Reports

Self-affirmation as a deliberate coping strategy: The moderating role of choice ☆

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ABSTRACT

Self-affirmation interventions, in which people write about personal values, show promise as a technique to help people cope with psychological threat. However, recent research shows that awareness of self-affirmation effects undermines them. We hypothesized that awareness attenuates self-affirmation effects only when completion of the affirmation is externally imposed, rather than personally chosen. In two experiments, self-affirmation effects reemerged when "affirmation-aware" participants were given a choice about either whether to affirm or not (Study 1) or simply which value to write about (Study 2). These results suggest that people can learn to actively apply self-affirmation as a tool for coping with everyday threats.

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Introduction

In recent years self-affirmation has received a great deal of empirical attention as an intervention strategy for improving coping and reducing defensiveness. "Self-affirmation" is the process of maintaining self-integrity, a global sense of adaptive adequacy, by reflecting on important domains of personal worth (Steele, 1988). In typical self-affirmation exercises, people are asked to think and write about meaningful values (McQueen & Klein, 2006; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). These brief writing exercises have been shown to confer a variety of short-term and long-term benefits (for reviews see Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Sherman & Hartson, 2011). However, in these studies, participants are generally unaware of the purpose of the self-affirmation activity, and so it is unclear whether people can be taught to self-affirm as a deliberate coping strategy. Indeed, awareness of the effects of self-affirmation can paradoxically attenuate its benefits (Sherman et al., 2009). We propose that being given the choice to affirm in the face of threat will restore these benefits.

Self-affirmation theory

Self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) begins with the premise that people are fundamentally motivated to maintain their self-integrity or global perception of adequacy. The self is conceptualized as a broad system composed of a person's attributes, values, roles, beliefs, and social identities. A threat to any component of the self-system, such as negative feedback about one's work performance or about one's fidelity to a value, disrupts the integrity of the self-system (Sherman & Hartson, 2011; Steele, 1988). This disruption is stressful, and when it happens, people can respond by reappraising the threat. For instance, they may reject the validity of negative feedback, attribute poor performance to external circumstances, or downplay the importance of the domains where they fell short (Greenwald, 1980; Steele, 1997; see also Sherman & Cohen, 2006). These defensive adaptations are effective, but they can undermine learning and future success. Alternatively, people can restore their self-integrity indirectly by affirming a different aspect of the self-system, such as an important value or identity unrelated to the threat. By doing this, they buffer their well-being against the threat (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Sherman & Hartson, 2011; Steele, 1988).

In self-affirmation exercises, participants reflect on intrinsically meaningful values, which bolsters self-integrity and reduces defensiveness. Indeed, in many laboratory and field experiments, participants show less defensiveness after engaging in such activities. For example, they are more open to opposing political views (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000; Cohen et al., 2007), more willing to adopt health-promoting behaviors (Epton & Harris, 2008; Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000), and show attenuated physiological reactions to stress (Creswell et al., 2005; Sherman, Bunyan, Creswell, & Jaremka, 2009).

One especially fruitful application of self-affirmation theory is to the management of academic threats. Students often experience threats to their self-concept arising from academic evaluations such as tests and grades. The self-integrity threat associated with failure can lead to stress or disengagement that interferes with later performance (see Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Self-affirmation theory suggests that when students reflect on non-academic domains of self-worth through self-affirmations, their performance should be less affected by these threats. In support of this, Martens, Johns, Greenberg, and Schimel (2006) found that women performed worse than men on a test on which they were stereotyped as inferior—a math test—but women performed better when they completed a self-affirmation exercise before the test. In a series of field experiments, Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, and Master (2006) demonstrated that self-affirmation exercises can benefit the academic performance of negatively stereotyped minority middle school students for up to two years afterward, particularly those who were performing poorly before the intervention.

These findings demonstrate that self-affirmation exercises can be useful in facilitating coping with threats, such as the chronic evaluative threats in achievement settings. As such, self-affirmation has the potential for applications in real educational settings, such as by students who want to obtain affirmation's benefits for their own test performance. However, for affirmation to be used deliberately as a coping strategy, it would have to maintain its effectiveness when users are aware of its function. Research suggests that such awareness undermines affirmation's effects. People have a "psychological immune system" that helps them cope with threats, but its functioning often depends on their being unaware of its operation. For example, for rationalizations and other self-deceptions to soothe, people cannot be aware that they are deceiving themselves (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). Sherman et al. (2009) theorized that awareness of affirmation effects could attenuate them. In their studies, participants who completed a standard affirmation task without being told of affirmation's benefits showed improved performance on a math test after a threat in the math domain (Study 1) and less defensive dismissal of threatening information (Studies 2 and 3). Participants were generally unaware of the link between the affirmation and their later behavior. Indeed self-reported awareness was negatively correlated with benefit (Studies 1 and 2). Furthermore, participants who were explicitly told that the affirmation task was designed to raise their self-worth (Study 2) or who were simply led to see a connection between the affirmation and their later behavior (Study 3) no longer showed affirmation's benefits.

There are several possible reasons that awareness of affirmation's effects negates its impact. Sherman et al. (2009) proposed that when people are made aware of affirmation's effects, they correct for them, in much the same way that people correct for influences they see as irrational, like the weather, when reporting their mood (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Alternatively, information connecting self-affirmations with specific benefits, like increased self-esteem, reduced stress, or improved performance, may undermine its intrinsic appeal. Finally, like any intervention imposed by outsiders, providing people with an affirmation and conveying that it is designed to "help them" may undermine the beneficiaries' sense of personal autonomy and agency and, moreover, stigmatize them as in need of help. This could prompt reactance, a rejection of the intervention in an attempt to restore autonomy (Brehm, 1966), and other negative reactions that undermine affirmation's benefits, as described below.

The role of choice

In everyday life, people may reflect on their important values because they find the reflection meaningful in itself (intrinsically motivated, i.e., Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, if they are informed about the benefits of affirmation for performance and well-being, they may

choose to affirm in order to obtain these benefits (i.e. to perform better on a test). The latter kind of motivation, although not purely intrinsic, is still considered "autonomous motivation" because the action is freely chosen and motivated by personally important goals. People may also self-affirm because they were instructed to do so by an authority figure, such as an experimenter or teacher. This is external motivation, because the action is not freely chosen but rather is motivated by external force (Moller, Deci, & Ryan, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The same actions can be depleting or counterproductive if done for external reasons, but vitalizing and performance-enhancing if freely chosen. Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) posits that if compelled to act in a certain way without free choice, people will be motivated to restore their behavioral freedom by acting in an opposite manner. Other research has shown a clear link between autonomously motivated action and enhanced persistence, performance, and vitality. For instance, children perform better academically when their teachers support their autonomy (Ryan & Connell, 1989) and competitive swimmers who reported that they freely chose to participate in swimming are less likely to drop out than swimmers who swim because others expect them to participate (Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Brière, 2001). Furthermore, Cordova and Lepper (1996) demonstrated that even incidental, instructionally irrelevant choices can improve performance on learning and achievement tasks. In their study, children showed greater intrinsic motivation toward an interactive math game when they could control aspects of the game, such as the names of the characters and the icons used to represent them on the game board. They also improved more on a subsequent test of their math knowledge.

Based on these findings, we hypothesized that awareness of self-affirmation's benefits would undermine its impact when participants were instructed to self-affirm, as in previous research (Sherman et al., 2009). Being told to self-affirm in order to attain specific benefits (i.e. to feel better about oneself or to perform better on a test) may challenge recipients' sense of autonomy or otherwise undermine the affirmation's intrinsic appeal. However, we hypothesized that when completion of the self-affirmation task was perceived to be freely chosen, its benefits for performance under threat should be restored.

In two studies, some participants were made aware of affirmation's benefits for academic performance, and then either instructed to self-affirm (aware-affirmation condition) or given a choice about whether to do so (aware-choice condition). In Study 1, participants in the aware-choice condition were permitted to write about anything they wished after being informed of the theory behind affirmation. This gave them the opportunity to write about self-affirming concepts only if they chose to do so. In Study 2, the wording of the self-affirmation task instructions was subtly varied to induce a perception of free choice in the aware-choice condition. In both studies, participants then completed two math tests as in Sherman et al. (2009, Study 1), the first designed to induce threat, and the second to measure performance after threat. Performance on the second math test was then compared to the performance of participants in other conditions, to determine whether or not the affirmation effectively buffered them against the threat. In both studies, we predicted that awareness would attenuate affirmation effects under no-choice conditions, as in previous research, but that even with awareness, the affirmation would boost performance under free-choice conditions.

Study 1

Participants and design

Fifty-nine students at a western university (27 women) participated in the study in exchange for course credit or $10. Participants were run in groups of 2–5 by a female experimenter [but completed all tasks at separate desks and did not interact throughout the study]. All but two were European American.