

Themis: Research Journal of Justice Studies and Forensic Science

Volume 11

Article 8

5-19-2023

Cognitive Dissonance: Analysis of the Theory

Marcus Crespo
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/themis>



Part of the [Cognition and Perception Commons](#), and the [Cognitive Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Crespo, Marcus (2023) "Cognitive Dissonance: Analysis of the Theory," *Themis: Research Journal of Justice Studies and Forensic Science*: Vol. 11 , Article 8.
<https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/themis/vol11/iss1/8>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Justice Studies at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Themis: Research Journal of Justice Studies and Forensic Science by an authorized editor of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

Cognitive Dissonance: Analysis of the Theory

Abstract

Cognitive dissonance arises as a person experiences discomfort when their belief does not align with their behavior. Cognitive dissonance can be divided into three categories: irrelevance, dissonance, and consonance; it also can be viewed in terms of what it is and what effects it produces for an individual. Studies have shown the struggles and inconsistencies that arise when people experience conflict between who they want to be and who they actually are. This paper examines cognitive dissonance at length and assesses the current theoretical models that exist to describe cognitive dissonance.

Keywords

cognitive dissonance, psychology, compliance

Cognitive Dissonance: Analysis of the Theory

Marcus E. Crespo

Department of Psychology, San José State University

PSYCH 135: Cognition

Professor Steven Macramalla

December 1, 2022

Abstract

Cognitive dissonance arises as a person experiences discomfort when their belief does not align with their behavior. Cognitive dissonance can be divided into three categories: irrelevance, dissonance, and consonance; it also can be viewed in terms of what it is and what effects it produces for an individual. Studies have shown the struggles and inconsistencies that arise when people experience conflict between who they want to be and who they actually are. This paper examines cognitive dissonance at length and assesses the current theoretical models that exist to describe cognitive dissonance.

Keywords: cognitive dissonance, psychology, compliance

Cognitive Dissonance: Analysis of the Theory

People are continually striving towards internal consistency, whether it is emotionally, behaviorally, or in their cognitive thought processes (Festinger, 1957). While the striving continues, so do the inconsistencies, also called “dissonances”. Cognition is defined as “the things a person knows about himself, about his behavior, and about his surroundings” (p.9). These are also known as elements of cognition. When a person’s knowledge about themselves, behavior, and surroundings are threatened, then that person experiences cognitive dissonance. Similarly, when there is greater importance on the person’s knowledge about themselves, behavior, and surroundings, then there would be greater dissonance when they are threatened. To explain further, cognitive dissonance arises as a person experiences discomfort when their belief does not align with their behavior.

Elements of cognitive dissonance can be labeled into three categories. The first being irrelevance, where two elements are not related in any way, and nothing arises from it. The second is dissonance, and the third is consonance, where the cognitive elements are consistent. When the cognitive elements are consistent then the person experiences a lack of discomfort because his actions and beliefs are congruent. Additionally, cognitive dissonance (CD) has two parts: what it is and what it produces. CD is typically the inconsistency between a belief and a behavior. It can also be experienced when new information is introduced into perspective that contradicts a current belief. The second feature of CD is what it produces. CD produces stress, anxiety, or overall psychological discomfort. The stress, anxiety, or discomfort acts as a motivational factor to lessen it and come to a place of consonance. If there is a lack of consistency between what someone believes and knows and what they do, then that person will experience cognitive dissonance. This lack of consistency can also be seen as the division of a

person's real self and their ideal self. The real self being an inner force shared by all humans, but unique to everyone. The real self has potential for growth (Horney, 1950). However, when an individual experiences threats to his core beliefs he has the potential to "become alienated from his real self. He will then shift the major part of his energies to the task of molding himself, by a rigid system of inner dictates, into a being of absolute perfection" (p. 13). This is known as the idealized self, which is unattainable. The unattainability causes cognitive dissonance. To understand an individual's finalized solution to a problem, it would be best to know how that individual arrived at that solution, and the motives behind it.

Festinger hypothesized that, "the existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance" (1957, p. 3). The independent variable being the uncomfortable feeling from the existence of dissonance is enough to drive the dependent variable to motivate the person to reduce the dissonance. Efforts to reduce dissonance can be seen in many ways. Usually to diminish the effects of dissonance, the question remains, does the person have enough conviction to change their beliefs or actions? The change of behaviors or beliefs will have to fit the new information that threatens current ones. That is assuming the new information is correct or if an individual were to be persuaded into adopting a new belief.

In a study, Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) explored the effects of forced compliance on 71 introductory psychology students at Stanford University. Participants were told that they would be undergoing a purposefully mundane experiment and to report their honest opinion about it. It was researched that if an individual holds a private opinion and is offered a reward or threatened with a punishment then their subsequent opinion change becomes a factor of the independent variable. This means, the greater the reward or punishment, then the less dissonance

there would be (Festinger, 1957, p. 91). On the other hand Kelman, as stated in Festinger and Carlsmith (1959), argues that the greater the reward then the greater the opinion change should be. This argument was not supported. It was not supported because when a reward is too large it would likely negate a true opinion change, making lying about the opinion change more favorable because of the size of the reward. This does not mean the person being offered the reward will not accept it. They would likely accept the reward, but lie about the opinion change, and secretly still hold their own opinion.

In most cases when testing cognitive dissonance, it is impossible to list all the cognitive elements involved. Although, in the previously mentioned study, “these elements correspond to the knowledge that a reward has been obtained or that a punishment has been avoided” (Festinger, 1957, p. 90). Testing cognitive dissonance in a forced compliance format allows one to be aware of the elements one is contemplating. Participants were then persuaded to be hired as part of the study. Their task was to report to people waiting to take the experiment that it was enjoyable. Participants were persuaded with either one dollar or twenty dollars. They were then interviewed in a separate room on how they felt about the task. Responses were recorded on a scale from negative five to positive five. The participants were then debriefed on the actual intentions of the experiment. One participant was removed for an anomaly. The first question, which was directly related to what was being tested: was the experiment enjoyable? Because the task was set up to be purposefully tedious, the participants’ persuaded response would be incongruent with their true feelings.

The average results for the control participants were -.45, the average score for the one-dollar group was +1.35, and the average score for the twenty-dollar group was -.05. The score for the one-dollar group indicated that since their reward was small then the persuaded response

would elicit more dissonance. Since there was more dissonance the pressures to reduce it were greater. This resulted in the participant having to change their belief to match the new information. The result of the twenty-dollar group was closely related to that of the control. The twenty-dollar group still held their belief while at the same time having security in their persuaded response because the reward was large enough to not produce dissonance.

The results supported the hypothesis that if an individual held a private belief and was then persuaded to publicly state the opposite it would produce dissonance. If there were a reward or punishment large enough the subsequent dissonance would be small. It was also hypothesized that the existence of dissonance being psychologically uncomfortable will motivate the person to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance. This was supported because each of the three elements (consonance, dissonance, and irrelevance) were present in the study as conditions (control, one-dollar, and twenty-dollar) respectively. The participants' responses indicated that whichever type of cognitive element was experienced there were efforts to reduce it. Irrelevance was seen in the twenty-dollar group because the reward was large enough to make the dissonance irrelevant and the participant still held their previous belief. Consonance reflected the control group because they were never asked to change their opinion; rather, they were only tested on their experience, which stayed consonant. Dissonance reflected the one-dollar group because the reward was not enough to lessen the dissonance acquired by forced compliance. This motivated them to reduce it by adopting the new information. Efforts to reduce dissonance are not always as clear as in this study. To reduce dissonance a person must learn enough information or be so convinced that they adopt the new knowledge. Their behaviors will then have to match their knowledge. Through this, dissonance will be diminished. In this case, however, the new information and action (publicly stating new information) was not congruent

with the participants' belief. The individuals in the one-dollar group then chose to incorporate the new information to match their actions.

The theory of cognitive dissonances' efficacy can be further supported through the battle of the real and ideal self. According to Horney (1950), "Under inner stress, however, a person may become alienated from his real self. He will then shift the major part of his energies to the task of molding himself, by a rigid system of inner dictates, into a being of absolute perfection" (p. 13). Inner stress can be seen as cognitive dissonance. Through inner stress the individual is motivated to lessen the stress (dissonance). In the case of this study, the participants were persuaded to reject their true feelings about the boring task and publicly state that it was enjoyable. The real self was seen as the participants' true feelings of the task. The idealized self was seen as the participants who were persuaded into stating a contradictory statement. It was seen this way because the opposite opinion was made the ideal one because of the reward. The inner stress was then formed because the participants were trying to live up to this rigid idealized self. The real and ideal self are a strong supporter of the theory of cognitive dissonance because it was recognized as being "a model of lucidity and consistency" (Feist, Roberts, & Feist, 2021, p. 203) as well as parsimonious. While according to Feist, Roberts, and Feist (2021, pp. 202-203), it lacks falsifiability and the ability to generate research. It can also be seen that they are supported through cross-sectional examination of the two theories.

One weak point of the theory of cognitive dissonance is that thought processes cannot always be listed. When someone is experiencing cognitive dissonance, it is impossible to be aware of all thoughts causing the dissonance and the thoughts helping to reduce it. However, there are some studies that make this possible. The theory of cognitive dissonance is important because it is necessary to know everyone experiences these uncomfortable mental processes.

Whether a person is psychologically healthy or not, it is always comforting to know there are more suitable mental pathways to follow. Research subsequently following Festinger's (1957) work has brought attention to people who experience frequent trouble in their lives and there is always help because of that. Further research should be employed to bring awareness to the consequences of unhealthy thinking. Another area of research that should be studied is the possibility of cognitive dissonance being a predictor of personality.

References

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.

Festinger, L., and Carlsmith, M. J. (1959). Cognitive consequences of forced compliance. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 58(2), 203-210.

Feist, J. G., Roberts, A. T., & Feist, J. (2021). *Theory of personality* (10th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Horney, K. (1950). *Neurosis and human growth: The struggles toward self-realization*. W. W. Norton & Company.