

Cognitive Dissonance

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by [By Saul McLeod](#) published 2008, updated 2014

Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors. This produces a feeling of discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance etc.

For example, when people smoke (behavior) and they know that smoking causes cancer (cognition).

Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory suggests that we have an inner drive to hold all our attitudes and beliefs in harmony and avoid disharmony (or dissonance).

Attitudes may change because of factors within the person. An important factor here is the **principle of cognitive consistency**, the focus of Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. This theory starts from the idea that we seek consistency in our beliefs and attitudes in any situation where two cognitions are inconsistent.

Leon Festinger (1957) proposed cognitive dissonance theory, which states that a powerful motive to maintain cognitive consistency can give rise to irrational and sometimes maladaptive behavior.

According to Festinger, we hold many cognitions about the world and ourselves; when they clash, a discrepancy is evoked, resulting in a state of tension known as cognitive dissonance. As the experience of dissonance is unpleasant, we are motivated to reduce or eliminate it, and achieve consonance (i.e. agreement).

Cognitive dissonance was first investigated by Leon Festinger, arising out of a participant observation study of a cult which believed that the earth was going to be destroyed by a flood, and what happened to its members — particularly the really committed ones who had given up their homes and jobs to work for the cult — when the flood did not happen.

While fringe members were more inclined to recognize that they had made fools of themselves and to "put it down to experience", committed members were more likely to re-interpret the evidence to show that they were right all along (the earth was not destroyed because of the faithfulness of the cult members).

How Attitude Change Takes Place

According to cognitive dissonance theory, there is a tendency for individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions (i.e., beliefs, opinions). When there is an inconsistency between attitudes or behaviors (dissonance), something must change to eliminate the dissonance.

Dissonance can be reduced in one of three ways:

First, individuals can **change one or more of the attitudes**, behavior, beliefs etc. so as to make the relationship between the two elements a consonant one. When one of the dissonant elements is a behavior, the individual can change or eliminate the behavior. However, this mode of dissonance reduction frequently presents problems for people, as it is often difficult for people to change well-learned behavioral responses (e.g. giving up smoking).

A second (cognitive) method of reducing dissonance is to **acquire new information** that outweighs the dissonant

beliefs. For example, thinking smoking causes lung cancer will cause dissonance if a person smokes. However, new information such as “research has not proved definitely that smoking causes lung cancer” may reduce the dissonance.

A third way to reduce dissonance is to **reduce the importance of the cognitions** (i.e. beliefs, attitudes). A person could convince themselves that it is better to "live for today" than to "save for tomorrow." In other words, he could tell himself that a short life filled with smoking and sensual pleasures is better than a long life devoid of such joys. In this way, he would be decreasing the importance of the dissonant cognition (smoking is bad for ones health).

Notice that dissonance theory does not state that these modes of dissonance reduction will actually work, only that individuals who are in a state of cognitive dissonance will take steps to reduce the extent of their dissonance. One of the points that dissonance theorists are fond of making is that people will go to all sorts of lengths to reduce dissonance.

The theory of cognitive dissonance has been widely researched in a number of situations to develop the basic idea in more detail, and various factors that have been identified which may be important in attitude change.

This research can be divided into three main areas:

1. forced compliance behavior,
2. decision-making,
3. and effort.

We will look at the main findings to have emerged from each area.

Forced Compliance Behavior

When someone is forced to do (publicly) something they (privately) really don't want to do, dissonance is created between their cognition (I didn't want to do this) and their behavior (I did it).

Forced compliance occurs when an individual performs an action that is inconsistent with his or her beliefs. The behavior can't be changed, since it was already in the past, so dissonance will need to be reduced by re-evaluating their attitude to what they have done. This prediction has been tested experimentally:

In an intriguing experiment, **Festinger and Carlsmith (1959)** asked participants to perform a series of dull tasks (such as turning pegs in a peg board for an hour). As you can imagine, participant's attitudes toward this task were highly negative. They were then paid either \$1 or \$20 to tell a waiting participant (relay a confederate) that the tasks were really interesting. Almost all of the participants agreed to walk into the waiting room and persuade the subject accomplice that the boring experiment would be fun.



Aim

Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) investigated if making people perform a dull task would create cognitive dissonance through forced compliance behavior.

Method

In their laboratory experiment, they used 71 male students as participants to perform a series of dull tasks (such as turning pegs in a peg board for an hour).

They were then paid either \$1 or \$20 to tell a waiting participant (a confederate) that the tasks were really interesting. Almost all of the participants agreed to walk into the waiting room and persuade the confederate that the boring experiment would be fun.

Results

When the participants were asked to evaluate the experiment, the participants who were paid only \$1 rated the tedious task as more fun and enjoyable than the participants who were paid \$20 to lie.

Conclusion

Being paid only \$1 is not sufficient incentive for lying and so those who were paid \$1 experienced dissonance. They could only overcome that dissonance by coming to believe that the tasks really were interesting and enjoyable. Being paid \$20 provides a reason for turning pegs and there is therefore no dissonance.

Decision Making

Life is filled with decisions, and decisions (as a general rule) arouse dissonance.

For example, suppose you had to decide whether to accept a job in an absolutely beautiful area of the country, or turn down the job so you could be near your friends and family. Either way, you would experience dissonance. If you took the job you would miss your loved ones; if you turned the job down, you would pine for the beautiful streams, mountains, and valleys.

Both alternatives have their good points and bad points. The rub is that making a decision cuts off the possibility that you can enjoy the advantages of the unchosen alternative, yet it assures you that you must accept the disadvantages of the chosen alternative.

People have several ways to reduce dissonance that is aroused by making a decision (Festinger, 1964). One thing they can do is to change the behavior. As noted earlier, this is often very difficult, so people frequently employ a variety of mental maneuvers. A common way to reduce dissonance is to increase the attractiveness of the chosen alternative and to decrease the attractiveness of the rejected alternative. This is referred to as "spreading apart the alternatives."

Brehm (1956) was the first to investigate the relationship between dissonance and decision-making. Female participants were informed they would be helping out in a study funded by several manufacturers.

Participants were also told that they would receive one of the products at the end of the experiment to compensate for their time and effort. The women then rated the desirability of eight household products that ranged in price from \$15 to \$30. The products included an automatic coffee maker, an electric sandwich grill, an automatic toaster, and a portable radio.

Participants in the control group were simply given one of the products. Because these participants did not make a decision, they did not have any dissonance to reduce. Individuals in the low-dissonance group chose between a desirable product and one rated 3 points lower on an 8-point scale. Participants in the high-dissonance condition chose between a highly desirable product and one rated just 1 point lower on the 8-point scale. After reading the reports about the various products, individuals rated the products again.

Participants in the high-dissonance condition spread apart the alternatives significantly more than did the

participants in the other two conditions. In other words, they were more likely than participants in the other two conditions to increase the attractiveness of the chosen alternative and to decrease the attractiveness of the unchosen alternative.

Effort

It also seems to be the case that we value most highly those goals or items which have required considerable effort to achieve.

This is probably because dissonance would be caused if we spent a great effort to achieve something and then evaluated it negatively. We could, of course, spend years of effort into achieving something which turns out to be a load of rubbish and then, in order to avoid the dissonance that produces, try to convince ourselves that we didn't really spend years of effort, or that the effort was really quite enjoyable, or that it wasn't really a lot of effort.

In fact, though, it seems we find it easier to persuade ourselves that what we have achieved is worthwhile and that's what most of us do, evaluating highly something whose achievement has cost us dear - whether other people think it's much cop or not! This method of reducing dissonance is known as 'effort justification'.

If we put effort into a task which we have chosen to carry out, and the task turns out badly, we experience dissonance. To reduce this dissonance, we are motivated to try to think that the task turned out well. A classic dissonance experiment by Aronson and Mills (1959) demonstrates the basic idea.

Aim

To investigate the relationship between dissonance and effort.

Method

Female students volunteered to take part in a discussion on the psychology of sex. In the 'mild embarrassment' condition, participants read aloud to a male experimenter a list of sex-related words like 'virgin' and 'prostitute'.

In the 'severe embarrassment' condition, they had to read aloud obscene words and a very explicit sexual passage. In the control condition, they went straight into the main study. In all conditions they then heard a very boring discussion about sex in lower animals. They were asked to rate how interesting they had found the discussion, and how interesting they had found the people involved in it.

Results

Participants in the 'severe embarrassment' condition gave the most positive rating.

Conclusion

If a voluntary experience which has cost a lot of effort turns out badly, dissonance is reduced by redefining the experience as interesting. This justifies the effort made.

Critical Evaluation

There has been a great deal of research into cognitive dissonance, providing some interesting and sometimes unexpected findings. It is a theory with very broad applications, showing that we aim for a consistency between attitudes and behaviors, and may not use very rational methods to achieve it. It has the advantage of being testable

by scientific means (i.e. experiments).

However, there is a problem from a scientific point of view, because we **cannot physically observe cognitive dissonance**, and therefore we cannot objectively measure it (re: behaviorism). Consequently, the term cognitive dissonance is somewhat subjective.

There is also some **ambiguity (i.e. vagueness) about the term 'dissonance'** itself. Is it a perception (as 'cognitive' suggests), or a feeling, or a feeling about a perception? Aronson's revision of the idea of dissonance as inconsistency between a person's self-concept and a cognition about their behavior makes it seem likely that dissonance is really nothing more than guilt.

There are also **individual differences** in whether or not people act as this theory predicts. Highly anxious people are more likely to do so. Many people seem able to cope with considerable dissonance and not experience the tensions the theory predicts.

Finally, many of the studies supporting the theory of cognitive dissonance have low **ecological validity**. For example, turning pegs (as in Festinger's experiment) is an artificial task that doesn't happen in everyday life. Also, the majority of experiments used students as participants, which raise issues of a **biased sample**. Could we generalize the results from such experiments?

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