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Cognitive Dissonance: How Reality Harshes Your Mellow

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### Abstract

This paper reviews the theory of cognitive dissonance, beginning with Leon Festinger's original theory that cognitive dissonance is a basic human drive. Other, newer additions to the theory are also reviewed. Two specific experiments are reviewed, one on doing favors and one on course difficulty and teacher evaluations. Implications of the theory are discussed, including how one can use knowledge of cognitive dissonance theory to increase personal rationality, and some possible implications of cognitive dissonance theory for social activists.

## Cognitive Dissonance: How Reality Harshes Your Mellow

### Introduction

Imagine it is the day after Election Day. You cast your vote, you watched the polls, and now you find out that your candidate lost. This is an uncomfortable feeling. You have several beliefs that are thrown into doubt, including “this candidate is the best”, “our current voting system works well”, or “the majority of people vote for the best candidate”. To decrease this uncomfortable feeling, you may change one or more of these beliefs. You may retrospectively start to think the winning candidate was the better choice after all. You may lose some faith in the power of voting. You may put down the people who voted for the winning candidate, believing that they were uninformed or stupid. You may even try to change the situation, insisting that your candidate actually won and the votes were miscounted.

The psychological explanation for what is going on in your head during this process is that you are trying to reduce cognitive dissonance. Hypocrisy, absurdity, and contradictions are uncomfortable for every human, and when faced with two thoughts, or cognitions, which do not agree with each other, we try as hard as we can to change something. When reality impinges we must try to accommodate it, even if it harshes our mellow.

### What Is Cognitive Dissonance?

In 1957, Leon Festinger proposed the theory of cognitive dissonance. Since then, it has been a key element of social psychology. Understanding cognitive dissonance is crucial to understanding why people are frequently not rational in their own decisions and in their relationships with others.

*Festinger's definition of cognitive dissonance*

Leon Festinger (1957) wrote: "The basic hypotheses I wish to state are as follows: 1. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance. 2. When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance" (p. 3). Festinger additionally pointed out that the above definition could apply to any psychological force if you replaced the word "dissonance" with "hunger" or "frustration". Reducing dissonance is a basic human drive.

Festinger proposed that there are three elements involved in resisting changing a dissonance-producing cognition: 1) The change may be painful or involve loss. For instance, giving up smoking causes withdrawal symptoms. 2) The present behavior may be otherwise satisfying. Smoking may allow someone to spend time with people while sharing an activity. 3) Making the change may not be voluntarily possible. When dissonance is caused by something in the environment, it may not be possible to reduce the dissonance-causing experience. It may be hard to believe your house burned down, but no matter how hard you try to disbelieve it reality will keep presenting you with that dissonance-inducing fact.

An interesting note is that many people do change their environment to match their beliefs. "For example," Festinger (1957) says, "a person who is habitually very hostile toward other people may surround himself with persons who provoke hostility. His cognitions about the persons with whom he associates are then consonant with the cognitions corresponding to his hostile behavior" (p. 20). However, this is infrequently possible, much less easy. Permanent change of one's environment is even more difficult.

*Some ways others have looked at cognitive dissonance*

Harmon-Jones and Mills (1999) point out how many theories have sprung from Festinger's original idea, ranging from very close to very different. "Part of the reason it has been so generative is that the theory was stated in very general, highly abstract terms. As a consequence, it can be applied to a wide variety of psychological topics involving the interplay of cognition, motivation, and emotion" (p. 5). Many psychologists have done experiments that both confirm the basics of cognitive dissonance theory while adding a new dimension. For instance, after someone chooses one item over a similarly attractive item, they rate the items as further apart in value than they originally did (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999, p. 6). The chosen item will be rated as more attractive, while the refused item will be rated less attractive.

Many experiments have shown that doing an unpleasant activity causes cognitive dissonance. "From the cognition that the activity is unpleasant, it follows that one would not engage in the activity; the cognition that the activity is unpleasant is dissonant with engaging in the activity (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999, p. 7). Along the same lines, if a person makes a large effort for a not-so-pleasant result, they will attempt to reduce this dissonance by trying to justify their effort.

Another paradigm of cognitive dissonance theory is called the "induced-compliance paradigm" (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999, p. 8) and refers to how a person's beliefs change when they say their beliefs have changed for the benefit of others. A subject who is induced to say something in conflict with their beliefs will tend to shift their beliefs to reduce the dissonance of lying.

### Experiments on Cognitive Dissonance

The basic idea of cognitive dissonance seems simple and obvious. People try to be consistent; when they are not they are uncomfortable; when people are uncomfortable they try to change what makes them uncomfortable. We all experience constant momentary dissonance, but almost all the time it is so easy to change our cognition that we do not take notice of the slight shift. But the basic theory of cognitive dissonance can be expressed in a number of surprising and interesting ways. It seems likely that you will like someone who does you a favor and that students will like teachers who go easy on them, but if you look at the situation through the lens of cognitive dissonance, the opposite can be true.

#### *Lenient grading, student effort, and teacher evaluations*

In general, students who get better grades like the teacher who gives them more. This easily leads to the opinion that teachers who give the best grades for the least amount of work will receive high evaluations from students. However, Heckert, Latier, Ringwald-Burton, and Drazen (2006) found that in accordance with cognitive dissonance theory, when students put forth a larger amount of effort for a teacher, they liked that teacher more in order to justify the effort. Heckert et al. asked 463 students to fill out a seven-point scale. This evaluating student effort by such measures as pre-class preparation and in-class participation, class difficulty as measured by pace, amount of assignments, and perceived difficulty, and teacher effectiveness through pedagogical skill, perceived value and learning, and just plain rapport with students. Their results confirmed that higher student effort was positively related to positive teacher evaluations.

It should be noted, however, that student effort and given workload are distinctly different variables. A large workload did not automatically lead to either student effort or

positive teacher evaluations. Heckert et al. found that “difficulty appropriateness” was the most significantly correlated with both. They explained this by saying that “students are likely to evaluate courses more positively if they feel the course was worthwhile” (para. 7) and that their effort resulted in learning something valuable.

*“He that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you another”*

Benjamin Franklin once had a certain political enemy. Instead of going head to head or even trying to win him over, Franklin asked his adversary to loan him a book. According to his report, his opponent became much more friendly. Franklin turned the experience into a proverb: “He that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you another than he whom you yourself have obliged” (cited in Aronson, 1995, p. 364). Controlled studies have confirmed similar results. In one experiment, students won money and, after the experiment was supposedly over, members of one group were asked to return it as a special favor to the broke experimenter. The results of a later survey asking participants to state their opinion of the experimenter showed that members of this group liked the experimenter better than members of a control group who did not return the money (Aronson, 1995, p. 364). These results have some very interesting implications.

### Implications of Cognitive Dissonance

The most obvious use for knowledge of how cognitive dissonance works is in increasing personal rationality. If you know the lengths to which people are likely to go to reduce dissonance and justify their efforts and decisions, you are better able to ask yourself whether your choices, actions and beliefs are rational or whether you are trying any avenue to decrease cognitive dissonance, even if it is not the most rational choice. However, I believe cognitive dissonance theory has even greater implications for social interaction and social change.

*Social injustice*

Cognitive dissonance theory helps explain why those who are the most disadvantaged by a given social system frequently are the ones most likely to support it. People who are the most disadvantaged by a system have the greatest need to justify why they're not rebelling. Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, and Sullivan (2002) found from national surveys that, among other results, "low-income respondents were more likely than high-income respondents to believe that large differences in pay are necessary to foster motivation and effort" (abstract). This counter-intuitive result is explained by low-income respondents reducing the cognitive dissonance involved not acting to change a system that does not work for them financially by justifying why the system is necessary.

Social activists who wish to change unjust social systems must be aware that those who are most disadvantaged by the system will frequently be resistant to changing it. To increase support for change, activists must find other ways for people to reduce the cognitive dissonance involved in having put up with an uncomfortable situation for as long as they have.

*Philanthropy and volunteerism*

Experiments showing that doing someone a favor makes you like them more, such as the one cited by Aronson above, have interesting implications for those who ask others to donate their time or money to a cause. If doing someone a favor causes you to be more willing to do them a favor in the future, it follows that once someone has volunteered or donated money, they will be more likely to donate again in the future.

This conclusion is confirmed by an experiment done by Cialdini and Schroeder (cited in Aronson, 1995, p. 207). The experimenters went door to door asking for donations. Sometimes they simply asked for a donation, and sometimes they emphasized that even a very small

donation was welcome. They found that not only did people who donated once almost twice as likely to donate again, they did not donate smaller amounts. “Once people reach into their pockets, emerging with a mere penny is self-demeaning; a larger donation is consistent with their self-perception of being reasonably kind and generous” (Aronson, 1995, p. 207). For people who want to raise money or recruit volunteers, the benefits are obvious. If one can encourage someone to donate a small amount of time or money, it is that much easier to encourage them to contribute again. They have already involved themselves in your cause, and must justify the effort they have already put in.

### Conclusion

The more our thoughts are out of sync with reality, the more frequently we experience dissonance. Our discomfort with dissonance is what keeps us relating accurately to objective reality and to the social cues and cultural mores of those around us. Although we may want to believe something very much, if there is enough conflicting information and experience out there we will experience dissonance again and again, until it builds up enough that changing our pleasant but wrong belief is easier than continuing to tolerate dissonance. Cognitive dissonance may harsh our mellow, but the end result of this basic drive is a better ability to exist in the same reality as others.

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