
Volume 1

Issue 3 CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS:
OCTOBER 13th-14th, 2011

Article 13


10-2011

Testing the Efficacy of Self-Affirmation in Improving Student Performance in a Business Law Course

Lynn M. Murray

Christine E. Fogliasso

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/aij>

 Part of the [Health and Medical Administration Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Murray, Lynn M. and Fogliasso, Christine E. (2011) "Testing the Efficacy of Self-Affirmation in Improving Student Performance in a Business Law Course," *Administrative Issues Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/aij/vol1/iss3/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Administrative Issues Journal by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.



Testing the Efficacy of Self-Affirmation in Improving Student Performance in a Business Law Course

Lynn M. Murray
Christine E. Fogliasso
Pittsburg State University

The authors explore the effects of a self-affirmation exercise on upper level college students in a business law class. Students from three business law sections were randomly assigned into one of two groups: one group was to write about a personally important value before exams and the other group was to write about a value not important to them but important to others. A third group emerged as some students chose to ignore the assignment. Contrary to expectations, students writing about others' values performed better on most exams than did those who did not complete the exercise. It may be that writing about others' values forces students into considering other people's viewpoints, a finding consistent with Kohlberg's theories of moral reasoning.

Keywords: business law, self-affirmation, moral reasoning, at-risk students

Recent research indicates that a simple self-affirmation exercise can improve performance among at-risk students: Cohen et al (2006; 2009), for example, found that when students wrote about one of their most important values reduced the racial achievement gap in underperforming minority grade school students. More recently, the same short values affirmation exercise conducted among college physics students also indicated the exercise's efficacy in reducing a performance gap between women and men in an introductory physics course (Miyake et al., 2010). This research explores whether the same exercise can improve performance of upper level college students enrolled in a business law course.

The exercise is derived from self-affirmation theory. Self-affirmation theory holds that in the face of threats to one's self-integrity, a person will respond in a manner to mitigate the threat; one such response is through the affirmation of alternative sources of self-integrity, one's sense of self as a good and moral person (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). These self-affirmations allow a person to realize that his or her worth isn't derived from the outcome of the threat. In the case of a student in a challenging course such as physics (Miyake, et al., 2010) or business law, negative feedback such as an exam score can threaten a student's self-integrity, driving a student to resist processing threatening information. The use of a positive defense mechanism, such as self-affirmation, can allow a student to distance him- or herself from the perceived threat and to process the information much more objectively. The research discussed here explores whether the values affirmation exercise can help business law students improve their performance as well.

The study was conducted at a mid-sized public institution. Business law is a required course for all college of business undergraduate majors and minors and it is a pre-requisite for entry into the MBA program. Typically, four sections of the course are offered each semester. Enrollment in each section ranges from 38 to 55 students; each section reaches capacity quickly. Three of the sections are taught by a full-time tenured faculty with a juris doctorate who holds the rank of University Professor; the remaining section is taught by an adjunct, a local practicing attorney. The intervention was administered only in the sections taught by the full-time faculty member. The vast majority of a student's grade in this course is dependent upon the student's performance on four exams and a comprehensive final exam. As a lecture course, there is little leeway for extensive intervention.

The business law class was chosen because of the difficulty of the course: most students struggle in understanding and applying the concepts. Applying the language and principles of the law requires a change in how students think – they must think logically and they must divorce their personal opinions of fair play. Additionally, the business

law course is a stand-alone course: it doesn't build on a student's previous knowledge, as a business statistics course builds on elementary statistics, nor is it required for any other courses in any major.

Sample

All students enrolled in any one of the three sections were assigned to one of two conditions. In all aspects the two conditions were identical except for the wording of the exercise. In both conditions students were presented with a list of values (attached). In the values affirmation condition students were asked identify the two or three values most important to them. Students were then asked to describe in a few sentences why these values are important to them. Further, students will be instructed that this is a free-writing exercise – spelling, grammar, and other writing mechanics will not be assessed. As the final reinforcement of the experiment, students were asked several likert-type scales.

In the control condition, students were asked to identify the two or three values least important to them, to discuss why these values might be important to someone else, and were asked several likert-type scales. While students were initially assigned to one of two conditions (Own and Others), there were essentially three conditions, as some students from each exam refused the extra credit opportunities (None). Because of the struggle most students face in this course, no group of students (men and women, racial) was identified a priori as more likely to benefit from the intervention.

Procedure

The course lecturer, who was privy to the experiment and process, but blind to individual student conditions, offered students course (not exam) extra credit for each of administration of the intervention. The exercise was administered via Survey Monkey. Each student was sent emails with a personalized link five days before each exam. Reminder emails with students' personalized links were sent to those students who had not completed the individual exam's intervention. Availability to the intervention closed before any student took the exam. The intervention was administered for the four regular exams but not the comprehensive final.

Results

One-way between groups analyses of variance were conducted to explore the effects of the intervention on test scores of those students who had taken at least four of the five exams. The intervention conducted before the first exam saw a significant difference between the groups on the test scores of the first exam [$F(2, 114)=8.357, p=.0001$] (see Figure 1). This effect seemed to carry over: a significant difference also appeared between groups on the third exam [$F(2, 114)=5.113, p=.007$] and on the comprehensive final [$F(2, 114)=4.824, p=.01$]. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the exam 1 mean score for the NONE group ($M=56.04, SD=7.235$) differed significantly from the exam 1 mean score for the OTHERS group ($M=64.4, SD=8.489$). The OWN group ($M=60.82, SD=8.988$) did not differ from either the NONE group or the OTHERS group. For the third exam, the NONE group mean ($M=47.81, SD=9.397$) differed significantly from the OTHERS group ($M=55.09, SD=8.921$) but not for the OWN group ($M=51.91, SD=9.793$). Similarly, the comprehensive exam scores differed significantly for the NONE group ($M=83.96, SD=14.429$) than for the OTHERS ($M=93.44, SD=12.55$) group but not for the OWN group ($M=88.76, SD=11.676$).

The intervention conducted before the third exam also saw significant difference between groups on the third [$F(2, 114)=7.413, p=.001$], fourth [$F(2, 114)=4.838, p=.01$] and final exams [$F(2, 114)=8.119, p=.001$] (see Figure 2). Post hoc comparisons for the third exam indicate that the scores for the NONE group ($M=49.61, SD=9.362$) differed significantly for both the OWN group ($M=55.2, SD=9.661$) and for the OTHERS group ($M=57.33, SD=8.015$). For the fourth exam, the NONE group ($M=50.58, SD=7.338$) differed significantly from the OTHERS group ($M=56.1, SD=9.57$) but not the OWN group ($M=54.2, SD=7.921$). For the comprehensive final, the NONE group ($M=85.85, SD=13$) differed significantly from both the OWN group ($M=93.48, SD=10.108$) and the OTHERS group ($M=96.86, SD=12.523$).

The analysis of variance for the second exam was not significant. No analyses were conducted for the fourth exam as the samples for the OWN and OTHERS condition were too small.

Discussion

Although past research indicated that students who affirmed their own values rather than someone else's values would perform better, the results from this study differed. In our sample, students who wrote about other people's values performed significantly better than those students who wrote about neither value. Why might this be so? It may simply be that at the level this course is taught (junior, senior, graduate), students already have extensive practice in protecting their self-integrity and what they actually need is less focus on the "I" and more on "We" or "Them". Some research has found that students who wrote about other people's values exhibited less confirmation bias and were able to assess correlation more accurately than did those who wrote about their own values (Munro & Stansbury, 2009). Kohlberg's work in moral reasoning may also provide some insight (Kohlberg, 1981).

The idea of looking to others' values when an individual is confronted with a decision about how to act in a particular situation is not new. This groupthink ("everybody's doing it") is a type of group-centered reasoning described in Kohlberg's classic work as a low-to-middle development stage in moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1981). While not the highest level, group-centered reasoning is nevertheless regarded as a higher stage of moral development than the lowest, ego-centered reasoning ("what do I want to do?").

Studies have reported that interaction within groups can provide an environment that improves the level of moral reasoning. In other words, our reference group can help raise our moral development from ego-based justification to group-based justification (Lawrence & Weber, 2008). The act of thinking and writing about other people's values appears to move a student from the ego-centered reasoning in which only the "I" is important to a broader reasoning in which others' opinions and values are considered.

References

- Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., & Master, A. (2006). Reducing the racial achievement gap: A social-psychological intervention. *Science*, 313(September), 1306-1310. doi: 10.1126/science.1128317
- Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Apfel, N., & Brzustoski, P. (2009). Recursive processes in self-affirmation: Intervening to close the minority achievement gap. *Science*, 324(April), 400-403.
- Kohlberg, L. (1981). *The philosophy of moral development*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Lawrence, A. T., & Weber, J. (2008). *Business and society: Stakeholders, ethics, public policy*. New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin.
- Miyake, A., Kost-Smith, L. E., Finkelstein, N. D., Pollock, S. J., Cohen, G. L., & Ito, T. A. (2010). Reducing the gender achievement gap in college science: A classroom study of values affirmation. *Science*, 330(November), 1234-1237. doi: 10.1126/science.1195996
- Munro, G. D., & Stansbury, J. A. (2009). The dark side of self-affirmation: Confirmation bias and illusory correlation in response to threatening information. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35(9), 1143-1153. doi: 10.1177/0146167209337163
- Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L. (2006). The psychology of self-defense: Self-affirmation theory. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 38, pp. 183-242). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Figure 1: Results of first self-affirmation exercise iteration

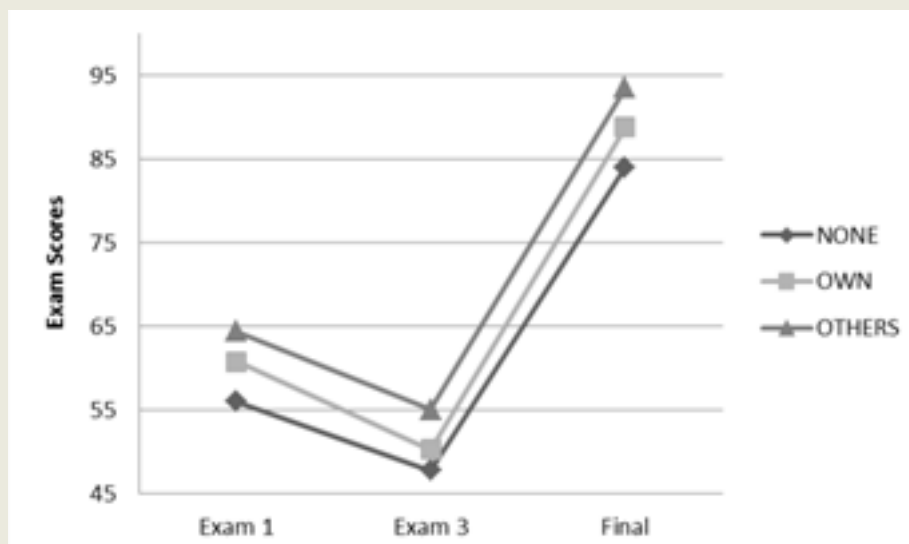
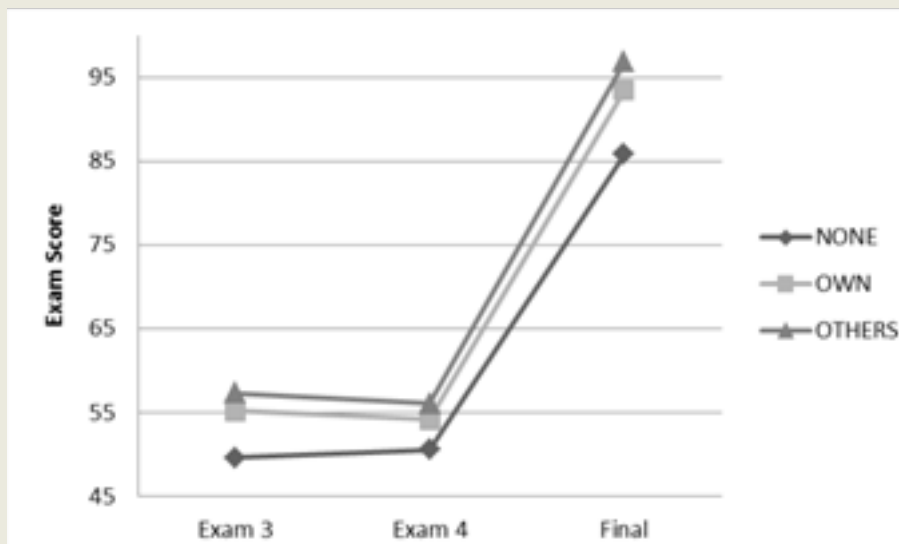


Figure 2: Results of third self-affirmation exercise iteration



Lynn Murray is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Management and Marketing at Pittsburg State University. She joined the faculty in August of 2007 after completing a Ph.D. in Marketing from the University of Missouri. Her teaching areas include marketing management, sales management, and retail management; her research interests include services marketing and marketing and business education.

Christine Fogliasso is a University Professor in the Department of Management and Marketing at Pittsburg State University. She has been on the faculty since 1979. Her Bachelor's degree was earned at Pittsburg State University, and her Juris Doctorate at the University of Kansas School of Law. Her teaching and research areas are business law and ethics.