolic, communication rituals are used to create and express it" (78). Hecht explains that identity may be understood as "a characteristic of a person, the enactment, the relationship, and the person" (79). This original piece on Hecht's theory has had several advancements, which have made considerable, and positive, changes toward the CTI.

Hecht, Jackson, and Pitts (2005) expand on Hecht's previous works by focusing on how identity is constructed from an intergroup perspective. The authors incorporate Social Identity Theory and claim that when an identity becomes salient (e.g., intercultural encounters), "a person will not behave according to his or her individual belief system, but in terms of the belief system held by the larger identity group" (24). The article then combines SIT and the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) to explain the motivation and social consequences underlying a person's change in communication styles. These authors get a bit excited and try to ad a third theory to be tallied: Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT). ELIT provides a focus on the

"socio-contextual variables present in an intergroup encounter among people with specific cultural histories and ethnic backgrounds" (28). The impulse here is not unique; as is with many identity related theories and concepts, due to the magnitude of the subject matter and this being the early stages of development, changes, meshing, and intermeshing between theories and ideas is fairly common practice – and ought to be encouraged as many scholars seek to grasp this illusive grail.

Hecht, Jackson, and Pitts (2005) expand on one and develop a new theory for their perspectives on identity and intergroup communication: Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) and Cultural Contracts Theory (CCT). CCT is concerned with people "co-develop[ing] cultural contracts in order to establish ground rules for interaction" (31). On the other hand, CTI is concerned with "how individuals and communities define their identities as well as how those identities are nested in relationships and expressed through communication" (31). Jung and Hecht (2004) propose, "identity also exists in social spheres between and among people" (266). They continue and explain that when CTI is evaluated, "In American culture, identity tends to be situated within the individual who is seen as a separated and discrete entity" (266).

Thorbjørnsen, Pedersen, and Nysveen (2007) explore the role of self-identity expressiveness and social identity expressiveness while implementing the Theory of Planned Behavior (763). Their idea stems from the hypothesis that, "self-identity expressiveness and social identity expressiveness prove to be significant determinants of intentions to use" (763). The central tenets of self-concept, according to our authors, follow these research streams: "(1) that consumers prefer brands associated with a set of personality traits congruent with their own, and (2) that consumers use these brands more or less consciously to express their own identity and values" (765). Thorbjørnsen, Pedersen, and Nysveen developed a model to explain the Theory of Planned Behavior (*Figure 1*). They explain that the "twin concepts of self-identity expressiveness and social identity expressiveness complement the Theory of Planned Behavior. Moreover, model paths are suggested between self-identity expressiveness and attitudes, and between subjective norms and social identity expressiveness" (766-67).
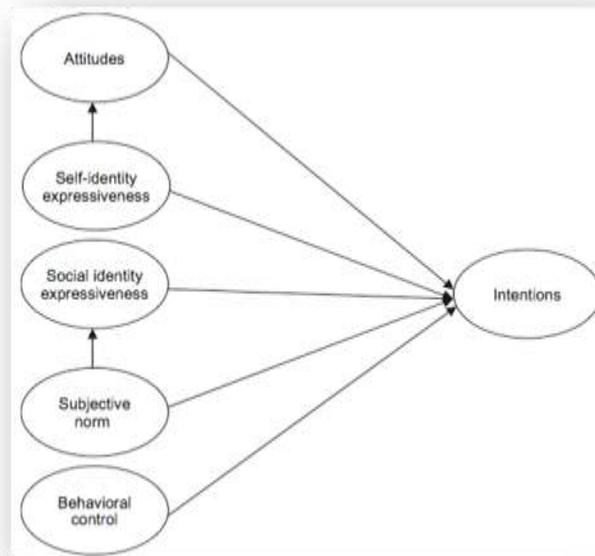
Figure 1
A Branch from the Tree: Identity Mediated Through the Internet
   The discipline of communication has experienced tremendous growth and expansion over the past century. The last half of that century was especially noteworthy as communication studies witnessed the birth and rapid development of a new trend in their scope: computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). As is the situation with any facet of communication, this particular realm has several unique aspects that scholars have taken into consideration. This new and quickly evolving arena has many ethical and practical questions that need to be dealt with. When a particular facet of communication, like computer-mediated communication, has such a rapid and grandiose entrance into this fragile world, a thorough criticism by worthy scholars is required of such a phenomenon.

   This "new media" seems to have simply bypassed the phenomenological stage and transcended directly in to acceptance and application (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). Ron Rice was one of the first individuals to begin to delve into this new media; Rice claimed in *The New Media* (1984) that the usual meaning of gadgets and trends lie in multilayered relationships connected through economic, political, behavioral, cultural, and institutional as well as technological phenomena. This new media has attracted many unique schools of thought since its conception, including: sociology, proposed by Short (1976) that there was a great potential for teleconferencing (which Short referred to as "social presence"), finance, in 1978, while working for the French government, Simon Nora and Alain Minc explained how this new media could influence *telematique*, and economics, Don Lamberton (1971), Kenneth Arrow (1979, 1984), Charles Jonscher (1983) and others worked out important conceptualizations of the economics of information and hinted at several consequences this may have on the identity. Since these early findings, nearly every possible area for scholarship has taken a chance and weighed the impact that new media, specifically CMC, is having on the world and in various cultures. While the ties and intricacies of this diverse facet in the discipline of communication have many connective aspects – interconnected and resiliently intricate, perhaps the most salient, challenging, and

noteworthy area for consideration will be the issue of identity and computer-mediated communication.

While the new media and computer-mediated communication seem to span most academic traditions, the issue of identity has also made significant strides across the world of academia. The connection between the new media, specifically computer-mediated aspects, and identity is a fascinating link. This is a particularly noteworthy endeavor considering the implications of this current information era. It may be irrational to taper such an immense topic, but please allow these two considerations to further explain the investigation into identity over a computer-mediated medium: 1) hyperpersonal interaction/communication and 2) subsequent implications for the Social Penetration Theory.

Hyperpersonal Interaction/Communication
Perhaps the most salient trend in hyperpersonal communication is that of creatibility – a feature prevalent on Facebook. Those who participate in a computer-mediated medium like Facebook have the perception that reality is completely manageable and malleable. Members are able to construct their profile and manage it according to whatever whim or inclination they deem worthy. While users cannot control what is being said about them in public forums or on other users' walls, the individual profile, including pictures, allows the user to manipulate blog notes, wall comments, and messages. Myers (1987) argues that members gain a sense of "efficacy or power" through the self-creation process (251-66). Users are able to construct exactly how they want to be perceived by the viewing world – they can choose whatever picture they want, whatever "about me" info they want, and can update or modify their profile as frequently or infrequently as they desire. The virtual self, as designed for and connected to Facebook, is a negotiable entity connected to but not restricted by the actual physical self.

How does one critique such a complex medium like Facebook? The variety of available modes of communication through Facebook makes discussion of the implications a difficult task. The original design of Facebook was asynchronous CMC; it reflected what Baym (2006) said, "one can read and respond to messages in one's own time" (38). The current trend in Facebook has been a synchronous form of communication resembling an instant messenger. The issue of the development and negotiation of self is therefore a synchronous and asynchronous task; while a member may be currently instant messenging, potentially millions of individuals may be viewing their profile. The management of self is not a new activity – Livingstone (2008) claims, "young people have always devoted attention to the presentation of self" (394). Livingstone continues, "The very language of social relationships is being reframed; today, people construct their 'profile', make it 'public' or 'private', they 'comment' or 'message' their 'top friends' on their 'wall', they 'block' or 'add' people to their network and so forth" (394). Communication through Facebook is sensitive and to a greater extent controlled.

It is the nature of CMC to require users to "adapt their linguistic and textual behaviors to the solicitation and presentation of socially revealing, relational behavior" (Walter, 1994). This relational phenomenon is what Walther (1996) labeled "hyperpersonal interaction." Walther and Burgoon (1992) explained that over time, "CMC becomes more similar to face-to-face communication in terms of socioemotional conversation and impression formation. Walther (1994) argued that the difference between interpersonal information revelation and dissemination

through CMC and face-to-face are "not issues of quality […] but of rate." The issue of concern as we focus on the medium of Facebook is that of attractiveness. Hyperpersonal communication has the tendency to "overestimate the attractiveness of their online relational partners, relative to people they know offline, making CMC more socially desirable than face-to-face communication" (Baym, 2006, 44-45). Walther (1996) says that this is due to reduced visual cues, increased ability to devote attention to message formation, and the opportunity for computer-mediated messages to be more introspective. In fact, Lea and Spears' (1995) believed that CMC makes it easier to assume that another individual is similar to you – this is because CMC allows the users to fill in the blanks, whereas with face-to-face communication there are fewer blanks to be filled in by the other participant.

Due to the arbitrary contextualization of symbols, tainted through a distant medium – the Internet via various web sites, we are relegated to interpret sign and signified by whatever means available. This process will inevitably cause confusion, disillusionment, and a questioning of individual identity. Baym (2006):

> Found that people randomly assigned to interact over the Internet rather than face-to-face were better able to express their true selves. Rather than making us less like our embodied selves, CMC's reduced cues sometimes allow us to be more true to our embodied selves than we can be in the flesh. (42)

While CMC may allow individuals to "express their true selves," the constant management and negotiation of the self is a taxing process. It may lead to many negative affects and could have lasting implications for many interpersonal relationships.

Computer-mediated Implications for the Social Penetration Theory

Can the layers of *the onion* be peeled back over CMC? At first glance it seems as though the Social Penetration Theory as described by Altman and Taylor (1973) is a viable theory, but as *we go deeper* this theory does not apply to the relational development through a medium such as Facebook. As it has been frequently noted, self-disclosure takes on interesting characteristics in online media; with disclosure made easier by the lack of direct, face-to-face interaction (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Others have argued that Altman and Taylor's "canonical" social penetration model gives undue preference to face-to-face communication, nonverbal communication, and physical proximity (Lea & Spears, 1995). Facebook allows complete strangers to see a user's sexual preference and deeply held religious beliefs before even meeting them face-to-face. The gradual process of self-disclosure as outlined by the Social Penetration Theory, is a model that slowly leads to the sharing of highly protected information. This is replaced among Facebook users by an immediate flood of candidness that can jumpstart the perceived intimacy of a relationship (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Although this revealing of information can be mitigated by Facebook's privacy settings or users' own discretion, a substantial number of members still allow other users within their network(s) full access to seemingly personal information. In summary, all of this was shared to demonstrate that if the layers of the onion are not removed in an orderly fashion, there are potential, arguably eminent, consequences that will need to be dealt with. Facebook does not follow the logical and pragmatic dissemination of information as prescribed by Altman and Taylor (1973). Facebook is outside the scope of the Social Penetration Theory; hypothetically, all mediated forms of communication violate the parameters of the onion theory.

Identifying Identity Implications

The threat of identity theft is knocking at the door. The emerging prevalence of recent identity literature and inquiry may, if left unchecked, experience a similar reaction that Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), had on our culture. Many doctors and scholars have been cautious to diagnose this condition due to the hasty escalation of the signs and symptoms.

Careful research revealed that the majority of the literature on DID has been generated and published in North America, to the extent that DID was regarded as a phenomenon confined to that continent (Boon & Draijer, 1991; Atchison & McFarlane, 1994). Over the past hundred years, the question has been asked as to whether DID actually exists. Doctors wonder whether this is result repeated and severe abuse or if patients have been simply copying symptoms either they've read about in fictional accounts or that a therapist probingly asked them about while attempting to diagnose them for this condition. Among those who believe such a condition exists there is the additional controversy of whether it should be considered a mental illness or not. The trend seems to have been brought about with the shear volume of publication, appearances in the media, and the beguiling nature of the subject matter.

A similar pattern is beginning to form within identity literature. It started years ago as psychologists began investigating the importance of the individual's self image and many subsequently related issues. The beginning was benign enough, with a functional and applicable approach, but as other schools of thought desired to get in on the fun, an academic swell occurred (some swells are good, like financial ones, but others are not-so-good, like aneurisms). The current research trend in communication research appears to be appropriate, but across the spectrum this swell seems to be capsizing. Take for example the incredibly malleable version of the self as presented by many computer-mediated forms of communication. The example critiqued in this review was that of Facebook. The natural trend by members of this medium is constant identity maintenance. The platform was originally a paper, non-negotiable, form, but now you can access, update, and modify your self (your profile) at your every whim through a variety of mediums including an iPhone or a Blackberry (Alexwuming, 2008; macrosunshine, 2008).

This society is quickly becoming aware of the importance of identity. Issues of identity theft, identity fraud, and multiplicity of identity are common coffeehouse conversation. Naivety is no longer a concern, but how much of this concern would be necessary if identity issues had not gained prevalence? This is a very similar phenomenon that was alluded to with Dissociative Identity Disorder. The pattern seems to be: beguiling subject matter, appearances in the media, and rapid and considerable publications, which yield a potential crisis. The question for consideration is how does a contentious society account for the tendency of information to swell? Where is the balance between necessary academic endeavor and frivolous pursuits?

While identity remains a necessary academic pursuit and offers the scholar many insights to deep-seated relevant issues, accountability needs to remain a high priority. The world of academia seems to have many of these safety measures already in place (i.e., journals, conferences, etc.) but these considerations do very little for the average identity contentious individual. The current concern seems to be not for the scholar, but for the unassuming victim caught in the identity swell. The average citizen has found himself or herself trying to navigate

an identity storm – they are trying to ride this wave. However, the problem is not necessarily the riding of this wave, it is that they have never surfed before. Trying to manage your identity is a very complicated task requiring effort and education. This is a new phenomenon, like DID, may or may have not existed prior to scholarship, but now it does and the consequences must be dealt with.

Conclusions

Trees can be difficult to maintain without careful pruning by skilled gardeners. The study of identity from the communication perspective, while it is encountering new challenges, is being cared for in a tender fashion. The areas revealed through this review of the literature were concerned two primary areas: communicative identity literature and computer-mediated identity inquiries. The conclusion of the matter is that the negotiation of the self is a delicate process, and if not given serious consideration, could lead to many undesirable consequences (or undesirable swells). The language individuals use to disseminate their self Joseph (2006) believes serves, "two other central functions, the phatic and the performative, and how these progressively opened up space for the study of how we perform our identities in the way we speak, and no less importantly, how we interpret the identities of others" (262). Joseph also asserts, "Identities are double-edged swords because, while functioning in a positive and productive way to give people a sense of belonging, they do so by defining an 'us' in opposition to a 'them' that becomes all too easy to demonise" (262). Identity is a double-edged sword. When in the hand of a skilled individual, the outcome could be careful pruning, but if a sword were to be left in a playground – or something obscene like that, the consequences would be unimaginable. As responsible scholars and citizens it is our duty to yield this sword accordingly and to instruct those around us how to do so as well. When it's all said and done, when the research has been collected, and the tallies have been counted, will *I* remain, "the best imitation of myself"?

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