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COMMENTARIES

It Was Social Consistency That Mattered All Along

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In retrospect, Leon Festinger's (1957, 1964) cognitive dissonance theory could be considered the opening salvo of the cognitive revolution in psychology. Its canonical experimental demonstration, Festinger and Carlsmith (1959), was a knife in the heart of behaviorism as it showed that *mental activity could reverse the law of reward*. Participants liked a boring peg-turning or spoon-loading task less when they were paid more to say they liked it and liked it more when they were paid less to say they liked it. Worse for behaviorism, it was internal mental activity that mediated this reversal of the basic law of reward—the same internal mental activity that behaviorism had long insisted was irrelevant to human behavior.

And the time was ripe for a return to the study of conscious mental life. The 1950s saw the dawning of the humanist movement in psychology (and elsewhere), a reaction against the devastation and atrocities of the cataclysmic world wars of the first half of the century. In existential philosophy as well as humanist psychology, there were numerous appeals to the necessity of overcoming and transcending our base animal instincts and tribal heritage, at whose doorstep the blame for the disaster was laid. Human beings were more than mindless robots or instinct-driven animals, said the Zeitgeist, and should aspire to higher ideals and standards of behavior. And what better distinguished us from animals and robots than our conscious minds and capacity for reason? The experimental demonstrations of cognitive dissonance effects proved just this, that what determined human behavior was how our minds reasoned about and transformed the meaning of external events, not the sheer principles of reward and punishment that had been derived from animal research.

Dissonance experiments involved the creation in the laboratory of realistic situations that evoked the richness of internal subjective psychological states and phenomena. In the very first dissonance study, Festinger's student Jack Brehm (1956) brought his own wedding gifts into the lab—toasters, can openers, and other household appliances—and asked 225 women to rank them in terms of which ones they'd most like to have. After they made their choices, they ranked them again—and the chosen alternatives were now ranked higher and the nonchosen ranked lower in the list. As predicted, the dissonance produced by choosing one and not another, nearly equally valued alternative was reduced by re-valuing upward the one chosen and down-valuing the unchosen appliance. Here we have motivated cognition at work, self-enhancement, causal attribution processes, rationalization, a cauldron of affect, motivation, and cognition all mixed together as they typically do in real-life situations. But remember, this was 1956, still very much an era dominated by behaviorism, and still a decade away from the full-blown cognitive revolution of the 1960s. All of which is to say that dissonance theory and research was far more—and far more important historically—than just the principle of dissonance itself. It offered the promise of a new and richer understanding of the human mind and opened up new vistas of research (e.g., attribution theory, social cognition, self-perception; see Festinger, 1980; Zajonc, 1980) that are still going strong today.

As with the initial presentation of other basic psychological principles, the simplicity and generality of the dissonance principle soon gave way to limiting conditions and moderator variables. In their target article, Kruglanski and colleagues review and summarize this rich research literature. As they demonstrate, the negative affective response is driven not so much by the inconsistency of the new information with prior beliefs and values as much as the affective implications of the new piece of knowledge all by itself. But 50 years ago, evidence was already growing that it was not the internal inconsistency among cognitions that mattered, as called for in the original theory, but the *external* inconsistency between what the person had done or said in the past and what he or she had just done or said in the present. In other words, it was the social or public nature of the discrepancy that mattered for dissonance effects to occur.

Early on in dissonance research many studies had shown that effects were stronger if the counterattitudinal behavior was public than if it was private. In several cases there was no dissonance effect at all if steps were taken to make the behavior truly anonymous even from the experimenter himself or herself (Carlsmith, Collins, & Helmreich, 1966; Harvey, 1965; Helmreich & Collins, 1968; Kiesler, Pallak, & Kanouse, 1968). For example, Helmreich and Collins (1968) found the largest cognitive dissonance effect ever reported when participants performed the counterattitudinal advocacy in a speech given on videotape for later presentation to a large introductory psychology class, and on which they were identified. For participants who gave the same speech on audiotape instead, and who were not identified, there was

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no dissonance effect at all. Festinger's (1957, 1964) classical theory, focused as it was on the intrapsychic and not the public inconsistencies, would have predicted a substantial attitude change effect in both the identified and unidentified conditions.

These findings led Tedeschi and colleagues, in their impression management theory, to reformulate the dissonance phenomenon in terms of a motivation to maintain a public reputation and credibility as an honest and reliable person instead of a matter of pure intrapsychic inconsistencies that had to be resolved (Tedeschi, 1981; Tedeschi & Rosenfeld, 1981; Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971). Impression management theory presaged later cross-cultural forays into dissonance effects, which confirmed that dissonance among internal cognitions per se does not universally produce attitude change: East Asians showed attitude change in the classic dissonance paradigms only when they believed others were observing their behavior or were otherwise focused on other people's reactions to their behavior (Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004; Sakai, 1981). Thus if there is a "universal" cognitive dissonance principle in human nature, it seems to involve social dissonance (discrepancies between public self and public behaviors) more than cognitive dissonance per se.

Indeed, Eliot Aronson (1969), one of the original dissonance researchers, recognized early on that dissonance effects required behaviors relevant to one's self-concept. Dissonance was produced, he concluded, only when a person behaved in a way that was inconsistent with their central sense of self (including values and beliefs). The involvement of the self-concept in dissonance effects moved the basic mechanism away from purely cognitive inconsistencies toward social or behavioral (public) inconsistencies because the self-concept is inherently social. It is the version of ourselves that we present to others and want others to know and accept as well.

Research and theory on symbolic self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) has shown that the self-concept does not exist merely for the private use of the individual; when important internal changes are made to it, the person is highly motivated to publicize those changes, making them a "social reality." It is as if those changes are not "real" until they are made public and one's close others know about them too. For example, there may be embarrassing or socially sanctioned aspects of self, such as addictions, fringe political beliefs, or sexual desires, which the person keeps hidden from even spouses, family members, and close friends. When the person finally does accept and acknowledge these aspects as self-descriptive, he or she is then highly motivated to "come out" to close others and make these previously secret behaviors and interests publicly known.

In one extensive field study of early-days (1990s) Internet newsgroup users who participated in online discussion groups on socially stigmatized topics such as White supremacy, BDSM, same-sex relationships, and antigovernment militias, the self-acceptance of these interests that was produced by the support of similar others (often for the first time in the person's life) via the anonymous newsgroups reliably led to the person to "come out" and disclose this interest or involvement for the first time to spouses, family, and friends (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). The average age of these newsgroup members was in the mid-30s, and many of them had kept this feature of themselves hidden from even their spouses for decades. Often this disclosure came at a very real cost of breaking up a long-term marriage or estranging one's children, yet the motivation to make the internal change a social reality was so powerful that it overcame these likely foreseen costs.

Another reason that dissonance effects are more likely driven by overt, public behavior rather than internal cognitive inconsistencies is that dissonance is purported to be a general principle of human mental functioning. As a general feature of human nature, it must have been selected for over time by natural selection processes—meaning that it was adaptive and increased chances of survival, safety, and reproduction. But natural selection processes can operate only on overt behavior, not intrapsychic processes alone in the absence of any effects on behavior, because only overt behavioral acts and their consequences can be responded to by the external environment in a way that increases or decreases the chances of survival and reproduction (see Dawkins, 1976; Mayr, 1976; also Bargh & Morsella, 2010).

For dissonance reduction to have evolved as a general principle of human cognition, therefore, as it was claimed to be, it must have had manifest adaptive behavioral consequences. These would most likely have been through its effect on increasing consistency in word and deed over extended experiences within the person's social group (family, tribe). Given the importance of acceptance by one's social group (including for one's health and longevity; see Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and the survival advantages of coordinated group behavior (Sober & Wilson, 1998), there were definite survival and reproduction advantages of being considered a trustworthy and reliable member of one's social group. Otherwise, one would be seen by others as a phony and untrustworthy.

Would that have been such a bad thing? The evidence is that indeed it would: As far back as Dante's *Inferno,* written in the early 14th century, the worst sinners of all—those who were relegated to the ninth and lowest pit of hell—were said to be those who had betrayed the trust of others. In modern times, according to Anderson's (1968) large-sample ratings of 555 different personality traits, being a "phony" was the most negatively rated trait of all, the worst thing a person could be in the eyes of others. Being trustworthy is so important to human relationships that a loss of trust between partners in close relationships is the main reason they break up (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Having one's trust betrayed by another person automatically turns off the "social cognition circuit" that supports cooperation and coordination of action with that person, as measured by evoked response potential recordings (Aragon, Sharer, Bargh, & Pineda, 2014). And interacting with an untrustworthy person literally makes one feel cold (Kang, Williams, Clark, Gray, & Bargh, 2011; Leander, Chartrand, & Bargh, 2012), which is probably why, in the

midst of otherwise fiery hell, the poetic justice—the punishment that fitted the crime—Dante assigned to those who had betrayed others was to be frozen in ice for eternity. Yes, being consistent in thought and deed does appear quite important for your social standing, your chances of gaining others' cooperation and help, and therefore your probability of survival and reproduction.

For all of these reasons, "cognitive" dissonance was always better understood as "social" dissonance—an adaptive mental drive to maintain consistency between public social behavior and the internal belief and value system that guides and generates it by updating and making changes to that internal system that would increase the probability of one's public reliability and trustworthiness in the future.

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