

The promise and peril of self-affirmation in de-escalation of commitment[☆]

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Abstract

Drawing on the motivated cognition literature, we examine how self-affirmation processes influence self-justification needs and escalation decisions. Study 1 found that individuals with a larger pool of affirmational resources (high self-esteem) reduced their escalation compared to those with fewer affirmational resources (low self-esteem). Study 2 extended these findings by demonstrating that individuals also de-escalated their commitments when they were provided an opportunity to affirm on an important value. Finally, Study 3 found that affirming on traits that were of low relevance (e.g., creativity) to an initial decision reduced escalation, but affirming on decision-relevant traits (e.g., decision-making ability) ironically increased escalation. Across three studies, using three instantiations of self-affirmations and two measures of escalation, the results highlight the potential benefits and costs of using self-affirmation as a vehicle to de-escalate commitment.

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High-stakes decisions are a central aspect of managerial life, and management scholars have amassed a large body of research on the anatomy of rational decision making and its anomalies (see Bazerman, 2002, for

review). One anomaly that has garnered over 30 years of research surrounds individuals' tendency to allocate additional resources to a failing course of action. Referred to as *escalation of commitment* (Staw, 1976), this bias has been shown to influence decisions involving military involvement in war (Lipshitz, 1995), auctions (Ku, Galinsky, & Murnighan, 2006; Ku, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2005), financial investments (Ross & Staw, 1986), and human resource allocations (Schoorman, 1988; Staw & Hoang, 1995).

Escalation of commitment occurs when a decision maker has allocated resources toward a particular goal and then received feedback that the goal was not achieved. Now facing an ambiguous choice of whether further resources will bring about goal attainment, the decision maker adds to (i.e., escalates) his or her original

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investment. Thus, as noted by Brockner (1992) “. . . escalation situations include repeated (rather than one-shot) decision making in the face of negative feedback about prior resource allocations, uncertainty surrounding the likelihood of goal attainment, and choice about whether to continue” (Brockner, 1992, p. 40). Escalation of commitment is typically considered economically irrational because rationality requires ignoring costs already incurred (sunk costs) and only considering costs that may change as a result of one’s future decision (variable costs). In addition, escalation of commitment often results in poor decision outcomes as decision makers continue to pursue lost causes, resulting in additional wasted time and resources.

Although a variety of economic, social, and psychological explanations have been posited to explain why escalation occurs (See Arkes & Blumer, 1985; Brockner, 1992 for review; Staw, 1997), one particularly informative line of research focuses on people’s psychological desires for *self-justification* (Brockner et al., 1986; Staw, 1976, 1997). Staw (1976), for example, suggests that escalation occurs because “individuals actively seek to maintain or restore the appearance of rationality to a previously chosen course of action” (Staw, 1976, p. 42). As a result, when faced with negative feedback concerning a previously chosen action, the self is threatened, which activates the need to self-justify, pushing individuals to increase their allocations (of effort, money, time, or company resources) to the initial decision.

In the current research, we consider how attempting to decrease the need for self-justification may impact the ability of decision makers to de-escalate their commitments. Because self-threat arising from negative feedback can trigger justification needs and escalation processes, we examine how affirming one’s overall self-worth following a poor decision (Steele, 1988; Tesser, 2000) can decrease escalation. Although the process of self-affirmation should generally mobilize one’s resources for maintaining global self-integrity and diminish the self-threat experienced in escalation situations, several lines of research have also suggested that, in certain circumstances, attempting such affirmations can instead draw attention to self-standards that have not been met and paradoxically increase feelings of threat (Blanton, Cooper, Skurnik, & Aronson, 1997; Galinsky, Stone, & Cooper, 2000). Thus, the primary purpose of this article is to investigate when and for whom self-affirmation can eliminate or exacerbate escalation of commitment.

The role of self-justification in escalation of commitment

Most people are driven to see themselves in a positive light. As a result, the inferences people form about their own actions are typically self-serving (Dunning &

Cohen, 1992; Kunda, 1990) and there is a pervasive tendency to focus on information that is consistent with a positive view of the self, e.g., that one is intelligent (Wyer & Frey, 1983), competent (Beckman, 1973) and healthy (Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch, & Lockhart, 1998).

Self-justification processes in escalation of commitment are thought to reflect similar self-serving reasoning. For example, Festinger (1957) proposed that when people’s behavior contradicts their attitudes or beliefs, it creates cognitive dissonance. Because attitudes can be altered more easily than previous behaviors, individuals change their attitudes to rationalize their past behaviors. This restores psychological consistency, and thus reduces the psychological discomfort from cognitive dissonance. Extending self-justification process to escalation situations, Staw and Fox (1977) proposed that instead of altering their attitudes to be consistent with past behavior, individuals can seek to rationalize past behavior through a continued commitment to that behavior. Thus, research on the engine that drives escalation suggests that the motive to justify our earlier investments as wise and rational results in behavior that contradicts economic notions of rationality (Whyte, 1986).

Evidence for the role of self-justification in escalation can be found in multiple studies that have manipulated self-justification needs by varying perceived responsibility for an initial decision; only when people feel threatened by their personal responsibility for a failed decision should they be motivated to justify this decision and thus escalate their commitments. Confirming this pattern of results, Staw (1976) found that personal responsibility for an initial failed investment led to greater escalation. Bazerman, Beekun, and Schoorman (1982) found similar effects on employee performance appraisals: people were more likely to continue their support for poorly performing employees when they were personally responsible for the employee’s initial promotion than when they were not responsible. Finally, Staw and Fox (1977) found evidence that when accusations of responsibility threatened people’s reputation as skilled decision makers, they viewed abandoning their initial decisions as a personal threat (Brockner et al., 1986) and continued to “stay the course” in the hopes of proving that their initial decisions were justified. Taken together, these studies strongly support the role of personal threats in creating self-justification needs which fuel escalation of commitment.

Self-justification and self-affirmation

Research on personal responsibility and escalation of commitment has illustrated the important role of self-threat in triggering escalation. Yet managers are rou-

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