

Rationalization

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rationalization_\(psychology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rationalization_(psychology))

In psychology and logic, **rationalization** or **rationalisation** (also known as **making excuses**^[1]) is a defense mechanism in which controversial behaviors or feelings are justified and explained in a seemingly rational or logical manner to avoid the true explanation, and are made consciously tolerable – or even admirable and superior – by plausible means.^[2] It is also an informal fallacy of reasoning.^[3]

Rationalisation happens in two steps:

- 1 A decision, action, judgement is made for a given reason, or no (known) reason at all (in cases for instance of dogmatic judgement or normal behaviour).
- 2 A rationalisation is performed, constructing a seemingly good or logical reason, as an attempt to justify the act after the fact (for oneself or others).

Rationalization encourages irrational or unacceptable behavior, motives, or feelings and often involves ad hoc hypothesizing. This process ranges from fully conscious (e.g. to present an external defense against ridicule from others) to mostly unconscious (e.g. to create a block against internal feelings of guilt). People rationalize for various reasons — sometimes when we think we know ourselves better than we do. Rationalization may differentiate^[clarification needed] the original deterministic explanation of the behavior or feeling in question^[clarification needed].^{[4][5]}

History[edit]

Quintilian and classical rhetoric used the term *color* for the presenting of an action in the most favourable possible perspective.^[6] Laurence Sterne in the eighteenth century took up the point, arguing that, were a man to consider his actions, "he will soon find, that such of them, as strong inclination and custom have prompted him to commit, are generally dressed out and painted with all the false beauties [color] which, a soft and flattering hand can give them".^[7]

DSM definition[edit]

According to the DSM-IV, rationalization occurs "when the individual deals with emotional conflict or internal or external stressors by concealing the true motivations for his or her own thoughts, actions, or feelings through the elaboration of reassuring or self serving but incorrect explanations."^[citation needed]

Examples[edit]

Individual[edit]

- Rationalization can be used to avoid admitting disappointment: *"I didn't get the job that I applied for, but I really didn't want it in the first place."*

Egregious rationalizations intended to deflect blame can also take the form of ad hominem attacks. Some rationalizations take the form of a comparison. Commonly this is done to lessen the perception of an action's negative effects, to justify an action, or to excuse culpability:

- *"At least [what occurred] is not as bad as [a worse outcome]."*
- In response to an accusation: *"At least I didn't [worse action than accused action]."*
- As a form of false choice: *"Doing [undesirable action] is a lot better than [a worse action]."*

Based on anecdotal and survey evidence, John Banja states that the medical field features a disproportionate amount of rationalization invoked in the "covering up" of mistakes.^[8] Common excuses made are:

- "Why disclose the error? The patient was going to die anyway."
- "Telling the family about the error will only make them feel worse."
- "It was the patient's fault. If he wasn't so (obese, sick etc), this error wouldn't have caused so much harm."
- "Well, we did our best. These things happen."
- "If we're not totally and absolutely certain the error caused the harm, we don't have to tell."
- "They're dead anyway, no point in blaming."

Collective[edit]

- Collective rationalizations are regularly constructed for acts of aggression,^[9] based on exaltation of the in-group and demonisation of the opposite side: as Fritz Perls put it, "Our own soldiers take care of the poor families; the enemy rapes them".^[10]
- Celebrity culture can be seen as rationalizing the gap between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, by offering participation to both dominant and subaltern views of reality.^[11]

Cognitive dissonance[edit]

Main article: Cognitive dissonance

Leon Festinger highlighted in 1957 the discomfort caused people by awareness of inconsistent thought.^[19]

Rationalization can reduce such discomfort by explaining away the discrepancy in question, as when people who take up smoking after previously quitting decide that the evidence for it being harmful is less than they previously thought.^[20]