SELF-SOULSTICE MODEL OF AFFIRMATION

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ABSTRACT

Self-affirmation is based on the consistency of how adaptively and morally one sees oneself, and the authenticity and consistency of how one presents oneself to others. The ability to affirm self is rooted in one's self-concept, which is deeply connected to self-image and self-integrity. Oftentimes, individuals have difficulty affirming themselves as a result of a wounded self-concept, impeding their ability to affirm others and difference in general. The Self-SOULstice Model of Affirmation outlines four stages that clarify the evolutionary process that ties the manifestation of affirming others to self-affirmation and living authentically. This model contends that the soul (i.e., the intrinsic self) is the core of the self, where affirmation begins. This process, which places the self at the center of all stages, demonstrates that there can be no true affirming of others without affirmation of self.

Existential psychology in its simplest terms is about human existence and the human drama of survival and flourishing (Wong, 2009). Seeking to make sense of how one comes to terms with the basic facets of life (e.g., beliefs and values, choices, relationships, etc.) in the face of setbacks and anxieties is an existential axiom (Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2006; Wong, 2009). Such understanding can be found at the center of one's identity. A clear sense of personal identity can also clarify how one navigates through life and how authentically one presents in diverse experiences.

Most people would agree that we are relational beings, in the sense that our connections with others contribute to the formation of what and how we perceive, believe, value, and choose (Craig, 2008). As humans, we desire connectedness and to be in relationship with others. According to Corey (1996), we desire to have a meaningful role in one another’s world and want to feel that the presence of others is significant in our world. Wong (2010) asserts that meaning is constructed not only socially, but also individually. While we may always be extrinsically in relation to others, we also are intrinsically in relation with ourselves—our own interests, goals, and choices that facilitate a sense of self-worth and stable sense of self (Schimel, Arndt, Banko, & Cook, 2004). This core entity, according to Landau and colleagues (2011), stands for one's “essence” or true self, rather than the self that is publicly presented yet not always consistent with the true self.
Consistency and certainty of who one is and how one fits into the world, particularly when faced with conflicts between different aspects of self, unclear boundaries between self and non-self, or limited self-insight is an existential dilemma (Koole et al., 2006) and concerns how one navigates connectedness, intrinsically as well as extrinsically. The self is both the center and the container of individual consciousness (Berke & Schneider, 2006). This container is the receptacle for one’s awareness of how one exists in relation to the world, and it includes feelings, thoughts, memories, actions, experiences, and all the elements that comprise a person’s uniqueness and sense of identity. In addition, from an existential perspective, the self is involved in the creation of meaning for one’s life.

At the center of the self is the soul. While the word soul is often connected with religion and spirituality, many scholars committed to the “question of being” have shown that the use of the word denotes what appears to be consistent with the intrinsic self—or what Landau and colleagues (2011) call “the true, core self or who people think they truly are” (p. 79). Berke and Schneider (2006) define the soul as the “central, invigorating core of one’s existence” (p. 338). Freud observed the soul as a purely psychological feature essential to one’s human existence, while Heidegger viewed it as “one’s own being-in oneself and for-one-self” (Craig, 2008). Linquist (2004) views the soul as one’s “center of sentience” and “perceivability.” Existentially, the meaning of soul has been connected with one’s own situated gatherings of lived experiences (Craig, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, the soul is defined as the intrinsic self—one’s own interests, core values, goals, and choices that are less connected to the demands of others. It is the true center of one’s existence and, according to Lippai (2008), the real self, which must be benefited and cared for.

Relevant to self is self-acceptance. Self-acceptance constitutes a core dimension of personal meaning and psychological well-being, according to researchers (MacInnes, 2006; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Wong, 1998). Self-acceptance implies affirmation of one’s worth in spite of one’s limitations and weakness (Wong, 1998). Self-acceptance, or self-affirmation, for most, is contingent on the integrity of self-image and self-worth.

Mead (Morris, 1934) asserts that self-image is often formed and managed by one’s perception of external views. In other words, perception of self is formed and influenced by one’s interactions with others. These external interactions facilitate development of one’s extrinsic self. Differentiating one’s own inner self from external influences, however, is a critical aspect of identity construction (Koole et al., 2006) and development of self-worth. The intrinsic self comprises one’s own interests, goals, and choices for action that are comparatively less connected to the demands of others (Schimel et al., 2004). Affirming one’s intrinsic value is essential to developing one’s sense of self-worth and acceptance (Wong, 2011).

In 2004, Schimel, Arndt, Banko, and Cook assessed the impact that focusing on intrinsic aspects of self-worth had on self-affirmation. Results indicated that affirming the intrinsic self rather than the extrinsic one reduced defensiveness in social situations and improved cognitive and social functioning when feeling threatened. Spencer, Fein, and Lomore (2001) found similar results when examining how individuals maintain their self-images when interpersonal aspects of self are threatened. When self-affirmed by thinking about an important core value, individuals seemed less likely to resort to self-
protective efforts to restore their self-image. In a more recent study, Wakslak and Trope (2011), too, found that when individuals were able to draw on their most important self value, they adopted a high-level of self-construal, influencing a positive perception of self and objects external to self. Research has demonstrated that people often resist information that conflicts with their personal views and may even see those who oppose them as misguided (Aronson, Cohen, & Nail, 1999; Correll, Spencer, & Zanna, 2004). According to self-affirmation theory, as described by Aronson and colleagues (1999), “thought and action are guided by a strong motivation to maintain an overall self-image of moral and adaptive adequacy” (p. 128). Although how one truthfully sees oneself may be affected by cultures, groups, and situations (Sherman et al., 2009), self-affirmation is most plausible when a person considers him- or herself good and appropriate. In the face of a specific challenge, reflecting on important self values reminds people of their broader identity (e.g., who they are and what is important to them), thereby reducing the pressure to defend a particular aspect of the self (Jaremka, Bunyun, Collins, & Sherman, 2011). Hurley (1993) linked self-acceptance with high regard for others. Thus, it appears that the better one is able to accept and affirm oneself, the more capable and, likely, more willing one will be to accept and affirm others.

This paper asserts several points. First, learning to affirm self is more difficult than learning to affirm others because affirming self usually involves the difficult task of spending time alone, nurturing the intrinsic self—the soul. Learning to affirm self is an internal process that starts at the soul, which expands one’s perceptions, allowing one to be receptive of the world without possessing it (Berghash & Jillson, 1998). Further, this work with the soul integrates inner reality with larger realities (Berke & Schneider, 2006). This internal process involves an examination of one’s strengths and challenges, as well as threats to one’s self-image. For the purposes of this paper, the impact of such threats will be referred to as “wounds” or “woundedness.” This paper asserts that it is through this examination that we can begin the healing of woundedness, a healing that opens the door for affirmation of self and, later, affirmation of others. Finally, this paper asserts that the process of examining, healing, and affirming self and others is systemic and epigenetic in nature in that all the stages are related to and contingent on the others (Erikson, 1997).

A key existential postulate is the experience of aloneness. Learning to “stand alone,” that is, developing a sense of our own separateness and an intrinsic relationship with ourselves, is critical to developing healthy, affirming relationships with self and others. Being alone and taking deliberate pause to connect with the intrinsic self (the soul) is therefore foundational to this entire process, defining the SOULstice in the four stages of the Self-SOULstice Model of Affirmation.

**Stage one: self-examination**

The first stage of the Self-SOULstice is Self-Examination. Self-examination involves exploration of the soul and all that one’s own sense of identity contains. Self-examination enables discovery and understanding of the essence of one’s individuality (Fein & Spencer, 1997). In other words, through exploration of self a person can become conscious of his or her self-concept.
For most, self-concept is deeply connected to self-image and self-integrity, that is, how one sees oneself and the authenticity (i.e. genuineness) and consistency with which one presents oneself to others. Self-integrity relates in particular to the presentation of one's feelings about self, others, self in relation to others, ideas, difference, and sameness. According to Berghash and Jillson (1998), authenticity and integrity are associated with the soul. Goldman and Kernis (2002) further assert that an authentic self is the unobstructed operation of the core (self). A major undertaking for most is to sustain authenticity and consistency of self, especially when faced with the inevitable setbacks and disappointments of daily life (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). One's perception of these setbacks and disappointments is influenced by both external messages and internal beliefs about what should be. According to Fey (1954), an individual's expressed attitudes may not be his “real” or determining attitudes. The conflict between self-image and self-integrity may cause a person to respond to situations insincerely, overly cautiously, dismissively, prejudicially, or defensively in an effort to protect his or her overall self-concept. For instance, by justifying and acting on prejudices, one may be able to reclaim a feeling of mastery and self-worth, saving oneself from having to confront the real sources of self-concept threat (Fein & Spencer, 1997). These efforts to protect self-concept are problematic, however, because they compromise the integrity of one's relationship with others (Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

Self-examination is a time to reflect upon one's relationship with self, the true source of these threats. Spencer, Josephs, and Steele (1993) maintain that nobody is good at everything and so each person has good points and bad points. Learning to affirm self requires that we honestly recognize and confront our limitations and the dark side of the human condition (Wong, 2009). Thus, self-examination toward self-affirmation involves not only acknowledging positive self-traits, but also those traits that challenge and limit us, represent our woundedness, and threaten our self-concept. The individual must come to terms with these facets of self, and decide to either affirm or change them. Spencer and colleagues assert that self-examination resources should be committed to memory so that one can connect with one's core self without external distractions. This sober self-examination, wherein one determines the positive and damaged aspects of one's self concept, is the first and most important move toward establishing an authentic relationship with one's self, a relationship that will affect relationship with others. Without self-examination, healing is not possible.

Stage two: self-healing

The soul has the potential to repair, restore, and renew itself (Berghash & Jillson, 1998). The Self-Healing stage of the SOULstice continues and builds on the process of exposing vulnerabilities and less than favorable self-truths, acknowledging that one has been affected by woundedness (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Acknowledging the challenges, limitations or wounded components during self-examination allows one to reconcile such components with who the person has become, not necessarily who they are authentically, and restore the self's damaged core. For many, past negative events, hurts, and weaknesses have consumed and damaged the core of their being. Many times, these events, hurts, and weaknesses are kept covered to protect us from further damage by
others or ourselves. This covering can be conscious or unconscious and is driven by what researchers (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Sherman et al., 2009) call the “self-system.” The overall goal of this system is to protect an image of its self-integrity so that it can restore self-worth when threatened (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). This covering often manifests as lack of acceptance and bias towards others. Seeing oneself as a “healthy person” contributes to biased assessments of others (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). This lack of acceptance or affirmation of others, however, is likely rooted in the inability to affirm and authenticate self because damage to the soul weakens self-image, self-worth, and self-concept. This internal damage interferes with one’s ability to cope effectively with the perceived threat of inconsistencies to this self-system. According to Steele (1988), rather than coping with the inconsistencies, individuals tend to cope with the meanings conveyed by the inconsistencies. One way of coping with such meanings is by engaging in behavior that is unaffirming and discriminatory, thus allowing the individual to feel better about him- or herself, but not necessarily affirming self or alleviating the self-system threat (Fein & Spencer, 1997).

This unaffirming, inauthentic behavior toward self and others covers woundedness and becomes familiar. Self-healing involves changing what is familiar to what is healthy. An elementary condition for change is assuming responsibility for the way one thinks about self, and the way one responds to the internal and external messages that perpetuate unfavorable, and sometimes false, self-truths, or “mis-truths.” Long-held beliefs are often tied to important identities and may be given up with great reluctance (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). This part of self-healing requires a great deal of patience.

Further, self-healing involves not only reconciling wounded components of the intrinsic self, but also reconciling its positive attributes acknowledged during self-examination and developing new, restorative attributes for the intrinsic self. This stage also requires a healthy, strong support system that can facilitate change. This support system also provides education and guidance during change, assistance through mistakes made during change, and acceptance/affirmation of the individual during change. One may need to revise one’s idea of a healthy, stable support system and understand that support can come in many different forms. Being attuned to what components of self need healing is essential to getting appropriate, reliable support.

Stage three: self-affirmation

The Self-SOULstice Model of Affirmation asserts that one must learn to accept and affirm self before being able to authentically affirm others. During self-healing, the soul is restored from woundedness as one learns to view oneself more authentically and develop healthier responses to messages that threaten the self-concept. Moreover, the person learns to take responsibility for making the most of his or her strengths, developing weaknesses or challenges, and making decisions about one’s own existence, based on perceived needs. During self-affirmation, one comes to accept where one is as a “true self,” facilitating not only a healthy view of self, but also unconditional self-acceptance. This unconditional acceptance allows full, genuine, and unreserved affirmation of self, regardless of the approval of others (MacInnes, 2006).
More than self-respect, self-affirmation also includes a sense of being independent and responsible for one's own actions (Rigby, 2001). So, while one may possess both positive and imperfect traits, the affirmed self can not only make amends for woundedness (of others) caused by one's imperfections but also acknowledge that such imperfections may require further examination of self. The Self-SOULstice Model of Affirmation maintains that one's identity as good and appropriate lies in this willingness to amend and examine.

Self-affirmation leads one to accept oneself as human and fallible, someone who sometimes makes mistakes (MacInnes, 2006) and sometimes needs help. With the continued assistance of a support system, the self-affirmed person learns to be this healthy, authentic person in various settings with various others. According to Wong (2009), authenticity has been a recurrent theme in existential literature. He asserts, “Authentic people assume responsibility to live in a way that is consistent with their true nature and core values” (p. 3). As an affirmed person, individuals can maintain self-integrity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006) and authenticity even when their self-image is perceived threatened, having mastered enhancement of their self-worth and no longer needing to protect it.

Self-affirmation is the most succinct, seemingly laconic stage of the Self-SOULstice model, as the true essence of self-affirmation lies in the process of self-examination and self-healing and cannot occur without these stages. According to Fey (1954), self-acceptance firmly and positively relates to acceptance of others. Thus, self-affirmation is the determinant for authentically affirming others.

Stage four: self-externalization

Self-Externalization, the final stage of the SOULstice, is an extension of Self-Affirmation. According to Craig (2008), affirming the self in a way that focuses people on their intrinsic value might allow them to more freely and successfully engage in tasks that may potentially threaten their self-worth. When individuals emerge from the sequence outlined above, after self-examination, restoration, and acceptance, they are more able and likely more willing to affirm others where they are. In a 2001 study, Rigby found a significant positive correlation between variables assessing self-acceptance and acceptance of others.

Self-affirmation has the potential to stop chronic self-doubts from spiraling into self-protective and defensive relationship behaviors (Jaremka, Bunyan, Collins, & Sherman, 2011). Sherman and Cohen (2006) found that individuals who were self-affirmed seemed to display more balanced cognitive and affective responses to difference than their non-affirmed peers. When self-affirmed, one is able to maintain oneself as true and valid, while asserting oneself positively. Additionally, such people are able to objectively process and evaluate information that might threaten their self-concept and be more open to ideas that would otherwise be difficult to accept (Cohen, Sherman, Bastardi, Hsu, & McGoey, 2007; Correll, Spencer, & Zanna, 2004; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Thus the affirmed individual may extend outward to affirm and support others in their current self-concepts. The affirmed person need not adopt for herself what is true for the other person, but rather accept and validate that which the other person considers
true of his self-concept. In this regard, the affirmed individual is better able to evaluate others positively, yet independently, in a non-defensive, open manner (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). In essence, the affirmed individual is better able to facilitate a more positive experience of relatedness.

Summary

Researchers (MacInnes, 2006; Rigby, 2001; Sherman & Cohen, 2006) agree that self-affirmation is significant in overall psychological well-being and, along with affirming others, is a complementary aspect of positive mental health. The Self-SOULstice Model of Affirmation clarifies an evolutionary process that ties the manifestation of affirming others to self-affirmation and living authentically. This process demonstrates that there can be no true affirming of others without affirming self.

The Self-SOULstice Model of Affirmation occurs in four stages that are related to and contingent upon each other. Further, the model demonstrates the innate nature of self-affirmation and places “self” at the center of all stages. The soul, which is the core of the self, requires nurturing in order to evolve authentically. Thus, self-affirmation must be innate and not manipulated in order for an authentic, true self to emerge (Sherman et al., 2009). Therefore, the first stage of the Self-SOULstice Model of Affirmation is self-examination. During this time, one explores one’s intrinsic self and own sense of individuality to develop consciousness of one’s self-concept. The most important stage of the SOULstice, self-examination requires that the individual stand alone with self, free of external distractions, to reflect upon his relationship with self and others and acknowledge those traits that compose his self-concept. Upon acknowledgement of such traits, the individual is then able to progress to self-healing, at which stage the intrinsic self is restored from the woundedness acknowledged during self-examination. The person also develops a more genuine self-view and healthier responses to the internal and external messages that threaten the intrinsic self, shifting focus from self-worth protection to self-worth enhancement while asserting oneself positively. During the final stage of the Self-SOULstice Model of Affirmation, the individual is better able and more willing to evaluate others positively, yet independently of how they evaluate self. Self-externalization calls for the individual to extend outward his or her affirmed self to affirm and support others in their present self-concept.

The goal of self-affirmation, according to Steele (1988), is to maintain one’s global self-image as adaptively or morally adequate. Self-affirmation, then, is based on the consistency of how adaptively and morally adequate one sees oneself and how authentically one presents to others. The Self-SOULstice Model of Affirmation extends the goal and process of self-affirmation to include the affirmation of others. Often people affirm themselves in social judgments based on their own self-evaluative needs rather than on the target of the judgment (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Thus, it would appear that if one does not authentically view oneself as appropriate and positive, one’s judgments of others will reflect similarly. Woundedness of the soul prevents consistency, harmony, and congruity of self’s perceptiveness (Berghash & Jillson, 1998), impeding affirmation of self as well as others. One can love others only to the extent that one loves oneself (Fey, 1954).
Though empirical data supporting the Self-SOULstice Model of Affirmation is warranted, this model is more than speculative as it connects various existential postulates and has merit within the conceptual framework of existential therapy. Therapists who practice existential approaches can assist clients in taking seriously their own subjective experience of the world. Therapists can also help clients understand the role and importance of self-awareness, as it pertains to the impact that their intrinsic relationship with self has on their experience of relatedness externally. Finally, in the process of helping clients become more conscious of this impact, therapists can encourage and challenge clients to take responsibility for any change the client feels is necessary to facilitate fewer measures to protect self-concept and change to living a more authentic, affirmed life—internally and externally.

REFERENCES


