with these same strengths and weaknesses, whereas people who are different are more likely to be seen as having shortcomings and weaknesses. In this way, people can bolster their self-impressions as lovable and capable people.

A sense of self also influences the emotions people feel. People do not feel merely bad or good, but experience an entire panoply of emotions. Some emotions arise because people view that they authored the actions that produced them. When students study hard and do well on tests, they feel happy and proud. If they wrong a friend, they do not feel unhappy; they feel guilty. If they are worried about how their action looks to others, they feel shame, or perhaps embarrassment. Many emotions involve self-consciousness, and the experience of all these emotions requires a sense of self.

Finally, people's views of themselves can significantly affect their behavior. People often act in ways to maintain the view of self they possess. For example, if you ask people whether they would give to charity, they will likely say yes. If someone else approaches them a few days later and asks them to donate, people are then more likely to donate (relative to a group not asked), even though they do not connect the second request to the original question. In a similar way, if you ask a person whether people should save water during a drought, he or she typically responds that they should and do. If you then point out what a long shower the person just had (such as is done in studies of hypocrisy), the person is much more likely to take shorter showers in the future. In short, the actions people take are constrained by the views they have of themselves, especially if those views are made salient to them.

David Dunning

See also Independent Self-Construals; Interdependent Self-Construals; Looking-Glass Self; Phenomenal Self; Schemas; Self-Enhancement

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SELF-AFFIRMATION THEORY

Definition

The self-affirmation theory posits that people have a fundamental motivation to maintain self-integrity, a perception of themselves as good, virtuous, and able to predict and control important outcomes. In virtually all cultures and historical periods, there are socially shared conceptions of what it means to be a person of self-integrity. Having self-integrity means that one perceives oneself as living up to a culturally specified conception of goodness, virtue, and agency. Self-affirmation theory examines how people maintain self-integrity when this perception of the self is threatened.

Background and History

From humanist psychologists like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers to contemporary investigators examining the psychology of self-esteem, there has been a historical emphasis in psychology on the importance of people's sense of personal regard. Some have suggested that a sense of personal regard emerges early in the life of an infant and remains relatively stable through the lifetime.

Contemporary researchers have documented the various adaptations people deploy to maintain self-regard. The social psychologist Daniel Gilbert and his colleagues have suggested that people have a psychological immune system that initiates psychological adaptations to threats to self-regard. Indeed, these protective adaptations may lead to rationalizations and even distortions of reality. The social psychologist Tony Greenwald described the self as totalitarian in its ambition to interpret the world in a way congenial to its desires and needs. People view themselves as able to control outcomes that they objectively cannot. They take excessive credit for success while denying responsibility for failure. They are overoptimistic in their predictions of future success and are blind to their own incompetence. People resist updating their beliefs and behavior in light of new experience and information, preferring to maintain the illusion that they were right

all along. Although people are certainly capable of realism and self-criticism, ego-defensiveness nevertheless seems to be a pervasive human penchant.

The social psychologist Claude Steele first proposed the theory of self-affirmation. A major insight of this theory involves the notion that although people try to maintain specific self-images (such as "being a good student" or "being a good family member"), that is not their primary motivation. Rather, individuals are motivated to maintain *global* self-integrity, a general perception of their goodness, virtue, and efficacy. There is thus some fungibility in the sources of self-integrity. If individuals feel relatively positive about themselves in one domain, they are willing and able to tolerate a threat to their self-integrity in another domain.

Self-affirmation theory led to a reinterpretation of classic research findings in cognitive dissonance. In a classic cognitive dissonance study, people are shown to change their attitudes to bring them in line with their past behavior. People led to commit an action espousing a position with which they disagree (for example, students who write in favor of tuition increases) subsequently come to agree with the position when they believe that their actions were freely chosen. Doing so is a form of rationalization and self-justification; it convinces the individual that his or her action was the right one. Previously, such effects had been viewed as evidence of a basic motivation for psychological consistency; people want to see their attitudes as consistent with their actions. However, Steele and colleagues demonstrated that these effects arise, in part, from the motivation to maintain self-integrity. Thus, when people are given an opportunity to affirm their self-integrity in an alternative domain, the rationalization effect disappears. For example, when people were given the opportunity to express the importance of a cherished personal value (for example, when science students were allowed to don a white lab coat, or when people who valued aesthetics were allowed to assert their love of art), these individuals did not defensively change their attitudes to make them concordant with their behavior.

Contributions of Self-Affirmation Theory

When self-integrity is threatened, according to self-affirmation theory, people need not defensively rationalize or distort reality. Instead, they can reestablish self-integrity through affirmations of alternative domains of self-worth unrelated to the provoking threat. Such self-affirmations, by fulfilling the need to protect self-integrity in the face of threat, can enable people to deal with threatening events and information without resorting to defensive bias. Self-affirmations can take the form of reflections on important, overarching values (such as relationships with friends and family) or on a prized skill.

Numerous studies demonstrate that individuals are less likely to rationalize, deny, or resist threatening information in one domain if their sense of self-integrity is affirmed in another domain. People have been shown to be more open to persuasive information, and less biased in their evaluations of political information and health risk warnings if they are first permitted to self-affirm in an unrelated domain, for instance, by reflecting on an important personal value. Self-affirmed individuals are also more likely to acknowledge their own personal responsibility (and their group's collective responsibility) for defeat. In addition, people are more open to threatening courses of action—for example, compromising with an adversary in a divisive social-political dispute—when self-affirmed. Self-affirmation theory also illuminates the way in which prejudice and stereotyping are forms of self-integrity maintenance. The social psychologists Steven Fein and Steven Spencer showed that respondents were less likely to discriminate against a Jewish job candidate if they had previously been provided with a self-affirmation. People, it seems, can use a negative stereotype as a cognitively justifiable way of putting other people down, to make themselves feel good. However, if their needs for self-integrity are met in another domain, they have less need to resort to negative stereotypes.

Self-affirmations can also help to reduce physiological and psychological stress responses. David Creswell and colleagues had participants complete a self-affirmation procedure before engaging in the stressful experience of public speaking and mental arithmetic in front of a hostile audience. Unlike those in a control condition, those in the self-affirmation condition did not show any changes from baseline in their levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Because chronic stress is linked to physical illness, this finding also suggests that affirming the self could have positive effects on health outcomes.

One of the most important implications of contemporary research on self-affirmation theory involves its demonstration that seemingly small interventions can

have large effects, if they are attuned to psychological processes of self-integrity maintenance. Self-affirmation was used successfully to mitigate the psychological threat associated with being the target of a negative stereotype in school. Previous research had demonstrated that African Americans experience threat and its concomitant stress, in situations in which they know that they or fellow group members could be judged in light of a negative racial stereotype. This stress, in turn, can undermine performance. A series of field experiments demonstrated that a self-affirmation, administered for 15 minutes in the context of students' classroom activities, improved African American students' end-of-term course grades and thus reduced the racial achievement gap by 40%. Although the affirmed state stemming from a self-affirmation may appear relatively brief, the changes in attributions and information processing it prompts can become self-reinforcing or self-sustaining over time.

Research and theorizing inspired by self-affirmation theory has led to theoretical advances in social psychology, with wide-ranging implications for many instances of human functioning and frailty. Self-affirmation theory research suggests that defensive resistance, self-serving illusions, intransigence in social dispute, prejudice and stereotyping, stress, illness, and intellectual underperformance can be understood as arising, in part, from threats to self-integrity and the motivation to protect it. Self-affirmation theory provides a framework for understanding the origins of these problems and an optimistic perspective for their resolution.

Geoffrey L. Cohen
David K. Sherman

See also Cognitive Dissonance Theory; Ego Shock; Goals; Stress and Coping; Values

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SELF-ATTRIBUTION PROCESS

Definition

Self-attribution refers to the process through which people determine the antecedents and consequences of their behaviors. Because people do not have access to their internal states—attitudes, beliefs, emotions, motives, traits—they must infer these from observations of their own behaviors and the situational contexts in which they occurred.

Historical Background

Theoretical and empirical accounts of the self-attribution process developed from attribution theory, which addressed how individuals infer the internal states of others from observable behaviors. The theory was derived from the work of Fritz Heider, who suggested that behavioral perceptions are a function of how observers make attributions for the causes of behavior. According to Heider, behavioral causes can be attributed either to the person who performed the behavior (i.e., internal cause) or to the environment in which the behavior occurred (i.e., external cause). If an attribution is made to an internal cause, intentionality can be assigned to the person, and thus both stable and temporary characteristics of the actor can be inferred. More recently, Daryl Bem developed self-perception theory as an account of how people determine their own internal states. Bem suggested that people determine their own internal states by inferring them from observations of their own behavior and the situational context in which the behavior occurred.

The Process of Self-Attribution

Theoretically, self-attribution occurs in a manner that is similar to the process of person perception. Specifically, individuals observe their overt behavior, assign intentionality through an attribution to either internal or external causes, and infer their own internal