

Cognitive Dissonance: The bane of value systems

Dr. Joseph Akpan

Jacksonville State University
United States of America

Dr. Larry Beard

Jacksonville State University
United States of America

Dr. Charles E. Notar (Emeritus)

Jacksonville State University
United States of America

Abstract

Cognitive dissonance is virtually the central mechanism by which we experience new differences in the world. The theory of cognitive dissonance has not been widely researched and fully implemented in a number of situations to develop basic practical ideas and various factors which may be important to change attitude. Today more than ever with social media, multiple 24-hour news, and the many social and political issues, we, as individuals, must decide what is true and valued. In these conditions it is easy to have cognitive dissonance affect our decision-making process. This article looks at cognitive dissonance and how it can affect each of us.

Key Words: Cognitive Dissonance, Cognitive Theory, Conflicting Attitudes, Discomfort, Behaviors, Dissonance Reduction, Decision-Making, Values and Value System.

Introduction

Cognition comes from the Latin root *cognoscere*, which means “to know”. Cognition is generally defined as the accumulation of information that we have acquired through our perceptions of reality. In other words, cognition is the act or process of knowing based on a personal belief system. It is the mental activity or thinking involved in understanding. Dissonance is a lack of agreement. It is inconsistency between the beliefs one holds or between one’s actions and one’s beliefs. An example of dissonance is the different between what we are told and what we see with our own eyes (Festinger 1957).

Dissonance is the single most powerful tool when it comes to self-image and self-perception. Dissonance appears in every aspect of human activities including evaluations and decision-making process (Festinger 1957). Cognitive dissonance is defined as a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors. The end results of dissonance are a feeling of discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behavior to reduce the discomfort. In 1957 Festinger argues that there are three possible relationships among cognitions (thoughts, ideas): consonance, dissonance, and irrelevance (Cognitive Dissonance 1, 2018).

Leon Festinger described a theory called 'Cognitive Dissonance' that was developed to explain the psychological processes that determine how people resolve important discrepancies between their behavior and beliefs. Festinger proposed that cognitive dissonance is a very common psychological phenomenon that many individuals experience on a daily basis. In a broad sense, dissonance theory describes how people make sense of the world when they find themselves acting in a surprising or irrational way (Stone & Fernandez, 2008).

Gibson (1992) defines 'dissonance' as a marked difference between an event or events and the description of it in words or behavior. People have a varying tolerance for dissonance according to genetics and early childhood. A person with a low tolerance for dissonance will be unable to fit his/her experiences into convenient conventions or rigid categories. As varied experiences conflict and clash, a new personal vision of reality must emerge if these dissonances are to be resolved.

Dissonance can occur when we spontaneously say or do something and immediately realize the mistake. At other times, however, dissonance can occur when we plan carefully and start off in a direction that makes sense, but then after a time, new information becomes available that suggests our behavior is unwise or immoral (Stone & Fernandez, 2008). Anxiety then results from simultaneously holding contradictory or incompatible attitudes, beliefs, as when one likes a person but disapproves of one of his or her habits (Random House, 2010).

Another example, is that despite Surgeon General's warning that smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema, and may complicate pregnancy in women and quitting smoking now greatly reduces serious risks to your health. Although this sounds like common sense that smoking is bad to people's health, thousands of people around the world still continue to smoke packs of cigarette every day. From this example, it seems to an inconsistency between what is believed and how someone acts. To those who smoke or continue to smoke, they know that smoking is bad for health, but because they enjoy smoking they cannot stop it (Festinger, 1957).

In addition, the frequently asked questions about exercising is why is exercise important? Even though exercise helps ward off many serious and common chronic health problems, many people find exercise not worthy of their time and effort.

Values and Value System

The definition of values can be categorized into either "*Personal Preference Values*" or "*Principle Values*." Hand values that are "*Principles*," like honesty and compassion and fairness, are consistent, transcultural and objective. Values that are "*Principles*" are something "*To Be*", like honest, kind, compassionate and responsible (acquired through virtues). Values are intrinsically valuable or desirable and individually determined. They regard that something is held to deserve; the importance, worth, or usefulness of something. Values are the individual beliefs people have, especially about what is right and wrong and what is most important in life, that control their family/moral/traditional behavior (Values 1-4, 2018).

A value system is a coherent set of values and principles of right and wrong that are accepted by an individual, social group or organization, that establishes values, norms, or goals used as standard guiding behavior in situations existing in a society. An example of a value for many is the Golden Rule: "To do unto others as they would do unto you," Likewise, by extension, the Golden Rule can be a value system encompassing compassion, consideration, co-operation, courtesy, dedication, empathy, equitable, ethics, fairness, forgiveness, happiness and/or honesty. The depth and breadth of an individual's commitment to the values/system when making decisions determines the cognitive dissonances one encounters. The depth and breadth of the commitment is a determinate of its sustainability.

Basis for Value Systems

Patterns of history and culture help define the path one finds acceptable and follows (Lawrence, 1999). The authors see feelings, reason and tradition as the basis for a value system and where dissonance comes into play. Feeling is the general state of consciousness considered independently of particular sensations, thoughts, etc. feelings can be a physical or emotional experience or awareness or an opinion or belief. Feelings are based on sensitivity, sentiment, premonition, or atmosphere (Feeling1-4, 2018).

Reason is the power of comprehending, inferring, or thinking especially in orderly rational ways by which we distinguish truth from falsehood, and right from wrong; and by which we are enabled to combine means for the attainment of particular ends thought to form conclusions, inferences, or judgments. Reason can be seen in a person's explanations or judgements. Reason is the act or process of drawing or forming conclusions, judgments, explanations, justifications, or inferences from facts, evidence, ideas or premises. Reason is the cause for something to happen or the power of your brain to think things through, to use logic, or to try to solve a problem with logic (Reason 1-6, 2018).

Tradition can be defined as a long-established transmission of inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (such as statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information, etc., from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth or by practice) having existed for a long time and handed down from generation to generation and commonly accepted as historical though they may or may not be verifiable (Tradition 1-4, 2018).

The Three Ds: Distract, Diminish, Destroy

Understanding is cluttered, meandering and protracted. Cognitive Dissonance is irritating and uncomfortable. Cherry (2017) asserts when people experience tension or discomfort when their beliefs or attitudes do not match their behaviors. People tend to seek consistency in their beliefs and perceptions. When there is a discrepancy between beliefs or behaviors, something must change in order to eliminate or reduce the dissonance She goes further and states influential factors are how personal the discomfort, how important the belief or attitude is, how strong the feeling and the pressure there is to relieve the feelings of discomfort.

Mistakes in judgment and action cause immense psychological discomfort, especially when the actions are inconsistent with deeply cherished beliefs, values, morals, or traits that define the individual (Stone & Fernandez, 2008).

When the consequences of a discrepant behavior are severe, taking responsibility may not reduce the discomfort; indeed, admitting to the mistake may make matters worse (Stone & Fernandez, 2008). Sometimes our only option for reducing the discomfort is to deny, trivialize, or seek justification for the immoral or incompetent act. Our need to restore a sense of integrity can, under some conditions, even lead us to distort our perceptions of what we did (Stone & Fernandez, 2008).

What makes dissonance processes so interesting is that the changes people undertake in the service of consistency can deviate from the reality perceived by the rest of us. The authors present the three degrees of dissonance they see in individuals: Distract, diminish, and destroy.

Distract can be defined as preventing an individual or group from giving full attention to something by diversion, interruption, disturbance, interference or hindrance. Distraction can cause mental confusion by directing one's attention away from someone or something and to think about or pay attention to someone or something else instead.

The definition of diminish is to make smaller, degrade, weaken, or lesser or cause to appear less, to lessen the authority, dignity, or reputation of or to become gradually less (decrease in size, extent, or range, lessen the authority, dignity, or reputation of). The definition of destroy is to damage something so severely that it no longer exists or can never return to its normal state (nullify; neutralize; invalidate; to render ineffective or reduce (an object) to useless fragments, a useless form, or remains, as by rending, burning, or dissolving; injure beyond repair or renewal; demolish; ruin; annihilate). As you can see dissonance can have grave consequences for an individuals' value system. The authors see cognitive dissonance as a major factor in present day behavior in our society.

Reduction of Dissonance

According to Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, people try to seek consistency in their thoughts, beliefs, and opinions. So when there are conflicts between cognitions, people will take steps to reduce the dissonance and feelings of discomfort. They can go about doing this a few different ways. Cherry (2017) reports there are three key strategies to reduce or minimize cognitive dissonance. Focus on more supportive beliefs that outweigh the dissonant belief or behavior. Reduce the importance of conflicting belief. Change the conflicting belief so that it is consistent with other beliefs or behaviors.

The theory of cognitive dissonance is a strong theory that comes with many real-life applications. It is also worthy to point out that the theory is not blind to thousands of weaknesses. For example, one may think that children should not talk back to parent, and in doing so is disrespect. Some cultures believe that children voice should not be heard, and unhappy when children run into trouble because she or he did not speak their mind. This is an example of dissonance because their beliefs go against something that is taking place and nothing is done to stop it. Dissonance is experienced when the behavior we practice is conflicting with our beliefs, as is known.

Another way of reducing this discomfort is to add new beliefs which support the conflicting behavior. Adding new beliefs help outweigh the dissonance beliefs, which reduces cognitive dissonance to a great extent.

Altering the importance of the original cognitions by adding new cognitions to support the conflicting behaviors. Simply put, changing actions, behavior, beliefs completely change your attitude and/or behavior. This would seem to be most obvious, even rational, response take place when confronted with cognitive dissonance. Belittle is the importance of the inconsistent behavior. Finding consonant elements that outweigh the dissonant ones. This kind of rationalizing goes quiet often, as when employees are confronted with ethical dilemmas but fear losing their jobs. Self-affirmation: bolster self-concept in a different domain to reduce dissonance

Rational behavior vs. rationalizing behavior (a). The need to maintain our self-esteem leads to thinking that is not always rational, but rather it is rationalizing (b). Jones & Kohler (1959): for & against racial segregation, participants remembered plausible arguments that agreed with their side and remembered the implausible/weak arguments for the opposing position, prevents people from changing their opinions.

The Cherry reductions the authors see as leaving out the process of achieving a reduction. That is the process of discernment. Social media, multiple 24-hour news, and the many social and political issues we as individuals must decide what is true and valued. We must look at what is being presented as being within context or is it an isolation from the context. Discernment is the mental ability to distinguish or judge wisely and objectively; it is the act or process of exhibiting keen perception, insight and good judgment. It is the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend, coming to understand something clearly and distinctly. It is the ability to notice the fine-point details, the ability to judge something well or the ability to understand and comprehend something through evaluating between relations and judging wisely and objectively.

Conclusion

The principle of cognitive dissonance operates out of the conscious level with almost the same strength as it operates under conscious sight. Decisions, decisions, decisions. Every time we make a decision, we experience dissonance: the rejected alternative is seldom always negative while chosen is rarely all positive. The authors see the key to cognitive dissonance and its effect on humans in day-to-day basis. While it can be extreme and can be obscure, like someone who feels dissonance over buying an old car. A core of 'basic humanity' surely must tie all of the world's value systems together – and if only we could locate this core we might be able to forge agreements that would minimize cognitive dissonance.

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