

Cognitive dissonance theory



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Cognitive dissonance theory was first developed by Festinger (1957; as cited in Baron & Byrne, 2003; Hogg & Vaughan, 2005; Sabini, 1995; Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006) and it can be defined as “ the effects of inconsistent cognitions” (Colman, 2009). This means that if one has two cognitions that conflict with one another, then these two cognitions are dissonant, causing the person psychological inconsistency (Sabini, 1995). Psychological inconsistency is defined by Sabini (1995) as a situation in which a person holds two beliefs which contradict each other; and the resulting internal conflict which is due to this contradiction. An example given by Colman (2009) is that of a smoker who is aware that smoking is dangerous for their health yet they continue to smoke. This shows that their behaviour is inconsistent with their attitude, resulting in cognitive dissonance. There are many ways to counter this dissonance, the most used and most effective one being to change one’s attitude. However, why is this necessary? This essay will discuss attitude change and the reasons behind when it follows cognitive dissonance.

When cognitive dissonance occurs, the person who is subject to the contradiction feels discomfort. Hogg & Vaughan (2005) describe this as post-decisional conflict, and they say that the best way to relieve this discomfort is by “ bringing the attitude into line with the behaviour”. Zimbardo, Weisenberg, Firestone and Levy (1965) conducted an experiment which studied how this is dealt with by participants when they are not acting at the request of others, they name this ‘ induced compliance’. Zimbardo et al (1965) had participants comply with eating grasshoppers by an authority figure who either made the request in a positive or negative way. Before the

experiment, the participants were asked to rate how much they would like to eat grasshoppers. The authority figure was careful to ensure that the pressure on the participants was subtle so that the decision felt like a free choice. They claim that in this type of situation the post-decisional conflict should be greater with the communicator being negative, as in theory the participant would find it harder to justify their behaviour. With the positive communicator, however, the participant may view it as doing him a favour (Hogg and Vaughan, 2005). Those in the negative condition would therefore experience greater dissonance. As a result, more than 50% of participants in the negative condition claimed to have an increased liking for grasshoppers, this change in attitude was done in an attempt to ease the dissonance of the situation. However, this feeling of dissonance, and resulting behaviour change does not occur when the behaviour is forced upon you (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006). Taylor, Peplau & Sears (2006) also note that behaviour change does not result from dissonance if the person is threatened to perform the behaviour, if the person has a irrevocable commitment which results in the behaviour and if they have responsibility for the behaviour. However, Baron and Byrne (2003) contradict this by claiming that when people experience the level of discomfort which occurs with dissonance, they alter their attitude even in the absence of external pressure. They say that attitude change directly reduces dissonance with the focus being on the discrepancies regarding attitude and behaviour which is the cause. Hamilton (2005) tries to describe the reason behind using change in attitude to ease the feeling of discomfort. He says that “ change occurs because the cognition...is dissonant and therefore painful”. Hamilton goes on to explain how this discomfort is avoided with a change of opinion about

behaviour. This gives rise to the idea that the pain of dissonance is best relieved through changing an opinion of an opinion instead of actually changing the behaviour itself. Using the smoking example (Colman, 2009), it would be much easier for a smoker to change their opinion about how bad smoking is for your health than to actually give up smoking. This could be a large part of why attitude change occurs as opposed to behaviour change; it's a far easier concept for people to take on board.

However, these researchers do not delve very deeply into the actual processes which result in attitude change. Moreover, Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones (2007) point out that Festinger doesn't explain in his original theory why cognitive dissonance results in psychological discomfort and consequent attitude change. The action based model which was put forward by Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones (1999, 2000; as cited in Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones 2007) describes how cognitions can serve as "action tendencies". This model proposes that dissonance induces an uncomfortable feeling due to the fact that it could potentially hinder any "unconflicted" action. Therefore, reducing dissonance by changing an attitude serves the function of "facilitating the execution of effective and unconflicted action" (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007). This means that our cognitions serve as the potential for an action, but when two of these "action tendencies" contradict each other we feel discomfort as these conflicting actions interfere with one another. To reduce this feeling, we change one of the action tendencies which aids us in carrying out the action uninterrupted. Starzyk, Fabrigar, Soryal & Fanning (2009) claim that people are more likely to change their attitude when the importance of this attitude was not salient,

in this case they changed their attitudes regardless of how important this attitude was to them. However, when the salience of the attitude was greater, the participants were far less likely to change their attitude. This shows that despite the discomfoting dissonance if the attitude in question is of great importance and highly salient, the participant is less likely to alter it.

However, attitude change is not the only way to relieve cognitive dissonance. Other methods include trivialisation and adding further cognitions which justify the behaviour (Colman, 2009; and Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006). Trivialisation is as it suggests, decreasing how important the cognitions are perceived to be (Colman, 2009). These methods are used far less than attitude change, but it is not clearly understood why. Further research should be carried out in this area.

Work has been done to investigate any biological changes which occur during the attitude change process. Van Veen, Krug, Schooler & Carter (2009) conducted research into the neural basis behind the change in attitude following the uncomfortable feeling resulting from cognitive dissonance. Van Venn et al used an fMRI to find that the activation of the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and the anterior insula predicted with a certain level of accuracy the participants subsequent change in attitude. This suggests that there are chemical reactions in the brain to the feeling of psychological discomfort, causing participants to change their attitudes about a behaviour. This could mean that the decision to change the attitude is not an entirely conscious one, but rather an automatic chemical reaction. The implications of this research are such that attitude change is the most

likely way to relieve the dissonance despite the fact that there are other strategies such as trivialisation or changing actual behaviour.

Further research was carried into what type of attitude change actually occurs, do we entirely change our beliefs entirely or is this change superficial? Gawronski & Strack (2004) studied implicit and explicit attitude changes as a result of dissonance. In their study, participants were asked to write an essay which contradicted their personal attitudes. They found that participants changed their explicit attitude to one which was more favourable to the subject of the essay when situational pressure was perceived to be low, but this was not the case when situational pressure was high. Despite this, Gawronski & Strack found that the implicit attitudes remained unaffected. In addition to this, they stated that “ explicit attitudes were significantly related to implicit attitudes under high perceived situational pressure and control conditions”. This suggests that when people experience cognitive dissonance it is only their explicit attitudes which they alter, meaning that implicitly their attitudes remain the same. These findings are supported by Rydel, McConnell & Mackie (2008). Rydel et al strived to conduct research into what psychological states accompany cognitive dissonance. They put emphasis on whether discomfort which has arisen from dissonance is a result of “ discrepant explicit and implicit attitudes”, and they also looked into the role of it in subsequent information processing. They discovered that where explicit and implicit attitudes differed, informational processing and low dissonance worked to eliminate this discrepancy. This supports the findings of Gawronski and Strack (2004) because it shows that there is a difference between a person’s implicit and

explicit attitudes, however, Rydel et al (2008) discover that this divergence can be reduced when dissonance is reduced and when further information processing is carried out.

Read and Monroe (2007) also conducted experiments to learn more about attitude change. They put forward a recurrent neural network model of long term attitude change as a result of a desire to reduce cognitive dissonance. They use Contrastive Hebbian Learning to establish changes in the strength of cognitions during dissonance reduction. This model, due to the fact it includes learning, can follow long-term attitude change by analysing the change in strength of the cognitions and as the model is recurrent it can circulate changes from inconsistent behaviour to the attitudes which are connected to that behaviour.

Attitude change occurs as a result of contradictory cognitions which cause the person psychological discomfort. This dissonance is believed to result in attitude change for a number of reasons including chemical reactions in the brain and the fact that it is easier for a person to change their cognitions than their behaviour. It has also been suggested that this attitude change only affects explicit attitudes and but not the implicit attitudes of a person. Having studied the research in the area, it can be concluded that more work needs to be done into how and why the changes occur instead of other methods which ease cognitive dissonance.

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