



# Encyclopedia of Communication Theory

## Cognitive Dissonance Theory

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Cognitive dissonance theory is concerned with how perception and cognition influence and are influenced by motivation and emotion. 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.

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.

Festinger 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 ways of reducing dissonance assessed most often 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. Tests of the theory often assume that one's most recent behavior is usually most resistant to change, because it is often very difficult to undo that behavior.

After a decision, all 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.

Dissonance is typically aroused when a person acts in a way that is contrary to his or her attitudes, especially when no one provides encouragement or incentive for doing so. Individuals may reduce this dissonance by changing their attitudes to be more consistent with their actions. Dissonance can also be aroused by exposure to information that is inconsistent with beliefs or attitudes.

Some theorists hypothesized that the effects were due to nonmotivational, cognitive processes or impression-management concerns. However, subsequent research confirmed that dissonance is a motivated process. Beginning in the late 1960s, researchers began to propose motivational explanations for dissonance effects that differed from Festinger's theory. Four revisions have been proposed.

Elliot 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 individuals with low self-esteem and individuals with high self-esteem should respond with less and more

dissonance reduction (e.g., attitude change), respectively, because in dissonance experiments, individuals with high self-esteem are induced to act in ways that are more discrepant from their positive self-views. Experiments testing this prediction have produced mixed results.

Claude Steele's self-affirmation theory proposed that persons possess a motive to maintain an overall self-image of moral and adaptive adequacy. Accordingly, 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 individuals are merely motivated to affirm the integrity of the self. In support of this idea, Steele presented experiments in which, 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. Other experiments have suggested that making important but non-self-affirming values salient reduces dissonance by reducing the individual's perception of the importance of the dissonant act, consistent with Festinger's theory.

Joel Cooper and Russell Fazio proposed the idea that the discomfort experienced in dissonance experiments was due, not to an inconsistency between the individual's cognitions, but rather to feeling personally responsible for producing an aversive consequence. In support of this idea, experiments revealed that dissonance-related attitude change occurred only in conditions in which an aversive consequence was produced. More recently, experiments have found dissonance-related arousal and attitude change in induced compliance conditions where individuals do not produce aversive consequences.

Several experiments since 1995 have supported the original conception of dissonance theory. But why does dissonance evoke this state? Eddie Harmon-Jones proposed an action-based model of cognitive dissonance in an attempt to answer this question. The action-based model proposes that the perceptions and cognitions likely to arouse dissonance are those that are associated with 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. Experiments have revealed that experimentally increasing the degree of action orientation experienced following difficult decisions increases the degree of dissonance reduction.

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See also

- [Attitude Theory](#)
- [Persuasion and Social Influence Theories](#)
- [Power, Interpersonal](#)

## Further Readings

Festinger, L.(1957).A theory of cognitive dissonance.Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.  
Harmon-Jones, E., & Mills, J.(1999).Cognitive dissonance: Progress on a pivotal theory in social psychology.W a s h i n g t o n , D C: American Psychological Association.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/10318-000>