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The Psychology of Cognitive Dissonance: Causes, Effects, and Solutions

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Theoretical Foundations of Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is nothing other than a negative emotional state that arises when different cognitions — such as thoughts, values, perceptions, or feelings — do not align with reality.

In the 1950s, American social psychologist Leon Festinger developed the theory of dissonance. As part of his research on human decision-making processes, he formulated this theory as an extension of the theories of consistency and balance.

In 1954 in Wisconsin, some sect members were convinced that on December 21 of that year, a great flood would destroy all life on Earth. Only they would survive, saved by aliens. This is what their leader had predicted. Later, the anticipated day passed: nothing happened. There was neither rain nor any sign of aliens. However, the believers were not surprised or revealed any falsehoods — on the contrary, they felt that their faith had become stronger. They argued that God had simply tested their faith. Festinger used this case to demonstrate cognitive dissonance: When people's deeply kept faith are proven mistakes, they experience intensely psychological discomfort. To reduce that discomfort, they can interpret the evidence of new or strengthen their faith, rather than admit that they were wrong.

Neuroscientist Keise Izuma suspects the existence of a “dissonance center”¹ in a brain region that researchers call the posterior part of the medial frontal cortex (pmFC). This area appears to be responsible for avoiding things that could have negative consequences.

To confirm his hypothesis, Izuma showed individual images to 52 test subjects and asked them to rate the beauty of each on a scale from 1 (ugly) to 8 (very beautiful). He then presented these images in pairs, asking the participants to choose the more beautiful one. In some cases, the second choice didn't match their initial rating — something that apparently bothered the participants. In a second round, the original ratings were subsequently adjusted.

Izuma was able to “switch off” this dissonance reduction by deactivating the pmFC using strong magnetic fields. The result: the participants no longer felt the urge to adjust their ratings afterward. This allowed Izuma to demonstrate how dissonance reduction works at the brain level, as originally described by Festinger.

In childhood, generally, values, norms and social rules are taken from parents, colleagues and teachers. Cognitive dissonance in early childhood usually occurs when children find conflicting information that challenges their new understanding of the world. In this case cognitive dissonance may be experienced when children's actions (such as lies or disobedient) contradict the values that the parents have learned. Also When children interact with colleagues, they may experience inconsistency between friends' expected behavior and family values.

Statistical data:

- A study on the moral development of children found that children 7 to 9 ($n = 250$) showed cognitive dissonance when their behavior was in conflict with the moral standards that their parents learned. The study revealed that 45% of children changed behavior to reduce inconsistency and 60% adjusted attitudes to matching parents after finding conflicting situations (Harris & Gerley, 2020).²

There was a survey conducted to determine whether cognitive dissonance affects mental illnesses. Specifically, the study aimed to assess whether cognitive dissonance after making decisions (1) is more pronounced in patients with mental disorders and (2) is related to symptom severity. Patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder ($n = 15$), patients with depression ($n = 20$), and a control group ($n = 42$) each completed a scale measuring cognitive dissonance after decisions and their symptom burden. Only patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder showed significantly more cognitive dissonance than healthy individuals ($p = 0.019$). Among patients with depression, a very strong correlation was found between symptom burden and cognitive

¹ <https://www.jneurosci.org/content/35/8/3598>

² Harris, P., & Gergely, G. (2020). Moral development in children: Cognitive dissonance and behavioral regulation. *Developmental Psychology Review*, 16(2), 120-134.

dissonance ($r = 0.70$). Obsessive-compulsive disorder appears to be associated with greater cognitive dissonance, supporting the assumption that cognitive dissonance plays a role—at least in this disorder.³

The symptoms of cognitive dissonance manifest differently depending on the person and situation. Common signs that someone is experiencing cognitive dissonance include:

1. **Feeling of discomfort:** A general sense of unease or anxiety when confronted with two conflicting thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors.
2. **Rationalization:** Attempting to justify or explain away conflicting behaviors or beliefs, often by inventing new excuses or explanations.
3. **Denial:** Ignoring or denying information or evidence that contradicts one's own beliefs or behaviors.
4. **Inner conflict:** The feeling of being pulled in different directions by opposing opinions or desires.
5. **Self-criticism:** Increased self-criticism, feelings of guilt, or shame regarding actions or decisions that conflict with one's own values or self-image.
6. **Worry and stress:** Feelings of concern and stress about being inconsistent in one's thinking or actions.
7. **Changes in attitude:** Altering one's beliefs or attitudes to reduce the dissonance.

Resolving Cognitive Dissonance: Good and Bad Solutions

Cognitive dissonance is best resolved by addressing the underlying problem. This is usually only possible if one changes their perspective to even recognize possible — and potentially completely new — solutions. If, instead, one is only looking for confirmation, a change in perspective is much more difficult.

Seeking Confirmation

Sometimes, people selectively seek out information that confirms their beliefs — and they almost always find it. Some people seek validation from their surroundings to resolve cognitive dissonance. They may even intuitively desire to be deceived. In fact, confirming information — even if false — can alleviate cognitive dissonance by reinforcing beliefs. However, this can significantly distort both self-image and perception by others, potentially leading to a persistent incongruence between self-perception and external perception.

Fantastical Explanations and Reinterpretations

There is also a human tendency to resolve dissonance through fantastical explanations or even absurd reinterpretations. This is driven by the dissonance-reduction effect and the self-esteem protection mechanism (i.e., self-serving biases). A particularly extreme form of this distortion is **massive external focus** — focusing all attention on something external to avoid inner conflict.

Escape Outward / Massive External Focus

By directing our attention to something entirely different — something unfamiliar or distant — we distract ourselves from cognitive dissonance and compensate through narcissistic-seeming attempts to gain attention and approval in a different context. Sometimes, this "context" is an imaginary or virtual world. Sometimes the focus is on distant countries, or on people or animals in distress. The more severe the perceived suffering of others, the stronger the distraction, the greater the approval, and the better we feel about ourselves.

Self-Reflection

A more constructive solution is to question and potentially change or abandon one's own desires, intentions, or beliefs, in order to set more achievable and less conflicting goals. The emotional tension can also be eased through balancing activities that build **positive eustress** and reduce **negative distress**.

Downplaying and Denial

Often, emotional tension is attributed to other causes, the conflict is minimized, or even portrayed as forced. Dissonance is frequently denied or devalued — and that, too, can provide relief. Whether this is beneficial in the long run is debatable. What matters is that something changes: either behavior is adjusted to align with beliefs, or beliefs are adjusted to align with behavior.

Researchers believe that the strategy of dissonance reduction is important as for our self-esteem, as for our overall well-being.

³ https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00278-013-0988-2?utm_source

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