

The Dissonance-Inducing Effects of an Inconsistency Between Experienced Empathy and Knowledge of Past Failures to Help: Support for the Action-Based Model of Dissonance

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This research was designed to test the hypothesis that an inconsistency between an experienced emotion and another element of knowledge would evoke dissonance motivation. To test this hypothesis, participants were induced to experience either low or high levels of empathy for a young boy with cancer. Then they were reminded either of their past failures to help similar persons or of neutral events. Finally, they were provided an opportunity to help the boy who had cancer. As predicted, participants who were in the high-empathy/reminder-of-past-failures-to-help condition helped more than participants in the other conditions. Discussion focuses on the implications of this research for the conditions sufficient to evoke dissonance motivation. Discussion also suggests how this novel paradigm can be used to increase helping behavior.

Although much research has tested predictions derived from cognitive dissonance theory (for reviews, see Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976), we are unaware of any prior experimental research that has examined whether dissonance can be created between an emotion and another element of knowledge. This is particularly interesting given the origins of the theory. According to Festinger (1957), the theory of cognitive dissonance occurred to him after reading articles by Prasad (1950) and Sinha (1952) on the spreading of rumors. Prasad (1950) reported that subsequent to a severe Indian earthquake, persons who lived in the area of the earthquake and experienced tremors but suffered no actual damage spread rumors that predicted even more serious disasters in the near future. In contrast, Sinha (1952) reported that subsequent to a severe landslide, which was quite comparable to the Indian earthquake in terms of amount of destruction and loss of life, persons who lived in the area of the landslide and did witness actual damage did not spread rumors that predicted more serious future disasters. Festinger (1957) surmised that the latter group did not experience a discrepancy between their feeling of fear and the objective evidence, as the evidence clearly indicated that they should experience fear. Hence, they had no dissonance and no need to spread rumors predicting impending disasters. By contrast, the former group

experienced a discrepancy between their feeling of fear and the lack of objective evidence indicating that they should experience fear. To reduce this discrepancy, the individuals spread "fear-justifying" rumors to reduce the dissonance.

The idea that dissonance could arise from an inconsistency between an emotion and another element of knowledge was also suggested to us by the action-based model of cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones, 1999, 2000a, 2002), which accepts the tenets of the original theory of dissonance, but specifies why cognitive discrepancy evokes an aversive motivational state (dissonance) and why cognitive and behavioral changes occur to reduce the dissonance. Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance specified that a cognitive inconsistency of sufficient importance would evoke motivation aimed at reducing the inconsistency, but it never specified why cognitive inconsistency evoked this motivation. Several revisions to the theory have been proposed to attempt to explain the motivation underlying dissonance reduction, but each of these revisions has been seriously challenged in recent years (for reviews, see Beauvois & Joule, 1996, 1999; Harmon-Jones, 1999, 2000a; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; McGregor, Newby-Clark, & Zanna, 1999). In fact, much recent evidence has supported the original version of dissonance theory. But the question still remains, why is cognitive discrepancy motivating? According to the action-based model, cognitive discrepancy generates dissonance motivation because the cognitive discrepancy has the potential to interfere with effective and unconflicted action (see also Jones & Gerard, 1967). Dissonance reduction then occurs to assist

