

# Dissonance Theory Revival: A Radical Prescription

Jean-Léon Beauvois and Robert-Vincent Joule

*A Radical Dissonance Theory*

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Radical often means extreme or revolutionary. Another meaning of radical is pertaining to the origin. It seems the latter is the meaning intended in *A Radical Dissonance Theory*. Appropriately dedicated in memory of Leon Festinger, this book is a major contribution to the revival of dissonance theory. The authors present a conception of dissonance based on the core of Festinger's 1957 version, which continues the dissonance tradition of generating counterintuitive findings.

Although their major focus is theoretical, the authors describe some practical implications for managers, teachers, and psychotherapists. On the basis of experiments indicating that internal causal explanations consistent with a problematic behavior block rationalization attributing value to the behavior, they recommend that practitioners eliciting new behaviors wait until rationalization has terminated before providing internal explanations (e.g., You've decided to face responsibilities).

Rationalization of counterattitudinal behavior is the function of dissonance reduction, according to the authors. In their view, dissonance reduction consists of modifying cognitions to eliminate those implying a different behavior or generating new cognitions implying the behavior chosen, and it may increase inconsistency among private cognitions. They contend,

contrary to common belief, that dissonance theory is not a theory of cognitive consistency. They consider unfortunate Festinger's use of the same word, dissonant, to refer to relations between cognitions and to the psychological state these relations generate under certain circumstances (they refer to the former as consistent or inconsistent and reserve the word dissonance for the latter).

Observing that revisions of dissonance theory have increasingly transformed it into a theory of the ego with a large role for self-attribution, the authors argue for a return to the core propositions of the original version: relations between two cognitions are dissonant if one is contradictory to what is implied by the other, dissonance is a tension state that needs to be reduced, and the amount of dissonance depends on the proportion of dissonant cognitions in the relevant set. Calculation of the dissonance ratio, which is central to Festinger's theory, requires one cognition to be chosen with which other cognitions are consonant or dissonant. The authors assert that this "generative" cognition, which is not in the numerator or denominator of the dissonance ratio, is always the representation of behavior, never an attitude. They posit that free choice, consequences, public nature, and irrevocability of the problematic behavior are cognitions of commitment that are not

part of the dissonance ratio because they are neither inconsistent nor consistent with the generative cognition, but rather determine the conditions for the occurrence of dissonance.

In support of their view of dissonance, the authors present 33 experiments, most of which were previously unavailable in English. Using assumptions new to dissonance research about what is consistent (consonant) or inconsistent (dissonant) with a counterattitudinal behavior, many novel predictions are made. One finding is that writing a counterattitudinal essay produces less attitude change in the direction of the essay than simply making a commitment to write the essay. The authors mention that Festinger once said that hypothesis seemed very strange. Another finding is that individuals, having chosen to participate in a compliance situation requiring them to write one of three counterattitudinal essays who then choose which one to write, show less attitude change toward the essay written than those in the same compliance situation who write the same essay without choice of which one to write. Predicted from the assumption that choosing to write the essay reduces dissonance regarding the generative cognition of choosing to participate in the compliance situation, that finding is contrary to what would be expected from previous interpretations of dissonance phenomena, including self-perception, impression management, and self-affirmation.

The authors present two new research paradigms: double forced compliance and act rationalization. In double forced compliance, two related counterattitudinal behaviors are predicted to produce less attitude change than one of them, based on the assumption that a related counterattitudinal behavior is consistent with the generative counterattitudinal behavior, thus reducing dissonance. In another situation, when the two counterattitudinal behaviors are both highly committing, each is considered generative, and attitude change is predicted to be greater when both are performed. Which situation exists could prove difficult to specify in advance.

Act rationalization refers to engaging in a new, more extreme counterattitudinal act to rationalize a counterattitudinal behavior that is not yet cognitively rationalized. Using the assumption that a related counterattitudinal behavior is consistent with a counterattitudinal behavior, it is predicted that act rationalization reduces cognitive rationalization and also that cognitive rationalization reduces act rationalization. One finding is that smokers who had chosen to abstain from cigarettes for 18 hours who then received information

that smoking did not endanger health (reducing cognitive rationalization of abstinence), smoked fewer cigarettes in the following eight days than those who did not receive such information. Another finding is that misattribution of tension from a counterattitudinal behavior to external sources, which has been shown to reduce cognitive rationalization, increases act rationalization, indicating that such misattribution does not reduce dissonance as previously thought.

The authors' view of dissonance could have profited from following Festinger's original version more closely in some ways. Festinger's assumption that importance of cognitions determines the amount of dissonance is not used. Festinger's position, disregarded by the authors, that dissonance reduction depends on resistance to change of cognitions, accounts for their observation that when the initial attitude is salient, dissonance can be eliminated by downgrading the behavior, whereas their position that dissonance reduction is postbehavioral and incapable of preparing rational action does not account for that observation. Their exclusive focus on forced compliance neglects other themes in Festinger's version (e.g., avoidance of dissonance).

Similar to Festinger's version of dissonance, the authors' version is likely to arouse controversy. The uncompromising theoretical stance may strike some as extreme, even revolutionary. However, it is carefully reasoned and supported by a wealth of data. The many remarkable findings will need to be explained by those with differing views of dissonance.

This important book deserves wide readership among those concerned with understanding behavior change and attitude change. It is a must read for anyone interested in dissonance theory. ■

# Chronic Illness and Close Relationships

Renee F. Lyons, Michael J. L. Sullivan,  
and Paul G. Ritvo (with James C.

Coyne)

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Approximately 110 million Americans will suffer from chronic health problems in their lifetime (Cole, 1974). Although it is well established that adaptive coping can facilitate recovery from and adjustment to illness, less is known about the impact of close relationships in illness outcomes. For instance, it has been suggested that family members' responses

can serve to increase the number of pain complaints (Paulsen & Altmaier, 1995), decrease the likelihood of return to work (Clark & Mills, 1979), diminish activity levels and treatment compliance (Foa & Foa, 1974), reduce social networks (Janssen, Philipsen, & Halfens, 1990), and contribute to an increased likelihood of divorce (Lyons & Meade, 1995). In contrast,