

A project to bring cognitive dissonance to a conceptual unity

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Cognitive Dissonance Theory Research Project

Though theory is a word that sounds complex and scares people away, when it comes to communication theory, it is simply a way to categorize the different aspects of communication that all of us experience - whether we realize it or not - on a daily basis. We often speak about communication in terms of specific events or ways we react to particular scenarios, and theory helps us by providing a more general understanding for the way we communicate in different ways. Theory can help us understand different ways we act and react to similar scenarios that are hard to explain otherwise. Having different communication theories gives us a way to understand all aspects of communication, and helps us understand the communication process. Knowing the different theories and how they work, it makes it easier to apply each one to real-life situations, understand why we communicate the way we do and rectify any ineffective communication in terms of a specific process. The theory I'm studying is cognitive dissonance by theorist Leon Festinger. Psychology being a primary interest of mine, this theory intrigues me because it explains, psychologically and in very general terms, why we think certain things and do things that are not in line with those thoughts.

As I stated before, cognitive dissonance is having certain thoughts and then acting differently than those thoughts, or more specifically, " a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors" (McLeod, Saul). Leon Festinger (1957) further suggested that " we have an inner drive to hold all our attitudes and beliefs in harmony and avoid disharmony (or dissonance)"

(McLeod, Saul). A very common example of cognitive dissonance is people who smoke and know the repercussions that can occur, but they continue to do it anyway though they know they shouldn't. Often times if you confront a smoker and tell them that they should stop smoking, they quickly say " I know" and dismiss the topic, because that is our inner drive to maintain harmony, or avoid any disharmony.

Leon Festinger had an interesting path to social psychology and cognitive dissonance. Initially, he attended college and got his MA and Ph. D. in child psychology, although he never saw a child and had never taken a course in social psychology (Milite, George A). Throughout the years, Festinger ran into many people in the field of social psychology, and became very interested in it. A little while after becoming involved in the field, he published his first book on failed prophecy and cognitive dissonance, and then later fully committed to the theory, publishing his second book A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Milite, George A). Once he published his second book solely on cognitive dissonance, the theory took off. Within just two years of its publication, it became the subject of research studies all over concerning experimental social psychology. Though Festinger didn't spend his whole early life working toward concepts of social psychology, he ended up in the field and created one of the most known theories. To this day, cognitive dissonance remains one studied regularly in not only psychology, but communication as well and others as it applies to many aspects of life.

The main experiment that was done to prove this theory was done by Festinger himself along with J. Merrill Carlsmith, where they had 71 students

participate in a controlled laboratory experiment to test the effects of cognitive dissonance (Jakobsen, Tor G). The idea of this experiment was to see what would convince people to act not in ordinance with their thoughts, and to do this, they had three groups of people participate in a boring experiment; one group was given \$1 to convince another person that it was actually fun, another group \$20 to convince another it was actually fun, and a third given nothing and didn't have to convince anybody of anything. As predicted by Festinger, the group given \$1 were the ones who were the most successful in deceiving the third party, reason being is because they were given a small reward for doing so, and they had to first convince themselves that it was fun in order to convince another person, and the \$20 group was less successful because the money became the sole reason for doing the experiment, rather than trying to enjoy the experiment (Jakobsen, Tor G).

This theory relates closely to interpersonal communication because when we do things that we don't actually believe, it may communicate to others that we do indeed believe that thing we are doing. Smoking, for example, may result in people thinking that person doesn't care about their health, which is opposite from what the person actually believes. A good way that cognitive dissonance can relate to communication is a person in their work environment. If somebody has great customer service, and always leaves their customers happy, but constantly thinks about how everything the customer is asking is stupid and how they'd rather be home, this is using cognitive dissonance to turn negatives thoughts into positive actions, even though they aren't in line with one another. In addition, in different cultures

it may be acceptable to do certain things that aren't acceptable in other cultures. In one culture that may not allow certain things, people who believe those things are acceptable may not do them to be in ordinance with their culture, even though they believe, personally, that they are acceptable.

Studying this theory gives me a better understanding for how people's beliefs may not align with their actions, just in order to maintain harmony within themselves, and that we all do it on a regular basis. Addressing these issues and embracing dissonance can lead to positive outcomes, such as smoking; if a person constantly brushes off a conversation about smoking being harmful, they'll never be compelled to change their ways. However, if they are confronted and openly express and accept those disharmonious feelings, they may realize the importance of quitting and creating harmony that way, rather than avoiding dissonance. Understanding the effect cognitive dissonance can have can help deceive people less often, be more in tune to who you are as a person, and prevent negative dissonance from occurring in your life as often. Though it is a natural instinct, being aware of it can lessen the negative impact it can have on daily life.