

# Obligations, Internalization, and Excuse Making: Integrating the Triangle Model and Self-Determination Theory

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**ABSTRACT** Schlenker's triangle model (Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994, Schlenker, Pontari, & Christopher, 2001) identifies three excuses people use to avoid taking responsibility after failure: that one had no control in the situation, that the obligation was unclear, and that it was not really one's obligation. Three retrospective studies tested the presumed negative association between excuse making and responsibility taking. The studies also examined the effects of self-determination theory's concept of motivational internalization (Deci & Ryan, 2000) upon these variables. A complex but replicable pattern emerged, such that responsibility taking and motivational internalization correlated with adaptive outcomes such as future commitment and positive expectancy and excuse making did not. Of particular interest, perceiving that the person levying the obligation internalized motivation predicted responsibility taking, in all three studies. Implications for the triangle model, as well as for theories of maturity and personality development, are considered.

The triangle model of excuse making considers how people make excuses, thus avoiding taking responsibility for personal failures. In a sense, the model considers ways in which people behave "in bad faith," favoring self-esteem protection and impression management over taking clear personal responsibility for one's mistakes. In

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contrast, self-determination theory (SDT) considers ways in which people can act “in good faith,” feeling a full sense of ownership of their behaviors even when they are not enjoyable or when they do not yield positive outcomes. In this research we explored the intersection of these two theories, testing predictions from within each model as well as predictions derived by integrating the two models. We elaborate below.

The triangle model of responsibility, proposed by Schlenker and colleagues (Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994; Schlenker, Pontari, & Christopher, 2001), defines excuses as statements or attributions that allow one to “minimize personal responsibility for events” (Schlenker et al., 1994, p. 637), both for oneself and with others. Thus, excuse making is in part an emotion-regulation tool and in part an impression-management tool (Doherty & Schlenker, 1995; Schlenker et al., 1994). The triangle model depicts three crucial aspects of responsibility that can be more or less linked: prescriptions (i.e., what is supposed to be done), identity (i.e., the sense of self), and a situation or event (that is relevant to the prescription). The model thereby defines three kinds of excuses: *denying personal obligation* (weakening the link between the prescription and identity: “It wasn’t my problem”), *denying personal control* (weakening the link between identity and the characteristics of the event: “I couldn’t help it”), and *denying prescription clarity* (weakening the link between the prescription and the event: “The prescription didn’t apply here”).

Schlenker and colleagues assume, along with other researchers studying excuse-making processes (Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Snyder, Higgins, & Stuckey, 1983), that excuses have some positive benefits by protecting the self from condemnation by self and by others. However, Schlenker et al. (2001) also suggest that excuses can have disadvantages, by disempowering the person in future similar situations (Pontari, Schlenker, & Christopher, 2002). We hoped to test these ideas, and their implications, in several new ways.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) provides an elaborated perspective upon positive motivation, attempting to delineate the social and personality conditions that enable people to fully internalize their behaviors, that is, to “own” and assimilate them within an integrated sense of self. The theory began with the concept of intrinsic motivation, that is, behavior engaged in because it is inherently interesting and enjoyable, in contrast to extrinsic

motivation, that is, behavior engaged in because of the rewards and outcomes that follow the behavior (Deci, 1972, 1975). Central to the early research was the “undermining effect” in which external rewards and controls, once administered, reduce peoples’ desire to perform a behavior in the future (see Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999, for a meta-analysis of this literature).

However, not all important behaviors can be “fun,” and, thus, in the late 1980s the theory expanded to consider how extrinsic motivations might be internalized into the self, even though they are not enjoyable (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Ryan & Connell, 1989). This later development defined three primary types of extrinsic motivation: external motivation, in which behavior is sustained by the reward or punishment contingencies in the environment; introjected motivation, in which behavior is sustained by the desire to avoid internally imposed guilt and recriminations; and identified motivation, in which behavior is sustained by the desire to express important self-identifications. For example, a person might research local political issues because she has to for her job (external motivation), because she’d feel like an irresponsible person if she didn’t (introjected motivation), or because she believes in the political process and wholeheartedly wants to participate in it (identified motivation). Although these three types of motivation may not be enjoyable in their own right, identified motivation is assumed, nonetheless, to be autonomous and self-determined. In this case, extrinsic duties are enacted with the full assent of the self.

The concept of extrinsic motivation is particularly relevant for considering failed obligations and excuse making. We defined obligations as interpersonal presses to enact certain behaviors or duties (i.e., one’s parents insist that one maintain an “A” average; one’s coach asks one to help out at a junior sporting event; one’s minister exhorts one to pray every day). Of course, there are other types of obligations (i.e., moral, legal), but we deemed interpersonal obligations most relevant to SDT and the social functions of excuse making. We assumed that most people do not perform interpersonal obligations with a sense of enjoyment (intrinsic motivation) but, rather, to produce or avoid some later outcome (extrinsic motivation). From the SDT perspective, the question becomes, “To what extent has the person managed to internalize the imposed obligation rather than feeling that the locus of causality for the behavior lies external to the self?”

We believed that these concepts could provide a new and more differentiated way of considering the link between identity and prescriptions (Schlenker et al., 2001). Indeed, Schlenker et al. (1994) noted that experienced internalization and self-determination are likely to be relevant for excuse making but did not examine this issue directly. In addition, we believed that these concepts might provide a new way of predicting outcomes in excuse-relevant situations. Previous SDT research has linked internalized motivation to adaptation and performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000) in many different domains, and presumably this pattern also holds true for social obligations and duties (Sheldon, Kasser, Houser-Marko, Jones, & Turban, 2005). A prescription follower who fully identifies with and endorses the prescription should want to do what is objectively most rational and adaptive after a setback, including taking responsibility for controllable failures rather than disempowering herself by denying culpability. As this illustrates, SDT provides a way of posing an authentic form of selfhood in which self-protection and self-enhancement are minimized, rather than dominating as in most self-theories (Crocker & Park, 2004).

Another advantage of employing the SDT perspective is that it also considers the role of the social context (here, authorities and prescription givers) in promoting (or thwarting) the internalization of obligations and duties. Much research shows that when authorities are autonomy supportive (i.e., taking the subordinate's perspective, providing meaningful rationales, and giving as much choice as possible in the setting), then subordinates evidence greater motivational internalization (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994). In contrast, when authorities are pressuring, coercive, or controlling, then internalization is typically forestalled (see Deci & Ryan, 2000). In triangle model terms, a controlling parent, coach, or minister may reduce peoples' ability to create a strong prescription-identity link, weakening their commitment to the obligation and making them more prone to maladaptive excuse making.

In the current research, we addressed the authority-subordinate relationship issue by considering the authority's own motivation. How are subordinates' responsibility taking and excuse making affected when the authority imposing the obligation appears to have internalized motivation himself, compared to when the authority wants the subordinate to do the behavior for external or inauthentic reasons? Assessing both the obligator's and the subordinate's

motivation allowed us to consider social contagion effects in which one person's motivation is passed on to another (Wild & Enzle, 2001).

We reasoned that the perceived internalization of the obligator should have positive impact upon the subordinate's responses following failures, just as the subordinate's own internalized motivation should. For example, if a coach asking for a team-centered style of play seems motivated primarily by self-interest or external pressures, then a transgressing team member may be less willing to accept responsibility for her own failings. In contrast, if the coach really seems to believe in the team concept as an end in itself, then a team member who is criticized for her self-centered play may be more willing to own up to her failures and better able to resist the temptation to make excuses instead. According to Schlenker et al. (2001), this can give her the power to effect positive change in her style of play.

How do SDT and the triangle model overlap? They converge primarily in their conception of one type of link within the triangle model—between identity and the prescription; both theories assume that when this link is stronger, then excuse making will be weaker and responsibility taking greater. A second way the theories overlap is in their assumption that responsibility taking (rather than excuse making) after failures promotes better fulfillment of obligations in the future. Although excuse making may serve some social and protective functions, excuse making, ultimately, is immature, inauthentic, and problematic for performance. We hoped to validate these shared assumptions in the current data.

How do the two theories differ? Actually, there is no point of direct contradiction between them. However, self-determination theory does provide a more detailed way of considering the nature of identity-prescription linkage. Whereas the triangle model considers this link in a more nominal sense (“Did I say I would do X?” or “Am I really the one who is supposed to do X?”), SDT takes a deeper, more phenomenological perspective (“Do I really believe in X?” or “Does X express my values and not just the obligator's values?”). In addition, self-determination theory gives attention to the sociomotivational context of obligations and prescriptions, in particular the motivation and motivational style of the person imposing the obligation. We hoped that these features of self-determination theory would help to complement and clarify the triangle model.

*The Current Studies*

All three studies discussed in this article followed the same general format. First, we asked participants to describe important obligations owed to some mentor, parent, teacher, or other authority. Participants rated their own motivations for performing the obligations, as well as the perceived motivations of the people (i.e., the “obligators”) asking them to do the obligations. In addition, they described a time when they had failed in those obligations. Afterwards, they completed measures of responsibility taking and excuse making regarding the failure(s). Because there were substantial similarities between the three studies (but also a few differences, described below), we present all three studies together as well as the results yielded by combining the three samples.

In two of the samples, we examined four additional “outcome” variables concerning emotion and future performance. First, given that excuses are conceived of partly as emotion-regulation mechanisms (Doherty & Schlenker, 1995; Snyder & Higgins, 1988), it seemed useful to examine their associations with emotions of different types. We focused on two negative emotions: resentment and guilt. Resentment is an outwardly directed emotion, resulting in part from the perception that one is being unfairly treated (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004; Enright, 2001). It seemed important to assess feelings of resentment concerning a failed obligation, given that the obligation was presumably somebody else’s idea. Guilt is an inwardly directed emotion, resulting in part from the perception that one has let others down (Tangney, 2002). It seemed important to assess guilt along with excuses, given that excuses are supposedly adopted (in part) to prevent guilt.

Finally, we assessed participants’ felt commitment to the obligation(s) after the failure and their expectancy of successfully fulfilling the obligations in the future. This enabled us to test for the expected links between the theoretically central variables and adaptive functioning. If taking responsibility for failure is really the mature and most adaptive thing to do, then it should correlate with renewed commitment and positive expectancies regarding the obligation.

An important feature of these studies is that they concern potential excuse makers’ own perceptions of their obligations and their perceptions of their failures at those obligations. No previous research using the triangle model has employed such a focus. Some

research has taken a social categorization approach, addressing how observers perceive a transgressor. For example, Schlenker et al. (1994, Study 1) showed that observers assign the most responsibility to a transgressor when he/she is portrayed as having a strong identity-event link, a strong prescription-identity link, and a strong prescription-event link (i.e., three independent main effects were found). Similarly, Schlenker et al. (1994, Study 2) showed that observers seek all three types of linkage information in deciding how to apportion blame for various failures, and Pontari et al. (2002) showed that observers negatively evaluate another's character when he/she uses excuses of any type. Other studies have adopted a self-report focus but have not examined failure experiences. For example, Britt (1999, 2003) used the rated strength of the three linkages to predict participant "engagement" (i.e., responsibility) in a given activity, such as voting or military service. Schlenker (1997) also had participants rate the strength of their own linkages and looked at their correlations with responsibility. However, neither researcher applied the triangle model to study excuses per se, where excuses involve breaking or weakening links in order to minimize responsibility for a failure. To our knowledge, ours is the only study to apply the triangle model to examine participants' attributions for their own failures.

We tested five primary hypotheses, based on the reasoning outlined above.

H1. Participants' endorsements of Schlenker et al.'s (2001) three excuses (i.e., lack of control, lack of clarity, and lack of obligation) should be negatively correlated with participant responsibility taking. This is logical given that excuses are defined as strategies for avoiding personal responsibility and given that the three excuses have in the past been found to have additive main effects upon observers' ratings of transgressors' responsibility (Schlenker et al., 1994). Presumably, this effect should generalize to self-report data regarding a personal failure.

H2. Participant's internalization should correlate positively with responsibility taking after failure since the internalized participant has more fully accepted the obligation and thus wishes to do what is objectively necessary to live up to it.

H3. Participant's degree of internalization of the obligation should correlate negatively with endorsing the "not my

obligation” excuse since both constructs address the extent to which the prescription and identity have been linked (or not). In other words, we assumed that one cannot both believe in an obligation and explain failure by saying, “That’s not my problem.” In contrast, internalization should *not* correlate with saying, “The obligation was unclear,” because this excuse concerns a weak linkage between the situation and the prescription. This is doubtless a feature of many obligations, which are not as spelled out as they might be and whose applicability to particular situations that arise is objectively ambiguous. In other words, we assumed that one can believe wholeheartedly in an obligation and still find that one fails because it is unclear or ambiguous. Similarly, internalization should *not* correlate with saying “I had no control,” because this is also a feature of many obligations, which concern difficult or complex promises to be enacted within situations that may be unpredictable or unanticipatable. We assumed that one can believe wholeheartedly in an obligation and still find that one fails because something unexpected happened.

H4. The obligator’s perceived internalization should correlate positively with the participant’s internalization, supporting the SDT-based reasoning that people better internalize obligations when they feel that the person imposing the obligation is herself acting with internalized motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Again, this would suggest a social contagion effect, as in the earlier example of the authentic coach who inspires commitment and responsible behavior in his charges.

H5. The obligator’s internalization should be correlated with greater responsibility taking and less excuse making. If one feels that the person making the request is behaving authentically, one should be more willing to own up to failure and not make excuses.

We did not venture any specific hypotheses concerning the four “outcome” variables (i.e., resentment, guilt, future commitment, and positive expectancy) except to say that, in general, responsibility taking and internalization should be correlated with positive outcomes (less guilt and resentment, more commitment and

expectancy), and excuse making should be negatively correlated with these positive outcomes.

## METHOD

As mentioned, three studies were conducted. The measures were the same in each (although our second and third studies added four measures, described below), but there were some variations in the procedure each time. One study assessed a failure in a single, open-ended obligation, another assessed failure in a family, an academic, and an interpersonal obligation, and another assessed failure in an obligation owed to an “extrinsic” other and in an obligation owed to an “intrinsic” other (see below). In order to test our primary research hypotheses, which concern dispositional styles of dealing with obligations, we first aggregate across the three obligations in the second study and the two obligations in the third study and then combine the samples (total  $N = 510$ ). Then, we discuss any noteworthy within-subject differences in the second and third studies.

### *Study 1 Participants and Procedure*

Participants were 117 introductory psychology students at the University of Missouri, 63 men and 54 women, who participated to help fulfill a course requirement. Participants came to the laboratory in small groups and completed several measures, including the “personal obligations” questionnaire. In this questionnaire, participants were first asked to think of an important relationship with a mentor (i.e. teacher, coach, boss) and write down his or her initials.<sup>1</sup> Next, participants read, “We all make mistakes. In the next part of the questionnaire, we ask you to remember a time you let this person down—a time you didn’t fulfill an obligation, or didn’t do something you promised to do.” After describing the obligation and how they failed in it, they made a number of ratings.

A wide variety of obligations and failed obligations were listed. Representative examples include the obligation to help a youth pastor at a retreat (the participant “decided not to show up because I simply did not want to go”); the obligation to fill out a scholarship application, as promised to a high school principal (the participant “kept procrastinating and missed the deadline”); the obligation to go to India with a grandfather (the participant “had to stay home and work before school”); and the obligation to sell many ads for the yearbook, as promised to a teacher

1. A between-subject factor was also included in the study in an attempt to manipulate the type of mentor recalled. However, the manipulation had no effects and will be ignored in this article.

(the participant wrote, “Instead of leaving school and selling ads, I left school and went to a friend’s house”).

### *Study 2 Participants and Procedure*

Participants were 187 introductory psychology students at the University of Missouri, 72 men and 113 women (2 were missing gender information), who participated to help fulfill a course requirement. Participants came in large groups to the laboratory, where they completed several measures, including a “personal obligations” questionnaire. In that questionnaire, participants read, “Please think of some obligations or duties that you fulfill. These should be things that you agreed to do that are not necessarily interesting or enjoyable. For example, a person might agree to serve as the secretary or record-keeper for a club or organization, or might agree to visit elderly persons in retirement homes on a regular basis, or might agree to call their parents once a week, whether they want to or not.” Participants were asked to write down three obligations: one obligation in the family sphere, one in the academic sphere, and one in the social sphere. Again, a wide variety of obligations were listed.

Next, participants were asked to “bring to mind an incident in which things went poorly with each obligation, or when you perhaps failed in the obligation.” After writing a brief description of each incident, participants made a number of ratings.

### *Study 3 Participants and Procedure*

Participants were 206 introductory psychology students at the University of Missouri, 127 men and 79 women, who participated to help fulfill a course requirement. Participants came in large groups to the laboratory where they completed several measures, including a “personal obligations” questionnaire. In that questionnaire, participants read, “First, please think of some obligations or duties that you fulfill. These should be things that you agreed to because your parent(s) asked you to, things that are not necessarily interesting or enjoyable. For example, a person might agree to regularly visit her elderly grandparent in a retirement home, or might agree to call his parents once a week, or might agree to live at home when they do not really want to, to help with family finances.”

Participants were asked to write down two obligations. The first obligation was one that “some family member wants you to do because you doing it will make that family member look good, will give that family member some monetary or social reward, or will relieve some pressure on the family member. In other words, the family member was ‘extrinsically motivated’ to have you engage in the behavior.” The second obligation

was one that “some family member wants you to do because that family member really believes it is an important and/or moral thing to do, and wholeheartedly values your doing it. In other words, the family member is ‘intrinsically motivated’ to have you engage in the behavior.” The two obligation descriptions were elicited in a counterbalanced order, as were the later failure descriptions and ratings. As expected, this between-subject factor of order had virtually no influence upon the results and will be ignored henceforth.

Next, participants were asked to “bring to mind an incident in which things went poorly with each obligation, or when you perhaps failed in the obligation. You can go as far back in time as you like; primarily, we want the failure to be very memorable and impactful.” Participants described a failure regarding both of the obligations they had listed. After writing a brief description of each incident, participants made a number of ratings.

### *Measures*

Because the measures were the same in all studies (with the exception of four items added in Studies 2 and 3), we describe the items and procedures only once, below. Alphas are provided for the multi-item scales in Table 2.

*Participant internalization.* First, participants read, “Why did you originally intend to perform this obligation, before the failure occurred? Please rate your original intention in terms of each of the following four reasons.” The four reasons provided were “You intended to perform this obligation because somebody else wanted you to, or because the situation seemed to compel it” (external motivation, noninternalized); “You intended to perform this obligation because you knew you would feel ashamed, anxious, or guilty about yourself if you didn’t” (introjected motivation, partially internalized); “You intended to perform this obligation because you really identified with it and believed that it was an important obligation to fulfill (identified motivation; fully internalized); and “You intended to perform this obligation because of the enjoyment or stimulation that obligation would provide you” (intrinsic motivation, fully internalized). All ratings were made with a 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) scale. Consistent with Deci and Ryan’s motivational continuum concept (Deci & Ryan, 1991, 2000) and with much of the past research in this area, we created an aggregate internalization score by summing the intrinsic and identified ratings and subtracting the external and introjected ratings (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995, 1998).

*Obligator's internalization.* Participants next read, "An obligation is, by definition, something that somebody else wants us to do (even if we also want to do it). Below, please bring to mind the person who wanted you to do the obligation. Then, rate why they wanted you to do the obligation." All items were prefaced with "To what extent did this person want you to do the obligation because . . ." The external motivation item was "If you did it, then they would get some kind of reward, praise, or approval"; the introjected motivation item was "If you didn't do it, then they would feel ashamed, guilty, or anxious"; the identified motivation item was "They genuinely felt that it was the right thing to do. That is, they endorsed it freely and valued it wholeheartedly," and the intrinsic motivation item was "of the enjoyment or stimulation that your taking part in the obligation would provide them." The same 5-point scale was presented for these ratings, and an aggregate internalization score was computed in the same way as above.

*Responsibility taking and excuse making.* Two items were averaged together in order to assess the extent participants take personal responsibility for the failure: "To what extent were you responsible for the incident or failure?" and "To what extent did the incident or failure occur because there was something you could have or should have done differently?"

Three items were used to assess the excuse of denying control (in terms of the triangle model, denying the link between identity and the event): "Sometimes we fail in an obligation because of a lack of personal control over events. To what extent did the incident occur because of something you had no control over, or couldn't help?" "Sometimes we fail in an obligation because we don't have sufficient skills or plans for doing the obligation. To what extent did the incident occur because you didn't have the tools you needed for doing the obligation?" and "Sometimes we fail in an obligation because the situation is overwhelming or unpredictable. To what extent did the incident occur because of something you could not have predicted?"

Also, three items were used to assess the excuse of denying the obligation (i.e., denying the link between identity and prescription): "Sometimes we fail in an obligation because we don't really think it should be our problem in the first place. To what extent did the incident occur because this is not really your duty or obligation?" "Sometimes we fail in an obligation because when the time comes to act, we realize we didn't really want that obligation anyway. To what extent did the incident occur because you re-assessed the obligation when the time came to act, and decided you didn't want the obligation?" and "Sometimes we fail in an obligation because the obligation wasn't really our own idea—for

example, maybe you only wrote down this obligation because we asked you to. To what extent did the incident occur because performing this obligation is not really your idea?"

Finally, the simpler excuse of denying prescription clarity (i.e., denying the link between the prescription and the event) was assessed with one item: "Sometimes we fail in an obligation because the obligation is unclear, and we can't tell what needs to be done. To what extent did the incident occur because you were unclear about the obligation, or didn't know what to do?"

*Emotional reactions to failure.* 393 participants were also asked "To what extent did you personally feel these emotions, immediately after the incident you described?" To assess resentment, the adjectives "irritable" and "hostile" were employed. To assess guilt, the adjectives "guilty" and "ashamed" were employed. Participants rated the adjectives three times, once for each of the three domains, using a 1 (*very slightly*) to 5 (*extremely*) scale.

*Future commitment and expectancy.* For each domain, these 393 participants were asked "To what extent did the incident or failure weaken your commitment to pursue the obligation?" and "How successful do you expect to be in the future in the obligation?" A 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) scale was employed; we reversed the commitment measure so that high scores indicate higher commitment.

## RESULTS

Table 1 contains the means and standard deviations for all of the study variables, aggregated over the three samples. We conducted three preliminary analyses of theoretical interest upon these data. First, we compared the strengths of the three excuse variables. Which one is most strongly endorsed overall? A within-subjects MANOVA with excuse type as a three-level factor found a significant main effect ( $F(2,508) = 75.92, p < .01$ ). As can be seen in the table, this reflects the fact that "the obligation was unclear" excuse was endorsed to a lesser extent than the other two excuses. Apparently, the listed problem hinged more on a lack of controllability or commitment rather than on a lack of clarity. Also, a matched-pairs *t*-test on the two internalization variables found that obligator's perceived internalization was greater than the participant's own reported internalization ( $t(509) = 9.63, p < .01$ ). Apparently, participants

**Table 1**  
 Combined Sample: Descriptive Statistics for All Study Variables

	Mean	<i>SD</i>
1. Own Internalization	1.21	1.95
2. Obligator's Internalization	1.98	1.85
3. "Not My Problem" Excuse	2.34	.87
4. "Not Clear" Excuse	1.84	1.02
5. "No Control" Excuse	2.37	.82
6. Responsibility Taking	3.81	.91
7. Future Commitment	2.86	.95
8. Future Expectancy	4.06	.77
9. Felt Guilt	3.03	.97
10. Felt Resentment	2.25	.91

*Note:*  $N = 510$  for the top six variables,  $N = 393$  for the bottom four variables.

identify with the obligation less than the one who asked them to do it. Finally, a matched-pairs  $t$ -test on the two emotion variables found that following failure, guilt was stronger than resentment ( $t(392) = 14.15, p < .01$ ). Apparently, participants felt more contrition than anger after their own lapses.

Table 2 contains the correlations pertaining to the five primary hypotheses (correlations directly relevant to the hypotheses are in bold). Consistent with H1, greater responsibility taking was associated with less endorsement of the "no control" and the "prescription not clear" excuses. Unexpectedly, responsibility taking was not associated with the third excuse: "It wasn't my obligation." Furthermore, participant internalization was unrelated to responsibility taking (H2); that is, those who identify most strongly with the obligation do not necessarily take greater responsibility when they fail. These findings will be considered in the discussion. Nevertheless, as expected, participant internalization was positively correlated with the "not my obligation" excuse and was unrelated to the other two excuses (H3).

In addition, the perceived internalization of the obligator was positively correlated with participant internalization, suggesting a social contagion effect (H4). H5 stated that the obligator's internalization would be associated with responsibility taking and negatively correlated with excuse making. This was true in three of

**Table 2**  
 Combined Sample: Correlations Relevant to Hypotheses 1-5

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Own Internalization	.61					
2. Obligator's Internalization	<b>.47</b>	.50				
3. "Not My Problem" Excuse	-.22	-.25	.65			
4. "Not Clear" Excuse	-.03	-.15	.25	—		
5. "No Control" Excuse	.06	-.04	.10	.36	.65	
6. Responsibility Taking	<b>.02</b>	<b>.16</b>	<b>.02</b>	-.12	-.22	.73

Note: If  $r > .12$ ,  $p < .01$ . If  $r > .09$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Bolded** correlations are associated with hypotheses 1-5.

Alpha coefficients are given on the diagonal.

four cases, the exception being that the obligator's internalization was unrelated to the "no control" excuse.

Table 3 contains the correlations involving the four "outcome" variables. Again, our general expectation was that responsibility taking and internalization would correlate with positive outcomes and excuse making would correlate with negative outcomes. This was mostly borne out. Both participant internalization and the obligator's internalization were positively correlated with both future expectancy and commitment (all four  $ps < .01$ ). The two internalization variables were unrelated to the two emotion outcomes, except that the obligator's internalization was associated with less

**Table 3**  
 Combined Sample: Correlations Between the Predictors and the Four Outcome Variables

	Commitment	Expectancy	Guilt	Resentment
1. Own Internalization	.20	.26	-.06	-.02
2. Obligator's Internalization	.23	.24	-.04	-.18
3. "Not My Problem" Excuse	-.43	-.23	.01	.19
4. "Not Clear" Excuse	-.25	.08	.01	.19
5. "No Control" Excuse	-.25	.16	.03	.25
6. Responsibility Taking	.07	.10	.36	.02

Note: If  $r > .13$ ,  $p < .01$ . If  $r > .10$ ,  $p < .05$ .

$N = 393$  for all correlations.

resentment. Furthermore, responsibility taking was associated with greater future expectancy. However, responsibility taking was also associated with greater guilt.

Turning to the excuse variables: All three of the excuses were associated with greater resentment and with less future commitment. Apparently, situations leading to excuse making provoke interpersonal irritation and anger and leave the person with less resolve to fulfill the obligation in the future. However, none of the excuses were associated with guilt, suggesting that making excuses does not necessarily make one feel less guilty. Finally, the “not my obligation” excuse was negatively associated with expectancy, whereas the “out of my control” excuse was *positively* associated with expectancy. Thus, although participants do not expect to do well in the future when they deny the obligation, they do expect to do well when the past situation in question was one over which they had little control. The latter finding will be considered in the discussion.

#### *Considering Between-Study and Between-Obligation Effects*

*Between-study effects.* Did any of the correlations testing the five primary hypotheses (see Table 2) vary by study? We evaluated this possibility by conducting regressions using two dummy variables to control for main effects of study membership and two variable-by-dummy product terms to test for study-by-correlation interactions. Specifically, we conducted seven regressions corresponding to the seven cases where our predictions were confirmed, ignoring the three cases where they were not.

Although there were some sample main effects in these analyses, in no case did these effects usurp the theoretically central effects, which always remained significant. In addition, of the 14 study-by-variable interaction effects examined, only one was significant; the negative association between the obligator’s internalization and endorsement of the “not my problem” excuse was significantly greater in the third sample. Taken as a whole, these analyses suggest that our strategy of combining the three samples for hypothesis testing was reasonable.

*Differences among different types of obligations.* Next, we considered only the second sample, which asked participants about three obligations: one each in the academic, social, and family domains.

These data were collected primarily as a way to broaden our assessment of individuals' dispositional styles of excuse making, and we did not have hypotheses about mean differences between domains (see Table 4). For each variable we conducted three contrasts (i.e., school with social, school with family, social with family), setting alpha at .01. Participants experienced the least internalization for their academic obligations compared to the other two and also thought that the academic obligator had less internalization than the family obligator. They felt the most resentment after the academic failure but also felt the most responsibility for that failure, compared to the other two failures. Participants felt the least guilt after failing in their social obligation, perhaps because they were more likely to endorse the "that's not my problem" excuse. Participants felt that other's internalization was greatest for the family obligation and reported more future commitment to this obligation. These effects are sensible and do not impact our primary results.

Finally, by itself, we considered the third sample, which asked participants about two obligations: one owed to an extrinsic other and one to an intrinsic other. This methodology allowed us to test the association of the obligator's internalization with participant

**Table 4**

Within-Subject Means Across Obligations Owed in School, Family, and Social Domains (Sample 2) and Obligations Owed to an Intrinsic and an Extrinsic Other (Sample 3)

	Sample 2			Sample 3	
	School	Family	Social	Intrinsic Other	Extrinsic Other
1. Own Internalization	.73	1.42	1.99	.21	.05
2. Obligator's Internalization	2.01	2.48	2.36	.92	.53
3. "Not My Problem" Excuse	2.08	2.11	2.43	2.39	2.30
4. "Not Clear" Excuse	2.05	1.96	2.00	1.74	1.85
5. "No Control" Excuse	2.56	2.44	2.62	2.23	2.30
6. Responsibility Taking	4.16	3.61	3.45	3.90	3.56
7. Future Commitment	2.88	3.10	2.78	2.88	2.72
8. Future Expectancy	4.26	4.37	4.22	3.94	3.81
9. Guilt	3.18	3.05	2.44	3.30	2.99
10. Resentment	2.57	2.16	2.01	2.23	2.29

responsibility taking in a different way, this time using within-subject mean differences instead of between-subject correlations. As a manipulation check, the obligator's internalization was higher in the intrinsic other than the extrinsic other case, as expected ( $p = .001$ ). More importantly, participant responsibility taking was indeed lower in the case of an extrinsic obligator ( $p < .005$ ), as was the sense of guilt after failure ( $p = .005$ ). Although there were trends for the failed extrinsic obligation to be associated with lower future expectancy, lower participant internalization, and greater endorsement of the "not my problem" and "obligation unclear" excuses, these effects did not reach significance ( $ps$  ranging from .052 to .122).

## DISCUSSION

These studies were the first to apply the triangle model of responsibility to study participants' self-perceptions of culpability and excuse making after a failure, rather than studying participant's perceptions of the culpability of a generic other. Thus, they shift the focus from social categorization to individual differences, allowing a test of several important but unexamined implications of the triangle model. Also, the studies were the first to apply self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) to understand excuse-making processes. This is an important and underexplored issue for SDT: Do those with "optimal" motivation, as defined by this humanistic theoretical perspective, respond with the most integrity when they fail? The studies converged to yield a consistent picture of how excuse making, responsibility taking, felt internalization, guilt and resentment emotions, and future commitment and expectancies, relate to each other. Although the studies were admittedly only correlational, the data are personologically rich because they tap participants' recollections of impactful personal events along with their thoughts and feelings during those events.

Consistent with the triangle model's assumption that excuses in part serve a responsibility-denying function, we found that participants accepted less culpability when they claimed they had little control (i.e., when they felt the identity-situation link was weak) and when they claimed the obligation was unclear (i.e., when the prescription-situation link was weak). Why didn't the "not my obligation" excuse also predict less responsibility taking, as it did in

Schlenker and colleagues' earlier (2001) studies? Although we cannot definitively answer this question, the fact that the current studies of culpability assessed participants' self-perceptions, whereas the earlier studies assessed generic person-perceptions, may be important. Perhaps people have more lax standards for assigning blame to self versus others, a kind of self-serving bias. Indeed, such discrepancies might help to explain many real-life arguments and disagreements concerning culpability. Future research might attempt to bridge self-perception and person-perception, for example, by asking participants to rate the responsibility of a person in a given failure situation while thinking either of themselves or a generic other.

Consistent with SDT's claim that people are better off when they manage to internalize externally prescribed duties, we also found that participant's internalization of the listed obligations predicted less endorsement of the "not my obligation" excuse, greater future expectancy, and greater future commitment regarding the obligation. These findings lend support both to SDT and to the triangle model, which similarly emphasizes the importance of linking social prescriptions with identity. We suggest that SDT, which focuses on the combination of external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic motivation, provides a more differentiated means of measuring this linkage than past triangle model research, which has simply asked participants "how relevant" the role or prescription is to their identity (Britt, 1999, 2003; Schlenker, 1997). Specifically, the SDT approach allows a focus on phenomenological, rather than merely nominal, identity relevance. The current results indicate that this shift may bear fruit for the triangle model.

Incorporation of the SDT perspective also allowed us to consider the effects of the social context upon excuse making, specifically, the motivation and motivational style of the person levying the obligation. Although past triangle model research has acknowledged that social context is important (Schlenker et al., 1994), it has not focused directly upon the interpersonal processes by which responsibilities and commitments are transmitted (or not) from one person to another. In these studies we assessed participants' perceptions of the motivations of the obligator, using the same measures as those that assessed participants' own motivations.

The findings regarding the "obligator's internalization" measure were clear and revealing. First, the obligator's and participant's internalization were positively correlated, consistent with SDT's

emphasis on the link between authority's autonomy support and subordinate's later felt autonomy. Our results suggest that the interpersonal style and motives of the obligator may indeed have influence upon the recipient's own motivation to perform the obligation. Of course, the current correlational and retrospective studies cannot provide direct support for this social-contagion perspective. Future research might experimentally manipulate authority styles or apparent motivations to further develop this idea (Wild & Enzle, 2001).

In addition, the perceived internalization of the obligator predicted greater participant responsibility taking and also predicted less endorsement of the "not my problem" and "obligation unclear" excuses. Finally, the obligator's internalization was also associated with greater future commitment and expectancy and less interpersonal resentment. Interestingly, then, the perceived internalization of the obligator was a somewhat stronger predictor of positive outcomes than the participant's own internalization. This result underscores the importance of requesters having "impeccable motivation" themselves if they want others to fully assimilate their requests. Returning to the earlier coaching example, a coach who strongly identifies with a team-play concept may engender greater responsibility taking in momentary transgressors compared to a coach who seems primarily motivated by pressures, compulsions, or profit concerns.

The association of the obligator's internalization with participant responsibility taking also suggests that a fourth point might perhaps be added to the triangle model, corresponding to "the person imposing the prescription." Notably, Schlenker et al. (1994, Figure 1) have already acknowledged the role of interpersonal processes by suggesting that the triangle is really a pyramid, where the top apex is the judging audience that is looking "down" upon the triangle. The current findings suggest that the actor within the triangle is also looking "up," judging the audience (here, the obligator) and the obligator's own motivation for imposing the obligation.

Three unexpected findings merit brief discussion. First, participants' own internalization did not predict responsibility taking, although it did predict several other "positive" outcomes. One possible explanation is that our methodology was biased to solicit incidents in which participants were clearly culpable (i.e., we asked for "a time you didn't fulfill an obligation, or didn't do something you promised to do"). Asking participants simply to list a time when there was a problem might yield stronger results. Another possible explanation

is that internalized participants really are less culpable (on average) for the failures they described. Because they are more committed and self-efficacious, they may tend to do well except in situations they literally can't help. If this speculation is correct, then controlling for the association of internalization with general successful performance might reveal a correlation between internalization and responsibility taking. Unfortunately, we did not include a general performance or performance frequency measure in these studies.

A second unexpected finding concerned the positive association between responsibility taking and felt guilt. We did not predict this because we expected that responsibility taking would be generally associated with "positive" outcomes (i.e., less excuse making, less negative affect, and greater future commitment and expectancies). However, the correlation with guilt reveals that the latter positive effects may come at a cost—taking responsibility creates a sense of remorse and negative self-feeling. Indeed, in retrospect, this finding may simply highlight why people would rather not take responsibility for failure: it can be painful (Schlenker, 1997). Still, the moral emotion of guilt can be an important motivator of corrective action (Tangney, 2002), and thus it may not necessarily be a bad thing to feel guilty when one falls short in one's obligations.

A third unpredicted finding concerned the positive correlation between endorsing the "I had no control" excuse and future expectancy. One possible explanation is that making excuses for failure does not always indicate "bad faith;" sometimes, one's excuses may actually be correct, removing culpability. Indeed, civil liability defense law focuses on the establishment of objectively acceptable excuses. In the current data, when participants reported failing because of some factor they could not have predicted or controlled, they may also have felt that this factor was not likely to recur and that they would perform better the next time. Testing this speculation will require further research.

In conclusion, this article provides new support for both the triangle model of responsibility and the self-determination theory of motivation while also showing how the two theories may be fruitfully integrated. The results also suggest that the most adaptive approach to a personal failure is to take responsibility for it rather than make excuses. Finally, the results suggest that it is healthiest if authorities fully believe in an obligation themselves, prior to levying it upon others.

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