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Reconsidering Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) Classic Experiment Testing

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

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Summary

The theory of cognitive dissonance and research derived from it have yielded a rich array of insights into the mind. One of the early experiments on the theory, the classic experiment by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959), has been subjected to criticisms by scientists. Rijsman has offered novel, insightful criticisms of this classic experiment. In this article, I address these criticisms by reviewing research that has suggested improved ways of testing dissonance processes, and I present new data relevant to the concerns espoused by Rijsman. I conclude that while the classic experiment by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) may have flaws, these flaws have been addressed in recent dissonance theory research.

The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) has been one of the most influential theories in psychology (for reviews, see Beauvois & Joule, 1996; Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). In 1959, Festinger and Carlsmith published one of the first tests of the theory.

Rijsman's Criticisms

Rijsman offers a number of novel and insightful criticisms of Festinger and Carlsmith (1959). First, he suggests that the general description given of this experiment is inaccurate. He notes that the boring task was not evaluated as very boring. He also notes that other researchers have found that after persons perform a boring task and then say that it was dull or pleasant, they evaluate the task more positively (Girandola & Joule, 1995) or do not change their evaluations (Bruin & Rijsman, 1994; Nuttin, 1966). As Girandola and Joule (1995) demonstrated, the performance of the boring task can cause a more positive attitude toward the task. Presumably, commitment to perform the task created dissonance, and caused the attitude change. Such a finding is in line with dissonance theory. However, the finding that the content of the statement (positive as compared to negative) about the task does not matter in determining attitude change can be seen as inconsistent with the theory of dissonance.

Do these failures to replicate Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) indicate that the dissonance theory interpretation of Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) is fiction? Or are there other interpretations of the failures to replicate? ¹

The Importance of Perceived Choice Over the Role-Playing Behavior

A number of experiments have conceptually replicated Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) results (see reviews by Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). However, along the way, a number of variables have been identified that need to be considered in induced compliance experiments.

First, experiments revealed that the effects of Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) were most likely to occur when persons perceived that they freely engaged in the role playing (e.g., Linder, Cooper, & Jones, 1967). In addition, other research revealed that simply manipulating perceived choice over engaging in the role playing influenced the amount of dissonance and dissonance reduction (e.g., attitude change), with persons given low choice to engage in the behavior not evidencing attitude change and with persons given

high choice to engage in the behavior evidencing attitude change. In these latter experiments, no obvious incentives (e.g., monies) were offered to participants for engaging in the role playing.

The majority of experiments described by Rijsman included no manipulation of choice or commitment, and no assessment of perceived choice or commitment. Consequently, it is difficult to ascertain whether conditions likely to influence the magnitude of dissonance were present.

Money as a Means of Inducing Compliance

There is another difficulty with the use of money in the induced compliance procedure. Money can take on different meanings. For example, if participants perceive the money as a bribe, then the more they are paid, the more they change their attitudes (Schlenker, Forsyth, Leary, & Miller, 1980).

The Importance of Perceived Choice Over the Attitude-Creating Behavior

In addition to controlling the perceived choice over engaging in the role playing behavior, the control and/or assessment of the perceived choice over engaging in the attitude-creating behavior (e.g., performing the boring task) needs to be considered. In the experiments of Girandola and Joule (1995), there seems to be an assumption that the participants freely chose to perform the boring task. This commitment to the boring task behavior then arouses dissonance. The reduction of dissonance may entail a changing of the attitude toward the boring task so that it is viewed as less boring. Hence, when participants say that the task is boring, additional dissonance is created, because their statement is dissonant with their new positive attitude toward the task they have just performed.

The results obtained in the Girandola and Joule (1995) experiment strongly suggest that participants felt that they freely chose to perform the boring task, and the results are consistent with predictions derived from the radical version of cognitive dissonance theory (Beauvois & Joule, 1996, 1999). However, without a manipulation of choice over performing the task or an assessment of the perceived choice, it is difficult to know whether participants felt free to choose to perform the task. Perceptions of choice may vary between laboratories or experimenters, making the results difficult to interpret in the absence of assessments of perceived choice or manipulations of choice. Such would explain why Bruin and Rijsman (1994) found different results than Girandola and Joule (1995).

A Test of the Effects of Pro-Attitudinal Behavior on Dissonance and Attitude Change

While the results of Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) can be questioned for lacking a very boring task, some recent research has addressed this and other concerns about their experiment. In this research, the attitudinal objects used have been extremely negative and the statements about them have been produced in private, thus eliminating concerns about self-presentation interpretations of the effects. Moreover, in this research, participants' behavior did not produce any aversive consequences, thus making the situation one in which the dissonance is truly an intrapsychic phenomenon revolving around concerns about cognitive inconsistency.

In these experiments, under the guise of research concerned with factors that affect memory for the characteristics of stimuli, persons were exposed to a simple attitudinal object (e.g., a boring passage describing a tachistoscope that they read), and given low or high choice to write a statement contrary to their attitude toward the object (to ostensibly assess how writing such a statement would affect their memory for characteristics of the stimulus). Finally, they completed a questionnaire assessing their attitudes toward the object.

Participants were told that they were randomly assigned to the type of passage they received. Thus, they were forced to engage in the behavior of reading the passage, and hence they were not committed to this behavior and should not change their attitudes toward it simply as a result of performing it (results have confirmed this; see Harmon-Jones et al., 1996). Moreover, the behavior of writing the statement contrary to the attitude is clearly counterattitudinal, as it has been demonstrated that these attitudinal objects are evaluated very negatively. In five experiments, it has been observed that persons given high choice to write the counterattitudinal statement change their attitudes to be more positive, whereas persons given low choice do not (Harmon-Jones, in press; Harmon-Jones et al., 1996). In addition, results have indicated that the high-choice manipulation increases dissonance as measured by increased electrodermal activity and self-reported negative affect.

However, in all of these experiments, participants produced only counterattitudinal statements. After considering the research described by Rijsman, I thought it important to assess the effects of writing a proattitudinal statement on attitudes in this experimental paradigm. Such an experiment was conducted and modeled closely after one of the previous experiments (Harmon-Jones, in press, Experiment 1). After explaining that the experiment was to examine how writing a statement evaluating a reading passage affects the recall of the characteristics of the passage, the experimenter explained that participants would be randomly assigned to read an article from a magazine, manual, or scientific journal, write a short statement about the passage, and then complete a few short questionnaires. Then, participants were given a boring passage to read (Harmon-Jones et al., 1996; Harmon-Jones, in press). Next, they were given written instructions that randomly assigned them to a low or high choice condition (for detailed choice manipulation instructions, see Harmon-Jones et al., 1996; Harmon-Jones, in press). After participants wrote that the passage was uninteresting, they completed a self-report affect questionnaire that included items that assessed dissonance-related negative affect (Harmon-Jones, in press), a questionnaire assessing their attitudes toward the reading passage (how interesting was the passage, how boring was the passage, assessed on 7-point scales, where 1 = not at all and 7 = extremely), and a questionnaire assessing their perceived choice.

Results indicated that the manipulation of choice was successful ($p < .03$). In addition, participants in the high-choice condition did not rate the reading passage as more interesting or less boring than did participants in the low-choice condition (p 's $> .75$). Finally, there were no differences between conditions on reported negative affect ($p = .71$). Thus, these results strongly suggest that having high choice to write that the boring reading passage was boring did not cause dissonance or attitude change.

These results suggest that attitude change does not result in situations in which persons write proattitudinal statements after being randomly assigned to engage in the task that creates the attitude. Of course, proattitudinal advocacy can create dissonance and attitude change if persons first freely choose to engage in a countermotivational task (e.g., work on a boring task), as Beauvois and Joule (1996) and Girandola and Joule (1995) have described. In experiments assessing the effects of behavior on attitudes, it is important to control the perception of choice over the attitudinal task and over the role-playing behavior.

The General Description of Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) vs. the General Description of the Induced Compliance Paradigm

Rijsman wrote that, "the only reason for which we wrote this paper was to criticize the way in which the 'real results' of the classic experiment have been 'generally described' in the literature" (p. 5). While there is reason to emphasize the importance of accurate descriptions of experiments, there is no reason to question the validity of Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) results or other dissonance theory research obtained in the induced compliance situation. There are a number of variables that have been identified in dissonance research that may account for the differences in experimental outcomes. Without careful control, manipulation, and assessment of these critical variables, it is impossible to compare results of failures to replicate Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) experiment with the original experiment. Moreover, the facts necessary for the dissonance theory interpretation of the effects of role playing on attitude change have been unequivocally demonstrated. That is, recent research has cogently demonstrated that dissonance-related attitude change can result after freely choosing to state that a boring task, which the participant actually performed, was interesting (for a review, see Harmon-Jones, 1999).

The challenging of old ideas (and experimental outcomes) arouses dissonance in reviewers, editors, and readers (Burris, Harmon-Jones, & Tarpley, 1997; Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956). These challenges are met with vigorous attempts to defend the old ideas (Burris et al., 1997). This defense of old ideas that have weathered repeated attacks may often be very useful for science, in that scientists are forced to identify the complexities of the system with which they are working. Indeed, psychological scientists are faced with the most complex system – the mind. The challenges and responses to the challenges to dissonance theory have provided the theory with its longevity, fecundity, and increased accuracy of explanation and prediction. More challenges to the theory and its research will certainly assist in clarifying the theory. As Festinger (1999) said, "All theories are wrong. One doesn't ask about theories, can I show that they are wrong or can I show that they are right, but rather one asks, how much of the empirical realm can it handle and how must it be modified and changed as it matures?" (p. 383).

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Footnotes

1. Null effects are always difficult to interpret. An infinite number of factors can produce them.