

## **Cognitive Dissonance: A Psychological Unrest**

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### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author VLD designed the study, managed the literature searches, performed the literature review and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author SMK supervised this particular literature review and supported to the final draft. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Cognitive dissonance is a phenomenon which will be created based on the discomfort experience when two cognitions are mismatch with each other. This study reviews some literature (nearly twenty-five (25) articles based on cognitive dissonance in past to give a clear picture regarding the cognitive dissonance in order to make the human beings away from stress and negative feeling. A cognition is a piece of a knowledge which can be, thought, attitude, personal value and behaviour. All of the human being prefer that their world should be associate with their cognitions. So, cognitive dissonance can be making a human being under stressful condition. People tend to seek uniformity in their attitudes and perceptions, so this battle creates feelings of unease or discomfort. This discrepancy between what people believe and how they behave stimulates people to engage in actions that will help to minimize their feelings of discomfort. In order to cope up with tension, humans are carrying out several strategies, such as rejecting the new information, explaining away or avoiding new information. Cognitive dissonance isn't necessarily a bad thing. It can be positive, if we make positive changes in our beliefs when we realize that our beliefs and actions are odd. Not everyone experiences cognitive dissonance to the same degree. Some people have a higher tolerance for uncertainty and inconsistency. Even, based on the personality of a human also will decide how to tolerate the dissonance in an effective manner to reach a healthy life.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cognitive dissonance is a phenomenon which is creating the psychological uncomfortable which lead to the stress of a human being. It's a very vital aspect in the social psychology. When our actions conflict with our prior attitudes, we often change our attitudes to be more consistent with our actions. This phenomenon, known as cognitive dissonance, is considered to be one of the most influential theories in psychology. However, the neural basis of this phenomenon is unknown [1]. Individuals experience cognitive dissonance when they hold two or more cognitions, which are incompatible in psychology. This situation makes them experience an unpleasant state of tension. However, people prefer consonance so they will seek a stable state where there is a minimum dissonance to make such inconsistent cognitions fit together.

## 2. COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

According to Idowu and Esere [2], Cognitive refers to mental awareness while dissonance means disharmony. Dissonance refers to a condition of which conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors. This dissonance creates a feeling of embarrassment leading to a variation in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance. For example, when people smoke (behavior) and they know that smoking causes cancer (cognition), they are in a state of cognitive dissonance [3]. Always people tend to seek uniformity in their attitudes, beliefs or behaviors so when what they hold true is challenged or what they do does not fit with what they think, the state of cognitive dissonance will occur [4]. According to Franzoi [5] cognitive dissonance is a feeling of discomfort caused by performing an action that is inconsistent with one's attitudes. Further, it is a drive or feeling of discomfort caused by holding two or more inconsistent cognitions.

Most of the cognitions have nothing to do with each other. For instance, the two cognitions such as "I am a man and I like driving" are unrelated. Some cognitions however are related. For instance, "perhaps I am a poor and I like pizza". These cognitions are consistent with each other. They go together without any dissonance. However sometimes human have cognitions that are related but do not follow from one another. In fact, they may be inverses. For instance,

"perhaps I like junk foods but I am also trying to be healthy". These two thoughts are problematic in a way that if I eat junk foods then I may gain weight as well as some diseases, and if I really want to be a healthy man / woman, then I want to avoid junk foods. These types of cognitions are referred to as dissonant.

As per the cognitive dissonance, all human beings try to be consistent with their attitudes and behavior. When they feel incompatibility between two or more attitudes or between their attitudes and behaviors, they experience cognitive dissonance, that is where they will feel frustrated and uncomfortable, sometimes extremely so with the situation [6]. Idowu and Esere [2] further stated that dissonance is formed when an individual performs a task out of an action that is discrepant from one's customary or typically positive duty. For example, a counsellor who is supposed to infuse positive values among students could be forced by the school authorities to be involved in examination malpractice during external examinations. Thus, the realization by the counsellor that he is performing a role that is at dissonance with what he believes or role expectation provokes an emotional pain in the counsellor.

Thus, Idowu and Esere [2] states, that cognitive dissonance is the psychological conflict arising from holding two or more incompatible beliefs simultaneously. Kolo (2006) on his part, says dissonance is a state of psychological discomfort that is aroused when an event occurs which disconfirms any strong expectation. In the simplest explanation, cognitive dissonance is having two different and contradicting beliefs in an individual's brain at the same time.

## 3. THE CAUSES OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Cognitive dissonance is measured by the dimensions as forced compliance, psychological tension, phony, level of reward, motivation to reduce tension [7].

### 3.1 Forced Compliance

Occasionally people may engage in behaviors that are contrasting to their own beliefs due to some external expectations from work, school or from social institution. This might involve going along with something due to peer pressure or doing something at work to avoid getting fired.

Over the years, a large body of literature has appeared in recent years which suggests that inducing a person to adopt a counter attitudinal position causes him/her to change his/her attitude in the direction of the position adopted [8].

Thus, one of the dimensions to cognitive dissonance is forced compliance. This occurs, when an individual acts, behaves or expresses an opinion in a way or manner that is dissonant to what the individual would have liked to do or what the person believes because various circumstances are compelling the person to comply. Such circumstances include the nature of the person's designation, the need to demonstrate loyalty to one's superior or fear of being sanctioned or fired from the job [7].

Forced compliance is a procedure in which persons tend to perform counter attitudinal behaviors. Numerous studies have found that this procedure leads persons subsequently to express attitudes that are consistent with the behavior if certain situational conditions are met. Anyhow behaviors would be contrary to the persons' initial attitudes [9].

### 3.2 Psychological Tension

Oduh [10] states, Psychological tension is the mental anguish experienced by the individual as sequel to the awareness that the person has behaved stupidly, unethically, immorally, illegally or unconventionally. This distressing mental state occurs when people do things they would not want to do, or express opinions that are contrary to opinions they are holding.

### 3.3 Phony

Phony is the third dimension of the cognitive dissonance, in which people exhibit pretentious behavior, de-emphasizing the import of genuine and authentic behavior. In order to gain cognitive consistency, the subjects were motivated to reduce the tension. The subjects could reduce the mental anguish through another dimension labelled phony or denial of reality [10]. In discussing cognitive dissonance, Aronson [11] clearly identified phony as a dimension of cognitive dissonance.

### 3.4 Level of Reward

A third dimension to cognitive dissonance is level of reward accruing from the behavior. The higher the level of reward accruing to individuals who

engage in unethical behavior the less the degree of dissonance [5].

Proponents of this approach posit that people who are highly rewarded for their action(s) have sufficient justification for the counter attitudinal behavior and as such never experience dissonance. Conversely, people who are less rewarded have insufficient justification to engage in the counter attitudinal behavior and hence they experience dissonance. Thus, the weaker the reasons for acting inconsistently with one's attitudes, beliefs or conviction, the greater the mental anguish experienced by the individual and the greater the motivation to reduce the tension by changing the attitude in question [10].

### 3.5 Motivation to Reduce Tension

Motivation to reduce tension is another dimension which is going to be created by the previous dimension of psychological tension. Diminishment of psychological tension is got through cognitive rebuilding by changing the way individuals think around the world as well as the way they carry on. Those who are offensive seem embrace few techniques to relieve the psychological tension [10].

Firstly, individuals may alter their state of mind in order to synchronize their attitude and behavior with the issue at hand. A moment technique of this phenomenon is that the dissonant individuals might include more cognition.

Here, for instance, two discrepant thoughts that causes dissonance would be "I like eating but it can lead to obesity". The person could add another cognition in order to diminish dissonance as "eating makes me feel good and helps me stay alive" [5]. Thirdly, the dissonant person can modify the importance by stating as "it is better to stay alive than to worry about may be, becoming obese" [5]. Fourthly, a dissonant person could justify that there was no alternate to the value of the perceived choice. Using this strategy, the person rationalizes that there is little or no choice than to involve in the discrepant behavior. Finally, the dissonant person could underestimate the importance of the event that concluded in the dissonance [10].

## 4. IMPACT OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE ON HUMAN BEING

Cognitive dissonance can make people feel anxious and insecure, especially when there is something that is fundamental to their sense of

self in the difference between their beliefs and behaviours. This discomfort will manifest itself in several different ways. Human beings can feel fear, guilt, remorse, sorrow, shame as well as the utmost stress.

Cognitive dissonance can also affect how people feel about and see themselves, leasing their self-esteem and self-worth against the negative feelings. This will be a part of how they act, think and make decisions. If humans feel high disparity, that will lead to them to feel the dissonance. The dissonance a gain will lead to the above negative consequences (Cherry, 2020).

To resolve these negative emotions, human beings are attempting to cope with these feelings, which include modifying values or concepts to help explain the tension in their views or actions. This may leave others or external factors to blame for safeguarding their feelings in a secure environment. They hide their values or actions from other people so that embarrassment and remorse can be minimized. They'll look for their current beliefs. This is called confirmation bias, which can impair the ability to objectively think about the situation.

In order to deal with the cognitive dissonance, people will take steps to overcome form their dissonance of feelings of discomfort. In order to cope up with this they will add more supportive beliefs that outweigh dissonant beliefs, or reduce the importance of the conflicting belief or they will tend to change their belief in order to avoid the discomfort.

Sometimes, the ways that people resolve cognitive dissonance can contribute to unhealthy behaviours or poor decision. In the "Theory of Cognitive Dissonance", Leon Festinger, the psychologists who first described this phenomenon, gave a good example of how a person might deal with the dissonance related to a health behaviour by deliberating individuals who continue to smoke, even though they know it is bad for their health.

There are few ways that a person might resolve this dissonance: According to Festinger, "a person might decide that they value smoking more that they value health, considering the behaviour "worth it" in terms of risks versus rewards. Another way to deal with this dissonance is to minimize potential downsides. The smoker might persuade themselves that the

negative health effects have been exaggerated. They might also assuage their health concerns be believing that they cannot avoid every possible risk out there".

Festinger also suggested "that people might try to convince themselves that if they do stop smoking, they will then gain weight, which also presents health risks. By using such explanations, the smoker is able to reduce the dissonance and continue the behavior" (Cherry, 2020).

## **5. COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY**

Cognitive dissonance has been one of the most enduring and successful theories in the history of social psychology. The psychologists Leon Festinger published his theory of cognitive dissonance in his 1957 book, "A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance". Festinger proposed that people experience discomfort when they hold conflicting beliefs or when their actions. Since then, cognitive dissonance has become on of the most influential and research theories in social psychology.

Almost half a century ago social psychologist Leon Festinger developed the cognitive dissonance theory [12]. "Conative dissonance theory posits that individuals seek to maintain consistency among multiple cognitions such as thoughts, behaviors, attitudes, values or beliefs. Inconsistent cognitions produce unpleasant states that motivates individuals to change one or more cognitions to restore consistency with other cognitions" [13].

According to Festinger [12], "Cognitive dissonance is a psychological state, which refers to the discomfort felt at a discrepancy between what individuals already know or believe, and new information. Individuals experience cognitive dissonance when they hold two or more cognitions, which are psychologically inconsistent. This situation makes them experience an unpleasant state of tension. However, people prefer consonance so they will seek a stable state where there is a minimum dissonance to make such inconsistent cognitions fit together" [14].

More than 60 years ago, Leon Festinger made a modest proposal by suggesting that people who hold two or more cognitions that are psychologically inconsistent experience a state of psychological discomfort called cognitive dissonance. Moreover, the state of dissonance

has drive-like properties, motivating people to seek its reduction. That relatively straightforward description of the relationship among cognitions led to decades of research that supported, contradicted and modified the theory. It led to innovations in understanding people's motivations for the attitudes they hold, the behaviors they engage in and the preferences they express. It also led to innovations in leveraging the dissonance process to help people with important practical considerations such as improving their mental and physical health [15].

### 5.1 Fundamental Assumptions of the Theory

Cognitive dissonance theory is based on three fundamental assumptions.

1. *Humans are sensitive to inconsistencies between actions and beliefs:* according to the theory, at some stage, we all know when we behave in a manner that is inconsistent with our beliefs / attitudes / opinions. Effectively, there's an alarm installed that goes off when we find such an anomaly, whether we like it or not. For example, if you have a belief that it is wrong to cheat, yet you find yourself cheating on a test, you will notice and be affected by this inconsistency.
2. *Recognition of this inconsistency will cause dissonance, and will motivate an individual to resolve the dissonance:* according to this theory, if you realize that you have broken one of your values, you won't just say "oh well." You are going to have some kind of emotional anguish about that. Of course, the degree of dissonance may vary with the value of your beliefs / attitude / principle and the degree of conflict between your actions and this belief. In any case, according to the theory, the greater the dissonance the more you will be motivated to resolve it.
3. *Dissonance will be resolved in one of three basic ways:*
  - *Change beliefs:* Maybe the only way to overcome the dissonance between acts and values is simply to change your convictions. Of course, you might actually conclude that cheating is o.k. This would take care of any dissonance. But of course, of action like this impossible if the conviction is basic and

essential to you. In addition, our basic beliefs and attitudes are fairly consistent, and people are not only continually shifting basic beliefs / attitudes / opinions, as we depend heavily on our world view to predict events and organize our thoughts. Thus, while this is the easiest way to solve dissonance, it is possibly not the most popular one.

- *Change actions:* A second choice will be to guarantee you never do this again. Lord knows shame and anxiety can be a motivation to improve behavior. So, you can convince yourself you're never going to cheat on an exam again, and this will help to overcome the dissonance. Aversive conditioning (i.e., guilty / anxiety) can, however, also be a very poor way of learning, particularly if you can train yourself not to feel these things. Plus, you might potentially benefit from the behavior that is conflicting with your values in some way. So, the trick would be to get rid of this feeling without changing your beliefs or your actions and this leads us to the third, and probably most common, method of resolution.
- *Change perception of action:* A third and more nuanced resolution approach is to adjust the way the acts are viewed / remembered / perceived. You'd "rationalize" your actions, in more colloquial terms. You could decide, for example, that the test you cheated on ways for a stupid class you didn't need anyway. Or you can convince yourself that everyone cheats so why don't you? In other words, you think about your behavior in a particular way or sense so it doesn't seem to be inconsistent with your acts any longer. If you are thinking for a moment on this sequence of mental gymnastics, you'll probably remember why cognitive dissonance has become so common. If you're like me, you notice such post-hoc reconceptualization (rationalizations) of behavior on the part of others all the time, though it's not so common to see it in one's self.

### 6. DISSONANCE THEORY AS INNOVATION

The theory of cognitive dissonance way both revolutionary and controversial. The least known function of the theory of dissonance was perhaps its most revolutionary, too. Festinger used the

word “Cognitive” to precede dissonance, arguing that by way of their cognitive experiences, all sorts of emotions, actions and beliefs were reflected in people’s thinking.

Social psychological theories of attitudes and shifts in attitudes usually include contrasting people’s own attitudes with others’ attitudes, or contrasting the basic of those attitudes with knowledge that a communicator might give. Using Festinger’s idea of cognitive representations, attitudes, actions, social mores, communications – that is practically any phenomenon that people can perceive everything is grist for the mill of cognitive dissonance.

Drive reduction is the process which make the theory of dissonance transform cognitive representations into change of attitude and other activities of regulation. “The keeping of two or more contradictory cognitions, as Festinger said, awakens the condition of cognitive dissonance, which is experienced as unwanted stress. This tension has drive-like properties and must be reduced.”

While Festinger had no clear proof that drive-like properties actually existed, it made the mechanism of dissonance distinct from other hypothesis, implying consistency is preferred to inconsistency. Consistency between cognitions was not a choice for Festinger, but a move. Much as people need to eat and minimize their thirst by drinking and their appetite, people perceiving confusion need to find a way to reduce it. The push to eliminate inconsistency can be achieved by a variety of ways, but change of attitude became the most frequent resolution in early dissonance research.

A third innovation in dissonance research was to posit that dissonance has a magnitude. Various theories discussed preferences for symmetry, balance and consistency. Only dissonance theory discussed magnitudes. Just as people can be slightly hungry or extremely hungry, Festinger’s theory provided for different magnitudes of dissonance.

The greater the dissonance, the greater the urgency to make the cognitive changes necessary to reduce the unpleasant tension state [15].

## 7. CONCLUSION

It is concluded that cognitive dissonance isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It can be positive, if we

make positive changes in our beliefs when we realize that our beliefs and actions are odd. Cognitive dissonance can make people feel anxious and insecure, especially when there is something that is fundamental to their sense of self in the difference between their beliefs and behaviours. Even, based on the personality of a human also will decide how to tolerate the dissonance in an effective manner to reach a healthy life.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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