EXAMINING THE CONCEPT OF INITIATION

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EXAMPLES AND EFFECTS OF INITIATION

Introduction

Initiation is a term used to describe a rite of passage ceremony; which marks one’s entrance or acceptance into a group, society, or adulthood. If successfully performed, it can mark both a pivotal change within the initiate, and acceptance amongst their initiated peers. Initiation has been known to inspire attraction to the group in question and conformity among new members.¹

It will be the goal of this paper to examine the effects of initiation, explore how it works, and consider how this information can be applied to Freemasonry.

Examples of Initiation

In a tribal context, when a boy is about to enter adulthood, he is often separated from his tribe and isolated. There are often restrictions placed on him during this time of isolation which emphasise the severing of his old life and to mark a momentous change. After facing some kind of ordeal resulting in a physical and mental weakening, the candidate is exposed to ceremonies, instruction in tribal law and the recitation of myths.²

Likewise in the military, we see new recruits leaving for basic training. They leave their former selves behind and give themselves over to a transformative process involving a physical and mental ordeal, as well as education and participating in military culture.

The hazing practices of college fraternities in the US have contributed significantly to psychological research into the effects of initiation. In this case the initiation comes in the form of an ordeal, sometimes a test of physical strength or endurance, while others involve humiliation and acts of social deviance.³

How Does It Work?

In any successful initiation, the initiate ends up in some way changed, preferably for the better, and feels a close affiliation with the group who performed the initiation.

Having shared in a common experience with the other group members may account for some of that feeling of close affiliation, but it doesn’t account for the extent of it, or the change that occurs within the initiate. The underlying cause for this effect can be found in the psychological phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance.


Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual holds two conflicting beliefs or cognitions. Their natural tendency is to harmonise those beliefs and reduce dissonance.\(^4\)

A classic example is in Aesop's fable of *The Fox and the Grapes*. The fox sees some high hanging grapes and wants to eat them. When he can’t find a way to get them, he convinces himself that they were most probably sour anyway.

The two conflicting cognitions in this case are firstly, that the fox has decided he will eat the grapes, secondly that he ends up not eating them. This causes cognitive dissonance within the fox, which he seeks to resolve. He reduces his first cognition (the belief that he wanted to eat the grapes) in order to make the unavoidable second cognition (that he will not eat them) easier to live with.

In the case of the tribal initiation, the boy clearly didn’t enjoy being kept in isolation or being physically and mentally weakened by some horrendous ordeal. Yet he went through with it anyway, and this creates dissonance.

He justifies his actions by convincing himself that the end result is so great that the ordeal was worth it. That end result of course, is that he has left his childhood behind in order to embrace adulthood, and that he is now accepted into the community of adults.

Given that he is so enamoured with having achieved adulthood and with his membership amongst the men of the tribe, he will do everything he can to learn and conform to their laws, beliefs and practices.

Since the 1950’s there have been quite a few psychological experiments testing this theory of cognitive dissonance, as well as observing the different behavioural patterns people adopt in order to reduce that dissonance.
THE ARONSON & MILLS EXPERIMENT

Background

In 1959 an experiment was conducted to test the effect of severity of initiation on liking for a group. It tested the observation 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”.

Sixty three college women were invited to participate in group discussions on the psychology of sex. Each subject was individually scheduled to meet with the discussion group. On arrival they were told that they were replacing a member of a group which had already been meeting for several weeks.

It was further explained that in order to make everyone more at ease in talking about such taboo subject matter, each member was to sit in a different room and communicate via an intercom.

The topic of the discussion was based on something the other group members had previously read. As the subject had not read the material she was only allowed to listen, and not actually contribute to this particular discussion. This meant she would listen in on a pair of headphones, but would not be supplied with a microphone.

Before being allowed to be a member of this group, a question was put to the subject if she could discuss sex freely. Each subject invariably answered in the affirmative.

Subjects in the control group were then allowed take part straight away. Other subjects were submitted to an initiation of sorts. This came in the form of an embarrassment test before being allowed to join the group.

The Initiation

This embarrassment test consisted of the subject being made to read out loud sexually oriented material whilst things like their amount of hesitation and blushing were recorded to facilitate a clinical judgement.

In the Extreme condition, subjects were made to read out obscene words and vivid descriptions of sexual activity. In the Mild condition, subjects were merely asked to read out five words which were related to sex but not considered obscene. All subjects in both the Extreme and Mild conditions were told that they had passed the test, they were now a member of the group, and could sit in on the discussion which was already in progress.
A Twist in the Plot

Unbeknownst to the subjects, there was no actual discussion group. Each subject would put on the headphones and listen to a pre-recorded discussion, on the assumption that it was taking place live.

The recording was deliberately designed to be as dull as possible. The participants spoke dryly and haltingly on secondary sex behaviour in animals. They contradicted themselves and each other, mumbled several non sequiturs, started sentences that they never finished, and in general did what they could to make the discussion difficult to sit through and generally a waste of time.

At the end of the discussion, each subject was asked to fill out a questionnaire evaluating both the discussion itself and the discussion group.

The Results

Subjects who were submitted to the Extreme initiation gave a higher rating to both the discussion and the participants than the other two groups did. There was very little difference between the evaluations submitted by the Mild group and the Control group.

In other words, in order to justify having willingly submitted to going through something unpleasant, the Extreme group convinced themselves that the quality of the discussion and becoming a member of the discussion group was worth the ordeal they submitted to.

On the other hand, those who had no initiation did not experience cognitive dissonance. With no ordeal to have to justify having submitted themselves to, they had no reason to convince themselves that the discussion group was more worthwhile than it actually was. Interestingly, those in the Mild group who experienced an insignificant initiation returned similar results.

In this case they resolved their dissonance in the opposite manner to the Extreme group. Where the Extreme group convinced themselves that the discussion group was worth going through the ordeal for, the Mild group assured themselves that the ordeal wasn’t that bad.
THE DELIBERATE USE OF
COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN INITIATIONS

Ethical Issues

It’s all well and good to note that creating cognitive dissonance increases one’s opinion of a group, and motivates them to embrace their ideals. The initiate must find the group somewhat agreeable before the initiation, and the change brought about in the initiate needs to be in their best interest.

It’s also obviously frowned upon to use initiation as an excuse to give someone a hard time. Its effectiveness (and arguably the high occurrence of people with a sadistic nature) is a big part of what makes hazing practices so difficult to stamp out.

The Initiate Must Willingly Submit

The very reason cognitive dissonance works is because the initiates must subconsciously justify having willingly submitted themselves to the ordeal. If it wasn’t their idea, they have nothing to justify and it simply won’t work.

Finding a Balance

One need not go to great extremes to invoke cognitive dissonance. The dissonance only needs to be enough for the initiate to recognise they are submitting themselves to something they wouldn’t otherwise do, and that they deem it to be significant.

As Aronson and Mill’s experiment pointed out, if the discomfort is not significant enough there may as well not be any at all.

If the ordeal is too far beyond what the initiate deems reasonable, they will opt out of the initiation. If they are forced to continue against their will, they are no longer a willing participant. They are now a victim, and have nothing to justify to themselves. Cognitive dissonance does not occur, and the initiate can only feel resentment towards the group for their maltreatment.

The brutal hazing practices known as dedovshchina employed by the Russian military led to poor morale and a high desertion rate in the early 1990s. This was no doubt a combination of the extent of their brutal hazing, and the fact that they were conscripts rather than volunteers.
ETHICAL AND EFFECTIVE USE OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN FREEMASONRY

Relevance in the Craft

Quite a few lodges struggle with retention and attendance from their newer members. Of those who do stay and attend somewhat regularly, very few seem to find the time to take office and get involved. Fewer still find the time or inclination to put in significant effort to perform good ritual.

No matter how much you lecture, badger, or plead and beg with these men, it will have little if any positive impact.

Research has shown that effective use of cognitive dissonance increases one’s opinion of the initiating group, and makes the initiate keen to embrace their ideals and assimilate with them. It’s likely then, that the proper use of cognitive dissonance could make freemasonry more impressive in the eyes of our candidates.

It could inspire in them a strong desire to assimilate with the lodge and embrace the craft’s ideals. This would mean wanting to learn and participate as much as they could, and taking great pride in their efforts to assimilate.

In this case assimilation would likely mean attending regularly, taking office, and diligently participating in the work – provided, of course, that is the example the senior officers set.

Where Cognitive Dissonance Occurs in Freemasonry

Nothing New Is Required

Since time immemorial, candidates have had to first be prepared in their heart to be a freemason, free from the solicitation of others. This needs to be strictly enforced if they are to experience cognitive dissonance. It must be the candidate’s idea to join, and his alone.

The naturally occurring stresses within the candidate leading up to his First Degree provide the majority of the ordeal he must overcome. We do not have to resort to altering the ritual or actively hazing the candidate to provide an ordeal significant enough to induce cognitive dissonance. We just have to be mindful of where those pre-initiation stresses are, and try not to minimise them.
First Impressions

There’s a fair chance that, no matter how much a man reads about the craft on the net, it will still be somewhat mysterious to him. Indeed, the lure of the mystery may play a bigger part in his desire to join than he will ever let on.

This air of mystery about the craft is a powerful tool in the process of initiation. On the one hand, the lure of the mystery plays a part in attracting the man to the craft to begin with. On the other hand, the fear of the unknown contributes to the feeling of having to overcome an ordeal.

Whilst we should be open and honest in answering any questions the potential candidate may have, we do ourselves a disservice by going the extra mile to put him at ease.

Establishing the Right Dynamic

From the moment he first gets in touch with the lodge, it is important that the right dynamic is established. If he feels as though the lodge is trying to win him over, cognitive dissonance may work the opposite way. He may justify joining our organisation by convincing himself that it’s what we really wanted or needed, and out of pity he is doing us a favour.

There is no way he’ll want to assimilate with a group he feels sorry for. He may even end up resenting the lodge before he inevitably resigns.

On the other hand, making him feel as though he has to prove himself worthy of membership will be the first step towards effectively establishing cognitive dissonance. We need not place any unnecessary obstacles in the way of him joining. Neither should we have to increase our standards for allowing a man to join. There just has to be the perception within the candidate that he had to work hard to get in.
The Interview

Ideally you would have the candidate feel as though he was attending an interview for a job he is unqualified for, conducted by a panel. He should feel the need to speak persuasively in support of his application. You should be polite and courteous at all times, just not a complete push over. Of course, he doesn’t actually have to prove his worthiness. We only have a small number of requirements he needs to meet, but he doesn’t know that.

Given that there’s every chance you’ll want this man to join your lodge, you don’t want him to feel as though the interview was a catastrophic failure. There is actually a way to help him out whilst contributing to his pre-admission stress. Start the interview by telling him what you’re looking for in a candidate, in a tone of voice that tells him you mean business.

Tell him that you expect a candidate for freemasonry to be a just and upright man of mature age, sound judgement, and strict morals. Explain that a good candidate will be prompted to join by a favourable opinion preconceived of the institution, a general desire for knowledge, and a sincere wish to be more extensively serviceable to his fellow creatures.

Explain that the masonic life requires commitment to both the lodge and to personal contemplation and self-improvement. While there are charitable opportunities and the occasional social function, freemasonry is neither a social club nor a charity.

He will likely feel as though you are telling him you are only interested if he can identify with those qualities. However, you have actually just given him all the answers to the hard hitting questions you are about to throw at him, like:

- Why do you want to join?
- What makes you think you’ll be a good freemason?
- Is there anything we should know which may adversely affect your application?

If he struggles, ask leading questions like:

- Would you describe yourself as a just and upright man?
- Would you say you have sound judgement and strict morals?

Explain the costs in time and money imposed upon a member of the craft, and ask him if he can handle those costs without causing hardship for himself or his family. Obviously beyond that you’ll want to ask the usual questions about his job, his hobbies and interests, marital status etc. Make sure to take notes every time he says something.

At the end of the interview do not give him an application form. Remind him that joining the craft is no small undertaking and that he should take some time to consider it. Tell him to think on it for a week, and then if he still wishes to proceed he should give you a call. This is obviously an attempt to build his anticipation and desire to join. Regardless, it’s not a bad idea to instil in him just how serious a decision this is.
The Application

When the candidate gets in touch a week later, make arrangements to meet up and discuss the application form. The UGLQ application form itself is a formidable gauntlet to run. The requirements for references certainly add to the feeling that we don’t just let anyone in. Explain all this to him, and then let him know that if his references and application work out, the lodge will then hold a ballot to decide whether or not to accept him as a member.

On the Night

Unless the candidate is so struck with fear and anxiety that he is on the verge of a panic attack, there is simply no need to reassure him or put him at ease. A little bit of pre-initiation nerves will actually work out in his favour.

Everybody needs to exercise restraint. A short, poker faced, polite greeting will do. Save all your smiles and words of welcome for after his initiation, as it will have far more impact that way. If you can, keep him away from all the pre-meeting frivolity as much as possible. He is about to enter into a serious and solemn, life changing ceremony, and he should be allowed to get into that headspace.

Consider the boy in the tribal initiation. He was completely isolated so that he could sever ties with his former self and anticipate his new life as an initiate. When we get chatty with the candidate about how work was and what he’ll likely get up to on the week end, we are counteracting the effectiveness of that element of his initiation.

The European Chamber of Reflection serves this purpose beautifully, but in its absence, having the brethren be mindful of the candidate’s needs and acting accordingly should help.
CONCLUSION

Some may argue that this approach may seem mean spirited. To the contrary, it is actually for the candidate’s benefit. He has come to the lodge seeking initiation. As we have discovered, initiation implies subjecting the candidate to circumstances which inspire him to feel a close affiliation with the group, and a desire to embrace its ideals.

The suggestions in this paper do not imply that we should sport with the candidate’s feelings or do anything to cause him harm. The over-arching point is that we shouldn’t try to undo the natural stresses which occur prior to initiation. They are what fuel cognitive dissonance, which is the vital ingredient that makes initiation work.

A masonic initiation itself isn’t much of an ordeal to go through. The candidate doesn’t know this though, and the act of submitting himself to whatever happens behind those lodge doors is the primary source of cognitive dissonance in freemasonry. To a lesser extent, the same could be said when a candidate has to undergo his proficiency examination when progressing to the next degree.

If we make this process easier for him, we’ll be removing the very thing that will make the night of his degree in particular, and freemasonry in general, all the more special to him. We’ll also be neglecting to harness something which could inspire the new candidate to embrace our ideals and become a regular attendee and participant.

The goal of harnessing cognitive dissonance is not so much to dupe the new guy into compliance and make a diligent officer out of him. He has come to freemasonry looking to be changed from a good man to a better man. He wants to adopt the masonic life and be a freemason. By consciously using cognitive dissonance, we are making this happen for him in a dramatic and impressive way.

If we don’t use it, the result could be the opposite effect. We’ll have gently lead him around the lodge room and shown him everything without the ordeal of initiation. This is not a great deal different to having him read about it on the internet. He may develop a personal bond with the members of your lodge from having undergone a shared experience, but that will be the extent of the ceremony’s effectiveness.

He won’t be able to overlook the lodge’s shortcomings, from the minor slip-ups in the ritual to the modest or perhaps even inadequate festive board. By contrast, the man who has experienced cognitive dissonance will play down any shortcomings in an attempt to justify having submitted himself to the process. Of course, the initiation will be all the more effective if we embrace cognitive dissonance and have few if any noticeable shortcomings.

Given the candidate’s sudden drive to assimilate with his new peer group, the need to lead by example is crucial. If you take the initiations you play a part in seriously, and be the sort of mason you want your candidates to become, the craft will be in safe hands.
REFERENCES


2. Van Gennep, A., "The Rites of Passage" (1960) pp. 74-75.


