

CH 6. COGNITIVE DISSONANCE (Leon Festinger)

The notion of attitudes:

- An attitude is the manner, disposition, feeling or position one holds with regard to a person or thing; a tendency or orientation, especially of the mind
- We cannot necessarily directly observe attitudes
- Many theories try to explain how attitudes form, change, and relate to other cognitive processes that influence how we think, act, and feel

Attitudes as a Balancing Act:

- Cognitive Dissonance focuses on the balance between the pieces of information in our heads that come together to form our attitude about something
- According to **Leon Festinger**, the creator of CD:
- Cognitive Dissonance is a feeling of imbalance, where we do or say or think things that don't fit (are dissonant) with our established beliefs, opinions or values, and we become uncomfortable as a result
- In order to lessen the uncomfortable feelings that dissonance produces, we are driven to reduce (or eliminate) dissonance.

Cognitions: ways of knowing, beliefs, judgements, and thoughts

Cognitive dissonance: feeling of discomfort/imbalance resulting from inconsistent attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors (Leon Festinger "when they find themselves doing things that don't fit with what they know, or having opinions that do not fit with other opinions they hold")

Cognitive Dissonance Theory—a theory that argues that dissonance is an uncomfortable feeling that motivates people to take steps to reduce it

Consistency Theories:

- In general are theories that deal with how our mind processes and/or categorizes information (stimuli)
- As information is taken in, it is grouped with similar information to form a pattern that helps make it easier to understand & recall the information later
- Sometimes, even though the information we process relates in some way to information stored in our minds, it is inconsistent with the pattern (attitude) we have already created
- Because the mind processes information differently depending on the environment and type of stimuli, there are several different types of Consistency Theories

Principles of consistency theories

1. The mind operates as an intermediary between stimulus and response.
2. When people receive information (a stimulus), their minds organize it into a pattern with other previously encountered stimuli. If the new stimulus does not fit the pattern or is inconsistent, then people will feel discomfort. As a result, they will then take steps to reduce the discomfort (which we will cover later on).

Three components: A person or perceiver (P), another person (O), and an issue (X). Balance Theory's basic premise is that people prefer a balanced relationship between P, O & X (regardless of whether it is positive or negatively evaluated).

Dissing the Dissonance:

- The inner motivation to eliminate dissonance is one of the core principles of Cog. Diss. Theory
- The motivation to eliminate Cognitive Dissonance can result in behavior and attitude change

Magnitude of Dissonance: how much it matters to you; quantitative amount of discomfort felt

3 factors influence this...

1. **Importance** - a factor in determining magnitude of diss; refers to how significant the issue is

2. **Dissonance ratio**— if someone calls and says “I hope youre ok even though youre at fsu...” (huge dissonance ratio); a factor in determining magnitude of diss; the amount of consonant cognitions relative to the dissonant ones
3. **Rationale** (Strength of reasoning)—a factor in determining magnitude of diss; refers to the reasoning employed to explain the inconsistency

Coping with Dissonance:

Many techniques used to decrease dissonance cognitively-based

- Many making up things to deal with something you don't like to reduce diss. Ratio
- Convince yourself that diss. Feelings aren't as important as your thought—“Im at a wedding- psh im happy! (even though fsu is losing)”
- Distort diss info to make it fit with your original beliefs - “oh, well ole miss barely beat vandy! So its fine that they beat UF!”
- Many of the techniques used to decrease dissonance are cognitively based
- Mentally +/- cognitions to reduce your dissonance ratio
- Convince yourself that the dissonant feelings are NOT as important as you originally thought
- Distort the dissonant information to make it fit with your original beliefs

Coping with Cognitive Dissonance

1. Although CDT explains that dissonance can be reduced through both behavioral and attitudinal changes, most research has focused on the latter.
2. Many techniques to increase consistency are cognitively based, and the theory suggests several ways to reduce dissonance.
 - a. An individual can add or subtract cognitions to change the ratio of consonant to dissonant cognitions.
 - b. An individual might try to reduce the importance of the dissonant cognitions.
 - c. An individual might distort information or stimuli in an effort to reduce dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance and perception:

People avoid info that increases dissonance (4 ways...)

1. **Selective exposure**- seek out info that's consistent with beliefs // reduce dissonance
Ex. Since they won the game, I haven't been on Gainesville.com to look @the game info... don't want to see the good stuff UF did
 - A method for reducing diss by seeking info that is consonant with beliefs and actions
 2. **Selective attention**- pay attention to info consonant with beliefs
Ex. We hear something against gators- so we tune in more - “ole miss wasn't really 3rd!!! (- wait what!)”
 - A thod for reducing diss by paying attention to info that is consonant with current beliefs and actions
 3. **Selective interpretation**- taking info and molding it to fit your needs
 - A method for reducing diss by interpreting ambiguous info so that it becomes consistent with current beliefs and actions
 4. **Selective retention**- remembering consonant info more easily than diss info.
Ex. If I like hilary, Im gonna remember what good thing that person said about her - keeping the good info in your head
 - A method for reducing dissonance by remembering info that is consonant with current beliefs/actions
- (Any one of these techniques could be used to help you discredit the fact that your friend is still your best friend-even though they happen to be a Gator...but it also depends on YOUR beliefs about FSU & being a Nole)

3 types of cognitive relationships:

1. **Consonant Relationship:** our beliefs and behaviors coincide
 - two elements in equilibrium with each another
 - ex. If you believe that health & fitness are important goals and you work out 3-5 times a week, then your beliefs about health and your own behaviors would have a consonant relationship with one another
2. **Dissonant Relationship:** our beliefs do not fit with our behaviors
 - two elements in disequilibrium with each other
 - ex. Practicing catholic girl who believes in abortion- her religious beliefs conflict with her abortion beliefs
3. **Irrelevant Relationship:** beliefs and behaviors do not relate
 - Two elements that have no meaningful relation to each other
 - Ex. Believing the speed limit should be raised to 65 mph on all freeways, and believing that women should have equal rights in the workplace - both include freedoms, but they don't relate

Four assumptions of cog diss theory:

1. **Humans want consistency between thoughts attitudes behaviors and beliefs**
This is an aspect of human behavior; people want their thoughts and actions to be in balance with each other. Ex: Smoking in spite of the knowledge that it causes cancer.
2. **Psychological inconsistencies (when beliefs/behaviors don't fit together) lead to dissonance**
ex: Ali believes that it is important to give back to the community, yet working for the Alliance (which is not doing anything) makes her feel uncomfortable.
3. **Dissonance is cognitively uncomfortable**
4. **We are psychologically driven to reduce dissonance**
Physiological arousal (tension) from dissonance motivates people to take action to avoid situations that create psychological inconsistencies or to make an effort to restore or maintain psychological consistency (balance) between cognitions (beliefs & attitudes) and behaviors.

How do we balance it out?

Imagine that it is a visual representation about the ongoing discussion with your best friend about school

YOU (P) (O) Best Friend

(X)

Choice of College

There are attitudes/evaluations attached to this relationship

Heider's Balance Theory: looks at cognitive elements of relationships (among other things) and the attitudes/evaluations that are attached to these relationships.

In general, people prefer a balanced relationship between P, O & X whether it is positive or negative overall

But what happens if there is a piece of information that doesn't fit and could potentially change the way you evaluate a component of that relationship?

YOU (P) (O) Best Friend

(X)

You're going to FSU/Best Friend is going to UF

The concepts and processes of cog diss: