

IV. Cognitive Dissonance & Attitude Change

A. Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory

- Based on the view of humans as consistency seekers.

Dissonance = an inconsistency between one's beliefs, attitudes, and/or behaviors. Often conceptualized as a Negative Emotional state.

B. Beliefs, Attitudes, and behaviors can be related in 3 ways

- 1) Irrelevant - "I wear pants" & "I believe in the tooth fairy"
- 2) Consonant - "I wear pants and it is good" & "It is good to wear pants in public"
"I eat cheesy poofs & I am cool" & "people who eat cheesy poofs are helpful"
- 3) Dissonant - "I am not wearing pants and it is good" & "It is good to wear pants in public"
"I eat cheesy poofs & I hate terrorists" & "people who eat cheesy poofs support terrorists"

- Dissonant relationships result in a state of Cognitive Dissonance which is aversive. There is always a drive to reduce dissonance.

- When strongly held attitudes are dissonant, the drive is stronger
- When many attitudes are dissonant, the drive is stronger

C. 3 routes to Dissonance Reduction

1. Add Consonant Beliefs (basically a rationalization)

- Not that many people saw me without pants, so it was not that public.
- It is liberating not to wear pants sometimes.
- I don't eat many cheesy poofs.
- If I don't eat cheesy poofs, I could go insane and launch a frenzied killing spree. Eating cheesy poofs is good.

2. Change dissonant attitude

- Wearing pants in public is bad.
- The cheesy poof / terrorism link is only government sponsored propaganda.

3. Change Behavior

- I better put some pants on.
- I will stop eating cheesy poofs.

- When choosing among the alternatives, people gravitate to the weakest link.

- often it is hard to undo a behavior once it is done.
- if the dissonance is strong it may be hard to add enough Consonant Beliefs to overcome the Dissonance.
- thus, changing the attitude is the easiest path to dissonance reduction.

D. 3 Major Dissonance Inducing Research Paradigms (methods)

- Induced Compliance with Insufficient Justification
- Free Choice and Post Decisional Regret
- Effort Justification

1) Induced Compliance with Insufficient Justification

- a. - When you are induced (convinced/pressured) to perform a counter-attitudinal behavior in exchange for a small payoff, you may come to change your attitude to be consonant with your behavior.
- When you perform dissonant behavior for a large reward, you don't need to change your attitude. You simply add a consonant belief, that you did it for the money (a

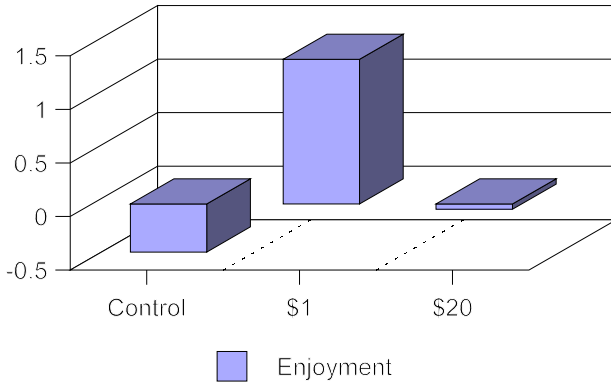
sufficient justification for the behavior).

b. Festinger & Carlsmith (1957)

- everyone performs the boring behavior

Festinger & Carlsmith 1957

Y axis represents rating of enjoyment



- no one not on drugs would find it interesting or challenging
 - everyone is told that helper did not show up and that E needs help with next participant.

- E offers \$1 to 1/2 the subjects, \$20 to other 1/2. (control condition does not perform the counter attitudinal behavior)

- P's who agree go in and tell other "Participant" (a confederate) how much fun the study was (A counter-attitudinal behavior - they are lying).

- P's later rate how enjoyable, informative, and important the task was and whether they would participate in a similar experiment.

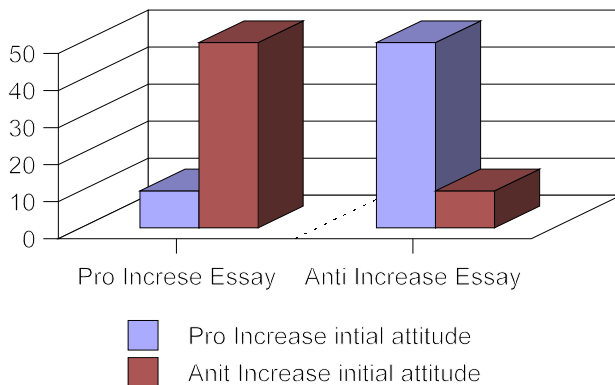
- Only ratings of enjoyment of the experiment showed reliably significant differences.

c. Induced Compliance via writing counter attitudinal essays.

Steele, Southwick, & Critchlow (1981)

Steel et al. 1981

Y axis represents attitude change



- Ask participants to write an essay. 1/2 of P's (college students) asked to write essay that argues for a tuition increase. 1/2 asked to write essay against tuition increase.

- Participants can choose to write essay or not write essay, but not given choice of which essay.

- No reward is offered.

- Attitude is measured prior to essay writing and after essay writing.

- When participants wrote a counter attitudinal essay (argues for the position they were initially against) their attitudes changed to be more like the essay they wrote.

2. Free Choice Paradigm

- Dissonance can result from making a choice between highly desirable alternatives, e.g., in consumer situations.

a. Brehm (1956)

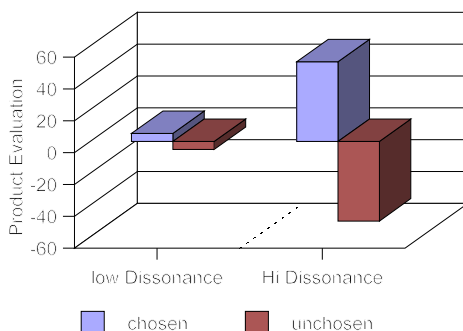
- brought female college students to the lab.
 - S's rated the desirability of household appliances (toaster, blender, etc.).

- S's told they would be given one of the items for participating.

- 2 conditions

- Low dissonance = S's got to choose between their 2nd and 5th ranked items (easy choice)

Brehm (1956)



- High Dissonance = S's got to choose between their 2nd and 5th ranked items.
- After making choice, S's rated the items again.
- Dissonance occurs because even the forgone alternative is attractive.
- Dissonance is reduced by derogation of the forgone choice.

3. Effort Justification

- When we go to great personal expense to achieve something and it falls short of our expectations we may experience dissonance.
 - I stood in the rain to get tickets, the tickets were \$50 each, I drove 5 hrs to see the band, it took 2 hrs to get to my parking space, and. the band only played for 45 minutes.
 - How was the concert? It was great.
- Change our attitudes about the outcomes, to reduce dissonance.
- When Prophecy Fails - Marion Keech
- Aronson & Mills (1959) - Suffering and Group Liking
 - Female college students asked to participate in a group discussion about sexual behavior.
 - Told they first had to go through a screening process to ensure that they would not be too embarrassed to participate
 - Two conditions
 - Mild Suffering - S's read a list of mildly sexual words in front of the Male experimenter. E.g., sex, kissing, petting.
 - Severe Suffering - S's read a list of extreme and rather obscene words in front of the Male experimenter. E.g., ?
 - S's told that before they actually participate in an actual discussion, they should "listen in" on a discussion.
 - From the listening booth they hear the most boring discussion of sex, ever (even by 1959 standards).
 - Aronson & Mills describe it as a discussion of the "secondary sex behavior in the lower animals. The participants inadvertently contradicted themselves and one another, mumbled several non-sequiturs, started sentences that they never finished, hemmed, hawed, and in general conducted one of the most worthless and uninteresting discussions imaginable".
 - S's in the severe suffering group rated the discussion and participants more positively than the mild suffering group did.
- This is an analog of fraternity hazing, tribal initiations, and military indoctrination.