

## **Rationalization in act and problematic behaviour justification**

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### *Abstract*

*This paper addresses the alternate aspect of the rationalization process. Requiring individuals to provide justification for a problematic behaviour renders its cognitive rationalization easier and makes a rationalization in act less probable. The effect of rationalization in act decreases the individual's focus in his justification. © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Exhibiting or engaging in problematic behaviours induces a state of dissonance (Festinger, 1957), which brings individuals to rationalize their acts. Beauvois and Joule (1996) define rationalization as a post-behavioural process through which a problematic behaviour becomes less problematic for the person who has displayed it. This process is achieved either by a post-readjustment of the cognitive representations to make them conform to the reality of the behaviour just accomplished—cognitive rationalization—or by performing another behaviour, more problematic than the one that aroused the dissonance—rationalization in act. These two rationalization processes are mutually exclusive as choosing one of them makes it highly unlikely that the other will also be chosen.

Joule (1986) provides the first experimental demonstration of the rationalization through acts. This author showed that individuals who were unable to rationalize cognitively (due to a lack of time) were more inclined to rationalize in act. The participants were smokers and agreed to stop smoking for 3 days (which is very costly for them) after having agreed to abstain from smoking for a shorter period (18 hours). It

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seems that the commitment to the 3 days deprivation allowed the subjects to minimize the problematic aspect of the initial commitment which was to stop smoking for 18 hours. The dual aspect of the rationalization process has given rise to several studies (for a review, Beauvois and Joule, 1996). It appears that the experimental inhibition of cognitive rationalization for a behaviour renders its rationalization in act more probable (as for the experiment mentioned above, Joule, 1986). Conversely, facilitating the cognitive rationalization of a behaviour would make less likely its rationalization in act (Beauvois, Joule, & Brunetti, 1993). These authors asked part of their smoker participants to justify their acceptance of a first problematic behaviour (18 hours' tobacco deprivation) before proposing a more severe deprivation (6 days' tobacco deprivation). The participants who had justified their first deprivation were less inclined to accept the 6 days' deprivation.

Our main hypothesis concerns the alternate aspect of the rationalization process. Following Beauvois *et al.* (1993) we will strive to facilitate cognitive rationalization by asking the participants to justify their commitment in a problematic behaviour. Participants engaging in this inferential type of justification should be less inclined to rationalize in act than participants who do not (hypothesis 1). A second hypothesis addresses the degree of focus on the rationalization in act. Thus, requiring a participant to justify the behaviour of a peer (low focus) prevents him from justifying his own behaviour which therefore still retains its problematic component. The only way to restore the value of the behaviour (i.e. to rationalize it) will be, given the opportunity, to accept another even more problematic behaviour. On the other hand, asking a participant to justify his own behaviour (high focus) sets the emphasis on the problematic aspect of this behaviour. In this case, the behaviour is rationalized cognitively (via the inferential justification process) and will require less rationalization in act. Therefore, the more individuals are focused on their own behaviour, the less they will engage in a rationalization in act (hypothesis 2).

## METHOD

### Overview

Participants were recruited according to compliance without pressure techniques (Joule, Fointiat, Pasquier, & Mugny, 1991; Fointiat, 1996) and informed they were to undergo an experiment on concentration. The experiment was carried out at 10 a.m. in the laboratory and participants were asked to make the choice whether or not to drink a glass of wine (first request). Some of the participants had to justify their decision in writing whereas the others did not. The experimenter then proposed to the whole group to participate in a further experiment which involved drinking one and a half glasses of wine (last request).

### Subjects

One hundred female students (excluding psychology students) were recruited individually for this study.

## Procedure

Participants were randomly distributed among five groups corresponding to the different conditions. For three experimental groups, once the first request (to drink a glass of wine) was accepted, the participants wrote down a justification for their acceptance with the following instructions modulating the degree of focus: low focus: 'state the reasons that incite students to participate in experiment'; medium focus: 'state the reasons that incited *you* to participate in this experiment'; high focus: 'state the reasons that incited *you personally* to participate in *this* experiment concerning alcohol and concentration'.

Immediately following the written justification the experimenter presented the last request (to drink a glass and a half of wine).

A fourth group was presented with a gearing presentation in which the two requests were proposed one after the other and participants were not required to provide any justification. The control group was presented immediately with the last request. The dependent variable retained is the frequency of acceptance of the last request.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants did not actually drink any wine. Nevertheless, we tried to ensure that the first request appeared costly enough to induce a state of dissonance. Drinking a glass of wine at 10 in the morning within the university building constitutes a costly decision and only six participants out of 20 accepted it spontaneously.

The last request proved problematic for the participants: for the control group four out of 20 accepted it against 17 out of 20 for the gearing presentation,  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 16,84$   $p < 0.001$ . There is a strong effect of gearing, which is due to the articulation of two compliance techniques: foot-in-the-door/law-ball (Joule *et al.*, 1991; Fointiat, 1996).

Our first hypothesis on the alternate nature of the rationalization process is verified. The participants who justified their compliance (justification conditions) rationalize less in act than those who provided no justification (gearing presentation). Respectively, 32/60 against 17/20,  $\chi^2_{(1)\text{cor}} = 5,071$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

Table 1. Acceptance of the last request in the different conditions expressed in frequency and percentages

	Justification required			No justification
	Low focus <i>n</i> = 20	Medium focus <i>n</i> = 20	High focus <i>n</i> = 20	Gearing presentation <i>n</i> = 20
Acceptance of the last request	14/20 (70%)	11/20 (55%)	7/20 (35%)	17/20 (85%)

*Note.* Acceptance of the last request for the control group: 4/20 (20 per cent).

The justification of a problematic behaviour seems to enable a cognitive rationalization, making a rationalization in act less necessary, which is in agreement with what has been shown by Beauvois *et al.* (1993).

Hypothesis 2 predicting that participants most focused on the problematic aspect of their behaviour (in the justification) would be less inclined to rationalize in act is also verified. Fewer of the highly focused participants were indeed accepting the second behaviour (last request) than those in the medium or low focus groups,  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.04$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

Two remarks may be noted concerning the content of the written justifications. First, all participants propose similar arguments to justify their compliance behaviour: student solidarity, interest in psychology, . . . . Second, a discourse analysis revealed that the construction of the texts differed according to the degree of focus.<sup>1</sup>

Our results suggest that the effect of rationalization in act decreases with the degree of focus in the inferential justification task. This would tend to indicate that cognitive rationalization and rationalization in act do not function so much as mutually exclusive alternatives as proposed by Beauvois and Joule, but rather as complementary alternatives with one relaying the other if necessary. Several authors (notably Simon, Greenberg & Brehm, 1995) consider alternative modalities for the reduction of dissonance and refer to an hydraulic model: 'the easiest mode of dissonance reduction will be used, and the more one mode is used in a particular instance, the less the other modes will be used' (Simon *et al.*, 1995, p. 248). In this way, rationalization in act would relay cognitive rationalization when this latter is unable to ensure a global reduction of dissonance. If, as we believe, this is sometimes the case, further investigation seems necessary for instance to better understand the conditions required for the rationalization in act to occur.

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, further investigation is required. Yet, we may already note that the text elaboration differs according to the focus conditions. With a low focus, participants elaborate their text in terms of 'they/them'; with a medium focus, 'I' is used more and with a high degree of focus the term 'alcohol' is used, stressing the problematic aspect of their compliance.