"Micro-affirmations" need a Research Agenda

2017 Working Paper

In 1973 I began to write about micro-affirmations.[1] There has been recent, wide interest in this term; micro-affirmations are now widely discussed. Action programs have appeared, largely in response to rising concern about damage from micro-inequities (unfair micro messages) and micro-aggressions (hostile micro-messages). We need research about how people understand micro-affirmations, and the effects of micro-affirmations, if action programs are to be most effective.

Discussions with others have suggested new hypotheses and many questions—please see below. I write here to encourage interested activists and scholars to contribute to a lengthening Draft Micro-affirmations Research Agenda. Do you have additional questions and hypotheses and know of relevant research?

Original hypotheses in an MIT IWER "Commentary[2]."

1. **Blocking unconscious bias**: I reasoned that we could try to practice—all the time—affirming the achievements and kindnesses of others. If we are always looking widely for excellence in the work of others, and are universally respectful, may we be able to *block* some of our own unconscious bias?

2. **Ameliorating damage**: Can micro-affirmations (for example in affinity groups and mentoring programs) make up for some of the damage caused by unconscious bias?

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[1] The story, with the early definitions of micro-inequities and micro-affirmations, is available at http://ombud.mit.edu/sites/default/files/documents/micro-affirm-ineq.pdf

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3. **Meeting a core emotional concern**: Since research suggests that appreciation and affirmation are core concerns for all of us, may this plan help in making the work place happier and more productive?

4. **Evoking reciprocal affirmation**: Since research suggests an impulse toward "reciprocity," may affirming behavior spread, as we respond to support from others?

5. **A possible role-modeling effect**: Research suggests that people are sensitive to the morale and happiness of those around them, and especially sensitive to the behavior of a local manager. If managers, bystanders, and others are role models for affirming behavior, will some others follow suit? Peers and bystanders often are important actors because they are most likely to be present where people act in a biased fashion.

6. **Rectifying our own unconscious bias**: Research suggests that behavior follows attitudes. Attitudes also can be changed by behavior. If we consciously improve our behavior, with new habits, may we lessen our unconscious bias?

Some additional hypotheses about Micro-affirmations

7. **Affirming the wellbeing and skills of "affirmers**:" Affirming the excellence and feelings of others—in a genuine and responsible way—may make affirmers feel good about themselves and be better managers.

8. **Building trust**: Genuine and responsible affirmations may help to build trust—in both directions.

9. **Motivating excellent behavior and performance**: Micro-affirmations may, in many circumstances, matter more to recipients than tangible rewards like money.

10. **Teaching specific skills**: Specific affirmations may help to confirm the particular skills and accomplishments that are needed in a specific setting.

11. **Meeting the *specific* interests of recipients**: We know that the sources of life satisfaction are varied. (As well-known examples, people may value the quality of goods or services they provide, or using their skills or learning new skills. People may value earnings to provide for their family, or acquiring status. Relationships at work and in the family may be paramount for some people.) It may be important to recipients that *specific* interests be affirmed.

Some Questions about Micro-affirmations.

What is a "micro-" and what would be a "macro-affirmation?" How are they to be observed and assessed?

• Who decides or judges the importance of an affirmation? How important is it that a recipient be able to assess the affirmation—or know that it happened? Can we try to track the effect on ourselves of noticing and affirming the achievements of others?

• Are there cross-cultural and cross-generational differences that could be studied? Can a group be "affirmed?"

• As a recipient or affirmer, do we assess what is happening in terms of our subjective feelings or in terms of tangible outcomes that could be objectively measured—or both?

• Could each of us notice and track the affirmations of others in our organization? Would it be worthwhile to collect peoples' memories of significant affirmations, in order to study them? How could the effect of multiple, reported affirmations in a single work unit or organization be measured?

• What are some ways of communicating about affirmations? Songs? Rap? Funny Videos? TV series? Paintings? Stories and poems? Scholarly articles? A poster competition?

Some Responsible Bystander Actions

When people think about bystander behavior they sometimes think of just two options. They imagine bystanders as basically doing nothing—or reporting to authorities. In real life, responsible bystanders do many things. Here are some ways, derived from hundreds of reports, that bystanders have taken responsible action with respect to unacceptable behavior. They:

- Ask questions, of the apparent perpetrator, in a direct or indirect fashion
- Consult with personal or professional resources, in a direct or indirect fashion, with or without information identifying the perpetrator
- Discourage and disparage behavior that is unacceptable
- Deflect or derail the behavior (unobtrusively as with humor, or overtly)
- Engage others to help deal with the behavior
- Instigate or trigger a "generic approach" such as asking for a relevant community or organizational program on the subject, without identifying any individual
- Interrupt the behavior
- Mitigate the effects of the unacceptable behavior, by personal action
- "Name" or talk about the behavior in the community, so it does not happen unnoticed
- Observe the behavior, gathering more information before choosing an option, perhaps collecting evidence
- "Pivot" the behavior by requiring or encouraging positive alternatives by the potential perpetrator
- Punish the behavior (at the time or later) or act to see it punished
- Re-channel plans or persons or resources engaged in unacceptable behavior, for example engaging the relevant person elsewhere, removing their access
- Remediate the behavior, (noticeably or behind the scenes, in an overt way or completely "casually")
- Report the behavior in one of many different ways, (alone or with others, once or repeatedly, in writing or orally, identifiably or anonymously, formally or informally, immediately or later, directly or indirectly, with a few salient details or with exhaustive information)
- Repudiate the specific unacceptable behavior in an explicit public fashion
- Stop the behavior
- Stop the behavior and follow up, directly or indirectly, to see that it stays stopped
- Take covert action in such a way that the behavior of the perpetrator will come to the attention of some inside or outside authority
- Teach others how to identify the unacceptable behavior and to analyze "Who, What, When, Where, Why, How, and with Whom?" in thinking about options
- Teach others how to lead and exemplify positive alternatives, and affirming behavior—in groups, as relevant, or one-on-one: "Each one, Teach one; Each one, Reach one"
- Try more than one of these interventions as needed.

In tailoring strategies in a specific case, ask local experts, "What might help bystanders of interest to act responsibly in this situation, given recent events and local perceptions?