

Micro-Affirmations are Joining the Social Science Research Agenda

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Working Paper

In 1973, I began to write about micro-affirmations.¹ The idea subsequently percolated here and there. In 2017, I posted a working paper called “Micro-Affirmations Need a Research Agenda” that collected additional ideas about micro-affirmations that had come my way. In this revision, I include more hypotheses and ideas and comments I’ve received about the possible relevance of micro-affirmations to many social science concepts.

In 1973, I defined micro-affirmations as: “*apparently small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed.*”² Micro-affirmations are now discussed more widely—sometimes tagged with different names—for the concept of helpful small acts that support others.³ Action programs to encourage micro-affirmations have appeared, in efforts to increase morale, improve productivity, and in response to concern about damage from micro-inequities

¹ For an early case that kept me thinking about micro-affirmations, see Mary Rowe, “BELONGING—The Feeling That We ‘Belong’ May Depend in Part on ‘Affirmations.’” *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* 16, no. 2 (Mary Rowe special issue, 2023-2024).

² For a collection of articles about micro-messages, see Mary Rowe, “Micro-Inequities (including Micro-Aggressions) and Micro-Affirmations,” n.d., <https://mitgmtfaculty.mit.edu/mrowe/micro-inequities>.

³ See, for example, Laura Morgan Roberts, Megan Grayson, and Brook Dennard Rosser, “An Antidote to Microaggressions? Microvalidations.” *Harvard Business Review*, May 15, 2023. See also Daniel Solórzano, Lindsay Pérez Huber, and Layla Huber-Verjan, “Theorizing Racial Microaffirmations as a Response to Racial Microaggressions: Counterstories Across Three Generations of Critical Race Scholars,” *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* 18, no. 2 (2020): 185-216. These authors examine and illuminate many of the hypotheses collected here.

(unfair micro messages)⁴ and micro-aggressions (hostile micro-messages).⁵ But we still need research about how people understand micro-affirmations, and the effects of micro-affirmations, if action programs are to be most effective.

Discussions with colleagues have suggested new hypotheses and questions. New hypotheses have contributed a list of social science concepts that may be related—or even depend—in part on micro-affirmations. (See “Some Social Science Constructs that May Be Affected by or Connected to Micro-Affirmations,” below).

Some Social Science Hypotheses About How People Understand Micro-Affirmations, and the Effects of Micro-Affirmations

1. **Blocking unconscious bias:** I posit that we can 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 and other unwanted behavior?⁶

2. **Ameliorating damage:** Can micro-affirmations (for example, in affinity groups and mentoring programs) make up for some of the damage caused by bias and other unwanted behavior?⁷

⁴ Mary Rowe, “Unconscious Bias: May Micro-Affirmations Provide One Answer?” MIT Institute for Work and Employment Research commentary, February 2015, <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?DocumentID=4270>.

⁵ See Chester Pierce, “Offensive Mechanisms,” in *Black Seventies*, ed. Floyd Barbour (Porter Sargent Publishers, 1970), 265-282.

⁶ See Mary Rowe, “Changing Behavior, Letting It Be—Or Maybe Making It Worse: Ideas to Consider,” MIT Sloan Working Paper 6747-22. Cambridge, MA: MIT Sloan School of Management, April 2022, <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=9390>.

⁷ See Solórzano, Pérez Huber, and Huber-Verjan, “Theorizing Racial Microaffirmations as a Response.”

3. **Meeting a core emotional concern:** Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro described five core emotional concerns: appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, status and role.⁸ Micro-affirmations appear closely connected to each of these core concerns.

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 may be present when people act in a biased fashion.

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

7. **Affirming the well-being and skills of “affirmers:”** May affirming the excellence and feelings of others—in a genuine and responsible way—make affirmers feel good about themselves and be better managers?

8. **Building trust:** Can genuine and responsible affirmations help to build trust—in both directions?

9. **Motivating excellent behavior and performance:** May micro-affirmations, in some circumstances, matter as much or more to recipients than tangible rewards like money?

10. **Teaching specific skills:** Can specific affirmations help to confirm specific skills and accomplishments that are needed in a specific setting?

⁸ Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro, *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate* (Penguin, 2005).

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.

12. **Reassuring recipients who “micro-ping” affirmers at specific *times* of stress:** Micro-affirmations may serve as important sources of reassurance and comfort when major problems cannot be fixed. Recipients may particularly value micro-affirmations in times of great stress. Would-be micro-affirmation recipients, at such times of great anxiety, sometimes “micro-ping” and nudge mentors, senior leaders and elders in the community (for example by asking apparently minor questions), as if hoping for micro-affirmations.

Some Questions about Micro-Affirmations

- What is a “micro-” and what would be a “macro-affirmation?” How are they to be observed and assessed?
- Are there cross-cultural and cross-generational differences that could be studied? Can a group be “affirmed”? Are some affirmers more important than others for a given recipient?
- Who decides or judges the importance of an affirmation? Is it important that a recipient be able to assess the affirmation—or know that it happened?
- As a recipient or affirmer, can we assess what is happening in terms of our subjective feelings or in terms of tangible outcomes that could be objectively measured—or both?

- Is it possible to track the affirmations of and by others in our organizations? 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 effective ways of communicating about the importance of micro-affirmations? Songs? Rap? Funny videos? Movies and television shows? Paintings? Stories and poems? Scholarly articles? A poster competition?

I write here to encourage interested activists and scholars to contribute to a lengthening micro-affirmations research agenda. Do you have additional questions and hypotheses and know of relevant research? If so, please write me at mrowe@mit.edu.

Some Social Science Constructs that May Be Affected by or Connected to

Micro-Affirmations

Ambition

Belonging

Burnout

Career Choice

Child Development

Dealing with Stress

Effectiveness Studies (Training, Coaching, Mentoring, Parenting, etc.)

Happiness

Imposter Feelings

Insider/Outsider Perceptions

Leadership

Personal Self-Confidence

Personal Identities (Physical, Mental, Emotional, etc.)

Positivity

Productivity

Professional Confidence

Psychological Safety

Resilience

Retention of Valued Personnel

Self-Compassion

Self-Valuation

Social Identities (Race, Ethnicity, Religion, Gender, Age, Physical Ability, etc.)

Socialization