



Helpful or unhelpful? Self-affirmation on challenge-confronting tendencies for students who fear being laughed at



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ABSTRACT

Studies suggest that self-affirmation interventions may help increase students' tendencies to confront challenges. However, we posited that self-affirmation cannot help students with higher levels of fear of being laughed at (gelotophobia) confront challenges because it may lead them to accept negative information (feelings of threat) about their ability and decrease their perceptions of self-ability. In support of this hypothesis, Experiment 1 found that being attribute-affirmed enhanced the tendencies to confront a challenging task for junior high school students with low gelotophobia, but not for those with high gelotophobia. Experiment 2 revealed that being value-affirmed increased challenge-confronting tendencies for senior high school students with low gelotophobia. However, it decreased high gelotophobia students' challenge-confronting tendencies because it caused them to feel less capable of performing the task. Thus, self-affirmation, which may decrease high gelotophobia students' self-perceived ability in challenging situations, may be unhelpful or even harmful in motivating them to confront challenges.

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The most important thing for students in school is learning. When students learn something new, they often encounter challenging tasks and activities they are unfamiliar with or uncertain whether they can perform well (Dweck & Master, 2009; Liu, 2012). Grant and Dweck (2003) defined students' tendency to seek out or face schoolwork challenges as a vital learning goal (known as challenge-mastery). In other words, students' tendencies to approach or to avoid these schoolwork challenges (challenge-confronting tendencies) can be seen as a vital component of learning goal or intrinsic motivation (see also Ames & Archer, 1988; Boggiano, Main, & Katz, 1988; Kim, Chiu, & Zou, 2010; Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991). Numerous studies suggest that whether students possess positive tendencies to take these schoolwork challenges is very important because it not only influences their academic performances but also future achievements (Clifford & Chou, 1991; Cury, Da Fonseca, Zahn, & Elliot, 2008; Grant & Dweck, 2003; Helmreich & Spence, 1978; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999). Thus, identifying measures which can be implemented to increase students' tendencies to confront challenges and clarifying the possible underlying processes

are of great importance, not only for advancing our conceptual understanding, but also because they provide guidance for motivating students to confront challenges actively.

1. Self-affirmation and challenge-confronting tendencies

1.1. Self-affirmation and threats to the self

According to the self-affirmation theory, people are motivated to maintain a global image of self-integrity (i.e., a perception of oneself as a good, competent, moral and adaptive person, see Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Sherman & Hartson, 2011; Steele, 1988). When the self-image is threatened by information or events such as failure, negative feedback, threatening stereotypes or even healthy concerns, it would arouse stress and self-protective defenses that can hamper performance and growth (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Vohs, Park, & Schmeichel, 2013). However, if individuals have opportunities to receive self-affirmation interventions when encountering threatening information or events, they would show less defensive responses to these threats. This is because the self-affirmation intervention would trigger a more expansive view of the self and its resources, weakening the implications of these threats for personal integrity (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010; Schwinghammer, Stapel, & Blanton, 2006; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Sherman & Hartson, 2011). In brief, people

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would respond to threats to the self in more healthy and productive ways after being self-affirmed and thus reduce the negative influence of these threats.

1.2. Self-affirmation intervention

Value affirmation and attribute affirmation are the two most popular techniques that have been used in self-affirmation studies. The value affirmation intervention is mainly aimed at increasing people's cognitive accessibility of personally important values. For example, in a study by Sherman, Nelson, and Steele (2000), the participants ranked 11 values and personal characteristics (e.g., creativity) in order of personal importance and then wrote an essay describing why their most important value was important to them. In addition, Cohen, Aronson, and Steele (2000) also implemented similar value affirmation procedure to lead the participants to reflect on their core personal values. Next, the attribute affirmation intervention is mainly aimed at increasing people's cognitive accessibility of positive self-definitions. For example, Koole and van Knippenberg (2007) affirmed the attribute of the participants through giving them positive feedback on their personality. In addition, asking participants to list positive aspects or experiences of themselves (e.g., a talent) may also be called attribute affirmation (e.g., Blanton, Pelham, DeHart, & Carvallo, 2001). Overall, both value affirmation and attribute affirmation would lead people to restore or bolster a perception of self as a good, competent, moral and adaptive person and have been widely used in self-affirmation studies to make people's self stronger and reduce their defensive responses to threats.

1.3. Self-affirmation intervention in education

Self-affirmation theory is a well-studied theory in social psychology and has been widely applied to improve outcomes in a number of domains such as education, health, and relationship (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). In educational settings, self-affirmation interventions show remarkable effects on enhancing students' academic performances, especially for students who are under stereotype threat. For instance, Cohen and his colleagues conducted a series of studies which revealed that engaging in value affirmation helped decrease the achievement gap between low-achieving African Americans and European Americans (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009). In addition, female students face more scientific performance threat (e.g., physics) than male students. Miyake et al. (2010) also applied the self-affirmation intervention to help female college students enrolled in introductory physics course. The results showed that the self-affirmation intervention successfully improved female students' test score, especially for those who tended to highly endorse gender stereotypes. In sum, the self-affirmation intervention would be a wise intervention to improve student's performance in educational settings (Walton, 2014; Yeager & Walton, 2011).

1.4. Self-affirmation may help increase students' challenge-confronting tendencies

Although a number of studies have supported that self-affirmation interventions would enhance students' academic performances, there appears to be relatively few studies that have focused on the effect of self-affirmation on students' learning motivation. However, students' tendencies to confront schoolwork challenges (a vital component of learning motivation) may also benefit from the self-affirmation intervention. Specifically, challenging situations, which infer the possibility of failure, would threaten the self and instigate individuals' defensive responses such as shying away from the challenges to protect the self from threat (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). However, according to the self-affirmation theory, the intervention of self-affirmation would reduce individuals' defensive responses to the threats. Therefore, if students have opportunities to affirm the self

when encountering challenging situations, this intervention may reduce their defensive responses and foster an approach orientation toward these challenging situations rather than avoidance (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Finally, it would be more possible for them to face the challenges bravely.

In brief, we inferred that the self-affirmation intervention may help increase students' challenge-confronting tendencies. It is noteworthy that although self-affirmation is a social psychological intervention, this inference does not run counter to the findings of educational studies. For example, teachers frequently use positive feedback (e.g., praising students' performance or attributes) to encourage students (e.g., Brophy, 1981; Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2010). This approach has been shown to be generally beneficial for increasing students' learning motivation (e.g., Anderson, Manoogian, & Reznick, 1976; Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Hancock, 2002; Shanab, Peterson, Dargahi, & Deroian, 1981). In self-affirmation studies, self-affirmation refers to behavioral or cognitive events that bolster the perceived integrity of the self; additionally, self-affirming events include receiving positive feedback from others (see Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009). In other words, providing positive feedback was considered a type of self-affirmation (for a review, see Epton, Harris, Kane, van Koningsbruggen, & Sheeran, 2015; McQueen & Klein, 2006). Thus, in a classroom setting, providing positive feedback to students, which can also reinforce their perceived integrity of the self, could be used as an attribute affirmation intervention.

2. Self-affirmation, gelotophobia, and challenge-confronting tendencies

Although research has widely supported the beneficial effects of self-affirmation, one direction of the self-affirmation research has aimed at revealing the boundary conditions for self-affirmation effects. Several studies have suggested that there are no benefits from the intervention of self-affirmation for specific individuals or under specified circumstances (Sherman & Hartson, 2011). For example, the effect of self-affirmation reduced when participants were told that the affirmation was expected to benefit them or the purpose of affirmation was to reduce threats (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman et al., 2009). In addition, Vohs et al. (2013) even reported a reverse result that being self-affirmed and then attempting but failing at a task would decrease people's motivation to pursue a goal. This was because when people experienced goal-attainment failure, being self-affirmed can lead people to internalize the implications of failure and decrease the perceptions of the self's ability regarding the goal attainment, thus resulting in goal disengagement. These studies imply that it is theoretically and practically critical for self-affirmation studies to find out where self-affirmation is helpful and where it is unhelpful or even harmful.

The findings of Vohs et al. (2013) suggest that being self-affirmed can lead people to be more open to negative information about the self's ability regarding a task, which in turn deflates people's motivation in achievement settings. It is noteworthy that in addition to the direct performance experience (e.g., failure), emotional arousal is also a major inner source of information which can influence people's evaluations of the self's ability (Bandura, 1977; Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007). The feeling of threat that students experience when encountering a challenging task, similar to the failure experience, can also be negative information about students' ability regarding the task (Liu, 2012; Liu, Chiu, Chen, & Lin, 2014). Hence, an interesting question emerges as to whether the self-affirmation intervention is helpful in increasing challenge-confront tendencies for students who do not experience failure regarding a challenging task but tend to perceive this task as highly threatening, such as someone with higher levels of gelotophobia (i.e., the fear of being laughed at; from *gelos* = Greek for laughter, and *phobia* = fear; Ruch, 2009).

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