

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND ATTITUDE CHANGE: CONCEPTUAL NOTE

Sandeep Kumar Verma

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, K.S. Saket College, Ayodhya, Faizabad, U.P., India

ABSTRACT

Cognitive Dissonance may be defined as circumstance which involves differing attitude, beliefs or behaviours. It engenders the feelings of psychological embarrassment leads to modification in attitude and behaviour to overcome the discomfort. For instance, when person smoke and this is the behaviour of person and he know that cancer is caused by smoking so that knowledge of the person is cognition, then the person in a condition of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is the state of psychological discomfort or tension that knowledgeable by the people who have more than two conflicting attitude, values and belief happen at same period of time. Its conception associated with self-doubt at the time of making decision. The aim of this conceptual paper is to emphasize on the relationship exist between cognitive dissonance and attitude change.

Keywords: *Cognitive dissonance, cognitive dissonance theory, attitude, behaviour.*

A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point.

-Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*

1. ATTITUDE & THEIR COMPONENT

Favourable or unfavourable evaluations towards something that define a person's attitude can be exhibited in beliefs, feelings, or inclinations to act. This is known as the multidimensional or tricomponent view of attitudes (e.g., Breckler, 1984; Katz & Stotland, 1959). These three components represent the basic building blocks of attitudes. Consider for example, my attitude towards swimming. Because I believe that it is an excellent form of exercise, I feel liking towards it, and therefore intend to swim every day (at least in summers!). These dimensions are known as the ABCs of attitudes: affect (feelings), behaviour (tendency to act), and cognition (thoughts).

Affect refers to feelings or emotions that are evoked by a particular person, item, or event — the attitude object, or the focus of our attitude, for e.g. fear, sympathy, hate, like, pleasure. You may feel positively or negatively about your boss, the painting in your office lobby, or the fact that your company just bagged a big contract (it may mean a bigger bonus; it may also mean strict and deadlines and hard work!). Obviously, such feelings can vary in intensity. For example, I may very strongly like classical music, but have only a casual dislike of carrots. Such feelings form from our experiences (or observing experiences) and serve to guide our future behaviour. I may be more inclined to go to a musical concert by Pandit Bhimsen Joshi; and may be less inclined to avoid carrots. Much of attitude research has emphasized the importance of affective or emotion components. Emotion works hand-in-hand with the cognitive process, or the way we think about an issue or situation. Emotional appeals are commonly found in advertising, health campaigns and political messages. Any discrete emotion can be used in a persuasive appeal; this may include jealousy, disgust, indignation, fear, humour, and anger. For e.g. a pack of cigarettes now contains a picture of black lungs along with a message that says 'Smoking Kills: Tobacco causes cancer' designed to arouse fear Research suggests that affect plays a very important role in attitude formation. For instance, Kim, Lim, & Bhargava (1998) conducted two experiments, using established conditioning procedures, to assess the impact of affect on formation of attitudes about certain products. The results indicated that affect can influence attitudes even in the absence of product beliefs. Further, affect plays as important or more important a role than the belief mechanism in attitude formation, depending on the number of repetitions. Affect is a common component in attitude change, persuasion, social influence, and even decision making. How we feel about an outcome may override purely cognitive rationales.

Attitudes involve more than just feeling— they also involve knowledge— what you believe to be the case about an attitude object. For e.g. you might believe that studying psychology will help you understand other people better and equip you to deal with them. Whether it is completely accurate or completely false (quite true in this case), this belief comprises the cognitive component of your attitude towards psychology. When you form your opinion or judgment on the basis of available information and decide whether you have a favourable or unfavourable opinion on that, it is the cognitive part of an attitude we are talking about. The term cognition literally means ‘to know’, ‘to conceptualize’, or ‘to recognize’. Hence the cognitive component of attitude is the storage component where we organise information about an attitude object. It comprises of our thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and ideas about the attitudinal object (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). When a human being is the object of an attitude, the cognitive component is frequently a stereotype, for e.g. ‘Punjabis are fun loving’.

As just mentioned, the things you believe about something (for e.g. ‘my boss is corrupt and is misusing company funds’) and the way you feel about it (e.g. ‘I can’t stand working for him’) may have some effect on the way you are predisposed to behave (e.g. ‘I’m going to quit my present job’). Thus, attitudes have a behavioural component— a tendency or a predisposition to act in a certain manner. Note that behaviour is different from a behavioural tendency. It may seem logical to assume that if we have a negative attitude for a particular object— your boss in the above example— it is likely to be translated into a particular type of behaviour, such as avoidance of your boss and even looking for an alternative job. However, such behavioural tendency may not actually be predictive of your actual behaviour. Behaviours are typically defined as overt actions of an individual. For e.g. although you may be interested in taking a new job, you might not actually take it if a better one (with higher or at least similar salary and designation) is not available. It is thus important to note that your intention to behave in a certain way may or may not translate into how you actually behave. It is more reasonable to assume that one’s behavioural intention, the verbal indication or typical behavioural tendency of an individual, rather than actual behaviour is more likely to be in tune with his affective and cognitive components.

Attitudes as mentioned earlier are indeed difficult to change. But there are many ways in which attitudes could also be changed. Many studies as for example that of Veen et al (2009), demonstrated that attitude change also shows in the neural changes. They found that when the person’s actions conflict with the prior attitudes, these often change the persons attitudes to be more consistent with their actions. This phenomenon, known as cognitive dissonance, is considered to be one of the most influential theories in psychology. Using a Solomon four group design, they scanned participants with functional MRI while the subjects argued that the uncomfortable scanner environment was nevertheless a pleasant experience. They found that cognitive dissonance engaged the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and anterior insula; They also reported that the activation of these regions tightly predicted participants’ subsequent attitude change. These effects were not observed in a control group. Their findings elucidate the neural representation of cognitive dissonance, and support the role of the anterior cingulate cortex in detecting cognitive conflict and the neural prediction of attitude change.

2. COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) was first introduced by Leon Festinger. Cognitive dissonance is the process by which people detect an inconsistency between cognitions, such as attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. When individuals become aware of an inconsistency between cognitions, they experience a state of psychological discomfort that motivates them to restore consistency. Factors such as the importance of the cognitions and the magnitude of the discomfort play a role in determining how people restore consistency. Festinger described three primary ways people can reduce dissonance: change a cognition; add new cognitions; or change the importance of the inconsistent cognitions. Many early studies showed that when people are unable to change their behavior, they will change their attitudes to be more in line with the inconsistent behavior. Cognitive dissonance theory postulates that an underlying psychological tension is created when an individual’s behavior is inconsistent with his or her thoughts and beliefs. This underlying tension then motivates an individual to make an attitude change that would produce consistency between thoughts and behaviors. Research has shown that when an individual engages in behaviors that are inconsistent with their attitude or belief (e.g., arguing a counter-attitudinal position on a topic), a change in attitude is produced that is consistent in the direction of his or her behavior. This mechanism of thought or attitude change is the same mechanism used to produce changes in negative, irrational thoughts that are involved in the maintenance of depression and related disorders. According to dissonance theory, self-esteem is threatened by inconsistency. Holding beliefs that are logically or ‘psychologically’ inconsistent, i.e., dissonant, with one another is uncomfortable.

According to Festinger’s theory, there are basically two factors that affect the strength of the dissonance, viz., (i) the number of dissonant beliefs, and (ii) the importance attached to each belief. Hence one can eliminate dissonance by the following methods: 1) reduce the importance of the dissonant beliefs 2) add

more consonant beliefs that outweigh the dissonant beliefs. 3) change the dissonant beliefs so that they are no longer inconsistent.

As mentioned earlier, Dissonance occurs when an individual has to make a choice between two incompatible beliefs or actions. The dissonance created is very high when the two alternatives are equally attractive. This is akin to approach – approach conflict which creates considerable tension. Attitude change is more likely in the direction of less incentive as this results in lower dissonance. These explanations could be very effectively used in attitude formation and change. In regard to changing of attitude towards a certain community people, the integrated housing scheme provides a good example of application of cognitive dissonance. When people start living together, and have to interact with each other for various reasons, they get to know each other and many ideas and beliefs about the other person belonging to a certain community start changing considerably as experience shows that these people are not as the individual thought them to be. In course of time with the changes in beliefs and ideas getting stronger the individual is able to get over the negative attitude and change to a more positive attitude. This is one way of changing attitude. Here dissonance is created by facts and figures and the individual reduces the dissonance by changing his attitude.

To cite another example, consider someone who buys an expensive car but discovers that it is not comfortable on long drives. Dissonance exists between their beliefs that they have bought a good car and that a good car should be comfortable. Dissonance could be eliminated by deciding that it does not matter since the car is mainly used for short trips (reducing the importance of the dissonant belief) or focusing on the car's strengths such as safety, appearance, handling (thereby adding more consonant beliefs). The dissonance could also be eliminated by getting rid of the car, but this behaviour is a lot harder to achieve than changing beliefs.

3. FORCED COMPLIANCE BEHAVIOR

When someone is forced to do (publicly) something they (privately) really don't want to do, dissonance is created between their cognition (I didn't want to do this) and their behavior (I did it). Forced compliance occurs when an individual performs an action that is inconsistent with his or her beliefs. The behavior can't be changed, since it was already in the past, so dissonance will need to be reduced by re-evaluating their attitude to what they have done. This prediction has been tested experimentally: In an intriguing experiment, **Festinger and Carlsmith (1959)** asked participants to perform a series of dull tasks (such as turning pegs in a peg board for an hour). As you can imagine, participant's attitudes toward this task were highly negative.

Aim-Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) investigated if making people perform a dull task would create cognitive dissonance through forced compliance behavior.

Method-In their laboratory experiment, they used 71 male students as participants to perform a series of dull tasks (such as turning pegs in a peg board for an hour).

They were then paid either \$1 or \$20 to tell a waiting participant (a confederate) that the tasks were really interesting. Almost all of the participants agreed to walk into the waiting room and persuade the confederate that the boring experiment would be fun.

Results-When the participants were asked to evaluate the experiment, the participants who were paid only \$1 rated the tedious task as more fun and enjoyable than the participants who were paid \$20 to lie.

Conclusion-Being paid only \$1 is not sufficient incentive for lying and so those who were paid \$1 experienced dissonance. They could only overcome that dissonance by coming to believe that the tasks really were interesting and enjoyable. Being paid \$20 provides a reason for turning pegs, and there is therefore no dissonance.

Fig.1. Festinger and Carlsmith: Experiment

4. CONCLUSION

Attitude to be consistent with those choices. The person forms stronger commitments once they have selected from several choices and then change their attitude which is psychologically discomfort. s to be conflict with his or her preliminary attitude. Cognitive dissonance occurs when people have two psychologically incompatible cognitions that are thoughts, beliefs, and dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory is one of the most influential in the history of social psychology and new research on cognitive dissonance suggested that self-concept plays an important role in increasing cognitive dissonance. In the Gosling et al. revealed that in place to resume the sense of consistency, the people change their attitude when they took decision to write the contradictory easy was liberally selected. Another dissonance reduction

strategy involves the value of the contradictory attitudinal behavior. Cancino-Montecinos et al. suggested that the dissonance researches has devoted numerous perceptive findings focusing on changes in attitude associated with cognitive dissonance and observe a significantly affirmative bond among occurrence of psychological discomfort and attitude change. Martinie et al. reported that an individual experienced dissonance i.e. feeling of anxiety, tension, psychological discomfort then individual exhibit attitude change. A more recent study found that the state of tension in an individual associated with the change in the attitude of an individual. The occurrence of cognitive inconsistency generates motivational situation that encourages regulation which approaches only through change in behavior or opinion. Many researches have been conducted on cognitive dissonance theory have depended upon inconsistency between attitude and behavior and found that with the help of behaviour an attitude shift toward more consistency. Thus the two most important principles of cognitive dissonance can be stated as that (i) dissonance occurs when a person has to choose between contradictory attitudes and behaviour. (ii) Another principle is that the dissonance can be removed by changing the importance of conflicting beliefs and acquiring new beliefs that change the balance or remove the conflicting attitude or remove the conflicting behaviour.

Festinger suggested that the individual has an intrinsic drive to change attitudes and to stay away from dissonance and this phenomenon is known as the theory of cognitive stability. When the existence of inconsistency between the points of view that is necessary to change and remove the discrepancy. Macleod, revealed that individuals would take steps to reduce cognitive dissonance only when they were in a state of cognitive dissonance. A person faces inconsistency in his cognition and this leads to psychological distress. Then a person adopts a strategy of minimizing the dissonance to come to a state of equilibrium. For example, in the motivated compliance paradigm, participants in that paradigm are asked to write an essay that refutes their prior view. Then the participants changed their approach to achieving consistency if they felt that the decision to write the essay was independently chosen and found that the behavioural change associated with the discrepancy.

Cognitive dissonance is not necessarily a bad or negative thing. In fact, it is a psychological mechanism that helps us perceive our world (and our place in it) consistently. It is a mechanism that alerts us when we are not acting in line with our beliefs, attitudes, or plans.

In that sense, the experience of cognitive dissonance is an opportunity to learn and grow, as long as we deal with it constructively and respond in a way that we choose and is beneficial.

1. Mindfulness: Often, we deal with cognitive inconsistencies without being aware of them. The first step is to notice inconsistencies between our thoughts. We can raise our awareness through mindfulness practice. This includes refraining from judgment and instead being accepting of our observations.

2. Challenge current beliefs: The next step is to identify the cause of inconsistencies in our thoughts. Understanding your beliefs and values behind the inconsistencies is an opportunity to develop deeper self-knowledge.

Sometimes, it's helpful to challenge our current beliefs. This can be a difficult and uncomfortable process and involves getting additional information.

3. Consider the importance of dissonant thoughts: Sometimes the dissonant information appears to be important at first sight but can be diminished upon deeper reflection.

A good example is the prospect of embarrassing ourselves in front of others, such as by forgetting our words during a speech. However, after further thought, we may decide that it does not matter what others think of us and can thus reduce the dissonance.

4. Justifying behavior: We may perceive dissonance when we engage in a new behavior (e.g., when we decline an invitation to an event we usually attend in order to protect our leisure time). While this can feel uncomfortable at first, it's helpful to reflect on the reasons behind our behavior.

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