

Cognitive Dissonance and Public Commitment

Public commitments and dissonance go hand in hand. Even when we feel an action is not right, we still go through with it if we have publicly committed to such a course of action. For example, weddings are psychologically binding.

When you ask that young lady to marry you and she says, “Yes,” there’s a commitment. The announcement of the engagement is a second commitment. All the other actions that follow suit increase your public commitment: telling your friends, getting the rings, asking the parents, setting the date, taking the pictures, sending announcements, paying the deposit for the reception center, etc. Each step closer to “I do” results in a greater level of commitment. Even if the couple decides they want to call it off, it actually feels easier to go through with the wedding than to stop the whole procession created by so much public commitment.

The more public our stand is, the more reluctant we will be to change it. A now famous experiment conducted in 1955 by Morton Deutsch and Harold Gerard demonstrates this principle. A group of students were divided into three groups. Each group viewed some lines and had to estimate their length. The students in the first group had to privately write down estimates, sign their names to it, and hand it in. The second group of students also had to privately write down their estimates, but they did so on a Magic Writing Pad. They could lift the plastic cover on their notepad and their figures would instantaneously disappear. The third group of students did not write down their estimates but just kept them privately in their minds. Not surprisingly, even when new information was presented contradicting their estimates, the students who had written down their estimates, signed their names to them, and handed them in remained the most committed to their choices, while those who had never committed anything to writing were the most readily swayed to change their responses.

Often procedures, customs, and traditions are specifically established for the purposes of creating psychological commitment. Consider fraternity initiations, military boot camps, political rallies, protest marches, and demonstrations. When we make our vows, beliefs, statements, or endeavors public, we feel bound to them. We can back out on commitments and claims we’ve made public, but we will pay a psychological and emotional price. What’s more, the more public we made those commitments, the greater the emotional price tag will be.

A pair of researchers, Elliot Aronson and Judson Mills, claimed that “persons who go through a great deal of trouble or pain to attain something tend to value it more highly than persons who attain the same thing with a minimum of effort.” Additional research confirmed their assertion when coeds who were required to endure pain rather than embarrassment to get into a group desired membership more than their counterparts. In one particular case, the more pain one young woman endured as part of her initiation, the more she later tried to convince herself that “her new group and its activities were interesting, intelligent, and desirable.”

Another study of 54 tribal cultures found that those with the most dramatic initiation rituals also had the most unity and commitment. It was also determined that these groups oppose any attempts to undermine or destroy these customs, which render so much strength to their tribe and their culture.

Understanding the psychology of commitment through publicity can be used to bring about good societal changes. Many organizations exist to help individuals conquer bad habits, patterns, or abuses. For example, weight-loss centers commonly encourage clients to share their goals with as many friends, relatives, and neighbors as they can, understanding that this public commitment and pressure often works when other methods don't.

An experiment conducted by Pallak used an interviewer who offered free energy-saving hints to natural gas users. Those residents who agreed to try to conserve energy would have their names publicized in newspaper articles as public-spirited, fuel-conserving citizens. The effect was immediate. One month later, when the utility companies checked their meters, the homeowners in the publication sample had saved an average of 422 cubic feet of natural gas apiece. The chance to have their names in the paper had motivated these residents to put forth substantial conservation efforts for a period of one month.

Even during the months when their names weren't in the paper, the families continued to conserve gas. They saved 12.2% in the first month because they expected to see their names displayed in the newspaper. When a letter went out stating that their names would no longer be printed in the paper, the families did not return to their previous wasteful energy usage as expected; rather, they continued to conserve energy.