

ERYTHROPOIETIN

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Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The Core Definition and Mechanism

Cognitive Dissonance is one of the most influential and enduring concepts within modern social psychology, describing the intense psychological tension that arises when an individual simultaneously holds two or more conflicting cognitions, beliefs, values, or ideas. The theory posits that the human mind strives for internal consistency, meaning that when a state of inconsistency, or dissonance, is experienced, it creates an uncomfortable, motivating feeling akin to hunger or thirst. This unpleasant drive compels the individual to engage in psychological work aimed at reducing the dissonance and restoring a harmonious state of internal equilibrium. The core mechanism is rooted in the fundamental human need to perceive oneself as rational, moral, and consistent, often leading to surprising and sometimes irrational shifts in belief or behavior simply to maintain this perception of self-integrity.

The magnitude of this felt dissonance is directly proportional to three key factors: the importance of the cognitions involved, the number of dissonant cognitions versus consonant cognitions, and the perceived ability of the individual to control the outcome or behavior. For instance, dissonance experienced over a minor preference, such as preferring one flavor of ice cream over another, is minimal and easily resolved, whereas dissonance resulting from a major life decision that contradicts one's core moral values, such as cheating on a partner, will be immense and require significant psychological restructuring to resolve. The intensity of the discomfort dictates the strength of the drive to reduce it, often resulting in complex defense mechanisms or radical shifts in worldview.

Furthermore, the theory emphasizes that dissonance is not merely about holding two contradictory thoughts; it often arises from performing an action that runs counter to one's private attitude. This crucial element is known as counter-attitudinal behavior. When a person is induced to argue a position they do not genuinely believe in, or when they exert significant effort for a disappointing result, the resulting feeling is attributed to the internal conflict between the action ("I did X") and the belief ("X is bad/not worthwhile"). Because the behavior is already performed and cannot be undone, the easiest path to reduction is often modifying the more flexible element, which is the internal attitude, thereby justifying the completed action and allowing the individual to move forward without enduring continuous psychological stress.

Historical Foundation: Leon Festinger and the Research Origin

The theory of Cognitive Dissonance was formally introduced by the esteemed American social psychologist, Leon Festinger, in his seminal 1957 book, "A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance." Festinger's work was a profound departure from the prevailing behaviorist and simple stimulus-

response models of the time, which struggled to adequately explain why people sometimes changed their attitudes *after* acting, rather than before. Festinger built upon earlier concepts of consistency, such as Fritz Heider's Balance Theory, but provided a much more dynamic and actionable framework centered on the internal psychological tension rather than merely the symmetrical relationship between attitudes.

The origins of the theory are deeply rooted in observational research. Prior to the formal publication, Festinger and his colleagues studied a small cult in Chicago led by a woman who predicted the world would end in a great flood on a specific date. This research, documented in the 1956 book, "When Prophecy Fails," provided the perfect real-world test case for cognitive dissonance. When the predicted date passed without incident, the followers, who had invested heavily--quitting jobs, selling possessions--faced immense dissonance. The cognition "The world did not end" clashed severely with the cognition "I sacrificed everything because I believed it would." Instead of abandoning their leader, many followers sought to reduce this extreme conflict by reinterpreting the failure, claiming their faith had saved the world, and paradoxically increasing their proselytizing efforts to recruit new members to justify their past actions.

Following this observational study, Festinger and J. Merrill Carlsmith conducted the now-classic "Boring Task" experiment in 1959. Participants were asked to perform a very dull, repetitive task and were then asked to lie to the next participant, claiming the task was interesting. Crucially, some participants were paid only \$1 for lying (low justification), while others were paid \$20 (high justification). The results showed that those paid only \$1 experienced the highest dissonance because they lacked sufficient external justification for their counter-attitudinal behavior ("I lied for almost no money"). To resolve this, they convinced themselves that the task was actually enjoyable, resulting in a genuine shift in their private attitude towards the task. Conversely, the \$20 group had a clear external justification ("I lied because I got paid well"), thus experiencing little dissonance and maintaining their original, negative attitude toward the task. This study solidified the principle that less external incentive leads to greater internal attitude change.

The Three Primary Dissonance Reduction Strategies

When faced with a dissonant situation, individuals are motivated to eliminate the conflict through one of three main psychological pathways. These strategies are often employed unconsciously and represent the brain's attempt to achieve psychological homeostasis, protecting the self-concept from threats posed by internal inconsistency. The chosen strategy depends heavily on which cognition is most resistant to change, typically prioritizing the modification of attitudes or beliefs over behaviors that are already completed or difficult to reverse.

The most common strategies for reducing dissonance are categorized as follows:

Changing the Behavior: This involves altering one's actions to align with existing attitudes or

beliefs. For example, if a smoker (behavior: "I smoke") knows smoking causes cancer (cognition: "Smoking is dangerous"), the most direct resolution is to quit smoking. However, this is often the most difficult strategy, especially when the behavior is habitual, addictive, or reinforced by social context, leading individuals to rely on the cognitive modification strategies instead.

Changing the Cognition (Attitude): This involves altering the conflicting belief or attitude to align with the existing behavior. If the smoker cannot quit, they might change their attitude towards the risk, perhaps by minimizing the danger ("The research is inconclusive") or questioning the source ("My grandfather smoked and lived to be 90"). This mental manipulation allows the dissonant elements to become consonant, reducing the perceived threat without requiring the challenging task of behavioral modification.

Adding New Consonant Cognitions: This strategy involves introducing new, supporting beliefs that outweigh the importance of the dissonant ones, effectively rationalizing the inconsistency. The smoker might introduce the new cognition: "Smoking helps me relax and manage my high-stress job." This new cognition increases the overall weight of the consonant side of the mental ledger, making the negative health consequences seem less important or acceptable in the context of the perceived benefits, thereby reducing the painful feeling of the internal conflict.

These cognitive adjustments demonstrate the powerful human capacity for self-justification. The individual is not necessarily seeking objective truth, but rather subjective psychological comfort. The selection of a strategy is often guided by the principle of least effort: the individual will pursue the path that requires the least resistance or sacrifice, which is frequently the internal manipulation of beliefs rather than the external change of difficult behaviors.

Practical Example: Effort Justification

A powerful and easily observable real-world manifestation of cognitive dissonance is the phenomenon of **Effort Justification**. This occurs when an individual willingly expends great effort, time, or resources to achieve a goal that turns out to be disappointing or less valuable than expected. The core conflict arises between the cognition "I worked extremely hard for X" and the cognition "X is actually worthless or mediocre." Since the effort is already invested, it cannot be taken back, creating significant pressure to justify the past expenditure.

A common, relatable scenario involves joining an exclusive club, fraternity, or organization that requires a difficult or humiliating initiation process--an element of hazing, for example--only to discover that the organization itself is poorly managed, uninteresting, or boring.

The application of dissonance reduction occurs in the following steps:

Initial Cognitions and Behavior: The individual performs the behavior (endures the difficult

initiation) based on the belief that the club must be worth the effort ("I must join this club because it is exclusive and valuable").

Dissonance Arousal: Upon entry, the individual realizes the club is dull, disorganized, and disappointing. The new dissonant cognition is "This club is boring and not worth the humiliation I endured." The magnitude of dissonance is high because the individual must confront the possibility that they suffered unnecessarily.

Dissonance Reduction Pathway: The individual cannot change the past effort (the humiliation is complete). They must therefore change their attitude towards the club. They begin to focus intensely on the few positive aspects, exaggerate the club's importance, and dismiss any negative evidence as irrelevant or temporary.

Resolution and Attitude Change: The person concludes: "The club is actually fantastic; the initiation process simply filtered out those who weren't committed enough to appreciate its deep value." The ultimate outcome is a stronger, more positive commitment to the mediocre group than would have occurred had the entry process been easy, purely because of the effort invested. This mechanism helps explain intense loyalty to organizations or products that demand high sacrifice.

Significance in Social Psychology and Beyond

Cognitive Dissonance Theory holds immense significance because it fundamentally changed how psychologists understood attitude change and human rationalization. Prior to Festinger, it was largely assumed that attitudes directed behavior; dissonance showed that behavior, particularly self-justifying behavior, frequently dictates subsequent attitude formation. It provided a powerful, empirically supported explanation for irrational human behavior, demonstrating that people are not rational beings who process information logically, but rather rationalizing beings who seek to make their internal world consistent.

Its impact extends far beyond the laboratory, influencing areas such as consumer behavior, political science, and health communication. In the field of politics, for example, the theory explains the phenomenon of "belief perseverance" after a candidate fails to deliver on promises: voters who invested heavily in supporting the candidate (time, money, public arguments) will often find ways to rationalize the failure or blame external factors rather than admit their initial judgment was flawed, thereby protecting their self-esteem and consistency. This principle underscores the difficulty inherent in changing deeply held political or religious beliefs.

Furthermore, dissonance research laid the groundwork for understanding post-decisional regret, often termed **post-decisional dissonance**. After making a choice between two equally appealing options (e.g., buying one car over another), the negative features of the chosen option and the positive features of the rejected option create dissonance. To alleviate this discomfort, people

quickly enhance the perceived attractiveness of their chosen item and devalue the rejected alternative. This psychological process ensures satisfaction with the choice and prevents debilitating regret, serving as an important psychological coping mechanism.

Applications in Therapy and Behavior Change

The principles of cognitive dissonance have proven highly valuable in therapeutic settings, particularly in approaches aimed at fostering long-term behavior change. If behavior can influence attitude, then clinicians can strategically induce mild, manageable dissonance to encourage patients to adopt healthier perspectives. One of the most common applications is in treating addiction and promoting preventative health measures.

In health interventions, techniques often involve inducing hypocrisy. Participants are first asked to advocate publicly for a healthy behavior (e.g., safe sex practices, recycling, or healthy eating), thus establishing a strong, consonant cognition ("I believe this behavior is vital"). They are then subtly reminded of past instances where their own behavior failed to align with this public advocacy ("But you haven't always practiced this yourself"). This confrontation creates acute dissonance--the conflict between the public stance and the private action. To reduce the resulting discomfort, the easiest and most meaningful path is often to change the future behavior to align with the public belief, leading to genuine, internalizing change rather than merely external compliance.

In cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), while not explicitly framed as dissonance reduction, many techniques rely on disrupting inconsistent thought patterns. For example, behavioral activation encourages depressed clients to engage in activities they intellectually know are beneficial but feel too unmotivated to perform. The act of performing the behavior, even minimally, creates dissonance with the existing negative self-schema ("I did something productive" conflicts with "I am worthless and incapable"), compelling the mind to update the self-schema to align with the new, positive action. This manipulation of the action-attitude link is a cornerstone of modern psychological intervention.

Connections to Related Psychological Constructs

Cognitive Dissonance Theory belongs to a broader family of theoretical models known as consistency theory, all of which emphasize the human motivation to maintain coherence among mental elements. Its closest relatives include Balance Theory and Self-Perception Theory, though the latter offers a significant alternative explanation for the observed phenomena.

Balance Theory (Fritz Heider, 1958), while predating Festinger's work, focuses specifically on the relations between three entities: the person (P), another person (O), and an object (X). It predicts that individuals prefer balanced or harmonious relationships (e.g., "I like O, O likes X, therefore I like X"). Dissonance is a more generalized and powerful theory because it is not limited to

interpersonal triads and focuses on the internal motivational state of the individual rather than just the structural relationship between cognitions. Dissonance explains the *arousal* and *tension* associated with inconsistency, which Balance Theory does not specifically address.

A major theoretical challenge to Cognitive Dissonance Theory came from Daryl Bem's ****Self-Perception Theory (1967)****. Bem argued that attitude change in experiments like the "Boring Task" did not require any internal motivational state of tension or arousal. Instead, he proposed that people simply observe their own behavior and infer their attitudes from it, much like an outside observer. For example, a person paid \$1 for lying simply concludes, "I must have enjoyed the task, otherwise why would I have lied for so little money?" While Self-Perception Theory effectively explains attitude formation in ambiguous situations or when initial attitudes are weak, considerable subsequent research has confirmed that cognitive dissonance requires a genuine, unpleasant state of psychological arousal (tension) to drive attitude change, especially when existing attitudes are strong and clearly contradicted. Thus, contemporary social psychology generally views both theories as complementary, with dissonance explaining attitude change driven by strong pre-existing beliefs, and self-perception explaining attitude formation in neutral or low-conflict situations. The broader category encompassing these models remains social psychology, specifically the study of attitudes, motivation, and persuasion.