

THE ROLE OF AFFIRMATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF

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ABSTRACT: This essay attempts to describe how the individual self is formed not only by others' perceptions of it, but also by the need of the self to be affirmed and thereby give confirmation to its sense of worth. Theoretically, the self must define itself both in relation to another self as well as apart from another self. It employs objects partly to affirm itself and teach itself who it is. Through the affirmation of others, the self ultimately feels pride and a sense of liberation. It is argued, moreover, that affirmations render the boundaries between people distinct thereby making it possible for one to develop a sense of a true self. Finally, the development of the self and the role of affirmation are put in the context of child and youth work.

Key words: affirmation, self, child and youth care work

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The Notion of Affirmation

Most psychologists and psychoanalysts speak of fundamental universal needs of the self which must be distinguished from wishes inasmuch as needs cannot be repressed. To say the least, a wish unfulfilled leaves a person melancholy, but a need unfulfilled leaves the self in structural disrepair. Developing distinctions between needs and wishes, Akhtar (1999) lists six basic needs, which he claims are essential for the development of the self as well as for the self's ability to engage in relationships. We employ Akhtar's discussion of basic needs because it puts in bold relief the essential argument of this essay: namely, that the development of the individual self rests in relationships with others, and for a self to develop in a healthy manner it requires others to affirm it.

Three of Akhtar's needs seem especially relevant to our discussion. First, is the self's need for recognition, identity, and affirmation. Second, is the need for the self to experience the emotional availability of a loved object. Finally, Akhtar suggests that the self maintains a need to have its love objects respond with resilience under what he calls special circumstances. In times of extreme stress, or terror, perhaps, the self asks that the other grant it flexibility so that it may find its way toward (self) understanding and liberation. But note, it does this with the "aid" of the other, more precisely, through the affirmations of the other, just as it finds a

sense of its own identity through others. Dryfoos (1998, page 39) offered confirmation of this role of affirmation in an observation of adolescents at risk: "Consistency, caring, encouragement, and maintenance of contact through childhood and adolescence are all important factors of resilient youth." In the end, Akhtar's notion of "resilient responsiveness" captures the essence of the relational aspect of an affirmation.

For my self to emerge as responsive, affirming, and resilient, I need you to respond to me in an affirming and flexible manner. The argument for establishing interpersonal relationships as the foundation of the self is found, perhaps, in these words of Paul Ricoeur (1974, p. 112), "My existence for my self depends utterly on this self-constitution in the opinion of others. My self, if I dare say so, is received from the opinion of others, who consecrate it." In a similar vein there is a growing theoretical literature suggesting that not only do relationships form the essential core of the conscious self, the unconscious too, may be formed in great measure from the unrecognized wishes and expectations born in the self from contact with others (Rzepka, 1999). Lacan (1968) has argued that the unconscious is all about the other and the sorts of dealings, successful or not, one experiences with others. Taking these two positions one step farther, one might even argue that our entire self-consciousness, our entire identity for that matter, is formed from our involvements with others, and, again, their affirmations of us, or their failure to affirm us.

At the heart of these notions of self-consciousness and identity is the role of affirmation in human relationships - affirmation literally implying the strengthening of the self by the other, a notion advanced by Mead (1934) and central to what psychologists have called the "Michelangelo phenomenon" (Drigotas, et al, 1999). Predicated on interpersonal relationships, the Michelangelo phenomenon represents an attempt to describe how the individual self is formed by the perceptions of it by some significant other, as well as by the (affirming or dis-affirming) behavior of this significant other. The essence of the phenomenon rests on the idea that the more the individual self is affirmed by the perceptions and behavior of the other, the more it "moves" toward its own conception of an ideal form. Simply put, the more you affirm me in word and deed, the more I imagine that I have begun to reach an ideal form of and for my self. Conversely, the fewer affirmations you provide me, the less likely I imagine ever being able to attain an ideal version of my self.

Support for the Michelangelo phenomenon is found in research conducted by Scheffler and Naus (1999) in which the investigators sought to learn the effects on a young woman of her father's affirmations of her, or lack of them. On the basis of questionnaire data, some sixty university women indicated that when they believed their fathers demonstrated unconditional positive regard to them-something akin to what we are calling affirmation-they reported higher personal self-esteem as well as a greater comfort with their own sexuality and sense of womanhood, irrespective of how they defined that term. Similar results are found when

young male university students are the objects of the research. In work undertaken by Naus and Theis (1995), a positive correlation was discovered between the degree of a father's affirmation of his son on the one hand, and the son's self-esteem, his security in intimate relationships, and a general contentment with his masculinity, again irrespective of how that term was defined by the young men in the study, on the other.

Considering the results of these two studies, we might wonder whether people can interpret and thereby refashion the words and deeds of others merely to give confirmation to their sense of self, or more precisely, their sense of worth and goodness? Can they, in other words, interpret the actions of others as acts of affirmation? In fact, research undertaken by Beauregard and Dunning (1998) argued for just this position. To reach this conclusion, the researchers, employing Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, utilized the device of either threatening or bolstering the self-esteem of experimental subjects. The results of the study indicated that when self-esteem was threatened, subjects tended to negatively evaluate the scores of others. In contrast, when self-esteem was raised, this negative relationship appears to dissipate. Put simply, those persons whose esteem had been threatened by others, (in our terms, those feeling their selves had been dis-affirmed,) exhibited a far greater contrast in their judgments of self and others than did those subjects whose esteem was enhanced, again, in our terms, those who imagined their selves affirmed.

Another illustration of the social world shaping the nature of the self through affirmation, or at least the self's perception of itself, is found in work conducted by Hill and Tollerud (1996). Here the purpose of the research was to enhance the felt sense of dignity in students. Specifically, the researchers wished to learn whether people would alter their sense of self as their basic needs come to be met and others enhance their personal sense of dignity. Not surprisingly, the research indicated that the more others meet our needs and generally affirm us, which they do in this research by allowing us to creatively participate in a group and perform valuable tasks or express our feelings, the more empowered and dignified we hold our selves to be.

A similar conclusion was reached in the work of Sved-Williams (1998). Sved-Williams discovered that in group therapeutic sessions, the daughters of mentally ill mothers expressed hatred of self and mother, difficulties in parenting chores, a sense of isolation from certain family members, and a generalized belief that they were, somehow, socially stigmatized by their mother's illness. Interestingly, although all the women perceived themselves as "disturbed," their comrades in therapy saw them as strong and resilient. Essentially by affirming one another, the women tended to lose a bit of the social psychological inheritance of their mother's illness, and eventually came to perceive positive ways of handling the isolation and stigmatization concomitant with the illness. Their behavior actually began to resemble the manner in which grieving patients can be affirmed in group or individual settings by therapists who fundamentally do "little

more" than affirm the emotions associated with the original grief event (Gunzburg, 1994).

If, as we have alleged, a self is formed in part through its relationships with other selves thereby creating what self psychologists call selfobjects—the mode of being Heidegger (1966) and May (1983) designated as the "with-world"—then nothing, theoretically, can be as damaging to the self as the destruction of the original affirming relationship. According to Lawrence (1999), this destruction, caused by separation, divorce, and death, even finds its way into a person's dreams, many of which depict in highly realistic fashion the circumstances surrounding the original dissolution of the relationship. Understanding those who have experienced separations and death, what Lawrence calls "splitting experiences," is made somewhat easier when we appreciate the role of affirmation among those persons grieving for lost love objects. Of course I am going to grieve for those people who have affirmed me if only because I continue to carry them, or at least my relationship with them, as part of my sense of self. It might be recalled in this context that Heidegger (1966) spoke of people being relationships rather than having relationships. If this notion has validity, we begin to understand why we don't fully lose someone when they die or even abandon us.

Self psychology, generally, perceives the self as striving to reveal itself to others, to the world generally, as well as to itself as cohesive, integrated, and regulated (Kohut, 1978). In theoretical terms, the overriding motivation of the self is to employ objects, mainly other people, to affirm itself. Objects to which the self becomes attached or with which it actually becomes con-fused, (the so-called selfobject), represent the need of the self to develop and regulate itself through the attachment to the external object. Additional needs of the self include the well known self psychological phenomenon known as "mirroring" which is a form of acknowledgment and affirmation of the self by another, idealizing, protection, the development of a positive and cohesive sense of self, and "twinning," which involves a belief that in some essential ways, my self and another self are alike if not wholly identical (Fosshage, 1998). For Kohut (1978), the so-called fragmented self, especially, requires affirmation, or what he called a merger with a powerful other, in order that the fragmented parts may become reintegrated (Jensma, 1993). Said simply, my relationship with you becomes a major factor in pulling together disparate pieces of my self. Your affirming me is what ultimately causes me to feel that the various fragments of my self cohere. And by cohere we mean both "stick together" and "make sense."

As much as any other body of work, attachment theory exemplifies the role of affirmation in this context of relationship of self and other. It was Bowlby's (1980) contention that the nature of the original relationship between mother and child has the power to create security, insecurity, or a complicated form of ambivalence the child tends to reveal for the rest of its life. Here we begin to see the way this first relationship pulls together

the various components constituting the emerging self of the infant, ideally making it possible for these components to cohere. As background for these assertions, Erikson (in Evans, 1967) had written that genuine identity begins when the child first recognizes his mother and, correspondingly, feels recognized by her. Suddenly he begins to feel that he is somebody, an individual in his own mind. But to repeat, it is his mother who makes possible this most profound set of personal formulations.

It is only logical to conclude, therefore, that Bowlby and Ainsworth (1966) would designate the nature of the (maternal) attachment to be a central feature in the development of pathology of the self, the so-called unintegrated self. Sable (1997), for example, employed Bowlby's theories to explain the emergence of the adult borderline personality. The essence of the borderline personality in fact reflects Bowlby's original typologies of attachment. In one moment, the borderline personality seeks intense closeness with significant others, only to reveal in the next moment a dread of closeness with these same persons.

While early trauma and an inability to regulate emotions are alleged to play a role in the development of the borderline personality, the therapeutic treatment of the borderline case presents a challenge to the therapist inasmuch as the nature of the therapeutic alliance becomes as significant for healing as any technique the therapist may utilize. Said differently, affirmation of the patient by the therapist plays a major role in the treatment as the patient must develop sufficient trust and security in the relationship with the therapist such that he or she may be able to engage in a discussion of his or her own self differentiated from others (including the therapist) and not feel terrified. In theoretical terms, the self must be able to comfortably define itself both in relation to another self (the self-object) and apart from another self, a phenomenon self psychologists call the self as object to itself. (After all, I have a relationship with you, but I also have one with me, and I need the one with you in order to sort out the one with me.)

All of this is made possible by the act of the therapist genuinely recognizing the patient, and the patient imagining that he or she has been recognized by the therapist. Sable's (1997) research suggests that affirmation of the self by the other, the patient by the therapist in this example, makes both of these actions possible. The result, presumably, is a diminution of pathology. Quite likely, the original pathology itself is caused by the lack of affirmation of the self by the other, a theoretical position also taken by Pardeck (1996) who argued that affirmation ought to become a core concept for therapists, generally, when diagnosing and treating patients. Coming from a psychoanalytic self psychological tradition, Basch (1980; 1988) was one of the early researchers to observe that a genuine sense of self derives in great measure from relationships, and in particular the affirmation of the self by a significant other. More specifically, he argued that a healthy sense of personal power and an unhealthy sense of destructive power actually derive from a common genetic trunk in which affirmation, or the lack of it, plays a vital role.

In the beginning of life, Basch asserted, the child experiences something called "infantile grandiosity." All the world revolves around this little being who, in some primitive sense, believes that he or she is capable of everything, perhaps even immortality. But ineluctably, the external world enters the child's sense of self in the form of affirming and dis-affirming people. The child's grandiosity, therefore, comes to be either confirmed or rebuked. The child, respectively, feels pride or humiliation. In Erikson's (1950) terms, the child experiences either autonomy or shame and self-doubt.

Where pride yields a growing sense of confidence and probably too, the capacity to affirm others, humiliation and shame eventually yield a nihilistic conception of the world in which customary moral and religious ideologies are renounced or perceived to be trivial (Basch 1980). In addition, the person experiences a felt sense of a purported death force in which he or she has no regard for the well being of self or others (Ornstein, 1997). Not surprisingly, this posture tends to inhibit any capacity for empathy, a posture we see frequently in the histories of young criminals (Dryfoos, 1998). Freud (1955) too, had explored these same ideas. If the purpose of the id, he alleged, was to seek pleasure and avoid pain and thereby urge the ego to aid it in fulfilling its rapacious wishes, then how did one interpret clearly destructive, even nihilistic behavior? Karlsson (1998) answered this question by arguing that a form of "binding energy" of the self takes an individual beyond the pleasure principle and actually stands in complete contrast with the original notion of a so-called primordial death instinct constantly striving, according to Freud, toward death. For Karlsson, this so-called binding energy is purported to correspond to Freud's original notion of a death instinct and actually serves to affirm the existence of the self.

Complicated to be sure, let us understand Karlsson's argument to mean simply this: If, because I have never been genuinely affirmed, I decide that, because I have to die, there is no reason to value anyone's life or any social institutions or any moral strictures, then why not assume a nihilistic posture and let the chips fall where they may? Why have children? Why be concerned about anyone? Or anything? Assuming this position, my sense of self would appear to be driven by what we might call a "negative death force." In contrast, if, upon having been affirmed and accepting the idea of my finitude, I determine that I shall employ this acknowledged final end point as motivation to value everything about life and the short years constituting my own life, I then proceed to affirm my self, other people, life itself, thereby exploiting a so-called "positive death force" as a motivation to do good. In the former example, I act in terms of what might be called dis-affirmation; in the latter example, I am using death as a touchstone for affirmation.

This matter of confronting death, or more precisely the recognition of the transitory nature of our existence, became a paramount feature of what Frankl (1963; 1967; 1970) called logotherapy. From this sense of transitoriness is derived an individual's sense of responsibility. Frankl argued that to the very instant of death, one must affirm existence; it is the only posture to assume in the face of one's finitude, nihilism remaining unacceptable. Understanding this defining principle, an example of what Frankl called a life boundary, provides a fundamental meaning for the self as it confronts any person, or any life situation, the most momentous, clearly, being that of death (Gould, 1995). In fact, Frankl suggested that it was the affirmation of boundaries that not only brought into consciousness ways for the self to act in the presence of some powerful force, but ultimately allowed for the self to be liberated.

Theories of Self and the Place of Affirmation

Recognizing that I am about to simplify complex formulations, let me assert the idea that my self has something to do with who I am on the "inside" and the "outside" as well. That is, I speak to my self about my self, just as I speak to the outside world about my self. But note, as obvious as this may sound, we have already encountered a problem. When it comes to deliberating about the self, does it not seem as if everything eventually comes to reside inside me? That is, when I think about me, am I not by definition working "inside" of me? And when I think about you and our relationship, am I not also somehow working inside of me? Perhaps the best I can do is appreciate that I can never get inside your head. I may imagine that I know what you know, or feel what you feel, but I may just be deceiving my self. In fact, even utilizing all my empathic powers, it becomes very difficult to distinguish the boundary line separating my (sense of) self from that which my mind is perceiving. Perhaps I am always at some distance from the so-called external world, so that whereas I imagine I genuinely know you, it may be that my "knowing" is actually a bit wishful inasmuch as it is difficult, if not impossible, to have my perceptions of the outside world wholly confirmed.

It just seems as though the self, looking outward, is able to approximate the external world it perceives. I think you like me, I really feel as if you do, but there is always that shred of doubt stemming from some intuitive knowledge that there is no way I can be completely certain of your love. The best I can do is make an approximation which I do when I say, alas, I must trust you; I must trust that you love me. In this same context, Erikson (in Stevens, 1983, page 64) wrote: "To a considerable extent, adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one's identity by projecting one's diffused self-image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified. This is why so much of young love is conversation."

Our next problem involves precisely that interior work, the work of knowing my self. Do I engage this work alone, or are you part of that

work as well? Asked differently, do I use you in creating a sense of my self? And if I do, then what, precisely, am I "using?" What you say about me? How you treat me? Or, how I imagine that you treat me or feel about me? To consider my self, moreover, and make deliberations about my self, I probably do consider you, but just how "accurate" is this consideration of you when we have just acknowledged that genuinely knowing you is perhaps a conceit (Storr, 1988)?

Complicated to be sure, these matters raise in us the sense that what we determine our selves to be may or may not be true, which opens another Pandora's box: namely, that we tend to recognize aspects of our selves that we imagine to be real and authentic. We could say that we choose to endorse them; they stand as the staples of our selves. Then there are those aspects of our selves, which at some level (a level implying that there is a part of our selves that views other parts of our selves and makes judgments about these other parts) we know to be inauthentic and utterly false. All of these components, the interior and exterior, on the one hand, and the true and false facets of the self on the other, comprise what we think of as our identity. I imagine who I think I am, just as I imagine who I think you think I am. I even shape part of my identity on the basis of what I think you think I am. And if I am uncertain about the former, then I am highly uncertain of the latter.

We recall Berkeley's (in Rzepka, 1999) famous expression: "To be is to be perceived." Self-consciousness, in other words, requires the presence, real or imagined, explicit or implied, of another person (Rzepka 1999). Which suggests that I am forever vulnerable to the assessments you make of me. I have no control over how you perceive me; I may, however, have control of what of your impressions I choose to incorporate as part of my self, or concept of self, and how I feel about those impressions. We may well be able to genuinely see each other for what we are, which means either that you understand the nature of my self, or I choose to believe that you do, or we may not be able to see each other for what we are. Similarly, as Rzepka suggests, I may or may not make my self-accessible to you, which further complicates my sense of self, for normally I make certain that you see me. At very least, I imagine that you are willing to see me, recognize me, and even affirm me. That is, if I have been affirmed, I imagine that you are willing to see me, recognize me, affirm me. If I have not been affirmed, then I will imagine you have little or no interest in seeing or recognizing me. Even more, I may imagine that no one in the world is willing to see or recognize me. And as a result, I may then choose not to see or recognize my self, or anyone else in the world, for that matter. In the end, affirmations allow me to engage in self-reflection, which in turn give birth to self-consciousness, which in turn allows me nothing less than a sense of my identity. Without self-reflection, implying as it does self-consciousness, there can be no sense of my having an identity (Cottle, 2001). But for the final time, I need you to reach this quintessential human point.

Youth Work and Affirmation

In this final section we consider briefly what all the prior discussion means for the child and youth care worker. To begin, the notion of affirmation, we recall, means simply to strengthen, and surely this must be one of the goals of any youth worker seeking to build the self of a child at risk, or any child for that matter. The purpose of this work, we understand, is not merely to build self-esteem, but to assist persons in strengthening their sense of self, their own identity, their capacity to recognize themselves as good, virtuous and worthy human beings.

Recall the Michelangelo phenomenon and the deceptively simple finding that in my mind, I determine that I am beginning to reach a conception of myself as ideal primarily as a function of the degree to which I am affirmed by others. Here affirmation implies being recognized and having someone respond to me with resilience which in turn helps me to become more resilient in my dealings with the outside world, as well as my inside world. To be affirmed in this manner by a youth worker, means that a child comes face to face with the concept and sensation of human dignity. He or she confronts not only the impact of the sorts of injurious experiences that have shaped their personalities, but also the impact of another human being whose affirming presence makes it possible to, well, put back together fragmented pieces of that injured self. The child at last has found a constructive, loving way to heal its self.

To say the least, therapeutic techniques employed by the youth worker are of great significance, but one begins to wonder whether among the most valuable aspects of youth work is the very relationship between worker and child, if, of course, that relationship yields affirmation, dignity, and pride. Like the little child described by Basch (1988), every one of us waits to hear the verdict on our utterances and actions. Will we be honored or humiliated, shamed or prized? Will we be recognized, our selves, in other words, affirmed, or will we be ignored, unseen, our selves, in other words, dis-affirmed? The responsibility of the youth worker appears to intensify with each moment if we consider that the alliance between worker and youth can render a proud, strengthened, resilient young person, or a young person reeking of nihilism and self-hatred, not to mention unbridled violent impulses. From this alliance is born the capacity to consider not only one's own self, but the self of another, the act we commonly call being considerate. Entire civilizations rest on this notion of considerate conduct; it is the basis of morality. But recall the premise of this essay: the consideration of both me and you rests on the original consideration of me by you. As we noted earlier, young people are forever vulnerable to the assessments made of them by their youth workers.

A final thought involves a common expression we all utter when taking our leave from the people with whom we work. "Just consider what I've said, and what we've talked about and done together today." The words sound simple enough but they carry significant import. For merely to con-

sider the words or actions of another, much less our own words and actions, requires an activity known as self-reflection. It requires the very same assessing and evaluating of self that I have learned from another, in this case, a youth worker. I cannot see my self without you seeing it first; I cannot make my self accessible to my self, which I must do in order to make these considerations, unless you first make your self available to me. This is the essence of recognition, and ultimately affirmation. It may also represent a core notion for understanding and appreciating the ultimate power of the alliance between youth workers and those in their charge. It is as Berkeley (in Rzepka, 1999) suggested: The youth worker is the one who perceives so that others may be.

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