

## **Cognitive Dissonance**

Afton Nelson, B.Sc.

Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität

Eric A. Goedereis, PhD.

Webster University

Leon Festinger proposed the theory of cognitive dissonance in 1957, in which he extensively outlined the major derivations of dissonance, consonance, and justification (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). In short, cognitive dissonance occurs when one's actions are inconsistent with previous beliefs about one's self. The inconsistency in these beliefs creates conflict within the self. For example, an individual may think of herself as a good person, yet she breaks a law. In this example, there is inconsistency between one's current action and prior beliefs about the self.

To test his theory, Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) conducted a study analyzing social compliance. They recruited 71 college students, who completed the protocol in exchange for course credit. Importantly, the participants were given little background information before entering the study. Upon arrival, participants were falsely told that the objective of the experiment aimed to measure task performance. Additionally, they were informed that they would be interviewed following the experiment. Participants were asked to perform a series of menial tasks, such as single-handedly emptying and refilling a tray of spoons or turning pegs on a wooden board.

Following the tasks, participants were falsely debriefed with an explanation about two different groups involved with the experiment. The experimenter explained that one group, the

group that the participants were in, was given no introduction to the study, while the other group was introduced to the study by a confederate who had previously completed the study. The participants were then divided into three conditions: the control group, \$1 group, and \$20 group. Participants in the \$1 and \$20 condition were hired to introduce the study to a confederate by conveying a positive experience during their participation. Following the experiment, participants were interviewed to assess their honest levels of enjoyment of the experiment. The participants were officially debriefed by the experimenter with the purpose of the study and asked to give the money back. In the control condition, the participants did not interact with the confederate. The purpose of the control condition was to demonstrate that no incentive effects participants' enjoyment of the tasks.

The results of the experiment indicated that participants in the \$1 condition expressed the most enjoyment of participants among the three groups. Specifically, those in the \$1 condition assigned higher scores for their enjoyment of the study, the importance of the study, and their willingness to participate in a similar study than in the \$20 or control conditions. Thus, the experimenters were able to examine the role of cognitive dissonance by examining participants' final thoughts toward the study. Although participants in the \$20 condition were more likely to sell the experiment to the confederate, those in the \$1 condition reported it as being more enjoyable. Assignment to the \$1 condition was associated with a genuine change in one's beliefs because it was enough to sway their perception, whereas those in the \$20 condition did not alter their perspective because the payment was sufficient.

These findings support the theory of cognitive dissonance because participants in the \$1 condition altered their beliefs to align with their positive description of the tasks to the confederate. Their beliefs were changed by their actions in order to justify the action, which

reduced the dissonance. Participants in the \$20 condition experienced sufficient justification because they had received a sizeable payment to promote the experiment. In short, they did not need to justify themselves their enjoyment in such menial tasks. However, those assigned to the \$1 condition experienced insufficient justification, which accounts for the change in their perspective (Myers & Twenge, 2017). Secondly, the experimenters asked for the money back after the participants had been debriefed. All of the participants returned the money without hesitation, which further demonstrates their compliance (Myers & Twenge, 2017). Because the incentive was distributed as part of an experiment, participants felt obligated to return the money as requested. This also demonstrates compliance as the participants willingly obeyed the requests of the experimenter.

Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance has been observed in numerous subsequent studies, employing tasks that range from rating toys to interpersonal relationships. Support for cognitive dissonance also concurs with recent studies, involving social and political attitudes (e.g. McGregor, 2013). Taken together, such findings demonstrate how cognitive dissonance manifests in various social contexts throughout development.

### **Further Readings**

Festinger, L. & Carlsmith, J. M. (1959). Cognitive consequences of forced compliance. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 58(2), 203-210. doi:10.1037/h0041593

McGregor, R.M. (2013). Cognitive dissonance and political attitudes: The case of Canada. *The Social Science Journal*, 50(2), 168-176.

Myers, D.G. & Twenge, J.M. (2017). *Social Psychology* (12th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.