Relational Self-Affirmation
Changing the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Julia Lee, University of Michigan
Joining a new team can be stressful
Problem with “belonging uncertainty”

- Need for social belonging as a fundamental human motivation (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995)

- Concerns about social belonging can be problematic for cognitive and academic performance (Baumeister et al., 2002; Walton & Cohen, 2007)

- Suppress unique perspectives and conform to a team’s shared knowledge (Gruenfeld et al., 1996; Littlepage, Perdue, & Fuller, 2012; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000)
My approach: **Relational self-affirmation**

**Definition:** The process by which individuals internalize socially-reflected self-narratives about their valued strength and distinct contribution.

In my eyes, you were at your best when you did X, Y and Z...
Operationalizing relational self-affirmation

STEP 1
Write three stories of your distinct strengths and contribution

STEP 2
Solicit your best-self stories from personal network

STEP 3
Analyze the stories to find recurring themes

STEP 4
Compose your self-portrait

Source: Roberts et al. 2005; Spreitzer et al., 2009
My hypothesis:

- Relational self-affirmation (pre-team)
- Feeling of social worth

Study 1

Study 2
My hypothesis:

- Relational self-affirmation (pre-team)
- Feeling of social worth
- Team Entry
- Information exchange and performance in teams

Study 1

Study 2
Study 1 Method

**Context:** Harvard Kennedy School’s 4-week long Senior Executive Fellows (SEF) Program

**Sample:**

- 246 executives ($M_{age}=48$, $SD=7.13$; 27% female) participated in the SEF program (across 4 programs over 2 years)
- Civil and military officers (85% work for the US federal government)
- Assigned to one of 42 work groups consisted of 5-6 members for the crisis simulation
Experimental design

Treatment group

STEP 1

STEP 2

Control group

STEP 1

STEP 2

Program begins
Experimental design

Program begins

10-day crisis simulation

Treatment group

STEP 1

STEP 2

STEP 3

STEP 4

Control group

STEP 1

STEP 2

STEP 3

STEP 4

Study 1

Study 2
Crisis builds up in Boston for 10 days.
Teams who received narratives first performed better

$p<0.05$

Measure: effective communication, creativity, clarity, feasibility, team cohesiveness, overall value to the decision-maker
Teams who received narratives first performed better

Measure: effective communication, creativity, clarity, feasibility, team cohesiveness, overall value to the decision-maker
Controlling for team size, age, gender composition, and cohorts...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variables</th>
<th>Team Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment (vs. Control)</td>
<td>0.74*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Size</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Age</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Composition</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort #1</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort #2</td>
<td>1.31*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort #3</td>
<td>1.26*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N  42  
Overall F  3.67
R-squared  0.43
Adj R-squared  0.31
Root MSE  0.99

*Note. B refers to an unstandardized regression coefficient.*
Summary of Study 1 Results

Relational self-affirmation (pre-team) → Expert-rated team performance
Study 2 Method

Sample: 123 virtual workers recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk

- Randomly assigned to 3-person teams and scheduled session times
- Have participants do the team problem-solving task (15 minutes) in a virtual chat room
Experimental design

Treatment group

STEP 1

STEP 2

Virtual team task scheduled

Control group

STEP 1

STEP 2
Experimental design

Treatment group

STEP 1

STEP 2

Virtual team task scheduled

STEP 3

STEP 4

Hidden profile task

Control group

STEP 1

STEP 2

STEP 3

STEP 4
Hidden Profile Task

A,C: Common to all three people
B,D: Shared by two people
E,F: Unique to one person

**Common information effect:** Groups tend to spend too little time discussing **unshared** (unique, uncommon) information.

Source: Stasser & Titus (1985)
Each member gets a checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>East Point Mall</th>
<th>Starlight Valley</th>
<th>Cape James Beach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At least 50 parking spaces</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larger than 2000 sq feet</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of less than $1M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No more than 2 direct competitors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantial foot traffic</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low maintenance costs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large tourist population</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large student population</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick access to waste disposal</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employable individuals</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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Source: Graetz et al. (1998)
Each member gets a checklist

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# Information distribution

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<td>N N</td>
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<tr>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>N N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employable individuals</td>
<td>Y Y Y</td>
<td>N N N</td>
<td>Y Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total # of criteria met</strong></td>
<td>+5-5 = 0</td>
<td>+8-2 = 6</td>
<td>+6-4 = 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Difficult to identify the best option unless unshared information is discussed!
Measures

Coding the chat dialogue to find proxies for information exchange

- Number of unshared cues (ICC1=.75, ICC2=.83, $R_{wg}=.99$)

Generalized feelings of social worth (Grant & Gino, 2010; alpha=0.90)

- “I feel valued as a person"
- “I feel appreciated as an individual"
- “I feel I made a positive difference in others' lives"
Results

Information Sharing

- Treatment
- Control

$\#$ of Unshared Cues

$p=0.02$
Mediation by feelings of social worth

Bias-corrected 95% CI for the indirect effect = [0.075, 2.172]
Summary

Pre-team Relational Self-affirmation → Feelings of Social Worth → Team Information Exchange

Study 1

Study 2

Team Performance
Theoretical contributions

Beyond self-affirmation

- Moved beyond the self-focused process of affirmation
- Fostered use of personal network of relationships for constructing contribution-based self-narratives
Theoretical contributions

Importance of socially-embedded view of self

- Highlighted how team members’ self-narratives before they join the team matter and facilitate team performance
- Provided a theoretical framework by which addressing social belonging concerns helps role entry
Managerial implications

- Enabled organizations to leverage the employees’ self-narratives to enhance team performance

- Power of **creating opportunities for social reflection** to remind individuals who they are when they make distinct contributions to others
Thank You!
Julia Lee, University of Michigan