

An Introduction to Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Wednesday, February 2, 2005

I. Prisoners of War in Korea

II. History and Tenets of Cognitive Dissonance Theory

A. A “Radical alternative” to Behaviorism

Ramona and her friends have been at a party. Although Ramona agreed to be the designated driver, she has drunk too much and is inebriated. Still, she gets behind the wheel with three other friends along and starts the car. Ramona knows that drunk driving kills, yet she drives off anyway.

B. Basic Assumptions of Dissonance Theory

1. Humans dislike cognitive inconsistency.

Ramona’s knowledge (cognition) is inconsistent with her behavior, and she doesn’t like it

2. Inconsistent cognitions cause unpleasant arousal: cognitive dissonance.

Ramona is experiencing unpleasant arousal called “cognitive dissonance.”

Drunk Driving Kills  I’m drunk and I’m driving.

3. We are motivated to reduce dissonance.

Ramona is motivated to reduce her dissonance about driving while drunk: She knows that drunk driving is dangerous, yet she is driving.

4. Ways to Reduce Cognitive Dissonance

- a. Change one or the other cognition.

“Drunk driving kills” becomes

“A lot of drunk drivers arrive at their destinations safely. More drunk drivers make it home than are killed in accidents.”

“I’m drunk and I’m driving” becomes

“Sure, I had a few drinks, but I feel fine. I’m not really drunk.”

- b. Make one cognition more important than the other.

“Driving drunk is dangerous, but my friends are even more drunk than I am, and I did promise to take them home.”

OR

“Sure, drunk driving is dangerous, but ‘live fast and die young’ is what I always say. Today is a good day to die, if that’s my fate.”

- c. When cognitions are discrepant with behavior, *change the behavior.*

Ramona could reduce her dissonance by pulling off the road and using a cell phone to call a cab to take everyone home.

- d. When cognitions are dissonant with behavior, *change the cognitions*.

Ramona could reduce her dissonance by convincing herself that she's not all that drunk, and keep on driving drunk.

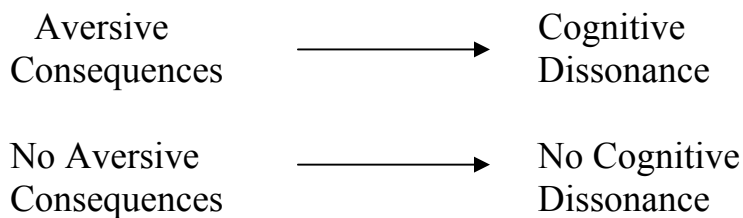
- 5. We choose the *path of least resistance*.

It's easier for Ramona to change her cognitions than it is to pull off the road and call a cab. She continues driving drunk. Four people with renal disease receive kidney transplants on Sunday morning.

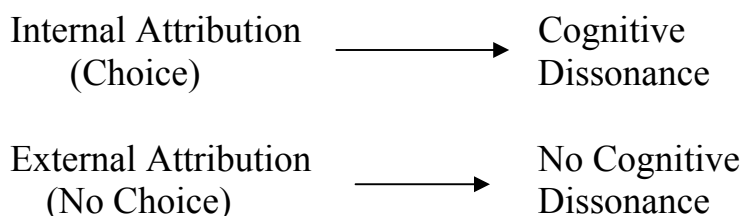
III. A Friendly Amendment to the Original Theory: Cognitions must implicate the *self*.

IV. Necessary Conditions for Dissonance Arousal (Fazio & Cooper, 1984)

- A. Attitude-discrepant behaviors must have aversive consequences for us or those we like.



- B. We must take personal responsibility for attitude-discrepant behaviors.



C. We must experience arousal.

Arousal → Cognitive Dissonance

No Arousal → No Cognitive Dissonance

D. We must attribute arousal to attitude-discrepant behaviors.

Attribute to → Cognitive
Behavior Dissonance

Attribute to → No Cognitive
Something Else Dissonance

Summary (so far)

Cognitive dissonance theory was a radical alternative to behaviorism.

Cognitive dissonance theory reflects five tenets or assumptions.

Dissonance theory was revised in the 1960s to include notions of the “self.”

Dissonance effects obtain only under certain specified conditions.