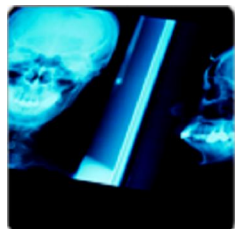


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Cognitive Dissonance Theory

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Introduction

Appearing for the first time in the mid-20th century, the term %cognitive dissonance+appears nowadays about 3,000 times in PsycINFO and the original book has been cited more than 25,000 times in scientific publications: that is more than once a day for about sixty years. The theory of cognitive dissonance was molded by Leon Festinger at the beginning of the 1950s. It suggests that inconsistencies among cognitions (i.e., knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, oneself, or one's behavior) generate an uncomfortable motivating feeling (i.e., the cognitive dissonance state). According to the theory, people feel uncomfortable when they experience cognitive dissonance and thus are motivated to retrieve an acceptable state. The magnitude of existing dissonance depends on the importance and strength of the involved cognitions. Experiencing a higher level of dissonance causes pressure and motivation to reduce the dissonance. Findings from several studies show that dissonance occurs when people do not act in accordance with their act attitude (e.g., writing supportive arguments in favor of a topic that they do not agree upon; performing a task they disapprove). Festinger 1957 (cited under Core Books) considered three ways to cope with cognitive dissonance: (a) changing one or several involved elements in the dissonance relationship (e.g., moving an opinion to fit a behavior), (b) adding new elements to reduce the inconsistency (e.g., adopting opinions which fit a behavior), and (c) reducing the importance of the involved elements. Early theorists in this field suggested improvement to the cognitive dissonance theory by adding restrictions for the emergence of the phenomena. Three major developments have to be considered: the commitment purpose and freedom; the consequence of the act purpose; and the self-involvement. Mostly studied in human beings, several studies shift paradigms to other animals such as non-human primates, rats, and birds. The cognitive dissonance theory has been applied to a very large array of social situations and leads to original experimental designs. It is arguably one of the most influential theories in social psychology, general psychology, and cross-discipline sciences more generally.

General Overviews

The field of cognitive dissonance is broad. Several paradigms were developed and many theories coexist. There are number of sources, mostly scientific articles and books, which provide a wide overview of the literature on cognitive dissonance. After about half-century of the development of the theory, several authors have published digests and state of the art concerning the topic, but they often suggest a partially deviant point of view. Aronson 1992 and Brehm 2007, by two of Festinger's historical students, offer historical anecdotic information as well as keystones to understand the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance. In the same vein, Cooper 2012 proposes the author's personal view of this story, focusing on his own theoretical achievements. Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones 2007 gives a short view of the main reformulations. Finally, more aimed at advanced researchers in cognitive dissonance, Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999 is an edited volume that synthesizes modern perspectives on dissonance.

Aronson, Elliot. 1992. The return of the repressed: Dissonance theory makes a comeback. *Psychological Inquiry* 3:303-311.

Aronson reviews the history of cognitive dissonance and mainly develops the self-consistency revision. This paper could be considered as the one that permits a regain of interest of the theory in the late 1990s.

Brehm, Jack W. 2007. A brief history of dissonance theory. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 1:381-391.

The paper reviews the storyline of cognitive dissonance theory, from Festinger's very beginning up to the spreading of experimentations all over the world. The author does not develop the reformulations but presents outline of the theory.

Cooper, Joel. 2012. Cognitive dissonance theory. In *Handbook of theories of social psychology*. Vol. 1. Edited by Paul M. Van Lange, Arie W. Kruglanski, and E. Tory Higgins, 377–397. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Cooper's personal review of the history of cognitive dissonance theory. The article gives a broad view of the life of cognitive dissonance. He focused on two important models of cognitive dissonance which he personally developed during his career: the New Look and the Self-Standard Model.

Harmon-Jones, Eddie, and Cindy Harmon-Jones. 2007. Cognitive dissonance theory after 50 years of development. *Zeitschrift für Sozialpsychologie* 38:7–16.

This synthetic paper examines the main paradigms of cognitive dissonance theory and three of the great revisions of the theory. The authors then develop the action-based model they defend.

Harmon-Jones, Eddie, and Judson Mills. 1999. *Cognitive dissonance: Progress on a pivotal theory in social psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Aimed at a postgraduate and researcher audience, this book is a collection of chapters written by various top experts in the field of cognitive dissonance. It offers a substantial panorama of the theories and research issues of the 2000s.

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