



# Cognitive dissonance: its role in decision making

■ Tulika Borah\*, Sampreety Gogoi and Ankita Dutta

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Community Science, Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat (Assam) India

(Email : [tulika.borah@aau.ac.in](mailto:tulika.borah@aau.ac.in); [sampreety.gogoi@aau.ac.in](mailto:sampreety.gogoi@aau.ac.in); [ankita.dutta@aau.ac.in](mailto:ankita.dutta@aau.ac.in))

## ARTICLE INFO :

Received : 25.08.2020  
Accepted : 11.10.2020

## KEY WORDS :

Cognitive dissonance,  
Role, Decision making

## HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE :

Borah, Tulika, Gogoi, Sampreety and Dutta, Ankita (2020). Cognitive dissonance: its role in decision making. *Adv. Res. J. Soc. Sci.*, 11 (2): 69-72, DOI: 10.15740/HAS/ARJSS/11.2/69-72. Copyright@2020:HindAgricultural Society

\*Author for correspondence

## ABSTRACT

Cognitive dissonance theory proposes that when people hold two psychologically inconsistent cognitions (ideas, beliefs), dissonance arises. People generally consider the experience of tension to be both undesirable and unsustainable, thus, people seek to reduce tension when it occurs. In general, people attempt to avoid situations that may result in cognitive dissonance. According to Festinger, when dissonance does occur, people attempt to reduce it in one of three ways: change one of the dissonant cognitions, add new cognitions that are consonant with what one already believes or decrease the perceived importance of the dissonant cognition. When making decisions humans commonly become victim of cognitive dissonance. Festinger (1957) found that cognitive dissonance can provide a serious hindrance to proper decision making, and reducing dissonance may significantly improve decision making skills.

## INTRODUCTION

Cognitive dissonance is a term which describes an uncomfortable feeling experienced by the differences in actions and beliefs. Cognition deals with the mind and how one thinks or reasons and dissonance deals with a conflict between two things occurring at the same time. In psychology, cognitive dissonance is described as the mental stress or discomfort experienced by an individual who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time; performs an action that is contradictory to one or more beliefs, ideas, or values; or is confronted by new information that conflicts with

existing beliefs, ideas, or values. An individual who experiences inconsistency (dissonance) tends to become psychologically uncomfortable and is motivated to try to reduce this dissonance- as well as actively avoid situations and information likely to increase it.

Decision-making is a ubiquitous part of daily life and people often make difficult choices between equally attractive alternatives. Yet, there are unexpected consequences for making such decisions. After a choice is made between initially matched options, people no longer find the alternatives similarly desirable (Brehm, 1956 and Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones, 2002). Rather, people adjust their attitudes to support their

decision by increasing their preference for the selected option, decreasing their preference for the rejected option or both. This rationalization is thought to be motivated by the drive to reduce ‘cognitive dissonance’, an aversive psychological state aroused when there is a discrepancy between actions and attitudes (Festinger, 1957; Zanna and Cooper, 1974 and Elliot and Devine, 1994).

**The theory of cognitive dissonance:**

Social psychologist Leon Festinger developed the theory of cognitive dissonance in 1957. Festinger (1957) defined cognitive dissonance as “antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction”. The theory was built upon the notion that individuals strive toward consistency. If there are inconsistencies, they try to rationalize in order to reduce psychological discomfort. Festinger used the term “Consonance” in terms of consistency and “Dissonance” in terms of inconsistency.

**Cognitive dissonance theory is based on three fundamental assumptions:**

*Humans are sensitive to inconsistencies between actions and beliefs:*

According to the theory, everyone can recognize, at some level, the inconsistency in beliefs/attitudes/opinions and the way one acts. There is a built in alarm that goes off when such an inconsistency is noticed, whether it is liked or not. For example, if one believes that it is wrong to cheat in exam, yet engage in cheating on a test, some kind of inconsistency will arise.

*Recognition of this inconsistency will cause dissonance and will motivate an individual to resolve the dissonance:*

Once the violation of principle is recognized, according to this theory, some sort of mental anguish will occur. The degree of dissonance, of course, will vary with the importance of belief/attitude/principle and with the degree of inconsistency between the behaviour and belief. In any case, according to the theory, the greater the dissonance the more one will be motivated to resolve it.

*Dissonance will be resolved in one of three basic ways:*

- Change beliefs : Perhaps the simplest way to resolve dissonance between actions and beliefs is simply to change the beliefs.
- Change actions : A second option would be to

make sure that the action is never repeated again.

- Change perception of action : A third and more complex method of resolution is to change one’s way of viewing/ remembering/ perceiving an action.

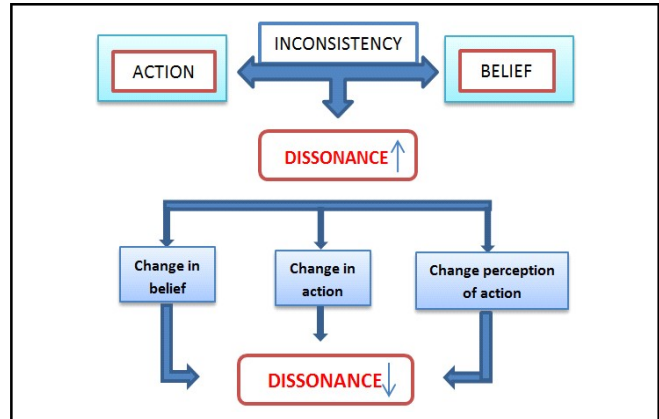


Fig. 1: Cognitive dissonance theory, Festinger (1957)

**The role of cognitive dissonance in decision making:**

Festinger theorized that humans experience negative emotions when performing behaviours that are contrary to their attitudes. These negative emotions, collectively called “cognitive dissonance,” have been shown to influence people’s attitudes and behaviours in myriad situations. As evidenced by his research, Festinger found that cognitive dissonance can provide a serious hindrance to proper decision making, and reducing dissonance may significantly improve decision making skills.

It is possible to influence a decision by providing consonant (or dissonant) information. There are four ways to reduce the dissonance that comes from making a decision:

- Revoke the decision
- Increase the attractiveness of the chosen alternative
- Decrease the attractiveness of the unchosen option
- Reduce the importance of the decision.

One common way to reduce the dissonance is to do both the second and third options: make the chosen alternative look better and the unchosen option look worse. If the chosen alternate looks much better than the unchosen alternative, there should be little dissonance. Thus, making a decision can cause dissonance, especially if the chosen and unchosen alternates have similar net benefits and if the decision is important. Dissonance can be reduced by

revoking the decision, dwelling on the benefits of the chosen alternative, stressing the drawbacks of the unchosen option (frequently people do both of the last two possibilities), or reducing the importance of the decision.

### **Reduction of cognitive dissonance through change in personality:**

Matz *et al.* (2008) showed that our personality can help mediate the effects of cognitive dissonance. They found that people who were extraverted were less likely to feel the negative impact of cognitive dissonance and were also less likely to change their mind. Introverts, on the other hand, experienced increased dissonance discomfort and were more likely to change their attitude.

A part of that self awareness that may help in dealing with cognitive dissonance is to examine the commitments and decisions we make in our lives. If the resolution of cognitive dissonance means that we move forward with a commitment and spring into action, making us feel better maybe the dissonance was trying to tell us something. Maybe the decision or commitment wasn't as right for us as we initially thought, even if it means overcoming our "no second-guessing" bias and making a different decision. Sometimes we're just plain wrong. Admitting it, apologizing if need be and moving forward can save us a lot of time, mental energy and hurt feelings.

### **Reduction of cognitive dissonance through changing attitudes:**

The theory of cognitive dissonance states that when people become aware that their freely chosen actions violate important or relevant attitudes, the inconsistency produces an uncomfortable state of arousal called *dissonance*, which motivates people to change their initial attitudes to make them consistent with their behaviour. Since it is such a powerful force in attitude formation, dissonance can be used in therapy to induce an attitude change in clients (Wright *et al.*, 1992 and Axsom and Lawless, 1992). It is easier to change attitudes than it is to go back and change behaviour that has already occurred and so dissonance is only eliminated when attitudes are brought in line with the previous actions.

### **Four steps are necessary to produce dissonance, and for that dissonance to produce attitude change:**

*The individual must perceive the action as inconsistent:*

Inconsistency alone is enough to cause discomfort/

dissonance. Dissonance is most likely to be provoked when actions are inconsistent with positive and important self-images.

*The individual must take personal responsibility for the action:*

Dissonance is only aroused when an internal attribution is made: if people can attribute their actions to external rewards or punishments, they will not experience dissonance. Those individuals who routinely attribute their behaviour to external causes don't experience dissonance in the same way as those who attribute actions to internal causes.

*The individual must experience uncomfortable physiological arousal:*

Studies have found that dissonance is actually experienced as a state of uncomfortable or unpleasant physical arousal.

*The individual must attribute the arousal to the inconsistency between attitude and action:*

People have to believe that their unpleasant feelings are a result of the inconsistency of their behaviour with their attitudes, in order to focus their attention on that inconsistency.

### **Reduction of cognitive dissonance through emotional expression and distancing:**

Other methods of dissonance reduction not included in Festinger's theory are emotional expression and distancing. Emotional expression is a form of dissonance reduction often used by psychotherapists. Pyszczynski *et al.* (1993) claimed that by "getting in touch" with their feelings, clients could reduce the dissonance involved. Distancing can also provide the same effect in many social situations. Distancing includes a wide range of internal and interpersonal behaviours, such as crossing your fingers when telling a lie and folding your arms defensively when listening to a disagreeable argument. Distancing reduces dissonance by weakening our attachment to one of the dissonant cognitions (Fleming and Rudman, 1993).

As human beings we need to feel confident in our decisions, which often results in justifying our choices as well as rationalizing our rejections. Tavassoli (2008) viewed that it is quite natural, common and automatic to enhance the value of a chosen option and to devalue rejected options. Studies of selective attention (e.g., Tipper,

1985 and Strayer and Grison, 1999) demonstrate that objects that previously had been targets (*i.e.*, previously having values roughly equivalent with the chosen object) show even stronger devaluation after being rejected compared to objects that had not been in the original consideration set. Studies have also suggested about neural rationalization as a basis of dissonance reduction in decision making (Jarcho *et al.*, 2011). People may run into problems with cognitive dissonance because it can be, in its most basic form, a sort of lie to oneself. As with all lies, it depends on the size of the lie. So while cognitive dissonance resolves the internal anxiety we face over two opposing beliefs or behaviours, it may also inadvertently reinforce future bad decisions.

### Conclusion:

Cognitive dissonance plays an important role in decision making, whether to hinder our reasoning, cause us to make decisions, or to determine the way we feel about the decisions we make. Recognizing and reducing dissonance while making difficult decisions may improve our decision making skills. This is possible since many errors in decision making may be indirectly caused by cognitive dissonance. Festinger (1957) proposes that dissonance arises after a choice has been made. The magnitude of the postdecision dissonance depends on the importance of the decision, relative attractiveness of the unchosen alternative and the degree of cognitive overlap of the alternatives. In other words, if the decision is important, unchosen alternatives are attractive and the degree of overlap is low, the postdecision dissonance is stronger. In order to reduce postdecision dissonance, an individual may change or revoke the decision, change the attractiveness of the alternatives (e.g. by magnifying the importance of chosen alternative and minimizing attractiveness of unchosen alternative) or establish cognitive overlap (e.g. by creating similarities among chosen and unchosen alternatives).

### REFERENCES

Axson, D. and Lawless, W. F. (1992). Subsequent behaviour can erase evidence of dissonance-induced attitude change. *J. Experim. Soc. Psychol.*, **28** : 387-400.

Brehm, J.W. (1956). Post decision changes in the desirability of alternatives. *J. Abnormal & Soc. Psychol.*, **52**, 384–389.

Elliot, A.J. and Devine, P.G. (1994). On the motivational nature of cognitive dissonance: dissonance as psychological discomfort. *J. Personal. & Soc. Psychol.*, **67** : 382–94.

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Fleming, J. H. and Rudman, L.A. (1993). Between a rock and a hard place: Self-concept regulating and communicative properties of distancing behaviours. *J. Personal. & Soc. Psychol.*, **64** : 44-59.

Harmon-Jones, E. and Harmon-Jones, C. (2002). Testing the action-based model of cognitive dissonance: the effect of action orientation on postdecisional attitudes. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, **28** : 711–723.

Jarcho, J. M., Berkman, E. T. and Lieberman, M. D. (2011). The neural basis of rationalization: cognitive dissonance reduction during decision-making. *Social Cognitive & Affective Neuroscience*, **6**(4) : 460-467.

Matz, D. C., Hofstede, P. M. and Wood, W. (2008). Extraversion as a moderator of the cognitive dissonance associated with disagreement. *Personality & Individual Differences*, **45** : 401-405.

Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S. and Sideris, J. (1993). Emotional expression and the reduction of motivated cognitive bias: Evidence from cognitive dissonance and distancing from victims' paradigms. *J. Personality & Social Psychology*, **64** : 177-186.

Strayer, D. L. and Grison, S. (1999). Negative identity priming is contingent on stimulus repetition. *J. Experimental Psychology: Human Perception & Performance*, **25**(1) : 24-38.

Tavassoli, N.T. (2008). The effect of selecting and ignoring on liking: In: Wedel, M. and Pieters, R (eds). *Visual Marketing: From attention to action*, 73-89. New York: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, Taylor & Francis Group.

Tipper, S.P. (1985). The negative priming effect: Inhibitory priming by ignored objects. *Quarterly J. Experimental Psychology A: Human Experimental Psychology*, **37**(A): 571-590.

Wright, E.F., Rule, B.G., Ferguson, T.J. and McGuire, G.R. (1992). Misattribution of dissonance and behaviour-consistent attitude change. *Canadian J. Behavioural Science*, **24** : 456 - 464.

Zanna, M.P. and Cooper, J. (1974). Dissonance and the pill: an attribution approach to studying the arousal properties of dissonance. *J. Personality & Social Psychology*, **29** : 703–709.

11<sup>th</sup>  
Year  
★★★★★ of Excellence ★★★★★