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
