Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Fessinger)

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Cognitive dissonance theory posits that individuals seek to maintain consistency among multiple cognitions (e.g., thoughts, behaviors, attitudes, values, or beliefs). Inconsistent cognitions produce unpleasant arousal that leads individuals to change one of the cognitions to bring it into line with other cognitions.

The theory has its roots in Heider's (1946) balance theory, which states that people strive for balanced relationships between individuals and objects in their environment. Because unstable beliefs are difficult to maintain, people make adjustments in order to regain consistency and rationality. Festinger (1957) extended balance theory, which focused on perceptions of the external world, to include consistency in self-perception, or one's internal world. Festinger theorized that the driving force behind the need for balance was the aversive arousal caused by inconsistent cognitions. People feel tension if they experience irrational cognitions and will therefore change cognitions to ease the tension and restore balance.

Aronson (1969) later introduced a "self-concept" theory, which posits that an individual is motivated by a threat to the self-concept caused by inconsistent cognitions. When a person has conflicting cognitions such as "I love my wife" and "I was rude to my wife yesterday," he experiences feelings of discomfort that threaten his self-concept. He then takes steps to change or weaken the negative cognition in order to reduce dissonance. For instance, he buys his wife flowers, which bolsters the cognition that he likes his wife and minimizes the dissonant cognition of being rude. This act reduces the threat to self-concept caused by dissonance.

Bem (1965) offered a non-motivational explanation for attitudinal change. His "self-perception theory" stated that people's attitudes are not predetermined, but instead are established by reflecting on one's behavior and then deducing underlying attitudes based on consistency with that behavior. For instance, attitudes are formed or changed when a person thinks "I acted in a certain way, thus my attitudes must be concordant with that behavior." Thus, a change in behavior leads to a change in attitude. This behaviorist explanation assumes that attitudes are formed through a non-motivational assessment of a situation.

Zanna and Cooper (1974) helped bring dissonance theory back to its motivational roots. In an experiment participants wrote counter-attitudinal essays after taking a placebo pill. The authors manipulated having either a high or low choice in writing the essay, as well as telling the participants that the pill made them feel tense, relaxed, or had no side effects (control condition). This research demonstrated that taking a pill allowed participants to blame arousal on the pill, thus reducing the motivation to change the dissonant cognitions. Researchers concluded that arousal caused by internal imbalance (i.e., dissonant cognitions) motivates attitude change, while arousal that is perceived to be caused by external factors (i.e., a pill) will not lead to attitude change.

Another approach was introduced by Steele and Liu (1983), who suggested that attitude change resulting from dissonance is caused by a need for a positive self-image rather than a need for cognitive consistency. Individuals can relieve dissonance-induced arousal simply by reaffirming a valued aspect of the self, even if the aspect is unrelated to the cognitions. For example, if a person who dislikes cherry pie finds herself telling the chef how good the pie is, she experiences dissonance. The dissonance threatens the self-image, leading to arousal. However, the discomfort is relieved when she gives a homeless man money on her way home. This act of self-affirmation relieves dissonance-induced arousal, even though it is unrelated to the cognitions that caused the arousal. Although the dissonant cognitions (i.e., not liking the pie, and saying she liked it) still exist, the arousal has dissipated because she has

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reaffirmed that she is a caring person by giving the homeless man money. Thus, self-affirmation reduces the need to change one's cognitions in order to restore consistency.

Another perspective, called the "New Look" alternative (Cooper & Fazio 1984), suggests that dissonance occurs when one violates a societal norm. The resulting arousal motivates one to justify this discrepancy through reinterpretation of the outcome (e.g., attitude change) in a more positive direction. Unlike many other dissonance theories, this approach claims that the self and self-esteem are irrelevant.

Through the years, dissonance has been theorized to be caused by inconsistent cognitions, a threatened self-concept, a need to protect one's self-image, and violation of social norms. Thus, it is not surprising that there is some disagreement about the true cause of dissonance-produced attitude change. Some researchers claim that each of these theoretical causes can lead to dissonance in different situations. Additionally, it is difficult to determine which cause leads to dissonance because study results can often be explained by multiple theories. As a result, researchers remain divided in their beliefs about the underlying mechanism that drives dissonance.

Traditional dissonance studies have employed a "forced compliance" paradigm to arouse dissonance. This technique involves convincing participants to do something that they would not usually do, while simultaneously leading the participant to believe that they had freely chosen to complete the behavior. For example, a student is induced to write an essay supporting graduation requirements including a senior thesis. If this behavior is counter to the participant's attitudes, it will create dissonance between the action of writing the essay and the participant's own beliefs.

An alternative dissonance technique called "hypocrisy" gained popularity in the 1990s. Stone and colleagues (1994) theorized that dissonance would result when one gives advice to others but later realize one's own failure to follow the advice. To test this hypothesis, they asked participants in the "hypocrisy" condition to create a speech to be included in a video ostensibly for the purpose of creating an AIDS education video for high school students. Then they asked the participants to list times in their pasts when they had failed to use condoms. Public advocacy of condom use coupled with the realization that they personally had failed to follow their own advice led participants to reduce dissonance by purchasing condoms.

Although forced compliance and hypocrisy studies are among the most noted dissonance studies, other studies have used a variety of techniques to demonstrate the effects of dissonance on decision-making, behavior, attitudes, morals, and learning. For instance, post-decisional dissonance occurs when a person has chosen between two equal choices. To bolster the belief that one has made the right choice, the person will see the chosen alternative more positively than the one not chosen.

Other studies demonstrate that strong commitment to a belief that is later invalidated can lead an individual to attempt to persuade others to support the incorrect belief. Obtaining social consensus then relieves dissonance because the belief and the social support of the belief will be consistent.

Initiation studies demonstrate that individuals report enjoying group membership more if they endure a difficult or painful initiation to join the group. Their liking of the group justifies the high price they paid to be in the group. Similarly, deterrence studies demonstrate that children who obeyed a weak order to avoid playing with a toy reported liking the toy less than children who obeyed a strong order. Because it is reasonable to obey a strong order, but not a weak order, the children rationalized their behavior by thinking they must have avoided the toy because they do not really like it that much.

Just as there is a variety of ways that dissonance is induced, there is also a variety of ways to alleviate dissonance. Festinger suggested that dissonance could be relieved by (1) changing one or more of the cognitions so that all the cognitions would be in agreement; (2) adopting cognitions or behaviors that strengthen the "desirable" cognition and therefore make the "undesirable" cognition less salient; or (3) reducing the importance assigned to the inconsistency. Traditional forced compliance studies typically involve the first method; they measure attitude change in participants who have acted in a counter-attitudinal way. Subsequently, participants adjust their attitudes to be more in favor of the counter-attitudinal position, adjusting their attitude to be more in line with their behavior.

Hypocrisy studies go a step farther and require participants to actually change discrepant behaviors in order to relieve dissonance. Stone and colleagues (1994) found that participants experiencing "hypocrisy" reduced dissonance by purchasing condoms and by stating intentions to use condoms. These behaviors strengthen the desirable cognition ("I practice safe sex") and takes the focus off the undesirable cognition ("I have failed to practice safe sex").

The third option for reducing dissonance involves reducing the *importance* of the inconsistency, rather than reducing the inconsistency itself. Such trivialization is likely to occur in circumstances where attitudes are very salient or central to the individual's self-concept and are therefore very resistant to change.

The "hydraulic model" of dissonance reduction suggests that, when several modes of dissonance reduction exist, the easiest mode will be used. Therefore, if changing a central attitude or behavior is difficult, an easier mode of dissonance reduction, such as trivialization, is likely to occur. Dissonance can also be relieved by other methods such as misattributing the arousal to external elements, creating a positive self-evaluation, receiving ego-enhancing information, reducing the arousal chemically, or by focusing on other valued aspects of the self.

In addition to studying theoretical aspects of how dissonance is aroused and relieved, researchers have also applied dissonance theory to many real-world settings. For instance, recent research has shown that people in some cultures are less likely to experience dissonance. Studies have also demonstrated that people with high self-esteem experience greater dissonance arousal than people with low self-esteem. The social aspects of cognitive dissonance have also been investigated. For instance, researchers have found that social support can reduce dissonance and that people change their attitudes when they witness someone in their group experiencing dissonance.

Researchers in the fields of health and prevention have applied the theory to a variety of behaviors that people carry out even though they know the behavior has negative consequences for their health. For example, recognizing one's dissonant cognitions regarding smoking or body image can lead to a reduction in smoking or bulimic behaviors. In addition, cognitive dissonance theory has been used to study patients suffering from anxiety disorders and depression who experience dissonance as a result of their disorders. Despite extensive evolution, dissonance theory has proved to be a resilient theory useful in many contexts.

Dissonance theory is not without its controversies, however. Early dissonance theory did not offer clearly defined terms, methods, or operational rules. As a result, individual studies confirming the theory were criticized as lucky methodological guesses. Skeptical researchers also questioned whether attitude change (e.g., in the forced compliance paradigm) was a result of dissonance or merely due to the reinforcement effects of the activity. Dissonance theory also challenged established behavioral theories by suggesting that animals had cognitions that could affect learning and behaviors. Finally, methodological techniques, especially deception, gave rise to ethical criticisms. The theory withstood these controversies and has since gained a general acceptance through decades of experiments, which have largely confirmed its basic propositions. Thus, dissonance studies testing the theory itself have declined recently, although researchers continue to test the theory using new operationalizations and new contexts.

SEE ALSO: Attitudes and Behavior; Cognitive Balance Theory (Heider)

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