

## Cognitive Dissonance

How do human beings make decisions? What triggers a person to take action at any given point? These are all questions that I will attempt to answer with my theoretical research into Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, as well as many of the other related theories. We often do not realize the psychological events that take place in our everyday lives. It is important to take notice of theories, such as the balance theory, the congruency theory and the cognitive dissonance theory so that one's self-persuasion occurs knowingly. As psychologist and theorist gain a better understanding of Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory manipulation could occur more easily than it already does in today's society.

Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory is very closely related to many of the consistency theories. The first of the major consistency theories, the balance theory, was proposed by Fritz Heider (1946, 1958) and was later revised by Theodore Newcomb (1953) (Larson, 1995). Heider and Newcomb's theory was mostly looking at the interaction between two people (interpersonally) and the conflicts that arose between them. When two people have conflicting opinions or tension is felt between another person, it is more likely persuasion will occur. Because if no tension was felt between the two parties, or there were no conflicting opinions there would be no need to persuade each other. If you think about it persuasion occurs only because there is tension between two facts, ideas or people.

Charles Larson writes in his book, *Persuasion, Reception and Responsibility*, "another approach to the consistency theory is congruency theory, by Charles Osgood and Percy Tennenbaum (1955)" (p.82). This theory suggests that we want to have balance in our lives and there is a systematic way to numerically figure it out. When two attitudes collide we must strive to strike a balance between the two attitudes. The balance varies depending on the intensity we feel about each attitude and our pre-disposed positions concerning the attitude. We either have a favorable, neutral or unfavorable opinion concerning ideas. When two attitudes collide we will attempt to downgrade the favorable position and upgrade the unfavorable position so that we feel a balance. For example, suppose someone thought of Mel Gibson as a good role model. Later on they come to find out Mel Gibson does not like football. If the person was to like both football and Mel Gibson one of three things would happen: 1) The individual would downgrade their opinion of Mel Gibson, or 2) downgrade football, or 3) downgrade both. The action taken would create psychological consistency in one's mind. These theories are very interesting and have been quite researched, but none more so than Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance.

Leon Festinger's theory, unlike the others I have described, deal with quantitative aspects, as well as qualitative. That's what is so different and revolutionary about Festinger's theory. Robert Wicklund and Jack Brehm (1976), in their book *Perspectives on Cognitive Dissonance*, write, "Most notably, the original statement of dissonance theory included propositions about the resistance-to-change of cognitions and about the proportion of cognitions that are dissonant, both of which allowed powerful and innovative analyses of psychological situations (p.1). The term "dissonance" refers to the relation between two elements. When two elements do not fit together they are considered dissonant. Cognitive dissonance can be broken down into a number of elements. As Brehm and Cohen (1962) write, "A dissonant relationship exist between two cognitive elements when a person possesses one which follows the obverse of another that he possesses. A person experiences dissonance, that is, a motivational tension, when he (or she) has cognitions among which there are one or more dissonant relationships" (p.4). Cognitive dissonance can occur intrapersonally as well as between two or more people.

With individual cognitive dissonance the individual longs for consistency within their own mind. Second, there exist dissonance between two or more people. This occurs when two people have differing opinions about a particular issue. This

phenomenon may have something to do with varying degrees of knowledge about the issue or different belief systems being enacted. An example of this can be seen by taking a look at the cultures of the West versus cultures of the East. Cultures of the East value loyalty and honor. Cultures of the West have different value systems that often collide with those of the East. Between two parties, dissonance may arise from: (1) logical inconsistency; (2) because of cultural mores; (3) because of a specific opinion; and (4) because of past experience. To reduce cognitive dissonance a person can either reduce the dissonant cognition, or its relative importance can be reduced (Wicklund and Brehm, 1976, p.5). Although the theory assumes that dissonance will be eliminated or reduced, only the thought about taking action to do so is a given. The means employed by any given individual to meet these ends is still open to speculation. Action taken depends solely on the many variables involved, such as ego involvement, commitment, past experiences and so on. We all react differently to dissonant cognitions that we are confronted with. My research attempts to examine the different reactions that people have had to different opinions I have declared which involve them heavily. The area I have chosen to look at is the habits which many of my close friends engage in: smoking. This is often a difficult topic to discuss because it is an addictive habit and very personal to many people. Full well knowing these facts, I attempted to delve in the minds of my friends and put many of the theories afore mentioned to use in the practical world.

To undertake my research project I observed my friends in their everyday routines. I chose to attempt to persuade many of my friends to stop smoking. While attempting to undertake this momentous task I observed many of the consistency theories, especially Festinger's theory of cognitive-dissonance. The research method that was used was first hand observation. You could say that I was undertaking a form of ethnographic research. Most of the time I had to become an active member of the persuasion process, or the subject of smoking possibly might not have been talked about. The context I chose was that of my friends at home. All of the participants in the study did not know I was logging their behavior for later use in this research paper. Either myself and/or my friends would be active participants in the persuasion process. The basic premise of the cognitive-dissonance theory is that when two pieces of information do not follow each other we will experience some form of psychological tension, which we will attempt to reduce in some way. Often times, according to Leon Festinger, people attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance whenever possible (Gleitman, 1983, p.12). I noticed many times that my friends were very interested in the topic of quitting their habit, and some at times took the issue personally. When people are personally involved with an issue, much like the use of tobacco, they are much more attentive to the issue (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, p. 847).

For example, on 3/31/96 I told my three friends that I was concerned about how much they had been smoking recently. On the average they are smoking 20 cigarettes a day. One of the girls immediately retaliated with the statement that "her grandmother smoked for nearly all of her life and she is in good health." In this particular instance we can see the basic premise of the consistency theories at work. The girl who said this statement likes me. She also enjoys smoking. When I made the statement that I was concerned with the levels of tobacco consumption she disregarded my opinion by using past experiences as evidence to back her point. She is a friend so I assume she somewhat values my opinion, but she upgraded her opinion of smoking and downgraded my opinion. She experienced some form of dissonance when I stated my opinion. She reduced her dissonance and thus was in balance. This is where Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance attempts to rationalize her behavior.

The other consistency theories do not recognize the degree to which the dissonance exist. If you were to not use Festinger's model, most likely you would have assumed that my opinion would have changed her attitude and actions. After all, I did have a contradictory opinion that did not follow hers, and dissonance was felt. That's what is missing from the balance theory and the congruency theory: "latitudes of attitude". This theory, unlike many others, must factor in the human

psyche as a variable. The persuasion process did not occur in this case because my friends attitude towards not smoking was so anti-quitting, that it might be impossible to change. You cannot think of this theory in regards to machines you must look at it from the human perspective.

Another example of observable cognitive-dissonance occurred on 4/7/96. The same three friends and myself were watching television. An anti-smoking campaign sponsored by the American Red Cross came on the television. Various facts about the amount of people that die every year from smoking and statistics about the amount of Americans with lung cancer were shared. I asked the girls what they thought about the information. They all agreed that it could happen to them, but they hoped it did not. In this case, I believe dissonance was created by exposure to information. The girls did not like the information and downplayed its validity. Not one of the girls stood up and said, "I am going to quit smoking today, I am really at risk of getting lung cancer!" Once again personal involvement was a given, and once again no action was taken. The girls feel too strong about smoking and refuse to quit. We must ask ourselves what a solution to this problem could be? Why is it that smokers, in the face of grave danger, refuse to reduce dissonance by acting out their urge to quit smoking?

The cognitive-dissonance theory is a part of our everyday lives, whether we realize it or not. When we are presented with view points or opinions that differ from our own often times we feel dissonance. We, as human beings, are always striving to keep our lives in balance. Often a balance in our psyche requires that we not heed the warnings of things to come. As I have shown, cognitive-dissonance is utilized to avoid taking action.

As many theorists have stated cognitive dissonance does create an internal conflict that causes someone to take action. In the case of smokers, I must regrettably report that smoking is rarely avoided, even with dissonance in full effect. Smokers, when presented with hard core data showing a decline in health due to smoking, refuse to heed warning. This is evident with all of the "guaranteed" products to help people stop smoking. First there was "The Patch" and now the consumers are intrigued with products, such as Niccorrest Gum. Apparently no matter how much dissonance is felt and to what degree it is felt does not matter. Therefore, it may not be possible to get rid of dissonance or even to reduce it materially by changing one's behavior or feeling.

The research I have conducted supports my claim that it is nearly impossible to change the actions of smokers even though massive amounts of cognitive dissonance are felt. I believe that many of the people being observed reduced the overall magnitude of dissonance by adding new cognitive elements. No matter how much dissonance is felt, the smoker will always find elements that are consonant (agreeable) with the fact of smoking. The will power of individuals feeling as though they have to have smoking in their everyday lives is, often times, far too powerful for dissonance to overcome. Perhaps research such as mine can be useful to further research into the area of dissonance and the use of tobacco. Much work still needs to be done in this area. We see so many people dying from lung cancer. Something must be done. Perhaps looking at effective methods of the use of cognitive dissonance can be helpful in this arena.

