



The Learning Theory Podcast

Episode 6

Festinger's - Cognitive Dissonance

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## Introduction

Welcome to episode 6 of the Learning Theory Podcast. Dale Schunk (2004) refers to this episode's topic, Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory, as the most elegant of the cognitive consistency theories. Elegant is a good word, but I like to think of it as one of the FUN theories. We have all experienced cognitive dissonance; some of us more than others, but how many of us have considered how we can use it to achieve educational goals?

## Background

Before digging into Festinger's theory, a quick explanation of cognitive consistency theory would be helpful. Cognitive consistency theory assumes a relationship between cognition and behavior (Schunk, 2004). This relationship is ideally homeostatic, meaning there is balance between the two, but when cognition and behavior conflict this conflict must be resolved. The two major perspectives within this theory of cognitive consistency are Heider's Balance Theory, and Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance (Schunk).

## What is Cognitive Dissonance?

The main premise of Cognitive Dissonance theory is that individuals will strive to maintain consistency in the relationships between their beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and behaviors (Schunk, 2004). These relationships can exist in one of three states: irrelevant, consonant, or dissonant (Schunk). Irrelevant relationships are those where that attitude and behavior are unrelated; hence no conflict can exist between them, such as "I am not interested in tennis" and "I am going to play golf this afternoon." Consonant relations are when a behavior flows from an attitude without conflict. For example, "I am a Christian therefore I will attend church services today" would suggest a consonant relationship between the attitude and the behavior. Dissonant relations occur when the behavior follows the opposite of the attitude. Think about the Marine

Corp Gunnery Sergeant who loves his son, and the son tells his father that he's gay. That's cognitive dissonance.

### Degrees of Dissonance

The example I just gave was meant to point out an extreme dissonant situation but there are varying degrees of dissonance, which depends on both the number of dissonance beliefs and the importance the individual attaches to each belief (Kearsley, 2008). As previously discussed individuals attempt to maintain consistency in the relationships between their beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and behaviors (Schunk, 2004). In other words, the individual will attempt to eliminate the dissonance. There are four ways to eliminate dissonance: “1) downgrade the importance of the dissonant beliefs, (2) qualify dissonant beliefs by adding consonant beliefs that outweigh them, (3) change the dissonant beliefs to be consistent with the behavior, (4) or change the behavior. Which of these strategies an individual will use to eliminate the dissonance will be largely depend on the number or dissonant beliefs and the importance the individual places on each belief.

Em Griffin (1997) told a wonderful story about one of Aesop's Fables in which a fox tries in vain to reach a beautiful cluster of sweet and juicy grapes dangling just beyond reach. The fox becomes discouraged and decides “These grapes are sour, and if I had some I would not eat them” (¶ 1). This fable illustrates how when the behavior and the cognition clash, in this case the fox's inability to obtain the grapes which looked sweet and juicy, changing one's beliefs to conform to the behavior reduces the dissonance. Of course in this fable the fox's change in belief is just sour grapes.

### Implications of the Theory

The implications of Festinger's theory are profound, especially when looked at in the context of a question that Festinger himself asked: "What happens to a person's private opinion if he is forced to do or say something contrary to that opinion" (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959, p. 203). In 1957, Festinger conducted experimental research which found that when an individual is forced to perform a behavior that is contrary to his or her beliefs, the elimination of the dissonance most often occurs by the individual qualifying or modifying his or her beliefs. Festinger's findings have been supported by a significant body of research over the last four decades. Of interest, much of the supporting research also suggests that in the absence of the forced dissonant behavior, the individual will embrace knowledge that is consistent with his or her belief system and disregard knowledge that is dissonant (Dechawatanapaisal & Siengthai, 2006).

Another interesting aspect of Festinger's experiment, was the finding that greater incentives for performing a dissonant behavior, produced less of a belief change than did lesser incentives. In Festinger's experiment the incentive was money. The greater incentive was \$20 which was a lot of money in 1957, and the lesser incentive was \$1 (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). Festinger's finding that the greater incentive produced less of a belief change than lesser incentives may seem counterintuitive, perhaps providing you a moment of cognitive dissonance, until you stop to consider the term Festinger used to define the incentive, he called it pressure. In other words, when attempting to change an individual's beliefs, the more pressure you place on that individual, the less likely you are to succeed.

This concept, known as Festinger's minimal justification hypothesis, proposes that when the reward or pressure is great, the individual can easily justify the dissonance between his or her beliefs and his or her behavior. The individual justifies the behavior by saying I am only doing

this under duress, or perhaps for the money. When the reward or pressure is minimal however, the individually must look internally and examine his or her beliefs in order to create a justification.

### Using Cognitive Dissonance in Education

Creating cognitive dissonance can be helpful in an educational or instructional event intended to change attitudes. By establishing dissonance the educator can incrementally address the cognitions upon which the attitudes are based and slowly move the learner towards accepting, or perhaps even embracing the desired attitude. If you recall from episode-3, Feminist Pedagogy is also a theoretical construct surrounding the changing of attitudes, but the literature surrounding Feminist Pedagogy suggests that there is a significant amount of conflict and resistance in the environments where it is practiced. Festinger's cognitive dissonance gives us some insight into why that conflict and resistance exists. Feminist Pedagogy by design creates a high degree of discrepancy between beliefs and behaviors, while at the same time using a very high pressure approach to elicit changes in beliefs. Festinger's theory, supported by a large body of research, suggests this will not work. Instead, using cognitive dissonance to gently nudge the learner towards a desired state would seem to be a much more effective way for educators to bring about attitude changes.

### Wrap up

I hope you have found this episode interesting and enlightening. If you would like to provide feedback please visit me at [www.dancampbell.us](http://www.dancampbell.us). Thank you for listening! I'll be back in two weeks. Until then, go out and learn something new everyday.

## References

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