

Theory Paper – Cognitive Dissonance

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Cognitive dissonance is defined by influential psychologist Leon Festinger as an “antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction” (Festinger, 1957, p.3). While this seems cut and dry, the theory expands far beyond the constraints of the definition. To explain the theory, you must first understand the parts of its components. First is cognitive, which deals with the mind and how one thinks or reasons. The other is dissonance, which deals with a conflict between two things occurring at the same time. Cognitive dissonance claims that people feel a need to diminish this uncomfortable conflict between what is felt or believed and what is happening, and thus they adjust either their situation or their beliefs in order to make the two exist, and agree, simultaneously (Festinger, 1957). The way Festinger put it in his book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, is “when feelings and facts are in opposition, people will find -- or invent -- a way to reconcile them” (as cited in Crossen, 2006).

Cognitive dissonance theory has been known to play out in several ways. Leon Festinger was the first psychologist to study cognitive dissonance around the 1950s, and his works, such as books and experiments, helped to shed light on the ways in which humans act to decrease cognitive dissonance. But even before Festinger was the Greek Fabulist Aesop. Aesop is credited with the fable of *The Fox and the Grapes*, which was originally written for children around 620-560 B.C. This fable is a simple, yet quintessential example of what is meant by cognitive dissonance.

In *The Fox and the Grapes*, a fox spots an attractive looking bunch of grapes hanging from a vine in an orchard. The fox is intrigued by the grapes and their bright color and tasty looking shine. Unfortunately, the fox is unable to reach them despite several different tries,

because of his height (Aesop, sixth century B.C.). Because of his cognitive thoughts and feelings about desiring the grapes, and the dissonance created when he was unable to attain them, the fox decides to adapt to reduce the dissonance (Aesop, sixth century B.C.). The fable ends by explaining how the fox eventually “walked away with his nose in the air, saying: ‘I am sure they are sour’” (Aesop, sixth century B.C., p.17). By deciding the grapes must be bad, sour or sickening, he has reduced the dissonance by making his expectations agree with reality. This fable told by Aesop displays what was meant by Festinger when he said that people will find a way to reconcile their opposing feelings (Festinger, 1957). The fox had a positive view toward the grapes, but when they were unattainable to him, he reconciled the dissonance by disliking the grapes.

While the fable from Aesop was created thousands of years ago, Festinger built upon it and made it relevant to the more modern times. Festinger’s interest in cognitive dissonance originated when he was a social psychologist at Stanford University in California during the 1950s. According to Crossen (2006), “Festinger was studying how and why rumors spread when he read about the aftermath of a severe earthquake that shook India in 1934” (p. B1). The individuals living in the area were horrified about the earthquake, but many survived despite the severity of it. Because of their cognitive fear, and the lack of good reason they could find for it, they started spreading rumors that “other terrible disasters were about to befall them -- a cyclone, a flood, another earthquake or unforeseeable calamities” (Crossen, 2006, p. B1). Festinger found that by doing this, they were able to justify their fear, and thus were able to reduce the cognitive dissonance they felt when their feelings did not mesh with actuality (Festinger, 1957).

Another example of cognitive dissonance in which people work to reconcile their beliefs/knowledge with their actions is one that proliferates much of America and other nations

around the world: cigarette smoking. It is common knowledge that smoking is bad for your health, yet thousands of people around the world still continue to smoke packs of cigarettes every day. Since consistency between what is believed and how one acts is the desired norm, Festinger studied why this seeming inconsistency was the case. According to Festinger (1957), “The person who continues to smoke, knowing that it is bad for his health, may also feel (a) he enjoys smoking so much it is worth it; (b) the chances of his health suffering are not as serious as some would make it out; (c) he can’t always avoid every possible dangerous contingency and still live; and (d) perhaps even if he stopped smoking he would put on weight which is equally bad for his health” (p.2). In order to continue smoking, an activity which the person enjoys too much to quit, they have to reduce the dissonance between what they know about it and what they feel about it. By making the excuses highlighted by Festinger, they have reduced the dissonance.

This is shown to play out in a survey performed by Festinger in 1954. This survey asked smokers if they felt that it was factual that smoking caused cancer. The survey found that “86 percent of heavy smokers thought it wasn't proven, while only 55 percent of nonsmokers doubted the connection” (as cited in Crossen, 2006). This goes to show the rationalization the smokers made in order to justify their smoking habit. By believing that it was not yet proven that smoking causes cancer, they were reducing the cognitive dissonance that they would have been felt by smoking while believing it could kill. Of the participants who did not smoke, and thus had less of a reason to doubt that cigarettes cause cancer, only 55 percent doubted the connection.

Cognitive dissonance seems to be a strong theory, with countless examples of ways in which it has played out. However, Festinger admittedly is not blind to the weaknesses of the theory. Festinger admitted that inconsistencies do occur, such as someone who believes children should be seen and not heard, yet is pleased when their child receives accolades or attention

(Festinger, 1957). This is an example of dissonance because their beliefs go against something that is occurring, however they do not mind, or do anything to stop it. This goes against the theory of cognitive dissonance. However, according to Festinger (1957), “It is still overwhelmingly true that related opinions or attitudes are consistent with one another. Study after study reports such consistency among one person’s political attitudes, social attitudes, and many others” (p. 1). Festinger goes on to discuss the consistency between a person’s actions and beliefs, but cannot fail to mention that there are instances in which these do not match up. Occurrences such as someone who claims to believe all races are equal, but would still prefer not to live in a mixed racial neighborhood, are things that go against cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Furthermore, cognitive dissonance is scientifically weakened because there is no way for it to be physically observed, making it unable to be measured (McLeod, 2008).

Although some instances show that cognitive dissonance theory is not true one hundred percent of the time, there have been experiments which strongly illustrate the theory in action. The case in point is the now iconic “peg turning task” conducted by Festinger and Carlsmith. In this task, participants were asked to perform the highly monotonous task of turning pegs in a board. Afterward they were either paid \$1 or \$20 to tell a participant that the tasks were intriguing (McLeod, 2008). Festinger and Carlsmith’s study found that “When the participants were asked to evaluate the experiment, the participants who were paid only \$1 rated the tedious task as more fun and enjoyable than the participants who were paid \$20 to lie” (as cited in McLeod, 2008). The conclusion was that those participants who were paid \$20 had a justification for lying, and therefore felt no dissonance, whereas those who were only paid \$1 felt that they had no reason to lie (McLeod, 2008). The ones paid \$1 expressed dissonance because they were unable to find a good reason for their lie. So, to reduce their dissonance, they were forced to

change their thoughts on the task, and began to convince themselves that it was in fact enjoyable and interesting (McLeod, 2008).

Other instances show how cognitive dissonance is applied, not only in social and psychological settings, but also in communications, marketing, and advertising. Cognitive dissonance has an effect on consumerism, and on how people act toward advertisements. Festinger realized that when a person makes a choice, they are forced to realize the positive aspects of the thing they rejected (Festinger, 1957). According to University of Colorado marketing professor Sadaomi Oshikawa (1969), “Since decision making entails the rejection on alternatives(s), the theory asserts that post-decision dissonance is an inevitable consequence of decision making” (p. 45). One cannot, in most cases, have both items, so they are forced to pick the one with the most positive aspects. Still, in choosing one, you must reject another, and this causes people to work to reduce the dissonance by focusing on how good their choice was.

One way in which people reduce the dissonance that accompanies consumerism is by reading advertisements for things they have already purchased (Crossen, 2006). Say someone purchased a pair of tennis shoes that were not very fashionable, but were inexpensive and great for running. Their conflict lies in the fact that they could have bought the more expensive pair of shoes, which looked more flashy and fashionable. But, according to Crossen (2006), “After reading a loving description in a newspaper or magazine, they feel less conflicted about their decision -- their dissonance has been reduced” (Crossen, 2006, B1). This is called post-purchase dissonance, and was studied by Oshikawa (1969) who found that “the greater the number of alternatives a consumer considers before his purchase decision and/or the more equal the positive and negative attributes of the alternatives, the greater the post-purchase dissonance” (p. 45).

One thing that weakens the post-purchase theory of cognitive dissonance is the fact that it is not known for certain whether people read ads of things they have already purchased to assuage cognitive dissonance, or if they do it because the topic merely is of interest to them personally (Oshikawa, 1969). While many people who recently purchased new automobiles were found to read advertisements of the car they bought, it was also found that purchasers also read advertisements of cars they rejected. According to Oshikawa (1969), “This evidence cast doubt on the hypotheses that purchasers experienced dissonance. According to dissonance theory they should have avoided the advertisements of the rejected makes” (p. 45). The post-purchase theory of cognitive dissonance cannot be proven completely sound, despite many aspects of the theory that seem to add up.

Other than the post-purchase theory, there are other theories that compete for the same sort of phenomenon as cognitive dissonance. Selective perception is one such theory. Selective perception claims that people take from a set of messages only those that support what they already believe (Vidmar; Rokeach, 1974). One example is the television show *All in the Family*, and a study conducted by Vidmar and Rokeach about the racial and ethical issues it projected. The main character, Archie Bunker, frequently speaks in a prejudice manner about other races. While the purpose of the show was to portray him as a bigot, many people found themselves agreeing with Archie and his racist antics, and seeing him as a character they could relate to (Rokeach; Vidmar, 1974). Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) found that “nonprejudiced viewers and minority group viewers may perceive and enjoy the show as satire, whereas prejudiced viewers may perceive and enjoy the show as episodes ‘telling it like it is’” (p.37). This displays how people will choose to see what they most strongly believe in, while ignoring the rest. Similarly,

cognitive dissonance deals with the way people adjust their beliefs according to what best suits their situation.

While all these variations and explanations of cognitive dissonance are interesting and important to note, there is no instance as extreme as the case of Marion Keech, which inspired Festinger, Riecken and Schachter's book *When Prophecy Fails*. Keech claimed the world was to end by a massive flood and that those who followed her would be spared by flying saucers that would take them to another planet (Festinger; Riecken; Schachter, 1956). According to the book *When Prophecy Fails*, which was written after the authors spent time with Keech and her followers, "Many people had accepted this belief and some were even disposing of their worldly goods" (Festinger; Riecken; Schachter, 1956, pp. 7-8). The followers shunned society who did not believe the world was ending, and convinced themselves that they would be the only ones saved.

However, when the predicted date in 1954 arrived, and the world did not end, Keech and her followers did not reject their theory of the Second Coming. Instead, because of the dissonance in what they believed and what had actually occurred, they adjusted their beliefs to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger; Riecken; Schachter, 1956). Festinger writes (1956), "The disconfirmation of the predicted Second Coming increased their enthusiasm and activity. They poured greater energy than ever before into obtaining new converts and sent out missionaries" (p.8). This extreme case highlights the lengths in which people are willing to go in order to avoid the discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance is a theory that humans deal with on a day to day basis. While it can be extreme in the case of Marion Keech's failed prophecy, it can also be obscure, like

someone who feels dissonance over buying a pair of running shoes. Although cognitive dissonance was not formally recognized until Leon Festinger's research in the 1950s, it has been something people have talked about in one form or another since Aesop's fables in the sixth century B.C. The theory of cognitive dissonance has been tested and proven by the peg turning experiment conducted by Festinger and also by showing that people who smoke cigarettes are more likely to deny the facts that they are tied to cancer.

The strengths of this theory seem to outweigh the weaknesses that sometimes turn up, in the case of post-consumer dissonance and the reading of advertisements. While the theory has been modified and expanded to include competing theories for the same type of phenomenon, cognitive dissonance seems to be the most recognizable and most frequent to occur. Thanks to the exhaustive research and experiments conducted by the theory's founder Leon Festinger, we now know why we adapt our attitudes toward the shoes we wanted but did not purchase, or that automobile we liked but could not afford. Cognitive dissonance can be seen in a number of places throughout life and relationships and to understand it is to better understand ourselves.

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