**Effects of Self-Affirmation on the Personal Self and the Interpersonal Self**

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**Paper #1: Broadening Perspective, Changing Narratives, and Improving Academic Performance: The Effects of Values Affirmation Interventions**

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Kimberly A. Hartson, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA  
Kevin R. Binning, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

**Paper #2: The Multifaceted Role of Affect in Self-Affirmation Effects**

William M. P. Klein, National Cancer Institute and University of Pittsburgh, USA  
Peter R. Harris, University of Sussex, UK  
Rebecca Ferrer, National Cancer Institute, USA


Sara Kim, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China  
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**Paper #4: Self-Affirmation has the Power to Offset the Harmful Effects of Money Reminders**

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**SESSION OVERVIEW**

The theme of ACR 2013 is “Making a Difference.” One of the most functional approaches to making a difference in the self is to incorporate feedback from the environment in a healthy, instructive manner and modify the self accordingly. Nevertheless, all too often dismissiveness and defensiveness get in the way of such personal growth.

One process that repeatedly and robustly has been shown to open people up to unflattering feedback and turn their attention toward others’ wants and needs is self-affirmation. The papers in this session delve into the promise for self-affirmation to bring about positive self-change.

Self-affirmation refers to processes that bolster a global sense of self-integrity (Steele 1988). Self-affirmation manipulations remind people of important aspects of the self, enabling them to view events from a reasonable, considered, rational view (Sherman and Hartson 2011). By enhancing the psychological resources of self-integrity, self-affirmation reduces defensive responses to threatening information and events, leading to positive outcomes in various areas such as psychological and physical health, education, prejudice and discrimination, and social conflicts (Sherman and Cohen 2006).

Although studied extensively by social psychologists, self-affirmation has only just begun to receive attention from consumer researchers. This session provides an overview of self-affirmation theory, and discusses why self-affirmation is beneficial to consumers’ personal and interpersonal well-being. The first two papers provide new evidence and insights on underlying processes that help explain how self-affirmation benefits the self under threat. The next two papers propose that self-affirmation enables people to transcend concerns about the self in order to care about others.

First, Sherman, Hartson, and Binning report results from a longitudinal field experiment involving minority students and the experience of academic threat. The authors find that self-affirmation alters the students’ narrative explanations about events and in doing so changes their perspective about threats. Self-affirmed (vs. not affirmed) students viewed threatening events within a larger view of the self and construed events at a more abstract level, with the result being that they were less undermined by identity threat. This new model has the potential to change the way that scholars think about self-affirmation in offering new mechanisms for how it works — while elucidating one of the most powerful and straightforward ways that consumers can ‘make a difference’ in themselves.

Second, Klein, Harris, and Ferrer examine how self-affirmation influences and is moderated by negative affect. They show that self-affirmation when combined with the experience of health-related threats increases the negative emotions of worry and anxiety (about getting breast cancer after reading an article linking alcohol consumption with breast cancer risk). These specific negative emotions consequently promote behavioral changes. Further, the authors find that affect moderates the effects of self-affirmation. Negative affect such as anger and sadness impairs the effectiveness of self-affirmation, whereas general positive affect enhances the effects of self-affirmation. In tying self-affirmation to specific and theoretically-derived forms of affect, this paper opens up new avenues for understanding how health-related messages should be constructed.

Third, in continuing with the theme of negative emotions and affirmation, Kim and McGill propose that self-affirmation enhances caring about others’ negative feelings. They find that self-affirmation increases people’s willingness to spread negative word of mouth (WOM) on behalf of others who are angry about product failures. Yet, affirmation decreases willingness to spread negative WOM about one’s own negative experiences. These outcomes occur because a broader view resulting from self-affirmation reinforces social connections, enhancing the importance of others’ negative feelings. However, such a broad self-view uncouples the self from threat, mitigating the importance of one’s own negative feelings.

Finally, Park and Vohs show that self-affirmation offsets the harmful effect of money priming on the interpersonal self. Money priming, which enhances the self-sufficiency orientation, has been found to reduce helpfulness toward others and requests for help, and to enhance tendencies to separate the self from others. The authors show that self-affirmation reduces such adverse money priming effects, and helps people become more sensitive to interpersonal needs. This work points to the power of self-affirmation while raising fresh and invigorating questions about the psychology of money as well.

These four presentations propose different effects of self-affirmation under various contexts such as identity threats, health threats, product failures, and money priming, which can significantly affect consumers’ well-being. By focusing on the effect of self-affirmation on the personal self (Sherman, Hartson and Binning; Klein and Harris) and the interpersonal self (Kim and McGill; Park and Vohs), the presentations proposed here paint a picture of how affirming the self impacts consumers. This presentation will be of interest to researchers studying goal-attainment, self-regulation, information processing, word of mouth, and prosocial behavior — and anyone interested in one of the most effective ways that consumers can “Make a Difference.”

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Broadening Perspective, Changing Narratives, and Improving Academic Performance: The Effects of Values Affirmation Interventions

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on self-affirmation theory has repeatedly shown that brief interventions designed to affirm the self-concept can produce lasting benefits on a variety of behavioral outcomes, including academic performance. However, the question of what causes these effects is the topic of continued research attention. The purpose of the present talk is to summarize self-affirmation theory, to present a general model to explain the effects of values affirmations (Sherman & Hartson, 2011), and to introduce new evidence from two values affirmation intervention studies that supports this model.

Self-affirmation theory evolved from an alternative explanation for cognitive dissonance phenomena (Steele, 1988; see also Aronson, Cohen, & Nail, 2009; Stone & Cooper, 2001) to an intervention strategy employed in a wide range of settings (see Harris & Epton, 2009; Garcia & Cohen, 2012 for reviews). Its core idea is that people have a general motivation to maintain self-integrity—that is, the perception of one’s self as efficacious, consistent, and good (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). In the face of threats to one’s self-integrity, people behave in ways that serve to protect the self-concept. For example, when faced with the threat of confirming negative stereotypes about one’s group (i.e., stereotype threat), people may defensively disengage from the domain rather than risk confirming the stereotype. However, when global perceptions of self-integrity are affirmed, for example, via a writing task that reminds people of an important personal value, otherwise threatening information may lose its capacity to threaten the self. After completing values affirmations, individuals feel, both to themselves and to others, as though the task of maintaining self-integrity is settled. Consequently, they can focus on other demands in the situation beyond ego protection—for example—the academic tasks at hand in a school environment.

Sherman and Hartson (2011) proposed a model that seeks to explain the cognitive processes by which affirmation exercises may exert their influence. Specifically, affirming important values is proposed to augment the psychological resources available to an individual to confront a threat. That is, self-affirmation allows people to experience threatening events and information within a broader, larger view of the self. Self-threats, when viewed in the context of this enhanced perception of self-resources, can be seen from a broader perspective. This broader perspective changes people’s narrative of their ongoing experience, such that the threat does not affect, to the same extent, their overall evaluations of themselves. In the context of this focal threat, the general attenuation of concern about self-evaluation can lead to attenuated stress responses, and improved performance. And to the extent that these effects shape enduring narratives of experience and initiate (or interrupt) recursive processes, they can lead to long-term psychological changes.

Evidence supporting this model comes from recent investigations in other laboratories (e.g., Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009; Waksler & Trope, 2009; Logel & Cohen, 2011) and two recent studies we have conducted, each featuring a longitudinal field experiment in a mixed-ethnicity middle school. These studies examined the achievement gap between Latino American and European American students and whether a values affirmation writing exercise could attenuate this gap, and the processes by which this attenuation occurs.

In Study 1, students completed multiple self-affirmation (or control) activities as part of their regular class assignments (in procedures modified from Cohen et al., 2006; 2009). The manipulation did not affect the grades of White students, but Latino American students, the identity threatened group, had higher grades in the affirmation than control condition as assessed by core course GPA over the academic year. Examination of quarter by quarter performance indicates that the affirmation elevated Latino American students’ trajectory. The results persisted for three years, the period of examination, and persisted despite approximately 2/3 of the sample moving on to high school. The long-term effects of Study 1 suggest that students’ narratives of their ongoing experiences changed, and that they took this new “story” with them into the new environment (cf. Wilson, 2011).

To provide more direct evidence as to how affirmation shaped students’ narratives of their ongoing academic experience, Study 2 featured daily diaries where participants reported their daily adversity, perceptions of identity threat, and feelings of academic fit. In addition, Study 2 included multiple assessments of construal level (the Behavioral Identification Form; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) to examine participants’ perspective. We predicted that affirmation would broaden construals and prevent daily adversity from being experienced as identity threat. We also predicted that affirmation would insulate academic motivation from identity threat.

Study 2 replicated the effects of values affirmation on academic performance, as affirmed Latino American students earned higher grades in their core courses than non-affirmed Latino American students. Evidence supporting the general model of affirmation effects (Sherman & Hartson, 2011) was also obtained, as the affirmed Latino American students also construed events at a more abstract (broader) rather than concrete level and were less likely to have their daily feelings of academic fit and motivation undermined by identity threat. More specifically, affirmed Latino American participants saw events and situations at a broader level of construal than Latino American students in the control condition. The measures of construal focused on general topics, and not just academics, and were separated from the affirmation manipulation by weeks to months, and thus, the effects seemed quite general. Being under identity threat may lead individuals to experience a narrowing of perspective. Providing value affirming experiences and thereby reminding them of their important self-resources may broaden this perspective.

The diary findings also suggest that when affirmed, and with self-worth perhaps more secure, identity-threatened students did not experience daily adversity as indicative of identity threat. Further, to the extent that they perceived threat in their environment, these negative experiences did not spread into and affect academic motivation. Rather, the Latino American students sustained motivation independently of the perceived threat in the environment. Together, these findings suggest that affirmation can change psychological experience and instigate lasting changes in how people create narrative experiences over time.

In sum, these two experiments provide evidence to support the general model of affirmation effects—that values affirmations exert their effects, in part, by bolstering resources, broadening perspective, and changing the narrative of ongoing experience under threat.

The Multifaceted Role of Affect in Self-Affirmation Effects

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Self-affirmation theory holds that threats to the self can be reduced by focusing on cherished values unrelated to the content of the threat (Steele, 1988). Because threat often leads to defensiveness (Liberman & Chaikin, 1992), self-affirmation can be a useful technique to promote even-handed, non-defensive responding. Indeed, several studies show that people are more accepting of a threatening...
Less about Me, More about You: How Self-Affirmation Changes Word-of-Mouth Intentions for the Self versus Others

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Previous literature on WOM has focused on consumers’ communications about their own experiences (Berger and Schwartz 2011; Dichter 1966; Dye 2000), however, consumers may also talk about others’ consumption experiences, sometimes when jointly experiencing a product or service (e.g., dining companions) or when another consumer reports an experience and the target consumer must consider whether to pass that story on. The present research shows that self-affirmation decreases the tendency for consumers to complain about their own, but to increase the tendency to talk about others’ negative experiences, the “Consumer Champion Effect.” We trace this effect to the broader perspective adopted by affirmed individuals, which mutes the extremity of their own emotional responses to events while it concurrently produces a more accurate understanding and deeper appreciation of the intensity of others’ emotions. These responses thereby lead to an ironic effect of self-affirmation in which very calm consumers, who are not upset about their own negative experiences, may nevertheless be vocal critics of a firm on behalf of others.

Prior research has shown that the “self-affirmation task,” that is, reflecting on core values, reminds people of their broader identity (Sherman and Cohen 2006). Within this broader perspective, people feel more secure in their self-integrity and less pressure to defend a particular aspect of the self. As a consequence, affirmed consumers are more likely to process potentially threatening messages, for example, reports that favored products might have negative health consequences, in an open-minded way (Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000). We build on this prior research to explore additional consequences of a broadened self-view. First, in a direct extension of prior work, we posit that a broader view of self may mute the intensity of people’s own feelings about a product or services failure because each event is “just one thing” in a broader view of the self. That is, the affirmed individual is not whipsawed about by each individual passing event because the broader view incorporates other, more stabilizing influences (thoughts and feelings about the rest of one’s life). This theorizing leads to the hypothesis that affirmed consumers will be less angry after experiencing product or service failures, and, in turn, when they have a chance to spread negative WOM, they will be less likely to do so.

However, we also propose a novel influence of a broader perspective resulting from self-affirmation, specifically, that a broader view incorporates the feelings of others to a greater extent, leading affirmed individuals to be more attentive toward others’ affective reactions. Supporting our argument Crocker et al. (2008) showed that self-affirmation increased other-directed positive feelings such as love. However, moving beyond Crocker et al. (2008) who focused on positive emotions expressed toward others, we show that affirmed consumers more deeply appreciate the intensity of others’ positive as well as negative emotions. Further, we suggest affirmed consumers estimate more extreme (and accurate) emotional profiles in others’ affective reactions. After self-affirmation, others’ positive emotions seem to be more positive, while negative emotions seem to be more negative. As a consequence, affirmed consumers will be more willing to complain on behalf of those others, an effect we term, the “Consumer Champion Effect.”

The first experiment, consisting of two studies, examines the influence of self-affirmation on estimation of others’ emotions. In experiment 1a, self-affirmation was manipulated using an essay writ-
Effects of Self-Affirmation on the Personal Self and the Interpersonal Self

In this paper, we asked the question: Given its impressive ability to promote prosocial responses, could self-affirmation reduce the negative effects of money on the interpersonal self? Money, a social resource, makes people feel self-sufficient and behave accordingly (Vohs, Mead and Goode 2006, 2008). When reminded of money, people pursue personal goals and prefer to be separate from others. Thus, people prefer that others do not depend on them, and want to be free from dependency (e.g., reduced helpfulness toward others and reduced requests for help) (Vohs et al. 2006, 2008). Further, money leads people to prefer to be separate from others, and to be less distressed about social exclusion (Zhou, Vohs and Baumeister 2009). In sum, prior research has consistently found that money negatively affects the interpersonal self. We proposed that affirming important values will help people be less affected by money. Within the broader and abstract perspective of the self, money should lose its symbolic power.

In the first experiment, we tested whether self-affirmation reduces tendencies to be free of dependents and dependency that money brings about. First, participants received the self-affirmation (vs. control) manipulation. In the self-affirmation condition, participants wrote an essay on a paper explaining why their core value is important to them, whereas those in the control condition explained why a less important value would be important to the average person. In the middle of writing about values, one of two screensavers appeared. Participants in the money (vs. control) condition saw a screensaver depicting various denominations of currency floating underwater (vs. white dots on a black background).

Next, to measure the tendency to be free of dependents, we used willingness to help others in need. Participants were asked to read about a non-profit organization—Operation Smile, which is an international children’s medical charity that provides reconstructive surgery for children born with facial deformities, such as cleft lip and cleft palate. Then, they were told that in this experiment, five participants would be randomly selected to win a bonus payment of $50. If they were chosen as a winner, they could donate all or part of the $50 to Operation Smile. They were asked to write down the amount of money they would donate to Operation Smile.

Finally, as an indicator of dependency, we used a request for help during a difficult task. Participants were asked to outline all segments of a geometric figure without lifting their pencil or retracing any segments. Unbeknownst to the participants, the figure was unsolvable. Participants were told that it was not a matter of how many tries it took or how long it took them to solve the puzzle. They were instructed work on it until they either solved it or decided to get help from the administrator. After 10 minutes, they were asked to stop.

Consistent with prior research, money priming led to self-sufficiency orientations, reducing helpfulness toward others in need and dependency on others while attempting a difficult task (Vohs et al. 2006, 2008). In the no self-affirmation condition, participants primed with money (vs. not primed) donated less money and were less likely to request help. However, self-affirmation reduced such an adverse money prime effect. Participants who self-affirmed and received the money prime donated more money, and were more likely to ask for help while solving a difficult task, as opposed to those who did not self-affirm prior to the money prime.

In the second experiment, we tested if self-affirmation reduces different effects of money priming—tendencies to reduce social contact and to feel less distressed under social exclusion. First, participants received the self-affirmation manipulation and the money priming, as in study 1. Then, participants were asked to choose between two activities. Within each item, one option was an activity for one person (e.g., planning your own vacation) and the other option was for two people or more (e.g., planning a family vacation).

Next, we manipulated social exclusion by asking all participants to play a computerized ball-tossing game (Cyberball; Eisenberger et al. 2003). Participants were led to believe they played with 3 live participants, but in fact, the computer simulated the other play-
ers. Initially, the ball was tossed equally among the 4 players. In
the normal-play condition, this equal play continued throughout the
game. In the social-exclusion condition, the simulated confederates
stopped throwing the ball to the live participants after 10 throws.
Afterward, participants rated the social distress they felt about the
game using the Southampton Social Self-Esteem Scale (Sedikides
2008). Sample items on this scale included, “I feel devalued,” and,
“I feel rejected.”

Consistent with prior research, money priming led to social sep-
arateness (Vohs et al. 2006, 2008). In the no self-affirmation condi-
tion, participants primed with money (vs. not primed with money)
chose more individually focused leisure experiences and were less
likely to feel distressed after social exclusion. However, self-affirma-
tion reduced the adverse money prime effect. Participants who self-
affirmed and received the money prime were less likely to choose
individually focused leisure experiences, and were more likely to
feel distressed after social exclusion, as opposed to those who did not
self-affirm prior to the money prime.

Conclusion: Self-affirmation and money are both simple but
powerful motivators of behavior change. Past work has documented
the deleterious effects that even small and subtle reminders of money
can have on interpersonal outcomes. The current work has documented
that self-affirmation can not only nullify such troubling negative out-
comes but in some cases actually reverse them. By understanding
how self-affirmation alters the typical effects of money priming, the
field is in a better position to understand more about the psychology
of money as well as how self-affirmation works – seemingly to insti-
gate the interpersonal self over the personal self.

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