

Introduction to Psychology – The Need to Justify our Actions: Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The Theory: Cognitive Dissonance

Most of us want to believe that we are reasonable, decent people who make wise decisions, do not behave immorally and have integrity. We do not want to think that we do irrational, absurd, cruel or absurd things. But, as we go through life, we encounter many challenges to this belief. When we are confronted with information that suggests that we have behaved in ways that are irrational, immoral or stupid we experience a good deal of discomfort. Psychologists call this feeling of performing an action that is discrepant with our typically positive view of ourselves **cognitive dissonance**. People get this unpleasant feeling of cognitive dissonance most strongly when we think or behave in ways that threaten our image of ourselves. It is upsetting, because the feeling forces us to confront the contradiction between who we think we are and how we have behaved. The feeling of discomfort motivates us to try to reduce the unpleasant feeling. We can do this in three main ways:

- By changing our behaviour to bring it in line with our view of ourselves
- By attempting to justify the behaviour by changing one of our beliefs about ourselves
- By attempting to justify the behaviour by adding new beliefs that make the behaviour consistent with our beliefs about our self.

For example, a smoker is likely to experience dissonance because it is absurd to engage in behaviour that stands a good chance of producing an early death. How can they reduce the dissonance? One way would be to change the behaviour – to give up smoking. Many do that, but many also fail to give up. So what can they do to reduce the dissonance. One way is to change their beliefs about the behaviour, for example, by convincing themselves that the risks of smoking aren't as bad as they first thought (so the behaviour is not so absurd after all). They like to point to exceptions to justify their new belief (e.g. Look at my grandma, she smoked all her life and lived to be 98). Others will add an additional belief that justifies the activity – for example by claiming that smoking is really enjoyable, or relaxes them, or reduces stress, and so smoking is worth it after all because the benefits outweigh the risks. These justifications sound silly to a non-smoker, but people will often go to extreme lengths to rationalise their behaviour to reduce dissonance. You can hear similar rationalisations and justifications from people who try and fail to lose weight, and for all sorts of other health harming or risky behaviours.

Study

Leon Festinger investigated cognitive dissonance (the theory that human beings feel tension/anxiety when they hold inconsistent ideas and will seek ways to decrease this dissonance) in a real life situation. He conducted an undisclosed or covert observational study of a religious cult. Festinger stated his hypothesis as follows: "Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to this belief, that he has taken



"You're new at this, aren't you?"

irrevocable actions because of it; finally, suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong: what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of his beliefs than ever before”.

Following a newspaper story in September 1954, a Mrs. Mariah Keach (pseudonym) claimed that for a year she had been receiving messages from superior beings (the Guardians from the planet Clarion) via automatic writing whilst in a trance. They had told her that on December 21st 1954 the northern hemisphere would be flooded and only a chosen few would survive. Festinger and two colleagues approached Mrs Keech as businessmen who were interested in her claim and who wanted to know more. They (with five other students) joined her small group of followers who were awaiting final directions from the planet clarion, engaging in a covert participant observation in the guise of true believers. They visited the cult members and took part in their meeting sixty times over a seven week period, some visits lasting two hours, others lasting 12-14 hours as they engaged in non-stop seance-like sessions. They would, at intervals, visit the toilet or take short walks in the fresh air to take notes on the proceedings. Eventually Mrs Keech received the long-awaited message that the Guardians would arrive and take the believers to safety, but they failed to turn up on that or several other occasions. December 21st came and went without a flood. Mrs Keech then received word that thanks to the goodness and light created by the believers, God had decided to call off the disaster and spare the world.

The researchers found that those believers who had not made much commitment dropped out of the cult when the disaster failed to occur, but those who had made strong commitments (some had quit their jobs or sold their possessions) remained and were more strongly convinced than ever of the truth of Mrs Keech’s revelations, thereby eliminating the conflict they experienced between what they believed and the disappointing reality (as Festinger predicted).