

# Cognitive dissonance theory analysis



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Leon Festinger created the cognitive dissonance theory as an attempt to explain why people desire to have consistency between their behaviors and actions.

Cognitive dissonance is the distressing mental state 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 (Festinger, 1957; as cited in Griffin, 2009). Thus, people are motivated to change either their behavior or their belief when feelings of dissonance arise. Dissonance is reduced using three mental strategies. Selective exposure is the strategy used before a decision is made. The premise of this strategy is to avoid information that is likely to increase dissonance. The second strategy deals with postdecision dissonance.

According to Abrams (2010), there are three factors that have the potential to increase postdecision dissonance. Dissonance may increase when the person is dealing with an important decision. Also, the more time and energy invested, the higher the possibility for increased dissonance. Lastly, dissonance is likely to increase when the decision is irreversible. Therefore, postdecision dissonance is reduced by reassurance that the person made the right decision. Festinger's minimal justification hypothesis is the last strategy used to reduce dissonance.

The hypothesis suggests that people need only minimal justification to change their attitude or belief. If a person is offered just enough reward or punishment, they are likely to reduce their dissonance. Social psychologist Elliot Aronson is credited with producing the self-consistency interpretation

of dissonance, a modification of Festinger's theory. Though Aronson's interpretation includes Festinger's idea that behavior and cognitive change is motivational in nature and derives from psychological discomfort, self-consistency or self-concept asserts that cognitive dissonance occurs when there is a discrepancy between a person's self-concept and behavior.

The basic premise of Aronson's self-concept interpretation is that, in general, most people strive to maintain a sense of self that is (1) predictable, consistent and stable; (2) competent; and (3) morally good. It is Festinger's notion of social group acting as an important source of cognitive dissonance that guides Matz and Wood (2005) in their research. Their first study aims to determine if a diversity of attitudes in a group is experienced as dissonance. Based on prior research, Matz and Wood conclude that disagreement from other group members is experienced as inconsistency and elicits a negative tension state. Therefore, they predict participants in a group with others who disagree would report more psychological discomfort than those in a group with others who agree. Participants did in fact experience a greater amount of discomfort when others disagreed, which demonstrates that being grouped with others who hold opinions opposed to one's own induces feelings of dissonance discomfort (Matz & Wood, 2005).

Though the results support their hypothesis, there are several doubts that need to be clarified. Specifically, does the dissonance occur because of the inconsistency of other group members' disagreeing views, or could it be that the participants were worried about the confrontation that would occur in a face-to-face interaction. It is because of these unanswered questions that Matz and Wood conduct their second study. As previously mentioned, there

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are flaws in Matz and Woods first study. As a result, they designed their second study so that all participants experience disagreement from others and all expect to interact with one another to reach an agreement (Matz & Wood, 2005).

The participants were given one of three conditions. The first condition allowed participants to freely choose their verdict before finding out that their judgment disagreed with the other group members. In the second condition, participants were assigned a verdict and then were told the verdict disagreed with the others' views. The third condition allowed participants to freely choose their verdict. The difference between condition one and three is that condition three allowed the participants to self-affirm after finding out their verdict was in disagreement with the other group members. Festinger argues that the lack of choice adds consonant cognitions which reduce the overall amount of dissonance that otherwise would be experienced (Festinger, 1957, 1958; as cited in Matz & Woods, 2005).

Additionally, the opportunity to self-affirm strengthens self-worth and thereby reduces the dissonance created when people's actions threaten their personal integrity (Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995; as cited in Matz & Woods, 2005). Thus, Matz and Woods hypothesize that dissonance will be reduced by the lack of choice and the opportunity to self-affirm. The results show low levels of discomfort in the lack of choice and self-affirmation conditions, providing an explanation of the kinds of strategies people use to reduce dissonance. Study three introduces an interpersonal strategy

introduced by Festinger: changing one's own attitude to align with others' opinions (Festinger, 1957; as cited in Matz & Woods, 2005).

Building off of Festinger's idea of changing one's attitude three conditions are used in this study. The three strategies used are: (a) changing one's own attitudes to agree with others in the group, (b) influencing others to change their opinion, and (c) joining a different, attitudinally congenial group. The end results show that the three methods of resolving disagreement yield similar reductions in discomfort. Though Matz and Woods acknowledge the comparable reductions among the three strategies, achieving consistency without having to change one's own opinion offered the most positive emotional benefits. Spangenberg, Sprott, Grohmann, and Smith (2003) conduct their research in an attempt to explain the theoretical process underlying self-prophecy. According to the researchers, a dissonance explanation for self-prophecy suggests that "prediction request causes psychological discomfort or tension for those who become aware of a discrepancy between the values they hold (e.

. , normative beliefs about performing the central behavior, a generalized positive self-concept) and the actions they perform (or have performed in the past)" (Spangenberg, et. al. , 2003, p.

49). In summary, they claim that a dissonance-based account of self-prophecy would account for the cognitive dissonance elicited by the prediction request, making prominent the incongruity between people's past behavior and their socially normative self-concept. The researchers adopt Aronson's self-concept idea of dissonance theory when conducting their

study. Aronson believes self-prediction will threaten people's view of themselves as good and morally competent when the prediction is contrary to previous behavioral patterns.

Furthermore, a person compares themselves to others when trying to rebuild a morally good and competent self-concept (Hakmiller, 1966; as cited in Spangenberg, et. al. , 2003). They hypothesize that psychological discomfort will be relatively lower for people who make a prediction about others' behavior. This hypothesis is supported because the participants that make a prediction about other people's behavior had less psychological discomfort than those who did not make that prediction.

Self-affirmation comes into play in the second study. Spangenberg (et. al. , 2003) determines that if dissonance underlies the self-prophecy effect, a person should be able to eliminate the effects of self-prophecy by self-affirmation. This also would mean that in the absence of self-affirmation, there should be a higher level of psychological discomfort. The results support the researchers' hypothesis.

The participants who were able to affirm values central to their self-concept reported lower levels of psychological discomfort than those who were not able to self-affirm. I have found cognitive dissonance theory to be useful in explaining my behavior in a multitude of situations. Though there are several examples I can use to demonstrate cognitive dissonance in my life, the example I wish to illustrate occurred during the 2010 NBA Playoffs. The Playoffs are a best of seven series, meaning the team that wins four games in comparison to three games wins the NBA championship. The Boston

Celtics were leading 3-2 and I had a strong desire to go out with friends to watch the game. The problem was that I had two midterms the following day and I knew it was crucial to study for the exams.

I was unsure of what to do, but I ultimately chose to stay home and study. In this instance I used the strategies ascribed to the before and after methods of reducing dissonance. For example, a strategy of reducing dissonance is selective exposure. By not exposing myself to the game on T. V. , I was able to maintain my focus on preparing for my exams.

Also, I did not dare to text or call my friends because I knew my exposure to them would likely lead to me stray from studying. My rationalization of my decision also helped to ease my dissonance. I rationalized that it was important for me to study because I paid over one thousand dollars for my two summer school classes. It would be a waste of money if I did not pass those classes. Because I am curious by nature, I had to quickly turn on the television to check the score. After seeing the Lakers were twenty points ahead, I reassured myself that there would definitely be a game seven.

It was at this point that all my dissonance dissolved. Cognitive dissonance has great heuristic value. I will continue to research this theory because I find it useful to explain why I act the way I do. References Griffin, E. (2009). A first look at communication theory.

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