

# Contemporary Issues in Juvenile Justice

---

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 5

---

2011

## The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance: A Reappraisal

Peter A. Metofe

*Prairie View A & M University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pvamu.edu/cojpp-contemporaryissues>



Part of the [Child Psychology Commons](#), [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#), [Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Metofe, Peter A. (2011) "The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance: A Reappraisal," *Contemporary Issues in Juvenile Justice*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pvamu.edu/cojpp-contemporaryissues/vol5/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @PVAMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Issues in Juvenile Justice by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @PVAMU. For more information, please contact [hvkoshy@pvamu.edu](mailto:hvkoshy@pvamu.edu).

---

## The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance: A Reappraisal

### Cover Page Footnote

Peter A. Metofe, Department of Psychology, Prairie View A&M University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Peter A. Metofe, Department of Psychology, Prairie View A&M University, Mail Stop 2600, Prairie View, Texas 77446. E-mail: [pametofe@pvamu.edu](mailto:pametofe@pvamu.edu)

# The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance: A Reappraisal

Peter A. Metofe

Prairie View A & M University

## Abstract

The cognitive dissonance theory, as postulated by Festinger (1957), has undergone increased scrutiny since its development. Through a reappraisal of this theory as explicated by other researchers, specifically relying on extant and current research in this theory, coupled with recent developments, this paper provides a context for better understanding of how individuals experience cognitive dissonance and its implications for clinical practice.

Keywords: cognitive dissonance, attitude change, motivation, self-perception

The cognitive dissonance theory as postulated by Festinger (1957) has been undergoing increased scrutiny since its development. How we experience cognitive dissonance has been a fertile ground for a plethora of studies in social psychology. Some of the findings from these studies as to how we experience cognitive dissonance have led credence to Festinger's conceptualization of dissonance, and while others (e.g., Bem, 1967) have not provided empirical support of how we experience dissonance as explained by Festinger. Through a reappraisal of this theory as explicated by other researchers, this paper provides a context for better understanding of how individuals experience cognitive dissonance and its implications for clinical practice. Specifically, this paper sheds light on contradictory and somewhat complementary explanations of how we experience cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance is an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously. The theory of cognitive dissonance proposes that people have a motivational drive to reduce dissonance by changing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, or by justifying or rationalizing them (Brehm, 1956; Festinger, 1957). In this context, dissonance occurs when a person perceives a logical inconsistency in their beliefs, when one idea implies the opposite of another. The dissonance might be experienced as guilt, anger, frustration, or even embarrassment.

## Classic Experiment of Cognitive Dissonance

Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) conducted a classic experiment of cognitive dissonance. In this experiment, students were asked to spend an hour on boring and tedious tasks (e.g., turning pegs a quarter turn, over and over again). The tasks were designed to generate a strong, negative attitude. Once the

participants had done this, the experimenters asked some of them to do a simple favor. They were asked to talk to another subject (actually an actor) and persuade them that the tasks were interesting and engaging. Some participants were paid \$20 for this favor, others were paid \$1, and a control group was not asked to perform the favor.

When asked to rate the boring tasks at the conclusion of the study (not in the presence of the other *subject*), those in the \$1 group rated them more positively than those in the \$20 and control groups. This was explained by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) as evidence for cognitive dissonance. The researchers theorized that people experienced dissonance between the conflicting cognitions, "I told someone that the task was interesting" and "I actually found it boring" (p. 207). When paid only \$1, students were forced to internalize the attitude they were induced to express, because they had no other justification. Those in the \$20 condition, however, had an obvious external justification for their behavior, and thus experienced less dissonance.

## Alternative Explanations of Dissonance

Daryl Bem (1967) was an early critic of cognitive dissonance theory. He proposed self-perception theory as a more parsimonious alternative explanation of the experimental results. According to him, people do not think much about their attitudes, let alone whether they are in conflict. He interpreted people in the Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) study as inferring their attitudes from their behavior. Thus, when asked "Did you find the task interesting?" they decided that they must have found it interesting because that is what they told someone (Bem, p. 183). Bem suggested that people paid \$20 had a salient, external incentive for their behavior and were likely to perceive the money as their reason for saying the task was interesting, rather than concluding that they actually found it interesting.

In many experimental situations, Bem's theory and Festinger's theory make identical predictions, but only dissonance theory predicts the presence of unpleasant tension or

---

Peter A. Metofe, Department of Psychology, Prairie View A&M University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Peter A. Metofe, Department of Psychology, Prairie View A&M University, Mail Stop 2600, Prairie View, Texas 77446. E-mail: pametofe@pvamu.edu

arousal. Lab experiments have verified the presence of arousal in dissonance situations (Zanna & Cooper, 1974; Kiesler & Pallak, 1976). This provides support for cognitive dissonance theory and makes it unlikely that self-perception by itself can account for all the laboratory findings.

Aronson (1969) reformulated the basic theory of cognitive dissonance by linking it to the self-concept. According to this new interpretation, cognitive dissonance does not arise because people experience dissonance between conflicting cognitions. Instead, it occurs when people see their actions as conflicting with their normally positive view of themselves. Thus, in the original Festinger and Carlsmith study, Aronson stated that the dissonance was between the cognition, "I am an honest person" and the cognition, "I lied to someone about finding the task interesting" (p. 27). Other psychologists have argued that maintaining cognitive consistency is a way to protect public self-image, rather than private self-concept (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971).

Cooper and Fazio (1984) argued that dissonance was caused by aversive consequences, rather than inconsistency. According to this interpretation, the fact that lying is wrong and hurtful, not the consistency between cognitions is what makes people feel bad. Subsequent research, however, found that people experience dissonance even when they feel they have not done anything wrong (Harmon-Jones, Brehm, Greenberg, Simon, & Nelson, 1996).

Chen and Risen (2010) have criticized the free-choice paradigm and have suggested that the *Rank, Choice, Rank* method of studying dissonance is invalid. They argue that research design relies on the assumption that, if the subject rates options differently in the second survey, then the subject's attitudes toward the options have therefore changed. They show that there are other reasons one might get different rank-ings in the second survey - perhaps the participants were largely indifferent between choices. However, some follow-up research has provided contradictory evidence to this account (Egan, Santos, & Bloom, 2007). Also, more recent studies have demonstrated the biological bases of how cognitive dissonance is experienced (e.g., Monroe & Read, 2008; Van Veen, Krug, Schooler, & Carter, 2009).

### Discussion

In recent times, social psychological experiments have provided impetus for the sustained interest in cognitive dissonance and, consequently, challenged the revisions of dissonance theory and provided empirical support for Festinger's original conceptualization of dissonance. On the basis of these profound experiments, dissonance reflects inconsistency and is at variance with self-threat or the production of an aversive consequence. According to Aronson (1992), a number of social psychological theories, including self affirmation theory, could be conceptualized as dissonance in the form of guilt. In addition to the theories postulated by Aronson, much research and theory concerned with guilt (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994) and self-regulation over prejudiced and other impulses (Amodio, Harmon-Jones, Devine, Curtin, Hartley, & Covert, 2004) may be understood from the perspective of dissonance.

Festinger (1957) failed to explicate why cognitive inconsistency produces discomfort and motivates perceptual, cognitive and behavioral changes. Nevertheless, research on the action-based model (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002) suggests cognitive inconsistency produces a negative emotive state that causes cognitive and behavioral changes. Specifically, the action - based model suggests a new way of thinking about cognitive dissonance processes; it states that dissonance processes may serve the necessary and vital function of assisting in the execution of effective and unconflicted behavior. It is incumbent upon social psychological researchers to include these ideas from action-based model into future research in cognitive dissonance.

As continued interest in dissonance theory is sustained, it is clear that this theory has faced many challenges in terms of its conjectures, but still provides empirical foundation for generating new hypotheses that lend themselves to testing. Against this backdrop, it is instructive to note that recent empirical and theoretical developments within dissonance theory will shed more light on how we conceptualize Festinger's theory.

In conclusion, this paper did not provide an exhaustive review of the literature of how we experience dissonance, but only a sample of the literature. However, the review of the literature presented here underscores the importance of complementary explanations of dissonance, and these explanations on how individuals experience cognitive dissonance has one common thread. This indicates that people experience dissonance and the source of the components of this dissonance might be different for individuals. Against this backdrop, are there any clinical implications resulting from cognitive dissonance? Fortunately, the answer is yes. For example, how one experiences cognitive dissonance may have utility in the clinical intervention of individuals suffering from anxiety and other maladjustments (Freedman, 1965).

### References

- Amodio, D. M., Harmon-Jones E., Devine P. G., Curtin J. J., Hartley S., & Covert, A. (2004). Neural signals for the detection of unintentional race bias. *Psychological Science, 15*, 88-93.
- Aronson, E. (1969). The theory of cognitive dissonance: A current perspective. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, (Vol. 4, pp. 1-34). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Aronson, E. (1992). The return of the repressed: Dissonance theory makes a comeback. *Psychological Inquiry, 3*, 303- 311.
- Baumeister, R. F., Stillwell, A. M., & Heatherton, T. F. (1994). Guilt: An interpersonal approach. *Psychological Bulletin, 115*, 243-267.
- Bem, D. J. (1967). Self-perception: An alternative interpretation of cognitive dissonance. *Psychological Review, 74*, 183-200.
- Brehm, J. (1956). Post-decision changes in desirability of alternatives. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 52*, 384-389.
- Chen, M. K., & Risen J. L. (2010). How choice affects and reflects preferences: Revisiting the free-choice paradigm. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 99*, 573-594.
- Cooper, J., & Fazio, R. H. (1984). A new look at dissonance theory. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 17, pp. 229-266). New York, NY: Academic Press.

- Egan, L. C., Santos, L. R., & Bloom, P. (2007). The origins of cognitive dissonance: Evidence from children and monkeys. *Psychological Science, 18*, 978-983.
- Freedman, J. L. (1965). Long-term behavioral effects of cognitive dissonance. *Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology, 1*, 145-155.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Festinger, L., & Carlsmith, J. M. (1959). Cognitive consequences of forced compliance. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 58*, 203-210.
- Harmon-Jones, E., Brehm, J. W., Greenberg, J., Simon, L., & Nelson, D. E. (1996). Evidence that the production of aversive consequences is not necessary to create cognitive dissonance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*, 5-16.
- Harmon-Jones, E., & Harmon-Jones, C. (2002). Testing the action-based model of cognitive dissonance: The effect of action-orientation on postdecisional attitudes. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28*, 711-723.
- Kiesler, C. A., & Pallak, M. S. (1976). Arousal properties of dissonance manipulations. *Psychological Bulletin, 83*, 1014-1025.
- Monroe, B. M., & Read, S. J. (2008). A general connectionist model of attitude structure and change: The ACS (attitudes as constraint satisfaction) model. *Psychological Review, 115*, 733-759.
- Tedeschi, J. T., Schlenker, B. R., & Bonoma, T. V. (1971). Cognitive dissonance: Private ratiocination or public spectacle? *American Psychologist, 26*, 685-695.
- Van Veen, V., Krug, M. K., Schooler, J. W., & Carter, C. S. (2009). Neural activity predicts attitude change in cognitive dissonance. *Nature Neuroscience, 12*(11), 1469-1474.
- Zanna, M., & Cooper, J. (1974). An attribution approach to studying the arousal properties of dissonance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 29*, 703-709.

