



Whatever Happened to Cognitive Dissonance Theory?

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Research and theoretical developments concerning the theory of cognitive dissonance are reviewed. Review focuses primarily on theoretical revisions that propose different underlying motivations for cognitive dissonance reduction. After reviewing the self-consistency, self-affirmation, and aversive consequences revisions, the authors review recent research that has challenged each of the revisions and that supports the original version of the theory. In the end, the authors review the action-based model of dissonance, which accepts the original theory's proposal that a sufficient cognitive inconsistency causes dissonance and extends the original theory by proposing why cognitive inconsistency prompts dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance theory is concerned with how perception and cognition influence and are influenced by motivation and emotion. Cognitive dissonance research dominated social psychology from the 1950s until the 1970s. Hundreds of experiments have tested dissonance processes. For the most part, these experiments have explored the ways that the experience of cognitive dissonance causes attitude and behavior changes. In recent years, there has been renewed interest in this theory (e.g., Beauvois & Joule, 1996; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

In addition to the large volume of research on cognitive dissonance theory itself, the theory has held a wide influence on the psychological theory and research. Aronson (1992) identified a number of social psychological theories that could be thought of as dissonance in other guises, including self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988), symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), self-evaluation maintenance theory (Tesser, 1988), self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1989) and action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987).

Leon Festinger formulated the original theory of cognitive dissonance in the mid-1950s. Festinger theorized that, when an individual holds two or more elements of knowledge that are relevant to each other but inconsistent with one another, a state of

discomfort is created. He called this unpleasant state "dissonance."

Festinger theorized that the degree of dissonance in relation to a cognition = $D/D + C$, where D is the sum of cognitions dissonant with a particular cognition and C is the sum of cognitions consonant with that same particular cognition, with each cognition weighted for importance (see Sakai, 1999, and Shultz & Lepper, 1999, for more precise mathematical models).

Festinger (1957) theorized that persons are motivated by the unpleasant state of dissonance to engage in cognitive work so as to reduce the inconsistency. To reduce the dissonance, individuals could add consonant cognitions, subtract dissonant cognitions, increase the importance of consonant cognitions, or decrease the importance of dissonant cognitions. One of the most often assessed ways of reducing dissonance is change in attitudes. Attitude change in response to a state of dissonance is expected to be in the direction of the cognition that is most resistant to change. In tests of the theory, it is often assumed that the knowledge about recent behavior is usually most resistant to change, because if a person behaved in a certain way, it is often very difficult to undo that behavior.

Experimental Paradigms Used to Test the Theory

Free choice. In 1956, Brehm examined dissonance theory's predictions for post-decision processing. According to the theory, after a decision, all of the cognitions that favor the chosen alternative are consonant with the decision, while all the cognitions that favor the rejected alternative are dissonant. The greater the number and importance of dissonant cognitions and the lesser the number and importance of consonant cognitions, the greater the degree of dissonance experienced by the individual. In a decision-situation, dissonance is typically greater the closer the alternatives are in attractiveness (as long as each alternative has several distinguishing characteristics). Dissonance caused by a decision can be reduced by viewing the chosen alternative as more attractive and/or viewing the rejected alternative as less attractive. Brehm conducted an experiment in which participants made either an easy or a

difficult decision between two alternatives. The difficult decision was one in which the alternatives were close in attractiveness, whereas the easy decision was one in which one alternative was much more attractive than the other. Participants were asked to evaluate the decision options before and after the decision. Brehm found that, when persons made a difficult decision, they changed their attitudes to become more negative toward the rejected alternative. After an easy decision, participants did not change their attitudes.

Induced Compliance. Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) hypothesized that dissonance should be aroused when a person acts in a way that is contrary to his or her attitudes. To test this prediction, they brought participants into the laboratory and asked them to perform a boring task. Then, participants were paid either \$1 or \$20 to tell "another participant" that the task was interesting. According to dissonance theory, lying for a payment of \$20 should not arouse much dissonance, because \$20 provides sufficient justification for the counter-attitudinal behavior (i.e., it adds 20 cognitions consonant with the behavior). However, being paid \$1 for performing the same behavior should arouse much dissonance, because \$1 was just enough justification for the behavior (i.e., it adds only one consonant cognition). As expected, participants in the \$1 (low-justification) condition changed their attitudes to be more positive toward the task, whereas participants in the \$20 (high-justification) condition did not change their attitudes.

Challenges to the Research and Original Theory

After these and other dissonance results appeared in the literature, some theorists began to question whether the results were due to motivation. Some theorists hypothesized that the effects were due to non-motivational, cognitive processes (e.g., Bem, 1972) or impression management concerns (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971). However, subsequent research confirmed that dissonance is a motivated process (Harmon-Jones, 2000a, 2000b).

Beginning in the late 1960s, researchers began to propose motivational explanations for dissonance effects that differed from Festinger's originally proposed theory. Four revisions of dissonance theory have been proposed, and their originators have provided evidence to support the new conceptions. These include Aronson's (1968, 1969, 1999) self-consistency theory, Steele's (1988) self-affirmation theory, Cooper and Fazio's (1984) new look at dissonance and Harmon-Jones' (1999, 2000c) action-

based model.

Self-Consistency. In his self-consistency theory, Aronson proposed that dissonance is not due merely to an inconsistency between cognitions. Instead, he posited that dissonance occurs when a person acts in a way that violates his or her self-concept, that is, when a person performs a behavior inconsistent with his or her sense of self. Since most persons have a positive self-concept, dissonance is most often experienced when a person behaves negatively, behaving in an incompetent, irrational, or immoral manner. One of the primary predictions derived from this revision is that low and high self-esteem individuals should respond with less and more dissonance reduction (e.g., attitude change), respectively, because in dissonance experiments high self-esteem individuals are induced to act in ways that are more discrepant from their positive self-views. Experiments testing this prediction have produced mixed results. Beauvois and Joule (1996, 1999) have also obtained results that are difficult to explain with this revision.

Self-Affirmation. Steele (1988) proposed a different alternative to Festinger's dissonance theory. He proposed that persons possess a motive to maintain an overall self-image of moral and adaptive adequacy. He stated that dissonance-induced attitude change occurs because dissonance threatens this positive self-image. While Festinger's dissonance theory posited that individuals are motivated to reconcile inconsistent cognitions, Steele proposed that, instead, individuals are merely motivated to affirm the integrity of the self. In support of this idea, Steele presented experiments, where, following a dissonance induction, participants either were, or were not, presented with an opportunity to affirm an important value. When participants were allowed to affirm an important value, dissonance-related attitude change did not occur.

However, in 1995, Simon, Greenberg and Brehm presented data supporting an alternative explanation for Steele's findings that was in line with the original theory of dissonance. Festinger's original theory proposed that the degree of dissonance experienced depended upon the importance of the dissonant and consonant cognitions. Simon, Greenberg and Brehm hypothesized that making an important value salient could reduce dissonance by reducing the individual's perception of the importance of the dissonant act. They conducted an experiment in which participants who opposed a tuition increase were given high choice to write essays in support of a tuition increase (a counter-attitudinal statement).

After writing the essay, participants either were given an opportunity to affirm an important value (self-affirmation condition), were asked to write about a value that was not important to them personally but was of general importance (value salient condition, e.g., world hunger), or neither (control condition). Participants were then asked to rate whether or not they supported a tuition increase. Participants in the control condition changed their attitudes to be more favorable toward a tuition increase, as expected. Participants in both the self-affirmation and value salient conditions did not change their attitudes. They had trivialized, or reduced the importance of, the tuition increase issue by thinking about other important values, even when these values were not personally important and thus not self-affirming.

New Look. Cooper and Fazio (1984) proposed the idea that the discomfort experienced in dissonance experiments was not due to an inconsistency between the individual's cognitions, but rather to feeling personally responsible for producing an aversive consequence. They stated, "Dissonance has precious little to do with the inconsistency among cognitions per se, but rather with the production of a consequence that is unwanted" (Cooper & Fazio, 1984). In support of this idea, Cooper and Worchel (1970) replicated and extended Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) classic experiment. In addition to the conditions of the original experiment, Cooper and Worchel added conditions in which, when the participant tells the confederate that the boring task is interesting, the confederate is not convinced by the lie. They found that attitude change occurred only in the low-justification condition where the confederate believed the lie. Cooper, Worchel, Fazio, and others interpreted this result as indicating that dissonance-related attitude change only occurred in the condition in which an aversive consequence was produced. A number of other experiments produced similar results. The new look, or aversive consequences, revision of cognitive dissonance theory was widely accepted.

However, concerns regarding the aversive consequences revision persisted among some dissonance theorists. According to Eagly and Chaiken, the aversive consequences revision "transformed the quite general theory that Festinger (1957) had envisioned into a mini-theory that delineates a particular set of circumstances that produce a particular type of attitudinal adjustment within the induced compliance paradigm (Eagly & Chaiken 1993, p. 520)." Berkowitz and Devine (1989) also lamented the rise of this model, saying, "Gone was the theory's broad sweep"

(p. 499).

In addition, the results obtained in paradigms other than the counter-attitudinal action paradigm are not consistent with the aversive consequences model. Dissonance research using a selective-exposure paradigm has demonstrated that persons are more willing to examine materials that confirm their beliefs than materials that dispute their beliefs (Brock & Balloun, 1967; Frey, 1986). Research using a belief disconfirmation paradigm has shown that, when persons are exposed to information that challenges their beliefs, they often strengthen their original belief (Batson, 1975; Burris, Harmon-Jones, & Tarpley, 1997). Research using a hypocrisy paradigm has shown that persons change their behavior to be more in line with their beliefs when they are reminded of times when they did not live up to their beliefs (Aronson, Fried, & Stone, 1991; Stone et al., 1994). It is difficult to reconcile any of these lines of dissonance research with a conception of dissonance theory in which the production of an aversive consequence is the only motivator of dissonance-related attitude change.

Certainly, according to the original theory of cognitive dissonance, the production of aversive consequences would be expected increase the amount of dissonance produced (see Harmon-Jones, 1999). However, the original theory would deny that an aversive consequence is necessary to produce dissonance.

So why did the new look research find that, in the induced-compliance paradigm, attitude change only occurred when the participant caused an aversive consequence? First of all, the lack of attitude change in the no-aversive-consequences conditions is a null effect. Null effects are notoriously difficult to explain and subject to multiple alternatives. Attitude change may have been produced, but may have been too slight to be detected with the small sample size of these experiments. It is also possible that not enough dissonance was aroused in these experiments to produce attitude change without the additional help of an aversive consequence. For example, too much justification for the counter-attitudinal behavior may have been provided. It is also possible that, in these experiments, dissonance was produced, but it was not detected or was reduced by a route other than attitude change.

Beginning in 1996, Harmon-Jones, Brehm, Greenberg, Simon, and Nelson conducted experiments that demonstrated that dissonance-related attitude change can occur without the production of aversive consequences. Under the guise of an ex-

periment on memory, participants were exposed to an attitudinal object. Participants were assured of privacy and anonymity, and then given high or low choice to write a counter-attitudinal statement about the object (to manipulate justification). They were asked to discard the statement in the trash after writing it, so that there was no chance of the statement causing an aversive consequence. This manipulation was based on Cooper and Fazio's (1984) statement, "making a statement contrary to one's attitude while in solitude does not have the potential for bringing about an aversive event" (p. 232).

In one experiment (Harmon-Jones et al., 1996), participants were asked to read a boring passage. They were then given high or low choice to write that they found the boring passage interesting. Nonspecific skin conductance responses (NS-SCRs) were assessed during the 3 minutes between the writing of the statement and the assessment of the participants' attitudes toward the passage. Although no aversive consequences were produced, persons in the high-choice condition changed their attitudes to be more favorable toward the passage. In addition, NS-SCRs indicated that participants in this condition experienced more emotional arousal.

In another experiment, participants who liked chocolate were asked to eat a piece of chocolate and then given high or low choice to write a statement that they disliked the chocolate (Harmon-Jones, 2000d). This experiment was conducted because it had been suggested that reading the boring passage, in itself, was aversive and that participants in the high-choice condition could have believed they had high choice to read the passage as well as to write the statement. Since eating the chocolate was pleasant, rather than aversive, that alternative could not apply in this case. Participants in the high-choice condition changed their attitudes to dislike the chocolate. In addition, self-reported negative affect was increased following dissonance-producing behavior and was reduced following the attitude change. The results obtained in these and other experiments demonstrate that dissonance affect and dissonance-related attitude change can occur in situations in which a cognitive inconsistency is present but the production of aversive consequences is not present. They also demonstrate that the experience of cognitive dissonance evokes an unpleasant motivational state that motivates dissonance reduction. These recent experiments have supported the original conception of dissonance theory against the revisionists. But why does dissonance evoke this negative motivational state? Why is inconsistency aversive? Festinger proposed no answer to the question of

what underlies dissonance processes.

Action-Based Model. Harmon-Jones (1999, 2000c) proposed his action-based model of cognitive dissonance in an attempt to answer this question. The action-based model concurs with other areas of psychological research in proposing that perceptions and cognitions can serve as action tendencies. The action-based model further proposes that dissonance between cognitions evokes an aversive state because it has the potential to interfere with effective and unconflicted action. Dissonance reduction, by bringing cognitions into consonance, serves the function of facilitating the execution of effective and unconflicted action.

After a decision is made, the cognitive processing that occurs should assist with the execution of the decision. The tendency of participants in dissonance research to view the chosen alternative more favorably and the rejected alternative more negatively after a decision is made should help the individual to follow through and act on the decision in a more effective manner.

An action-oriented state is a state that often occurs following a decision (Gollwitzer, 1990; Heckhausen, 1986; Kuhl, 1984). When a person is in an action-oriented state, implementation of decisions is enhanced. Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones (in press) integrated these ideas with dissonance theory to propose that this action-oriented state that follows decision-making is equivalent to the state in which dissonance motivation operates and dissonance reduction occurs. They hypothesized that experimentally manipulating the degree of action-orientation experienced following a decision should affect the degree of dissonance reduction.

Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones (2002) conducted an experiment to test these ideas. Participants were asked to make either an easy decision or a difficult decision. Participants were asked to fill out a mindset questionnaire after the decision. The neutral mindset asked participants to list 7 things they did in a typical day, while the action-oriented mindset questionnaire asked participants to list 7 things they could do to perform well on the exercise they had chosen. Participants were then asked to reevaluate the exercises. Results indicated that participants in the difficult-decision, action-oriented condition changed their attitudes to prefer the chosen exercise more than participants in the other conditions.

In a second experiment testing the action-based model, Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones (2002) replicated the results of the first experiment using a

different manipulation of action-orientation. In this experiment, action-orientation was induced by asking participants to think of an important decision that they had made and to list the steps they intended to use to successfully follow through with their decision. The participants in the action-orientation condition engaged in more attitude change following a difficult decision than did participants in the comparison conditions. This study replicated the results of the previous study, but provided stronger support for the action-based model because it used an action-orientation induction unrelated to the decision at hand. Additional support for other predictions derived from the action-based model has also been obtained (Harmon-Jones, Peterson, & Vaughn, 2003).

Conclusion

The many studies that have challenged the dissonance revisions have provided support for Festinger's original conception of dissonance. Clearly, dissonance has much to do with cognitive inconsistency rather than being due to such limiting conditions as a self-threat or the production of an aversive consequence. Festinger did not propose why cognitive inconsistency produces discomfort and motivates cognitive and behavioral change, however, the newly proposed action-based model of dissonance does propose an underlying motivation. Research on the action-based model suggests that dissonance reduction may serve the function of assisting in the successful execution of a commitment, which may facilitate effective and unconflicted action.

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