

# CHAPTER 15

## *COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY*

### Outline:

- I. Dissonance: discord between behavior and belief.
  - A. Identified by Leon Festinger, cognitive dissonance is the distressing mental state that people feel when they find themselves doing things that don't fit with what they know, or having opinions that do not fit with other opinions they hold.
  - B. Humans have a basic need to avoid dissonance and establish consistency.
  - C. The tension of dissonance motivates the person to change either the behavior or the belief.
  - D. The more important the issue and the greater the discrepancy, the higher the magnitude of dissonance.
  
- II. Three hypotheses: ways to reduce dissonance between attitudes and actions.
  - A. Hypothesis #1: selective exposure prevents dissonance.
    1. We avoid information that is likely to increase dissonance.
    2. Selective exposure works only when we anticipate hearing ideas that run counter to our beliefs.
    3. Dieter Frey concluded that selective exposure exists only when information is known to be a threat.
    4. Warm personal relationships are the best environment for considering discrepant views.
  - B. Hypothesis #2: post decision dissonance creates a need for reassurance.
    1. The more important the issue, the more dissonance.
    2. The longer an individual delays a choice between two equally attractive options, the more dissonance.
    3. The greater the difficulty involving reversing the decision once it has been made, the more dissonance.
  - C. Hypothesis #3: minimal justification for action induces a shift in attitude.
    1. Conventional wisdom suggests that to change behavior, you must first alter attitude.
    2. Festinger reverses the sequence.
    3. In addition, he predicts that attitude change and dissonance reduction depend on providing only a minimum justification for the change in behavior.
  
- III. A classic experiment: "Would I Lie for a dollar?"
  - A. Festinger's minimal justification hypothesis is counterintuitive.
  - B. The Stanford \$1/\$20 experiment supported the minimal justification hypothesis because subjects who received a very small reward demonstrated a change in attitude.

- IV. State-of-the-art revisions: the cause and effect of dissonance.
  - A. Most persuasion researchers today subscribe to one of three revisions of Festinger's original theory.
  - B. Self-consistency: the rationalizing animal.
    - 1. Elliot Aronson argued that dissonance is caused by psychological rather than logical inconsistency.
    - 2. Humans aren't rational, they are rationalizing.
    - 3. Research such as the \$1/\$20 experiment provides evidence of self-esteem maintenance.
    - 4. The amount of dissonance a person can experience is directly proportional to the effort he or she has invested in the behavior.
  - C. Personal responsibility for bad outcomes (the new look).
    - 1. Joel Cooper argues that it's the knowledge that one's actions have unnecessarily hurt another person that generates dissonance.
    - 2. Cooper concludes that dissonance is a state of arousal caused by behaving in such a way as to feel personally responsible for bringing about an aversive event.
  - D. Self-affirmation to dissipate dissonance.
    - 1. Claude Steele focuses on dissonance reduction.
    - 2. He believes that high self-esteem is a resource for dissonance reduction.
    - 3. Steele asserts that most people are motivated to maintain a self-image of moral and adaptive adequacy.
  - E. These three revisions of Festinger's theory are not mutually exclusive.
  
- V. Theory into practice: persuasion through dissonance.
  - A. Festinger's theory offers practical advice for those who wish to effect attitude change as a product of dissonance.
  - B. Apply the concepts of selective exposure, postdecision dissonance, and minimal justification to manage dissonance effectively.
  - C. As long as counterattitudinal actions are freely chosen and publicly taken, people are more likely to adopt beliefs that support what they've done.
  - D. Personal responsibility for negative outcomes should be taken into account.
  
- VI. Critique: Dissonance over dissonance.
  - A. Cognitive dissonance may not be falsifiable.
  - B. Festinger never specified a reliable way to detect the degree of dissonance a person experiences.
    - 1. Patricia Devine applauds researchers who have attempted to gauge the arousal component of dissonance.
  - C. Daryl Bem believes that self-perception is a much simpler explanation of attitude change than cognitive dissonance is.
    - 1. His version of the \$1/\$20 experiment supports his contention.
    - 2. Bem suggests that cognitive dissonance does not follow the rule of parsimony.
  - D. Despite detractors, cognitive dissonance theory has energized objective scholars of communication for 45 years.

## Key Names and Terms:

### *Leon Festinger*

A former Stanford University social psychologist and creator of the theory of cognitive dissonance.

### *Cognitive Dissonance*

The distressing mental state caused by inconsistency between a person's two beliefs or a belief and an action; an adverse motivation to change a belief.

### *Selective Exposure*

The principle that people pay attention only to ideas they already believe because discrepant information would be mentally distressing.

### *Dieter Frey*

A German psychologist who concluded that selective exposure exists only when information is known to be a threat.

### *Postdecision Dissonance*

Distressing doubts about the wisdom of a decision after it has been made; the resulting need for reassurance is highest the more the decision was important, difficult, or irrevocable.

### *Minimal Justification Hypothesis*

The best way to achieve private attitudinal change is to offer just enough reward or punishment to elicit public compliance.

### *\$1/\$20 Experiment*

Festinger and James Carlsmith's famous and controversial test of the minimal justification hypothesis, which has been replicated and reinterpreted by many other researchers.

### *Elliot Aronson*

A University of California social psychologist who argued that cognitive dissonance is caused by psychological—rather than logical—inconsistency.

### *Joel Cooper*

A Princeton University psychologist who argues that dissonance is caused by the knowledge that one's actions have unnecessarily hurt another person.

### *Claude Steele*

A Stanford University psychologist who argues that high self-esteem is a resource for dissonance reduction.

### *Patricia Devine*

A University of Wisconsin—Madison psychologist who believes that dissonance needs to be measured more accurately, particularly by a self-report measure of affect.

### *Daryl Bem*

A Cornell University psychologist who argues that self-perception is a much simpler explanation of attitude change than is cognitive dissonance.

## Principal Changes:

Readers of the fourth edition of *A First Look* who are unfamiliar with earlier versions will find this chapter entirely new. Veterans of the text who have read earlier editions will find that the first part of this chapter has changed very little. Beginning with the section entitled "A

Classic Experiment," however, Griffin has entirely rewritten most of the material. For example, he has added the work of psychologists Joel Cooper, Claude Steele, and—in the *Critique* section—Patricia Devine and has removed the discussion of Robert Wicklund and Jack Brehm's contributions. And, correspondingly, the *Second Look* section has been updated. As a result of these revisions, even though Griffin employs the same global example here, this version of the chapter feels very different from the treatment of cognitive dissonance featured in the Third Edition.

## Suggestions for Discussion:

In our experience, this is a difficult chapter to teach because at least one principal tenet of the theory is hard to grasp and/or counterintuitive. In particular, the minimal justification hypothesis perplexes students, who have come to understand that more is better than less. As upwardly mobile individuals, they believe they understand the calculus of rewards and punishments, and they know that the stakes in the professional world they will soon enter are high. We suggest that you tackle their confusion and skepticism head-on. As a class, scrutinize the examples Griffin provides, seeking to determine if other explanations for the reported behavior are more compelling than those offered by the featured theory. Take Griffin seriously, for example, when he asks in exercise #2 in *Questions to Sharpen Your Focus*, "The Results of Festinger's famous \$1/\$20 experiment can be explained in a number of ways. Which explanation do you find most satisfying?" (220). Festinger and Carlsmith's findings are based on a belief that the \$1 liars really think they're telling the truth when they claim to have enjoyed the boring task. Is this assumption warranted? Are there other explanations besides the minimal justification hypothesis for why students such as Joan would find the island experience more memorable with a lower emphasis on tests (213)? Challenges such as these help students to think critically about the interpretation of key studies and examples.

To alter the pedagogical perspective slightly, you may wish to discuss with your students that cognitive dissonance's counterintuitive core may possibly be viewed as its greatest *strength*. In a field that is so often perceived as driven by mere common sense and traditional wisdom, it is important to stress moments when knowledge and theory building work against the grain of received wisdom. With your students' help, generate a short list of important ideas, hypotheses, or theories that were originally considered bizarre, heretical, or nonsensical. Remind them that if common sense were always in charge, the earth might still be flat, the sun might still revolve around it daily, and human flight might remain a fantasy.

We suggest that you speculate with your students about the fact that cognitive dissonance may not account for situations in which individuals act rationally, decisively, and on occasion even heroically to eliminate discrepancies between their beliefs and their behaviors? Many people strive to think through the inconsistencies in their lives, and these reason-driven struggles lead individuals to give up destructive habits such as substance abuse, join or leave organizations, movements, and churches. Others terminate relationships they believe to be destructive. In extreme cases, when individuals cannot find ways to justify their actions, they commit suicide, an act that offers a particularly strong challenge to the assumption that humans are inherently rationalizing animals. How, for example, would Festinger account for Judas's death? Why didn't the fallen disciple simply rationalize that his former master deserved to die, or that the reward money proved the value of his service to the state? Why, if

people inherently explain away their dubious actions, are deathbed confessions not uncommon occurrences? Cognitive dissonance has great explanatory power in some instances, but it is hard-pressed to explain the full gamut of human behavior.

To put it another way, this theory of behavior and belief does not seem to be built on a particularly flattering or optimistic view of our species, but rather a Hobbesian foundation of human weakness, deficiency, and manipulation. (Integrative Essay Question #1 seeks to address this issue.) Without falling into rationalization (and thus acting out of the very mind-set we seek to understand), can one advocate cognitive dissonance theory and still maintain a positive view of the species and the process of influence? The problem is compounded when one considers the hierarchical emphasis on manipulating rewards and punishments inherent in the theory. Are the great majority of humans mere pigeons, readily handled by the elite cognitive dissonance specialists among us? Does successful persuasion constitute nothing more honorable or value-centered than cagily controlling behavior, stimulating the rationalization process in others by dropping the right-sized feed pellet at the right moment? Such challenges will help enliven your discussion and show your students that the implications of theories truly matter.

If students are perplexed by the counterintuitive proposition that behavior causes attitude, rather than the other way around, you may wish to mention that Alcoholics Anonymous successfully employs this premise to help with recovery. Their motto, "Fake it till you make it," encourages their followers to go through the motions of the proper lifestyle so that the belief will follow. By practicing abstinence, the recovering alcoholic eventually achieves the healthful mind-set. This positive application of the theory may serve to counteract some of the potentially negative aspects we raised above.

Initially, we were somewhat confused by the section of the chapter entitled "State of the Art Revisions: The Cause and Effect of Dissonance." In his discussion of the major reinterpretations of the classic \$1/\$20 experiment, Griffin does not explicitly mention the way each scholar theorized both the \$1 *and* the \$20 responses to the lie. As Griffin explained it to us, this apparent omission is due to the fact that all of the theorists involved would interpret the \$20 response in the same basic way. At the time, \$20 was enough money to allow the subjects to rationalize a small lie and thus to destroy any potential dissonance. The key issue in this section, thus, is not the \$20 response, but the revisionist scholars' differing interpretation of the cause and effect of the \$1 responses. More specifically, each state-of-the-art revision has a different way of understanding the dissonance created when lying for such a small amount of money.

Some students may wonder how one determines the proper minimal level of justification. Can one aim too low? They will be interested to know that Festinger asserts that if the reward falls below a certain minimum, the results will be counterproductive, thus strengthening the audience's original attitude. Exactly how one determines the proper minimum, of course, is difficult to quantify.

An additional difficulty with this chapter is that the connection between cognitive dissonance and communication may seem tenuous to many students. Essay question #9, below, seeks to encourage students to integrate the theory with their discipline.

Above, we question the necessity of believing the statements of the \$1 liars, which brings up the larger issue of the design of the overall experiment. Since the line between theory and research is frequently and insightfully crossed in this book, we would encourage classroom speculation in this area. In terms of experimental ethics, for example, we find it intriguing that--as Griffin mentions parenthetically--Festinger and Carlsmith never paid their subjects (214). What does your class have to say about this choice?

## Sample Application Log

Laura

I usually like most people and I feel uncomfortable when I do not like someone or when someone does not like me. A couple of years ago I was a lifeguard and swim instructor. My manager was this woman named "Laura." Laura was rather bossy and very aloof to me. I worked with her for eight hours a day so I did not know how to respond to how she treated me. I wanted to tell her a couple of ungodly words sometimes and tell her what a jerk she was. Instead I responded with kindness. I complimented her and talked with her often. At first I was uncomfortable because I was faking, but in the end I began to like her and I believe I liked her for the same reasons people thought they liked the experiment after they told the woman how fun it was for a dollar. I didn't want to feel like I was faking when I was being nice to Laura, so I changed my attitude so I could feel like I was being sincere to Laura.

## Exercises and Activities:

One way to think about cognitive dissonance is the mental stress that comes when new information is introduced that seems to contradict a previously held belief. Although some people are known for their ability to reassess continually their beliefs in light of new data, many individuals will consistently resolve the conflict by discounting the new information. The latter group follows the rationalizing pattern central to the theory featured in this chapter. An interesting take-home exercise is to ask your students to interview individuals who strongly endorse beliefs that have been pummeled by damaging or discrediting information. In many cases, these beliefs concern the innocence or goodness of public figures whose reputations have been tainted by strong evidence of misconduct. On the national scene, such people include Richard Nixon (Watergate), Oliver North (Iran-Contra), Ted Kennedy (Chappaquidick), Marion Berry (drug usage), and Bill Clinton (sexual infidelity and dishonesty). Some individuals your students may interview are so convinced of the baseness of certain national figures that they quickly discount any possibility of the person's potential goodness or value. In this case, the subject will explain away any facts that shed positive light on the villains. Popular scapegoats include Yasser Arafat and the PLO, Ariel Sharon and his conservative supporters, Hillary Clinton, Ronald Reagan, and--not surprisingly--the tainted figures listed above. Local celebrities may also be appropriate subjects for the exercise. In terms of overall belief systems, individuals who adhere to strict creeds such as creationism, Marxism, libertarianism, and Freudianism quickly exhibit cognitive dissonance when one attempts to confuse their beliefs with mere facts. Conspiracy theorists and UFO fanatics are also intriguing subjects for this exercise.

If you really want to push this issue, it can be useful to show that virtually all of us reduce tension through rationalization in some aspects of our lives. For example, ask students to explain how they can have plenty to eat, while around the world millions of people are starving? How they can enjoy good medical care when millions suffer from curable diseases? How they can consume vast amounts of energy for recreational purposes when most people of the world toil to survive? How they can eat food and wear clothes produced by underpaid workers? Students'--and our own--answers to these questions will be ostensibly rational, but eventually this difficult moral territory defies logical analysis. We cannot explain, so we simply explain away the selfishness and guilt inherent that comes with living the good life in a wealthy nation in a world that contains unbearable suffering, neglect, cruelty, and unkindness. We grimace at Marie Antoinette's "Let them eat cake," but ultimately we do little better.

When Em Griffin teaches this chapter, he employs volunteers for the purpose of reenacting the famous \$1/\$20 experiment. Usually, he plays the director and enlists three students to play the roles of the \$1 subject, the \$20 subject, and the female confederate. The ensuing skit provides a good way to discuss both the original theorizing and the three alternative explanations suggested by Aronson, Cooper, and Steele.

Ron Adler's social judgment exercise (see page 130-31, above) and its adaptation for the elaboration likelihood model (see page 139, above) could be modified to help exemplify aspects of cognitive dissonance, as well as to analyze the strengths and limitations of all three influence theories.

*Casablanca*, it seems to us, exemplifies aspects of cognitive dissonance theory. Victor Laszlo, who is truly heroic at every stage in the movie, requires no external justification to do the right thing because he is inherently noble. Rick and Ilsa, however, are not inherently so heroic. Because their natural tendency is to put their selfish love affair before the Resistance, they must act themselves into adopting heroic, self-sacrificing attitudes. Rick gives up his seat on the plane out of Casablanca to Victor--spurning the opportunity to flee with Ilsa--and joins the Resistance. Ilsa boards the plane with her husband instead of staying with Rick. Rick's final speech to Ilsa--in which he exhorts her to leave with her husband, not because it will make her feel good in the short term, but because it will give her long-term satisfaction--depends upon the idea that just behavior will cause just belief. They become hero and heroine by behaving heroically.

For students who find Bogart and Bergman obsolete or hopelessly square, the bad boy turned romantic hero in *Ten Things I Hate About You* experiences a significant change in attitude toward Kate that demonstrates the same principle exemplified half a century earlier by Rick and Ilsa. Although his initial decision to court Kate is based entirely on financial gain, his romantic behavior causes him to fall in love with her.

A word about the film *Norma Rae*, which Griffin lists in Appendix D as an exemplar for this theory. The character of Norma Rae is initially attracted to the labor union not so much because she is a true believer in unionism, but because she is intrigued by the character of Reuben, whom she finds dynamic and attractive. It's telling that when she first signs up with the union, she expresses her loyalty in personal rather than corporate terms--"I'm with you." As

her involvement in union organizing increases, however, she develops a firm understanding of and dedication to the inherent value of the union itself. Norma Rae's initial contact with Reuben provides the minimal justification for her involvement, and her endless activity on behalf of the union brings about a decided change in belief. This film also provides a good illustration of symbolic interactionism. Norma Rae becomes the self-confident, socially responsible person that Reuben consistently reflects back to her. Finally, the developing friendship between Norma Rae and Reuben exemplifies the principles of uncertainty reduction theory.

## Further Resources:

For an intriguing application of cognitive dissonance theory to HIV/AIDS prevention, see Perloff, *Persuading People to Have Safer Sex: Applications of Social Science to the AIDS Crisis*, 82-83. For other recent work on cognitive dissonance, see Thomas R. Shultz and Mark R. Lepper, "Cognitive Dissonance as Constraint Satisfaction," *Psychological Review* 103 (1996): 219-40.

## Sample Examination Questions:

These are not available in the online version of the Instructors' Manual