

# Effort Justification

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November 19, 2022

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Effort Justification*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=39301>

Effort Justification is an idea and paradigm in social psychology stemming from Festinger's theory of Cognitive Dissonance. Effort justification is people's tendency to attribute a greater value (greater than the objective value) to an outcome they had to put effort into acquiring or achieving.

### **Theory and Research**

Cognitive Dissonance theory explains changes in people's attitudes or beliefs as the result of an attempt to reduce a dissonance (discrepancy) between contradicting ideas or cognitions. In the case of effort justification, there is a dissonance between the amount of effort exerted into achieving a goal or completing a task (high effort - high "cost") and the subjective reward for that effort (lower than was expected for such an effort). By adjusting and increasing one's attitude or subjective value of the goal, this dissonance is resolved. One of the first and most classic examples of effort justification is Aronson and Mills's study. A group of young women who volunteered to join a discussion group on the topic "Psychology of Sex" were asked to do a small reading test to make sure they were not too embarrassed to talk about sexual related topics with others. The mild-embarrassment condition subjects were asked to read aloud a list of sex related words such as "prostitute" or "virgin". The severe-embarrassment condition subjects were asked to read aloud a list of highly sexual words (e.g. "fuck", "cock") and to read two vivid descriptions of sexual activity taken from contemporary novels. All subjects then listened to a recording of a discussion about "Sexual Behavior in Animals" which was dull and unappealing. When asked to rate the group and its members, control and mild-embarrassment groups did not differ, but the severe-embarrassment group's ratings were significantly higher. This group, whose initiation process was more difficult (embarrassment = effort) had to increase their subjective value of the discussion group to resolve the dissonance.

### **Implications**

This theory is clearly implicated in the effect of rites of passage and hazing rituals on group solidarity and loyalty. The hazing rituals, prevalent in military units, sports teams and Academic fraternities and sororities, often include demanding and/or humiliating tasks which lead (according to dissonance theory) the new member to increase the subjective value of the group. This contributes to his/her loyalty and to the solidarity of the entire group.

### **Competing Views**

Critics of this theory claim it is dependent on complex social context (which is responsible for the creation of dissonance), but research has shown the same effects in children (who understand less about social context and therefore are less likely to be influenced by it) and even in pigeons. The researchers argue that the cause for these findings, both in humans and animals, is the contrast effect. According to this theory, the preference is a result of the difference between the reward and the situation that leads to it. When the preliminary situation is unpleasant or strenuous, the

difference between it and the reward that follows is great. When the preliminary situation is not especially unpleasant or strenuous, the difference between it and the reward is smaller. The reward that has the larger difference from its preliminary situation will be preferred since it is experienced as more positive.

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