

Cognitive Dissonance

The Theory:

This is the feeling of uncomfortable tension which comes from holding two conflicting thoughts in the mind at the same time.

Dissonance increases with:

1. The importance of the subject to us.
2. How strongly the dissonant thoughts conflict.
3. Our inability to rationalize and explain away the conflict.

Dissonance is often strong when we believe something about ourselves and then do something against that belief. If I believe I am good but do something bad, then the discomfort I feel as a result is cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance is a very powerful motivator which will often lead us to change one or other of the conflicting belief or action. The discomfort often feels like a tension between the two opposing thoughts. To release the tension we can take one of three actions:

1. Change our behavior.
2. Change our beliefs
3. Change our **perception** of our behavior

Dissonance is most powerful when it is about our self-image. Feelings of foolishness, immorality and so on (including internal projections during decision-making) are dissonance in action.

If an action has been completed and cannot be undone, then the after-the-fact dissonance compels us to change our beliefs. If beliefs are moved, then the dissonance appears during decision-making, forcing us to take actions we would not have taken before.

Cognitive dissonance appears in virtually all evaluations and decisions and is the central mechanism by which we experience new differences in the world. When we see other people behave differently to our images of them, when we hold any conflicting thoughts, we experience dissonance.

Dissonance increases with the importance and impact of the decision, along with the difficulty of reversing it. Discomfort about making the wrong choice of car is bigger than when choosing a lamp.

Research

Festinger first developed this theory in the 1950s to explain how members of a cult who were persuaded by their leader, a certain Mrs. Keech, that the earth was going to be destroyed on 21st December and that they alone were going to be rescued by aliens, actually *increased* their commitment to the cult when this did not happen (Festinger himself had infiltrated the cult, and would have been very surprised to meet little green men). The dissonance of the thought of being so stupid was so great that instead they revised their beliefs to meet with obvious facts: that the aliens had, through their concern for the cult, saved the world instead.

Changing Perceptions of Behavior

There are three main ways people go about changing their perceptions of their own behavior.

1. **Justifying Attitude-Discrepant behavior: I have my reasons!**

In Festinger and Carlsmith's classic 1959 experiment, students were asked to spend an hour on boring and tedious tasks (e.g., turning pegs a quarter turn, over and over again). The tasks were designed to generate a strong, negative attitude. Once the subjects had done this, the experimenters asked some of them to do a simple favor. They were asked to talk to another subject (actually an actor) and persuade them that the tasks were interesting and engaging. Some participants were paid \$20 (inflation adjusted to 2010, this equates to \$150) for this favor, another group was paid \$1 (or \$7.50 in "2010 dollars"), and a control group was not asked to perform the favor.

When asked to rate the boring tasks at the conclusion of the study (not in the presence of the other "subject"), those in the \$1 group rated them more positively than those in the \$20 and control groups. This was explained by Festinger and Carlsmith as evidence for cognitive dissonance. The researchers theorized that people experienced dissonance between the conflicting cognitions, "I told someone that the task was interesting", and "I actually found it boring." When paid only \$1, students were forced to internalize the attitude they were induced to express, because they had no other justification. Those in the \$20 condition, however, had an obvious external justification for their behavior, and thus experienced less dissonance.

2. **Justifying Effort: I suffered for it, so I like it.** In cases where people have freely chosen to act in ways that cause them suffering (e.g., staying with an abusive spouse), they change their attitudes to justify that suffering. This is because realizing that they have personally chosen this action causes uncomfortable tension (dissonance), which can be resolved by valuing that goal/action even more. Almost any amount or kind of effort put into an action/goal can result in a dissonance-reducing attitude change to value that goal. This is a result of the *effort-justification effect*, which explains that the more effort, time, money, pain, and so on, are put into a goal, the more people value that goal, and change their attitudes towards that valuing.

Dissonance is aroused whenever individuals voluntarily engage in an unpleasant activity to achieve some desired goal. Dissonance can be reduced by exaggerating the desirability of the goal. Aronson & Mills had individuals undergo a severe or mild "initiation" in order to become a member of a group. In the severe-initiation condition, the individuals engaged in an embarrassing activity. The group turned out to be very dull and boring. The individuals in the severe-initiation condition evaluated the group as more interesting than the individuals in the mild-initiation condition.

3. **Justifying Decisions: Of course I was right!** Decisions, by definition, involve dissonance. When people give up options (by making a choice/decision for one option) they experience *decisional dissonance* (or post-decisional regret): this is tension between the alternative they have chosen and all the attractive alternatives they have rejected. According to dissonance theory, the more people focus on the implications of making a choice, the more this increases their feelings of dissonance, and their subsequent need to reduce that dissonance. Dissonance processes can help people convince themselves that they have made the right decision (e.g., people are more convinced about their candidate *after* they have voted for the person than they were before).

In an experiment conducted by Jack Brehm, 225 female students rated a series of common appliances and were then allowed to choose one of two appliances to take home as a gift. A second round of ratings showed that the participants increased their ratings of the item they chose, and lowered their ratings of the rejected item. This can be explained in terms of cognitive dissonance. When making a difficult decision, there are always aspects of the rejected choice that one finds appealing and these features are dissonant with choosing something else. In other words, the cognition, "I chose X" is dissonant with the cognition, "There are some things I like about Y."

Required Activity:

1. Jigsaw: Justifying Behavior

- a. Expert Groups: Talk through the experience of justifying decisions that you have been assigned. Create a comic strip or other visual that shows how your method works. You should make sure to include:
 - i. Why the dissonance happens
 - ii. How the dissonance is resolved
 - iii. What people do in their heads to resolve it
 - iv. Title (with the type of justification)
 - v. Bonus if you take into account things that can affect the amount of dissonance, or how people behave here.
- b. Jigsaw: Go into groups with others. Teach them your method. They should make sure to have in their notes:
 - i. Type of dissonance
 - ii. What happens to resolve it in this method
 - iii. Summary of research

Choice Activities (choose 1)

All resources you need are linked on the documents page of my DP

1. Dilbert Cartoon Analysis
 - a. What type of justification happens in this cartoon?
 - b. Has this ever happened in your life? Which of these do you think is most common and why?
2. TED Talk
 - a. Watch it, and list 5 new things you learned
3. Cognitive Dissonance in Monkeys
 - a. Read and annotate the article as you read.
 - b. When you finish it, answer the following questions in writing"
 - i. What did the Yale study show about cognitive dissonance in monkeys? How do they know the monkeys were having cognitive dissonance?
 - ii. What larger conclusions do the researchers draw about cognitive dissonance?
 - iii. Why is cognitive dissonance potentially useful? What are the upsides?
 - iv. Give one example of when you have felt cognitive dissonance in your own life. Be as specific as you can!