



Affirmation as a Way to Understand and Create Safe Spaces for all People

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Social justice movements often center on expanding access to the spaces where people live their public lives. Supporting underrepresented or vulnerable groups requires making spaces ranging from bathrooms to boardrooms available and welcoming to everyone. Debates about one kind of public space flared when North Carolina passed House Bill 2. Until it was later repealed, this bill required people in all government buildings to use the bathroom corresponding with their “sex assigned at birth,” or the sex officially listed on their birth certificates.

Fierce opposition was mounted by advocates for the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people, who argued that it is discriminatory to prevent individuals from using spaces aligned with their gender identity. In response to protests, the Obama Administration issued a directive to all public schools notifying them that they should allow access to bathrooms and locker-rooms based on gender identity. At the same time, many retailers, most notably Target, affirmed their customers’ right to use bathrooms corresponding to their gender identities. While proponents of measures like North Carolina’s House Bill 2 argue that the measure is common sense, LGBT rights advocates argue that these restrictions are unenforceable and force transgender people to use bathrooms where they are more vulnerable to verbal or physical attack.

My research develops a definition of affirmation that may help orient discussions about social justice and access to different kinds of spaces.

Affirmation Defined

I define affirmation as any moment in which an aspect of one’s identity is reflected back to that person. For example, a family photograph affirms a person’s identity as a member of the family, and a rainbow pin may affirms the identity of an LGBT person. When most people think about affirmation they imagine encouragement, compliments, or warmth. Such interpersonal interactions may be affirmations, but negative or damaging interactions can function the same way. Emotional abuse and manipulation are harmful forms of affirmation. For example, bullying is the intentional destruction or manipulation of the qualities that affirm the victim’s identity. Bullies often focus on traits that make their victims unique, denigrating them to isolate the victim or damage their feelings of self-worth.

Affirmation is important across the lifespan. Especially as people move into new spaces, having others affirm one’s identity is an important way to maintain a coherent and stable sense of self. Relational and environmental affirmations can be difficult to maintain, especially for many older adults as they move into new living environments or their social circles shrink. LGBT older adults are often afraid they may be abused or receive substandard care if they are open about their identities. Such fears may prompt them to hide their sexual orientations or gender identities, cutting them off from their community and from important affirmations about their history and experience. Focusing on affirmation allows us to understand what a lack of affirmation can do to a person’s sense of self and the quality of their care – especially as people age and need new relationships and forms of care.

Lessons for Care Providers

Being attentive to affirmation is a way for professionals, friends, and organizations to prepare to care adequately for all people. Providing affirmation is crucial as care and support are provided both in interpersonal relationships and in professional care settings. Of course, it is not always easy to know what exactly to affirm about another person. If a child comes out to as gay, should one affirm that identity? What if the child’s other family members are homophobic? How should one decide how and when to engage in

affirmative gestures to support another person?

There are no easy answers to such questions, and in my research I purpose that fluid and comfortably body language is both a sign of healthy affirmations and the lens through which we can judge affirmations. When people feel threatened, put down, or afraid their physical movements will often be guarded, stilted, and closed. By contrast, when people feel affirmed and cared for they are often more relaxed, at ease, open, and fluid in their movements. Caregivers who are trying to decide which aspects of a person's identity should be affirmed can look for the impact of affirming actions on the body language of the person. Do affirming statements prompt the person to become more or less fluid and open in their movements?

Practical Implications

Understanding affirmation can also help advocates and policymakers define safe spaces and develop political and policy prescriptions to create these spaces.

- **A safe space is created when people are affirmed for their authentic selves.** To ensure that such spaces exist, community norms and care practices should work to ensure that shared environments are welcoming to everyone. For example, transgender people are affirmed and made welcome when allowed access to spaces that accord with their identity.
- **Being forced into environments at odds with personal identities makes people fearful and vigilant.** For example, many transgender people say this is how they feel when being forced to use bathrooms at odds with their identity.
- **When a person is experiencing harm, feeling unwelcome, or otherwise uncomfortable, those who want to help can consider what is being affirmed -- or disaffirmed -- in the environment.** For example, most retirement facilities only display photographs of heterosexual couples and families. This may make a LGBT people feel uncomfortable and unwelcomed. Adding photographs of diverse families may help to affirm everyone, allowing all residents to relax and be themselves.

Overall, the dynamics of affirmation explain not only the psychological impacts when people are forced to use or live in spaces at odds with their sense of identity, but also the dramatic impact on their physical fluidity. Attentiveness to these realities and cues can help individuals, organizations, and policymakers create safer, more welcoming spaces for everyone.

Read more in Tim R. Johnston, *Affirmation, Care Ethics, and LGBT Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).