

Aronson & Mills (1959)

Background

Initiation rites are part of human culture. Around the world the transition from childhood to adulthood is marked by initiation rites - from the circumcision ceremony in Mali which is depicted here, to Americans and Europeans getting their drivers license, to Catholics getting confirmed and Jews having a Bar Mitzvah.



Some initiation ceremonies are about having to prove that you would make a good member of the group. Hazing, for example, is sometimes done for sports teams or university fraternities. In some cases, the initiation rites are so humiliating or dangerous, that potential group members will die in the process of getting "accepted."

Why do initiation rites play such an important part in our cultures? Why is it that often terrible rites of passage, which cause harm - both physically and psychologically - are maintained within a culture? And why do people defend their groups' practices, even if they condemn similar practices in other groups? It appears that this has to do with a compliance technique called "Commitment." Part of commitment is that once we have decided to do something - and put our "foot in the door," we are less likely to back out. For example, once we have started standing in a line that does not move, we are less likely to move out it. Part of commitment is that we "self-justify" our decision to join the group or activity. We justify standing in line by thinking "If I move now, it will surely start to move" or "I have already wasted an hour standing here already. I might as well stay rather than have to do this again later." Self-justification of our choices reduced cognitive dissonance and anxiety. It is not, however, always very logical.

In 1959 Eliot Aronson & Judson Mills wanted to examine the role that commitment and self-justification would play in joining a group. In this case, they would have to go through an initiation in order to join the group. When they actually were in the group, they find that it is terribly boring and not worth the bother. This should produce cognitive dissonance - that is, her cognition that she has gone through an unpleasant experience for the sake of membership is dissonant with her cognition that there are things about the group that she does not like. She can reduce the dissonance by exaggerating the positive aspects of the group and minimizing the negative aspects. This theory is exactly what Aronson & Mills were out to test.

Procedure

The aim of the study was to test if individuals who undergo an unpleasant initiation to

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a severe initiation.

The sample was made up of 63 university women who all volunteered to participate in a series of group discussion on the psychology of sex. 30 of the participants were from an introductory course in psychology. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the following conditions: a severe initiation condition, a mild initiation condition, and a control condition in which no initiation was required. In the severe condition, participants were asked to read aloud 12 obscene words as well as two explicit descriptions of sexual activity from modern novels. They read this into a microphone which they believed broadcast it to the already pre-existing group. The mild initiation had participants read aloud words that though related to sex, were not embarrassing - for example, virgin, prostitute, and petting. In both cases they were told that they had performed satisfactorily and that they would now be allowed to join the group meeting which was now in progress.

Participants were all told that because people were often inhibited to speak about sex, the members of the group met in separate rooms and the discussion was broadcast over intercoms. This was a necessary deception so that each participant could hear the exact same tape of the group discussion. They were also told that since the discussion was about a text which they all had read, that for this first meeting they should just listen and not contribute to the discussion.

The recording was a discussion by three female undergraduates. It was deliberately designed to be as dull as possible. The participants spoke dryly and haltingly, often mumbled, didn't finish sentences, and spoke about secondary sex characteristics of animals. It was as Aronson said, "one of the most worthless and uninteresting discussions imaginable (p 179)."

At the conclusion of the recording, the researchers explained that at the end of each meeting all participants fill out a questionnaire expressing her reactions to the discussion. They were to rate the discussion on interest and intelligence on a scale of 0 - 15.

Results

The questionnaire had 9 questions about the quality of the discussion. With each scale having a maximum score of 15, the total number of points that could be awarded to the discussion was 135. The total results and the standard deviations for the sum of the ratings was as follows:

Means of the Sum of Ratings for the Experimental Conditions

	Control group (n = 21)	Mild Initiation (n = 21)	Severe Initiation (n = 21)
Mean sum	80.2	81.8	97.6
Standard deviation	13.2	21.0	16.6

The significance of the differences between the means for the different conditions was determined by t tests. The severe initiation was significant at $p < .001$; the mild initiation was significant at $p < .02$ and the control group was not significant. It appears that the research hypothesis was supported. It also appears that the mild condition was so devoid of unpleasantness that it led to very little investment in the group.

Discussion

This study has several strengths. First, the procedure was highly standardized. The clever use of the tape recording and the deception with regard to why they needed to be in different rooms was an ingenious way of creating a situation which could isolate the variable of "unpleasantness" as the cause of one's rating of the group. It could be argued, however, that the set-up of the experiment that was necessary to test this construct was too artificial. Another strength is that the participants were randomly assigned to the different conditions. This should eliminate any participant variables that would influence the results.

Aronson & Mills argued that cognitive dissonance led to self-justification for liking the group. Some have criticized this, however, because it is not possible to actually measure the amount of dissonance that was experienced by the participants. There is no way to "prove" that the individual maintains two contradictory cognitions at the same time, and that in order to diminish the dissonance which results, the participant justifies the situation - in this case, the choice to endure an embarrassing initiation in order to join a boring group.

One has to also question the ethics of this experiment. At the end of the experiment the women were debriefed by the researchers. None of the participants expressed any resentment or annoyance at having been misled. The majority were intrigued by the experiment and several returned at the end of the study to obtain the results.

References

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

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