

Identifying Cognitive Dissonance in our Daily Lives

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January 2025

Author Note

This paper is a sample document prepared for supporting my technical writing portfolio.

Abstract

Cognitive dissonance, a psychological concept introduced by Leon Festinger, refers to the tension arising from conflicting thoughts or behaviors. This paper explores how cognitive dissonance manifests in daily life, using relatable examples such as the rationalization of unmet goals and the behavior of cigarette smokers downplaying health risks. It highlights the ways individuals strive to maintain internal harmony by reconciling inconsistencies, often through subtle shifts in perception or attitude. The discussion also emphasizes the dual nature of cognitive dissonance, showing how it can impair decision-making if unaddressed but foster self-awareness when recognized. Real-world examples, including the impact of societal and economic factors on job seekers, provide insights into the pervasive nature of this phenomenon and its relevance in contemporary life. This exploration underscores the importance of understanding cognitive dissonance as both a defense mechanism and a tool for personal growth.

Analysis

Did you ever notice that people often alter what they say so that it doesn't contradict what they do? Often times people are entwined in the struggle to preserve the authenticity of their words, even when something contradictory happens. This struggle is real as inconsistencies can lead to a character judgement causing the individual to be labelled as untruthful or dishonest.

A few days back Rachel was interviewed for her dream job, but she couldn't land the role. However, when she discussed this with her friends later, she said "I barely resonated with that job. Also, I had to travel all the way down to the southside every day. They were not even offering me allowances or benefits." When she couldn't land the role, she ended up devaluing the job and her desire to bag it. She is probably trying to achieve internal harmony by avoiding contradictory thoughts. This is called Cognitive Dissonance. This concept was coined by one researcher- Leon Festiger who stated that Cognitive dissonance is a state of

tension that is caused when two or more cognitions are conflicting or are inconsistent with one another (Pervin, 2003). Aesop's fable "The Fox and the Grapes" is also a strong example of Cognitive dissonance.

While Cognitive dissonance is a form of defense mechanism in itself, it can lead to impaired decision-making if left unattended. On the flip side, once it is recognized, it can help in greater self-awareness and control. Festinger argued that attitudes follow behaviour. Festinger's theory is recognised to be the most important development in social psychology to that time, as in the 1970s observed by a follower of Festinger (Aronson, 1992). According to Festinger, individuals tend to reduce dissonance if they think that the elements causing it are in their control. In Rachel's case, she knew that her consistent efforts were not enough for her to land the job. This was distressing for her and her brain was working all its way out to avoid that tension.

Let's look at a research study as an example. How can cigarette smokers balance their want to live with the belief that smoking causes cancer? Naturally, rejecting the information is one way to lessen dissonance, and many smokers do just that. However, studies have shown that people can try to reduce dissonance in much more subtle ways. A range of questions were posed to groups of smokers and nonsmokers, including the following: To what extent does smoking pose a major risk of cancer? To what extent is smoking actually harmful? When will a cancer cure be discovered? How long must a person smoke for it to be genuinely harmful?

As expected, smokers gave smoking a lower risk rating for cancer than nonsmokers. Furthermore, smokers said that a bigger quantity of cigarettes were actually harmful; the more cigarettes they smoked, the more they indicated that cigarettes were truly harmful. Lastly, smokers believed that there would be a cancer cure sooner than nonsmokers and that smoking for a longer period of time was risky. The fact that smokers believed that a cure for cancer would be discovered before smoking became seriously harmful to them, as

well as the number of years that smoking was required before it became dangerous, was especially astounding in this case!

Conclusion

As stated earlier, nonsmokers believed that a cure for cancer was a long way off and that fewer years of smoking were risky, with the remedy occurring after the risky number of years. Cigarette smokers therefore lessened dissonance by downplaying the danger, not only by denying the link between smoking and cancer but also by thinking they were immune or that a treatment would be found (Pervin & Yanko, 1965).

That being said, this might not be the best time in Canada, and that is why there is more room for Cognitive Dissonance. Government policies, economic and political conditions, recession, and many more factors can make a jobseeker feel like he is no longer in control of his career.

References

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