3 Baptism of Fire

When Suffering Leads to Liking

"Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim."
—George Santayana (1863–1952), Spanish-American philosopher

Background

Chapter 2 showed that, when we are led, with minimal inducement, to behave in a manner inconsistent with our attitudes, our attitudes often shift to become more consistent with our behavior (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). This is one way of reducing the unpleasant cognitive dissonance that comes from knowing we have willingly done something embarrassing or immoral. Because the deed cannot be denied, nor responsibility for it evaded, we preserve our dignity or integrity by adopting an attitude that justifies the deed, and by believing that we held that attitude all along.

However, cognitive dissonance can also arise, and be resolved, by other means. Consider the identical twins, Jess and Tess. Normally inseparable, the pair happened to attend different showings of the same movie. Whereas Jess paid an extravagant $20 for an advance screening, Tess paid a paltry $5 for a bargain matinee. Unfortunately the movie they watched turned out to be rather disappointing—at least, that was the subsequent consensus of moviegoers and critics alike. Some days later Jess and Tess got around to discussing their respective cinematic experiences. Although they usually agreed about everything, they found that they disagreed about the merits of the movie. Whereas Tess echoed the misgivings of the majority, Jess was enthusiastic in her praise.

The twins' difference of opinion can be explained by the difference in how much each spent. Jess prided herself on being a sensible spender. Hence, admitting that she had willingly wasted a sizeable sum on a lousy movie would have been too much for her to bear. The most convenient way to avoid making this admission was to regard the movie in retrospect as better than it had been. Tess, too, prided herself on being a sensible spender. However, having spent a smaller sum to see the movie, she did not feel any great need to revise her opinion of it upward.

Cognitive dissonance theory can explain why Jess came to like the movie more than Tess did. However, note that the counter-attitudinal behavior creating the dissonance (forking out $20) took place *prior* to the formation of the attitude (the impression of the movie), not after it, as happened in the study reported in Chapter 2. This inverted sequence of events points to the operation of a different class of dissonance effect. It boils down to this: If we first attain something at considerable cost, we later become biased toward evaluating it favorably. For Jess and Tess, the cost was monetary. But other costs can also arouse dissonance—effort exerted, trouble taken, pain suffered. In all cases, the greater the hardship endured, the greater the subsequent change in attitude.

This conclusion may strike you as plausible enough. Perhaps you have already observed a correlation between the amount of work people put into something and how much they value the result. For instance, someone who has worked diligently to get a degree is liable to prize it more

than someone who has worked only half-heartedly to get it. However, such correlations on their own are not enough to prove an *effort-justification effect*—namely, that the harder you work for something, the more you like it. This is so for two reasons. First, the amount of work people put in often determines the quality of the result. For example, if a student works hard on a term paper, his or her favorable opinion of the finished product may reflect its consequent quality, rather than any attempt on his or her part to justify the effort exerted. Second, people who strive harder to attain a result are likely to have initially placed greater value on attaining that result. So suppose that Chun-Ju does her level best to make the school volleyball team whereas Yi-Ying barely tries at all. Both nonetheless make the volleyball team. It turns out that Chun-Ju later appreciates being on the team more than Yi-Ying does. Was this due to the greater effort Chun-Ju put in? Not necessarily. Chun-Ju might have originally liked the idea of being a team member more, and then tried harder to make the team as a consequence. Hence, observation alone can provide only circumstantial evidence for an effort-justification effect.

What is a social psychologist to do? He or she needs to conduct an experiment in which the cost of attaining an outcome is varied while everything else—including the quality of the outcome attained, and the intensity of the original desire to attain it—is held constant. Under such circumstances, differences in outcome evaluation can be confidently attributed to differences in initial cost, and to nothing else.

Aronson and Mills (1959) set about obtaining the relevant data. They concentrated on a common but often significant social event: joining the ranks of an established group. Realizing that becoming a new group member can sometimes be a challenging experience, the researchers predicted that the more severe a person's initiation into a group, the more they would come to like that group and value being a member.

What They Did

To test their hypotheses cleanly, Aronson and Mills had to artificially create a social group that satisfied two conditions. First, it had to afford a suitable pretext for an initiation procedure whose severity could be varied. Second, it had to be interesting enough for participants to want to join even after they learned about the initiation procedure. To meet these challenges, the researchers created a group whose alleged purpose was to discuss on a weekly basis a most intriguing topic: sex. Sixty-three female college students volunteered to become members.

The initiation procedure consisted of an *embarrassment test* that was supposed to determine whether participants felt comfortable talking openly about sex. Across the study's three conditions, the magnitude of the embarrassment that participants experienced during the initiation was systematically manipulated. In the severe-initiation condition, participants had to say aloud 12 highly obscene words (including some four-letter ones) and then read aloud two passages of prose depicting lurid sexual activity. To make matters worse, they had to do this in front of the male experimenter, who was closely monitoring them for any signs of hesitation or blushing. In the mild-initiation condition, participants were given the far less daunting task of reading aloud five mildly sex-related words (e.g., virgin, petting). In a final control condition, the initiation procedure was omitted completely. In both mild-initiation and severe-initiation conditions, the experimenter explained that the embarrassment test was necessary in order to ensure that all participants would contribute in equal measure to the group discussion. The reason, he claimed, was that the dynamics of the discussion process were under scrutiny, and that reluctance to speak would distort these dynamics. Importantly, the experimenter emphasized that participants were under no obligation to take the test, although they could not become group members without doing so. This ensured that participants only took the test voluntarily (a known necessary condition for cognitive dissonance to occur; Linder, Cooper, & Jones, 1967). The fact that there was no pressure placed on participants to undergo the initiation may ease some of the reader's ethical

concerns about the study. One participant did indeed exercise her prerogative not to take the embarrassment test.

The experimenter also explained to participants that, in an effort to reduce the embarrassment caused by discussing sex face to face, he had opted to put all participants in separate rooms and have them communicate over an intercom system via microphone and headphones. However, this was merely an elaborate deception aimed at keeping an important fact under wraps, namely, that the discussion group did not actually exist! In reality, all participants listened through their headphones to the same recorded discussion taking place between supposed group members.

Why the elaborate deception? Why not just use a real group? The answer is that the researchers were trying to cut down on irrelevant variation in their experiment. Such variation makes the effects of the manipulation harder to detect—much as the background hiss on a radio makes a channel harder to hear. If participants had interacted in person, then the ensuing discussion would have been difficult to regulate, and would have introduced much irrelevant variation into the experiment. However, with all participants listening to the same discussion, it was all removed in a single stroke.

Of course, to maintain this clever deception, the researchers had to keep participants from joining in the discussion. To achieve this, they first asked participants whether or not they had ever read a book called *Sexual Behavior in Animals*. All replied in the negative. The experimenter then explained to participants that they could not join in the current discussion because the other group members had already read the book, and introducing someone who hadn't could distort the dynamics of the discussion. (Participants had earlier been told that the discussion group had been meeting for several weeks, so this revelation did not strike them as odd.) Nevertheless, participants were informed that they could still listen in on the group discussion to get a feel for what the group was like.

Participants were led to believe that a group meeting was already in progress. The experimenter interrupted the group over the microphone, and explained to them that a new member (whose name he gave) would be listening. At the precise moment when participants donned their headphones, three prerecorded voices introduced themselves, and then settled back into their discussion.

So what juicy topics did these fictitious group members address? Participants hoping to deepen their understanding of sexuality were in for a monumental disappointment. The researchers' own description of the recording illustrates why:

> The recording . . . was deliberately designed to be as dull and as banal as possible . . . participants spoke dryly and haltingly on secondary sex behavior in lower animals, inadvertently contradicted themselves and one another, mumbled several non sequiturs, started sentences that they never finished, hemmed, hawed, and in general conducted one of the most worthless and uninteresting discussions imaginable.
>
> (Aronson & Mills, 1959, p. 179)

Once the discussion had finished, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire about what they thought of both the discussion and of the other group members. They were told that everybody in the group had done the same. The main prediction was that participants in the severe-initiation condition, because they had experienced more cognitive dissonance, would come to think more highly of the group discussion, and of the group members themselves.

The cover story and carefully choreographed procedures proved remarkably successful. Only one participant, when questioned afterward, expressed any definite suspicions about the nonexistence of the discussion group (her data were discarded). It is also noteworthy that, when the real purpose of the study was at last revealed to participants, none were dismayed either at having been deceived or at having been put through the initiation procedure. In fact, the researchers

reported that most participants were intrigued by the study, even returning at the end of the term to learn about the results.

What They Found

The results were clear-cut. Compared to participants in the mild-initiation and no-initiation conditions, participants in the severe-initiation condition rated both the discussion and the discussants more favorably, providing powerful evidence for the effort justification effect (Figure 3). As predicted, the more severe participants' initiation into a group, the more they said they liked that group. Why? Most likely because of the cognitive dissonance they experienced. Specifically, participants' knew that (a) they had freely submitted to an unpleasant initiation procedure; and (b) that group membership was a disappointment. Unable to deny the freedom of their actions or the unpleasantness of the initiation, they instead looked back on group membership through rose-tinted glasses, and concluded that being part of the group was a worthwhile experience. (See Chapter 17, for more on perceptual bias, and Chapter 21, for more on retrospective bias.)

Two other experimental findings deserve comment. First, there were no differences between the mild-initiation and no-initiation conditions with regard to how participants rated the discussion and the discussants. It seems that the mild-initiation condition caused participants hardly any embarrassment, with the result that little cognitive dissonance was created. The researchers might have preferred liking for the group to rise in step with severity of initiation, but it was difficult for them to predict in advance what increment in severity would correspond to what increment in liking. Second, initiation severity had a greater influence on participants' opinions about the quality of the discussion than on their opinions about the likability of the group members. This may have been because derogating the quality of the discussion was more crucial to reducing dissonance. Alternatively, participants may simply have been reluctant to directly criticize fellow students.

It has been pointed out that other psychological mechanisms could perhaps have accounted for the findings obtained in the present study. For example, participants in the severe-initiation

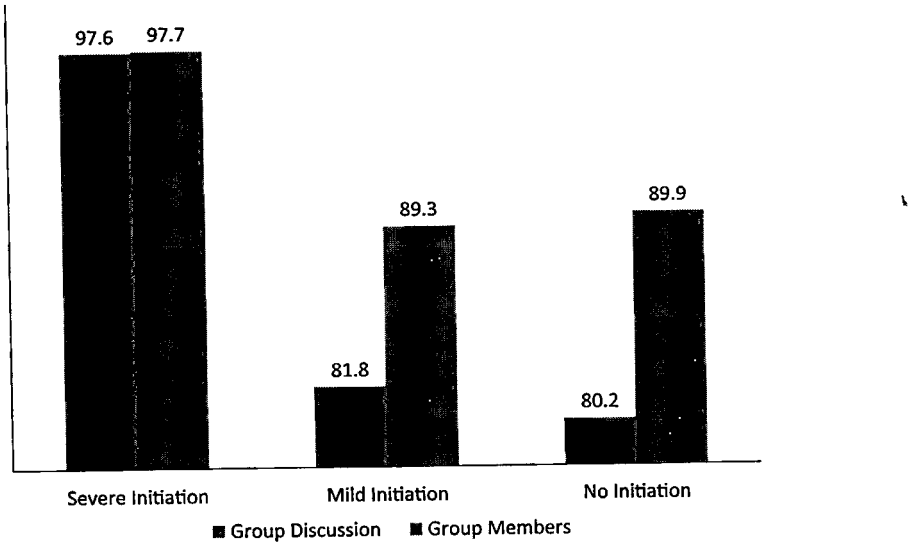

Figure 3 Participants' ratings of the group discussion, and of other group members, after undergoing a severe initiation or mild initiation into the group, or no initiation

condition might have formed a more positive impression of the group discussion because it seemed decidedly pleasant in comparison to the mortifying test they had just been put through. Or again, these participants, despite experiencing embarrassment, might still have had their interest in sexual topics piqued, and thus looked upon the tedious discussion of animal courtship more favorably. Happily, subsequent research has ruled out even these alternative explanations. In a rigorous replication study (Gerard & Mathewson, 1966), initiation severity was manipulated by administering to participants different levels of safe but unpleasant electric shock (unlike in the famous Milgram studies of obedience, where *no* electric shocks were actually administered; see Chapter 4). The merit of this new manipulation, from a scientific perspective, was that the content of the initiation procedure was no longer related to the content of the discussion group. This permitted several possible confounds to be simultaneously eliminated. In addition, the researchers manipulated whether participants did or did not believe that they were part of the group whose members and discussion they later evaluated. This permitted the researchers to tease apart the effects of otherwise identical negative experiences—one linked to group initiation, the other not—on later attitudes toward the group. Several other precautions were also taken. Despite this extra degree of rigor, the results obtained were strongly consistent with an effort-justification effect.

So What?

The study demonstrated that the overcoming of painful obstacles en route to becoming a group member makes people value group membership more, not less. This helps us to understand why, in everyday life, loyalty to a group can increase over time even in the face of seemingly substantial and repeated incentives to leave.

Common sense holds that the way to make people join a group, and ensure that they remain members, is to remove all possible obstacles to joining, and to generously reward long-term fidelity. In one sense, this is obviously true. If I do not have to do anything special to join a group, and am paid handsomely for being a member, why should I not join it? Yet, although such powerful incentives are effective in shaping our behavior, they do not necessarily lead us to *internalize* feelings of loyalty to a group. That is, you can bribe people into belonging to a group but you cannot bribe them into feeling committed to it. If you want to transform how people truly feel, you would be wise to adopt a more indirect approach. The present study documents one tactic that someone in a position of power can employ: induce people to willingly undergo some hardship as a precondition for joining a group. Cognitive dissonance will then ensure that people's private attitudes toward the group shift in a positive direction. Hence, group membership need not be maintained through the provision of incentives; the process of self-justification ensures that people come to value group membership for its own sake.

The problem, of course, is how to motivate people to take the first big step toward membership. Sometimes the allure of the group is sufficient on its own. The promise of a pay raise, status boost, or unique opportunity can inspire would-be members to endure any preliminary hardships they encounter. Ironically, it is precisely those who are originally more motivated to join a group who will be prepared to endure initiations of greater severity, thereby reinforcing their already positive attitude toward group membership. This is an example of how social conditions can conspire to make preexisting attitudes more extreme, creating a self-reinforcing loop (Abelson, 1995). Consider also, in this connection, the case of a prospective group member called upon at first to make a small sacrifice for the privilege of group membership, but then gradually seduced into making much larger sacrifices. Each increment along the way is so small that it is never possible, having made the previous sacrifice, not to justify making the next one also. Such a slippery slope can snare even people who were not initially so keen to become model group members. (See Chapter 4 for how a slippery slope has also been used to explain obedience to authority.)

There is evidence to suggest that the slope need not even be so slippery for commitment to take root. Making a token concession at first can lead a person to a more consequential concession later. In one study, for example, undergraduate participants were asked whether they would show up at seven in the morning to take part in research on thinking processes. Half the participants were immediately informed of the early starting time, whereas the other half were informed of it only after first agreeing to take part in the research itself. This trivial difference in the wording of the request made a substantial difference to the number of participants who complied with it. Whereas less than a quarter of those immediately informed of the early starting time showed up, more than half of those who first verbally committed to the research did (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller, 1978).

Salespeople often use similar techniques to get customers to part with their hard-earned cash. One of the authors (APG) learned from an investigative journalist about how a dodgy car finance company used compliance techniques to sweeten deals for themselves at the expense of their customers. For example, as a matter of sales policy, they had customers unnecessarily wait for hours while their finance deal was supposedly being negotiated upstairs. Can you see how this might elicit their acceptance of the dealership's final offer?

Given the various subtle means by which commitment can be strengthened, can you now begin to appreciate how people can get sucked into unsavory organizations whose practices and beliefs strike outsiders as absurd and extremist? Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of the fact that effort-justification phenomena are not limited to fringe organizations; they abound in mainstream society too. Think of all the social institutions that require sacrifices as a precondition for joining their ranks. College fraternities haze new members in fiendish ways; the military puts new recruits through purgatorial boot camps; and bleary-eyed interns slave night and day before becoming medical doctors. The rationale for such harsh preconditions on group membership is unclear until one realizes their potential for arousing cognitive dissonance. That dissonance can be resolved by members adopting a more positive attitude toward the group, which in turn facilitates greater loyalty, obedience, and esprit de corps, all of which promote group cohesion.

An analysis of 19th-century utopian cults by Kanter (1972) underscored the central roles of effort-justification and commitment in keeping groups together. She found that cults requiring their members to make significant sacrifices were more successful. For example, cults that had their members surrender all their personal belongings lasted much longer than those that did not. Hence, the experimental findings of Aronson and Mills are nicely borne out by historical data.

Afterthoughts

In concluding our discussion of the effort justification effect, let us once more consider the plight of Jess, who spent all that money to see such a disappointing movie. Suppose that Jess had sufficient acquaintance with dissonance theory not to let the $20 she paid influence her judgment. Halfway through the movie, she bravely admitted to herself that she had made a mistake. What, rationally, should she do now? Stay or leave? You might suspect that, having paid so much, she would be better off staying. However, a little thought makes it clear that Jess should leave as soon as she can. After all, she cannot get a refund no matter what she does. However, if she leaves, she will at least no longer have to sit through a boring movie. With the money already spent, the only thing that matters is the quality of Jess's life from now on. Hence, she should walk out of the movie posthaste. She would thereby avoid a common behavioral trap called the *sunk cost error*—the irrational tendency to honor an irrevocable loss to the detriment of one's present and future welfare (see Arkes & Blumer, 1985). In experimental tests, for example, people tend to keep investing well past the break-even point, even when the investment climate has obviously become unfavorable (Rubin & Brockner, 1975).

Irrationally sitting through a boring movie because you paid for the privilege of doing so is a relatively minor instance of the sunk cost error. Matters start to get more serious when high-ranking officials persist in squandering public funds on pointless projects to justify all the public funds they have already squandered. One famous example is the Tennessee-Tombigee Waterway. Costing $2 billion to build, and requiring more earth to be displaced than the Panama Canal, it today stretches 234 miles from Alabama to Mississippi. Midway through construction, however, it was concluded that the estimated economic value of the waterway would be far less than the amount required to complete it. Nonetheless, Alabama Senator Jeremiah Denton had these words to say in defense of forging ahead anyhow: "To terminate a project in which $1.1 billion has been invested represents an unconscionable mishandling of taxpayers' dollars" (cited in Dawes, 1988, p. 23). The good Senator appears to have overlooked the fact that the original $1.1 billion was gone forever, and that spending another $0.9 billion would only mishandle taxpayers' dollars further. Today, the so-called Tenn-Tom is used mainly as a shipping route for coal and timber products, and has failed to live up to its predicted usefulness.

Another potential boondoggle is the United States' F-35 stealth fighter jet, the most expensive (and possibly most error ridden) military weapons system in history. The project has been criticized at every turn, and yet it is now out of research and development and into production, and is estimated to ultimately cost as much as $1.5 *trillion*. Could it be that the sunk cost error—throwing good money after bad money—is again being committed? Time will tell. At any rate, we should never—whether as individuals or collectives—unwisely maintain our commitments to profligate endeavors. Rather, we should deliberately cut our losses and move on. This can be difficult, given our relative aversion to incurring sure losses (Tversky & Shafir, 1992). Indeed, because the sunk cost error tends to be a self-justifying process, it helps to have a more objective second party oversee ongoing investment decisions (Gunia, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009).

Revelation

When people voluntarily undergo an unpleasant experience to achieve something, they come to value that something more, not less. This helps explain why people become committed members of groups even when membership entails considerable initial sacrifice and offers scant subsequent reward.

What Do You Think?

It is often said that "winners never quit, and quitters never win." But isn't failing to quit, when progress is impossible or unlikely, a recipe for losing? To succeed in life, isn't it more a matter of "knowing when to hold 'em, and knowing when to fold 'em"—just as in a game of poker?

Chapter Reference

Aronson, E., & Mills, J. (1959). The effect of severity of initiation on liking for a group. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 59,* 177–181.

Other References

Abelson, R. P. (1995). Attitude extremity. In R. E. Petty & J. A. Krosnick (Eds.), *Attitude strength: Antecedents and consequences* (pp. 25–41). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Arkes, H., & Blumer, C. (1985). The psychology of sunk cost. *Organization Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 35,* 124–140.