

Shared Group Membership, Value Affirmation and Reactions to Injustice

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According to self-affirmation theory, the opportunity to validate oneself as a moral, competent or likable person or group member can alleviate feelings of distress when one is confronted by negative or threatening information. Although self-affirmation can lead to improved academic performance and other positive effects (see Aronson, Cohen & Nail, 1999 for a review), to our knowledge, potential negative effects of self-affirmation have not been explored. Yet if people can affirm their self-worth as a person or a group member in a different domain, they may be less distressed by the mistreatment of another group member, and less likely to confront the injustice.

During an experiment, participants witnessed the unfair treatment of a fellow participant (Wiesenfeld, Brockner & Martin, 1999). After the participant and confederate completed several tasks, the experimenter dismissed a confederate from the study without extra credit points or a promised gift certificate. After witnessing the dismissal, participants wrote a paragraph about a value that was most or least important (affirmation opportunity manipulation) to themselves as unique personalities or students at Sonoma State University (social categorization manipulation). After completing the "writing sample", participants completed a mood checklist, self-esteem measures and a "department evaluation" of research projects conducted by investigators from other universities.

Although all participants agreed that the dismissal of the other student was somewhat unfair, only participants asked to write about a value *not* important to SSU students (making their shared group membership salient without an opportunity to alleviate any distress) reported feeling guilty. These participants also evaluated the experimenter and his future projects very negatively. In contrast, participants who wrote about a value important to SSU students reported almost no guilt and viewed the experimenter positively. Further, affirming an important group value lead to more interest in future research participation whereas affirming an important personal value lead to less interest in future research participation; even though both types of affirmation increased participants' self-esteem. These data suggest that if participants were not reminded of their shared group membership, they did not need to defuse any guilty feelings and therefore, were less likely to support future "unethical" research.