

SOCI 323

Social Psychology

Session 12 – Cognitive Dissonance Theory

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Session Overview

The cognitive dissonance theory developed by Leon Festinger (1957) is the most developed of the cognitive theories of attitude change. The theory focuses on the ways in which particular beliefs or attitudes are either consistent or inconsistent with one another. The cognitive dissonance theory discussed in this session, explains how an individual attempts to change his attitude without any external influence because of the dissonance s/he is experiencing. Thus in this session, we shall examine the key tenets of this theory and explain how it is utilized to engender or undermine attitude change

At the end of the session, the student will:

- be able to explain the key tenets of the cognitive dissonance theory
- identify the various strategies people adopt to minimize the impact of dissonance

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Defining and explaining the concept of Dissonance
- The implications of Dissonance
- Strategies to reduce dissonance
- Sample Question
- Session Summary
- References

Reading List

- Please read chapter five (5) of the required text and the article on this session 12, posted on Sakai

Topic One

THE COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY

What is Cognitive Dissonance?

- The consistency theories of attitude change all maintain that if a particular attitude is inconsistent either with other attitudes that the individual holds or with the individual's behavior, the person will be motivated to change either that attitude or behavior to which it corresponds or in certain rare cases, an entire belief system.
- Thus, consistency theories view attitude change as an attempt by the individual to achieve cognitive balance or equilibrium. Three cognitive consistency theories can be identified namely, balance, congruity and cognitive dissonance theories.
- The cognitive dissonance theory developed by Leon Festinger (1957) is the most developed of the cognitive theories of attitude change. The theory focuses on the ways in which particular beliefs or attitudes are either consistent or inconsistent with one another.



Cognitive Dissonance Theory

- Dissonance theory emphasizes the psychological comfort/discomfort of the individual. According to Festinger, you experience consonance when two related cognitions fit together harmoniously. For example, smoking is harmful and I don't smoke.
- Thus, when people behave in ways that threaten their self-image, it is upsetting and generates dissonance because it makes you confront the discrepancy between who you think you are and how you have in fact behaved.
- You however feel dissonance (Psychological discomfort) when two related cognitions do not fit together harmoniously or clash. Dissonance also occurs when you must choose between two attractive alternatives. For example, rejecting one job or school generates dissonance brought on by the positives of the rejected option.
- Again, when we say things we do not mean or believe in, or when we behave in ways inconsistent with our values, beliefs or values, we experience dissonance.

Defining Cognitive Dissonance

- An internal state that results when individuals notice inconsistency between two or more attitudes or between their attitude and their behaviour (Baron and Branscombe, 2012)

Topic Two

IMPLICATIONS OF DISSONANCE

Implications of Dissonance

- Cognitive dissonance always produces discomfort, which leads to attempts to reduce it, just as being hungry leads to attempts to reduce hunger. And just as your need to reduce hunger depends on the intensity of the hunger, the reduction of dissonance depends on the intensity of the dissonance experienced.
- To reduce dissonance, the cognitive elements that produce dissonance must be replaced with or substituted for with consonant elements. For example, smoking is harmful; you don't smoke, so you experience consonance.
- However, this is not always easy to do. Mostly, instead of doing the rational thing or taking the 'right' action to reduce dissonance, you tend to adopt several ways (often rationalizing) your behavior so that you do not experience dissonance.
- Hence, Allport (1968) asserts that **“Dissonance theory does not rest upon the assumption that man is a rational animal, rather it suggests that man is a rationalizing animal—that he attempts to appear rational both to others and himself”**.

Topic Three

DISSONANCE REDUCING STRATEGIES

Adding on Cognitions

- You can reduce dissonance by attempting to justify your behavior by adding new cognitions. Thus, you can attempt to identify all the reasons to support your discrepant behavior (eg. Smoking relaxes me, it helps me keep awake, it keeps my weight down e.t.c).
- Thus, acquiring new and stronger reasons that are specifically consistent with the attitude/actions that seem inconsistent helps people to reduce the dissonance one feels. This is known as **'the less leads to more effect'**.
- Thus dissonance is stronger when we have less reasons for engaging in attitude discrepant behavior. The reverse is also true

Altering one dissonant behaviour

- Another way is by attempting to justify your behavior through changing one of the dissonant cognitions.
- Thus, modifying your opinion or changing your attitude to make them consistent with the discrepant attitudes or poor behaviors.
- For example, if you are a smoker you may lower your perception of the dangers of smoking. In this way, you can continue to smoke without feeling terrible about it. You may say things as 'I don't need to stop smoking, the data on its dangers are inconclusive- it's not harmful etc, all in the bid to reduce dissonance.
- Thus, with dissonance theory, '**suffering leads to liking**'. You may need to alter your opinion about something you have exerted effort on in order not to experience dissonance.

Trivialisation

- By minimizing or altering the importance of the discrepancy (beating down the discrepancy). In other words you may engage in **trivialization** (a technique for reducing dissonance in which the importance of attitudes or behavior that are inconsistent with each other is cognitively reduced).
- Thus, you decide that the inconsistency doesn't actually matter—that the attitudes or behavior in question are not important, so any inconsistency between them is of no importance.
- For instance, if you admit that you have a weight problem but you do not exercise you may feel dissonance. You may then say 'you already have an active life, so you do not need to exercise etc. After all there are other people more fat than you etc

Reducing Perceived Choice

- Dissonance can be reduced by reducing perceived choice. You can convince yourself that you are not freely choosing to engage in the discrepant behavior.'
- For example, you may say; I have no choice but to smoke or drink etc. You may say you have so many problems, stress; that you smoke/drink to keep yourself calm. "Or that you are too busy/old to exercise' –if you are overweight

Doing the Rational Thing

- By changing your behavior so that it no longer conflicts with our attitudes. ‘Smoking is harmful’ and so I quit’.
- In all of these, **the path of least resistance is what is followed**. Thus, you can reduce dissonance by changing what is easiest to change.
- The choice between the various alternatives may be a function of what is available and the specific context in which dissonance occurs (Aronson et al, 1995).

Sample Question

- With dissonance theory '**suffering leads to liking**' and '**the less leads to more effect**'. Explain these phrases and indicate how these help to manage dissonance.



Session Summary

- This session has explained how dissonance helps individuals to change their attitudes by themselves without any external persuasive pressure.
- There are several strategies individuals employ to reduce dissonance. What is important to remember is that people would in all situations choose the path of least resistance—manage their dissonance with the strategies that are easier to use in a particular situation. This is because, the rational thing, may not always be the easier option.
- Dissonance is effective in helping people develop positive attitudes and behavior. For instance, it helps people avoid hypocrisy/ double standards because doing these exposes one to dissonance.

References

- Robert, B. and Branscombe, N. (2012). Social Psychology. 13th Edition. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Aronson, E., Wilson, T. & Akert, R. (2007) Social Psychology. 6th Edition. Pearson Education Inc.
- Aronson, E., Wilson, T. & Akert, R. (2010) Social Psychology. 7th Edition. Pearson Education Inc.

