
THE IDENTITY-ACTION GAP

A fieldbook for better questions

How can people sincerely endorse a goal yet struggle to enact it? A practical, critical toolkit for examining intention, operational friction, contextual cues, social incentives and identity narratives.

WORKING RESEARCH, NOT ESTABLISHED THEORY

This fieldbook develops testable ideas, not verified findings from the author's research. Illustrative cases and toy numbers are explicitly fictional. Independent peer review and empirical validation have not been claimed.

CONTAINS

- Four competing mechanisms and rival explanations
- Four cautious propositions with disconfirmation criteria
- Three study designs and a fictional worked example
- Observation diary, measurement map and critique sheets
- Ethical safeguards, reporting checklist and source reading

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START HERE

How to use this fieldbook

A research-minded workbook: read the framework, try the methods, and question every inference.

Evidence labels are part of the method

- **Established adjacent research:** Peer-reviewed studies examine intention-behaviour links and implementation intentions. These do not by themselves validate the specific framework offered here.
- **Working hypothesis:** A plausible mechanism that needs operational definitions, rival explanations, and actual testing.
- **Illustrative scenario:** Invented events or numbers used for explanation only, never evidence of real-world effects.
- **Personal observation:** A local reflection that can generate questions but cannot establish causality on its own.

Suggested route

Read pages 3–7 to frame the problem. Pages 8–11 convert broad claims into testable propositions and study designs. Pages 12–16 are reusable field tools. End with research ethics, applications and references.

THE KEY EPISTEMIC QUESTION

What observation would make you change your mind? If no possible result could weaken your claim, it is not yet a useful empirical hypothesis.

A respectful starting point

A gap between intention and behaviour is not automatically laziness, dishonesty or hypocrisy. Resources, competing obligations, safety, power relations, access, illness, incentives and social constraints may shape what actions are possible. Consider structural as well as individual explanations.

CONSTRUCT MAP

Define the gap before you measure it

Words like “identity”, “intention” and “action” must be defined at the level of an observable situation.

Stated identity

A self-description such as “I am a person who supports careful research.” It is not automatically a promise to act at any particular moment.

Intention

A prospective commitment specifying an action and, ideally, its timing and conditions. Example: “I will read one full paper by Friday.”

Action

A bounded observable event. Example: a dated reading note with source and two critical questions.

Opportunity

Whether the action was feasible, permitted, safe and adequately resourced in the period being studied.

Intention-action discrepancy

A mismatch over a defined interval. A useful denominator is eligible opportunities, not simply calendar days.

MEASUREMENT CAUTION

Do not subtract a vague identity rating from a behaviour frequency and call the numerical difference an objective “gap”. They are different kinds of measurements. Specify a coding rule or a validated common scale first.

MECHANISM 01

Operational friction

An intention becomes difficult when the next executable step is expensive, uncertain, time-consuming or socially costly.

Proposed mechanism

Even high commitment may fail to become action when setup entails many decisions, tools, permissions, waiting periods or transitions between contexts. “Friction” is a family of constraints rather than a single psychological substance.

What to observe

- Time from intent to first feasible opportunity
- Number of required steps, dependencies and transitions
- Access to equipment, clear instructions and available time
- Difference between planned and actually available resources

Rival explanations

The task may not be a priority, the intention may be weak or socially imposed, unexpected obligations may arise, or the observed action may be misrecorded. Simplification may help independently of self-identity.

Small ethical intervention

Compare an unchanged process with one that removes a genuinely unnecessary step. Keep task difficulty, incentives and observation periods as comparable as possible. Record unwanted effects, not just completion.

A CLAIM WORTH RESISTING

No source supplied here supports a universal “more than three context switches” threshold or a guaranteed “50% reduction” in mismatch. Such exact thresholds require evidence.

MECHANISM 02

Social visibility and incentives

Public commitments may invite support, accountability, impression management or pressure. Direction is not predetermined.

Proposed mechanism

The social meaning of a declaration can alter later effort: recognition may reinforce the goal, or signalling may substitute for work. Different communities and tasks can plausibly show opposite patterns.

What to observe

- Whether public commitment was voluntary or coerced
- Audience relationship: mentor, peer, stranger or authority
- Support, resources and accountability received after disclosure
- Verified behaviour, not self-reported pride or shame alone

Rival explanations

People who choose to share goals publicly may differ systematically from those who do not. Publicity also changes monitoring, reminders, costs and social support. An apparent “visibility effect” is ambiguous without accounting for these.

Experiment sketch

Randomly assign willing participants, if appropriate, to private logging, supportive peer sharing or anonymous encouragement. Use the same opportunity structure and a predefined behavioural measure. Avoid public shaming or disclosure of sensitive goals.

NO UNIVERSAL SIGN

The original mock-up deducted arbitrary points for public commitments. That is a toy assumption, not an evidence-based general behavioural law.

MECHANISM 03

Time, identity and changing goals

The self we describe, the goals we prioritize and the opportunities we receive all change over time.

Proposed mechanism

An identity statement can remain meaningful even when a specific behavioural routine declines. Alternatively, a person may continue an action after the motivation originally attached to it changes. Timing matters, but “lag” requires longitudinal measurement.

Questions before interpretation

- Is identity measured as a value, role, aspiration or self-judgment?
- Did the person encounter meaningful opportunities to act?
- Did their priorities, circumstances, or definition of success change?
- Were the measures reliable and repeated at comparable intervals?

Possible disconfirmation

If self-description updates promptly when opportunities and behaviour change, an “identity overhang” explanation becomes less useful. If action tracks resources rather than identity, favour the resource-based account.

AVOID INVENTED TIME CONSTANTS

The source website asserted an identity lag of “up to 180 days” without providing supporting observations. This edition treats lag length as an empirical question, not a known result.

MECHANISM 04

Cues and implementation intentions

A plan for “when, where and how” may help people act when the opportunity arrives.

Adjacent empirical work

Implementation intentions pair a detectable situation with a specific response: “If event X occurs, then I will do action Y.” Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2006) reviewed 94 independent tests and reported a positive overall effect on goal attainment. Size and applicability still depend on task and study context.

Design a clean comparison

- General intention: “I want to write more.”
- Specified intention: “After morning tea, I will draft for ten minutes at this desk.”
- Behaviour: dated draft entries, not a global self-evaluation
- Feasibility: whether the cue occurred and whether the action was possible

Rival explanations

Plans may improve performance by simplifying choices, increasing reminders, changing expectations or increasing monitoring, not necessarily through one unique mechanism. Distinguish the active components where possible.

DISTINCTION FROM FOGG

Fogg’s Behaviour Model highlights motivation, ability and prompt at the moment of action. The current framework asks a different, testable question about mismatches between identity/intention and repeated situated action; it does not replace or refute Fogg’s model.

THE PROPOSITION DESK

Four hypotheses; four ways to be wrong

These formulations are proposals. They are not conclusions drawn from completed experiments.

P1 — Reducing setup friction

Prediction: For a comparable action and eligible opportunity, reducing avoidable setup steps will increase the share of opportunities in which an attempt begins. **Disconfirm:** no meaningful change relative to control under an adequately powered design. **Competing account:** more reminders or additional researcher attention.

P2 — Social visibility is conditional

Prediction: Visibility effects will depend on support, audience and goal type, rather than consistently helping or harming execution. **Disconfirm:** an adequately replicated, context-invariant direction across prespecified conditions. **Competing account:** self-selection into visible versus private pledges.

P3 — Identity reports and actions may diverge over time

Prediction: Within some individuals, observed changes in action and identity measures will occur at different times. **Disconfirm:** concurrent change within measurement precision. **Competing account:** unreliable or mismatched measurement scales.

P4 — Cue specification may help translation

Prediction: Where cues are stable and action is feasible, if-then planning may improve action initiation relative to general intention instructions. **Disconfirm:** no detectable difference in well-designed tests. **Competing account:** increased attention to tasks.

IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

An absence of statistical significance is not always evidence of “no effect”; design, sample size, measurement precision and confidence intervals matter.

RESEARCH PROTOCOL 01

A friction-reduction comparison

An accessible starting protocol for an exploratory pilot—not a substitute for preregistration or research ethics review.

QUESTION AND OUTCOME

Does simplifying setup improve initiation of a chosen action? Primary outcome: proportion of *eligible opportunities* with a time-stamped initiation within a predefined window. Record effort and quality as secondary measures.

DESIGN

- Choose one non-sensitive activity and define eligibility before allocation.
- Randomise opportunities or participants to standard versus simplified setup where feasible.
- Hold cue timing, reward, instructions and contact constant.
- Predefine observation windows, missing-data rules and exclusions.
- Record adherence, unintended consequences and reasons for non-opportunity.

ANALYSIS LOGIC

Compare completion or initiation proportions with uncertainty intervals; avoid treating repeated observations from the same person as independent samples. Report adherence to allocation and deviations transparently.

THREATS TO INFERENCE

Novelty, order effects, self-selection, unequal resources, participant awareness and measurement errors can masquerade as friction effects.

RESEARCH PROTOCOL 02

A visibility comparison

Social disclosure needs special care: confidentiality and choice come before experimental elegance.

CONDITIONS

Private log; voluntary sharing with a supportive peer; and, only where appropriate, a non-sensitive public declaration. Do not publicly expose personal goals without explicit, informed permission.

CONTROL WHAT YOU CAN

- Use similar reminder frequency and equal access to help.
- Measure support actually received, not merely audience size.
- Record participants who decline visibility without penalising them.
- Separate declaration from actual action evidence and quality.
- Avoid assuming public sharing is intrinsically performative.

INTERPRETATION

If public-sharing groups differ in outcomes, ask whether publicity changed monitoring, resources, fear of embarrassment, feedback or actual motivation. The data may support a contextual rather than universal explanation.

Write a rival interpretation that fits the same pattern of outcomes:

RESEARCH PROTOCOL 03

A cue-design comparison

Compare “I want to do it” with “When a feasible moment occurs, I will do this specific next step.”

OPERATIONALISE THE CONTRAST

All groups receive the same goal statement. The cue group additionally selects a feasible event, location and small response. The comparison group receives equally long neutral information to reduce unequal-contact effects.

MEASURES

- Cue occurrence: how often did the planned situation actually happen?
- Opportunity: was completing the action possible and safe?
- Initiation: did the smallest planned action begin?
- Continuation: did a meaningful contribution follow?
- Burden: did the plan add pressure, rigidity or conflict?

ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

Was any difference due to greater action per available cue, or because the cue occurred more often? Was the intervention followed as intended? Does outcome quality matter as well as frequency?

BOUNDARY CONDITION

A rigid cue might not help in unstable work schedules, caregiving responsibilities or emergencies. Good behavioural design must adapt to real life.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

A fictional lab: the daily reading promise

Invented numbers below demonstrate how denominators change interpretation; they are NOT results from any study.

Two fictional researchers each say they will read papers on weekdays. Both report having missed multiple sessions after fourteen calendar days. But one had fewer genuine opportunities due to a caregiving obligation.

Example	Eligible opportunities	Observed starts
Researcher A	8 of 10 weekdays	6 of 8
Researcher B	4 of 10 weekdays	3 of 4

Both initiated action on 75% of eligible opportunities: $A = 6/8$; $B = 3/4$. Dividing both by ten weekdays would misleadingly report 60% vs. 30% and potentially pathologise a constraint as lack of motivation.

What this does and does not show

A denominator can improve fairness, but “eligible” must not be defined after seeing the result. An attempted start may not reflect comprehension, and self-reported opportunity can itself be biased. Validity requires deliberate measurement.

Now stress-test it

- What rule would distinguish unavailable time from low motivation?
- Who decides what counts as a completed reading?
- What if interruptions are correlated with the study group?
- Would an alternative outcome tell a different story?

WORKSHEET A

Define one observable gap

Print or duplicate this page. Do not include sensitive identifiers in material you share.

1. Stated value, self-description or intention (quote exactly):

2. Specific action that would count (observable and time-bounded):

3. Opportunity and feasibility criteria (who, where, when):

4. Observation window and source of evidence:

5. At least two rival explanations besides "lack of willpower":

WORKSHEET B

Two-week opportunity diary

A diary for exploratory reflection or pilot logistics, not a clinical or psychometric instrument.

Use “N/A” when the action was not feasible. Record one sentence of context; do not force a moral interpretation. Protect privacy and avoid collecting names without a purpose.

Day	Context / cue	Eligible / started	Notes
01	_____	___ / ___	_____
02	_____	___ / ___	_____
03	_____	___ / ___	_____
04	_____	___ / ___	_____
05	_____	___ / ___	_____
06	_____	___ / ___	_____
07	_____	___ / ___	_____
08	_____	___ / ___	_____
09	_____	___ / ___	_____
10	_____	___ / ___	_____
11	_____	___ / ___	_____
12	_____	___ / ___	_____
13	_____	___ / ___	_____
14	_____	___ / ___	_____

At the end of the fortnight

Count eligible opportunities and observed starts. Then revisit your definitions, note missingness and ask whether actions were meaningful—not merely frequent.

WORKSHEET C

The counterexample protocol

Good research makes room for the most inconvenient observation.

1. Your claim in one sentence, without universal language:

2. What exact result would weaken or reverse it?

3. What might produce the same result for a different reason?

4. Which observation would distinguish the explanations?

5. What evidence is missing, and who could challenge you?

WORKSHEET D

Research critique: review a proposition

Use the checklist to strengthen a paper without confusing criticism with hostility.

- Is the stated claim distinct from observations and personal values?
- Are identity, intention, action and opportunity defined separately?
- Could the measurement detect failures as well as successes?
- Is the hypothesised mechanism distinguishable from rivals?
- Are confounding, selection effects and missing data acknowledged?
- Are the data real, synthetic, or unavailable—and labelled accurately?
- Are sample size, uncertainty and practical importance considered?
- Could the proposed test create coercion, surveillance or shame?
- Would a disconfirming result change the conclusion?

Most consequential critique and an actionable revision:

RESEARCH PRACTICE

Ethics, autonomy and responsible reporting

A credible behavioural research programme is judged as much by the human costs it avoids as by the hypotheses it tests.

Minimum ethical commitments

- Use informed consent and allow withdrawal without penalty.
- Avoid capturing sensitive habits, mental health or private relationships when unnecessary.
- Do not equate non-compliance with moral failure; include feasibility.
- Use data minimisation, secure storage, retention limits and access controls.
- Seek institutional ethics review when your population, methods or setting require it.
- Never disguise hypothetical participant outcomes as observed data.

Report findings with appropriate language

Prefer “consistent with”, “the estimate suggests”, or “not distinguishable in this sample” to claims of proof. Include sample selection, operational definitions, dates, study constraints, uncertainty and whether the analysis was exploratory or preregistered.

PUBLICATION STATUS

Sahil Tayal’s Identity–Action Gap material presented here is independent conceptual inquiry, not a peer-reviewed publication. References to established papers are background and should not be construed as endorsements.

APPLY CAREFULLY

Three settings; three different questions

A framework becomes more useful when it resists forcing everyone into the same explanation.

Workplace: the process everyone “supports”

A team says it values knowledge sharing, yet documents seldom get updated. Examine permissions, workload, documentation quality, incentives, and who has time. An intervention might remove approval steps or assign paid documentation time rather than repeat motivational slogans.

Classroom: the student who “does not participate”

A student endorses learning but rarely speaks in class. Separate interest from language confidence, safety, turn-taking, access, preparation and whether public speaking is the only acceptable measure of engagement.

Independent creative practice

A writer identifies as someone who writes, but little is published. Distinguish drafts from public outputs, voluntary privacy from fear, time constraints from idea quality, and exploration from shipping. “More published posts” is not automatically the right measure.

What the framework should never become

A device for ranking people, pressuring disclosure, turning identity into a compliance target, or treating daily output as a proxy for human worth. Measurement should serve understanding and humane design.

REFERENCES

A short, verifiable reading shelf

These sources inform adjacent constructs. They do not verify the novel claims or hypothetical cases in this fieldbook.

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