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Summary of Pro and Con Sides of Cognitive Dissonance

The question addressed and analyzed in this paper is: Does cognitive dissonance explain why behavior can change attitudes? The position that cognitive dissonance does explain why behavior can change attitudes is presented by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959). The position that cognitive dissonance does not explain why behavior can change attitudes is presented by Bem (1967) the creator of the self-perception theory, the theory used to dispute cognitive dissonance.

The question of whether behavior changes attitudes or attitudes change behavior is the core of the argument presented. The theory of cognitive dissonance which was originally proposed by Festinger in 1957, suggested that people strive to maintain consistency in one's attitudes and actions, and when a contradiction exists between one's attitudes and actions, one will experience psychological tension. Accordingly, the theory of cognitive dissonance stated, "people sometimes change their attitudes in order to reduce the psychological tension that is produced by the contradiction between their actions and attitudes" (Nier, 2007, p. 75). Behavior can, therefore, change attitudes.

Does cognitive dissonance explain why behavior can change attitude? This is the question sought to be answered. As presented by Festinger and Carlsmith & Gross (1969) they feel this is a true statement. The theory of cognitive dissonance was first proposed by Festinger in 1957 and it suggested that people will strive to maintain consistency in one's attitudes and actions. Festinger states that when this occurs, psychological tension will be experienced.

Accordingly, the theory of cognitive dissonance stated, "people sometimes change their attitudes in order to relieve the personal psychological stress they feel" and this stress is a

byproduct of the contradiction between their actions and attitudes”(Neir, 2007, P.75). Changes in behavior can then alter attitudes.

Bem (1967) presents the opposing position that cognitive dissonance does not explain why behavior changes attitudes. According to Bem (1967), he created the self-perception theory which holds when people are unsure of their attitudes; they then examine their behavior to determine the reason for their attitudes (Neir, 2007). Based upon Bem’s (1967) self-perception theory, he holds this allows one to be able to give more weight to one’s cognitive reasoning abilities. Bem (1967) is not a supporter of the belief that psychological tension will change one’s behavior to match their attitude. However, after self-reflection attitude may adjust itself and therefore the desired behavior will be altered.

The position that cognitive dissonance does not explain why behavior can change one’s attitude is presented by Bem (1967). Bem created the self-perception theory which explains that when people are unsure of their attitudes, people examine their behavior to determine the reason for their attitudes (Nier, 2007). The self-perception theory gives more weight to one’s cognitive reasoning abilities and does not propose that psychological tension will change one’s behavior to match attitude. After self reflection, attitude may change to change one’s behavior.

Consonant and Dissonant Cognition

Cognitive Dissonance theory is made up of many elements. These elements are anything we feel or believe in about other people, events, places or things. Consonant cognition is the elements working along together while Dissonant cognition is stating the elements are inconsistent with each other.

Cognitive dissonance is a theory of social psychology presented by Festinger (1957).

Harmon-Jones and Mills (1999) define it by suggesting: “Pairs of cognitions (elements of knowledge) can be relevant or irrelevant to one another. If two cognitions are relevant to one another, they are either consonant or dissonant. Two cognitions are consonant if one follows from the other, and they are dissonant if the obverse (opposite) of one cognition follows from the other. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, motivates the person to reduce the dissonance and leads to avoidance of information likely to increase the dissonance. The greater the magnitude of the dissonance, the greater is the pressure to reduce dissonance”.

Hogg and Terry (2000) discuss the concepts of social identify and self categorization, and proposed that when groups are faced with subjective uncertainty they may “produce a prototypically cohesive and homogenous organization with which members identify strongly.” These both point towards the tendency for organizations to gravitate towards homogeneity in some form. When the factors that this homogeneity consists of are dissonant, with respect to the technology that is under threat of a discontinuous type of innovation, we propose that that the organization will be at risk of mismanaging its response this innovation. Other factors that could affect the inability of an organization to perceive this dissonance is the presence of confirmatory (of its historical cognitive maps) information that is communicated by the communities of practice that it belongs to (Swan et al., (2002), and the tight coupling that is required for high performance teams (London and London, 1996).

Cognitive Irrelevance probably describes the bulk of the relationships among a person's cognitions. Irrelevance simply means that the two cognitions have nothing to do with each other. Two cognitions are consonant if one cognition follows from, or fits with, the other. People like consonance among their cognitions. We do not know whether this stems from the nature of the human organism or whether it is learned during the process of socialization, but people appear to

prefer cognitions that fit together to those that do not. It is this simple observation that gives the theory of cognitive dissonance its interesting form.

Cognitive dissonance and consonance theory is basic to understanding human thought and behavior (Flesher, 2008). It describes how our beliefs interact with each other, our resistance to new beliefs, and what dynamics are involved when we do change our beliefs. We experience cognitive dissonance and consonance on a day-to-day basis as we process all the new information in our mental "inbox". It not only applies to our spiritual and political beliefs, but also what products we choose to purchase, how we raise our children, where we arrange our furniture, and all other decisions we make both large and small.

Dissonance comes from holding two conflicting thoughts or opinions at that same time. It is a powerful motivator which will often lead us to change one or other of the conflicting belief or action. Discomfort often comes from the tension between the two opposing thoughts.

Dissonance and consonance are relations among cognitions that is, among opinions, beliefs, knowledge of the environment, and knowledge of one's own actions and feelings. Two opinions, or beliefs, or items of knowledge are dissonant with each other if they do not fit together; that is, if they are inconsistent, or if, considering only the particular two items, one does not follow from the other (Festinger 1957).

Influence Analysis on Attitudes and Behavior

According to Issue four in Taking Sides, consonant and dissonant cognitions have different influences on a person's attitude and behavior. Theorist Leon Festinger and theorist James M. Carlsmith believed people attitudes change after their behavior is inconsistent with what their actual attitude is toward a subject or situation. (Nier, 2007) According to this the cognitive dissonance theory we try to keep our behavior consistent with our beliefs. It says we

either change our behavior to fit our attitude or we change our attitude to justify our behavior. People often change their attitude or behavior to eliminate the psychological tension that can be caused by the contradiction between attitude and behavior.(Nier, 2007)

Deryl Bem believes his theory of self-perception account for the change in a person's behavior more than what is explained in the cognitive dissonance theory. In his theory people who are unsure of their attitude toward something examine the situation and then determine their attitude.(Nier, 2007) People feel their behavior must be taking place because they feel a certain way about the situation or subject. The person acts and then makes their attitude instead of believing something and acting in a certain way based on their attitude toward it. (Nier, 2007) The study done in Issue four of Taking sides paid students to claim they enjoyed taking a boring test. They wanted to see if the person would change their attitude and start to think they really enjoyed the test because they were telling other people it was fun. They tried to prove both theories to be true through this study.

Analysis: Concept of Persuasion

Persuasion is a powerful communication tool that some individuals use to influence people's behaviors. Through persuasion some individuals influence others to change their attitudes, beliefs and behaviors (Fiske, 2004). People respond to persuasion differently. Chapter 4 of *Taking Sides* includes two perspectives to objectively explain an individual's attitudes and behaviors after he or she undergoes attitudinal changes through persuasion.

Chapter 4 of *Taking Sides* suggests that the cognitive dissonance theory offers insightful information about the psychological distress and tension an individual may be experiencing when he or she is being persuaded to change his or her attitudes and beliefs (Nier, 2007). *Taking Sides* also implies that the situation in which an individual is may influence the levels of

cognitive dissonance he or she may experience when he or she directly or indirectly is being persuaded to drastically change his or her behavior.

To better illustrate this point, chapter 4 discusses in detail an experiment a group of individuals undergo to test their feelings and attitudes about being persuaded to lie and to provide deceptive responses in an experiment they participated. A major finding from this experiment suggests that consequences and rewards may also play an important role in affecting the level of discomfort an individual may feel for being persuaded to behave in a manner that may be inconsistent with his or her beliefs and attitudes. In the cases of the individuals who received \$20.00 for being persuaded to lie and behave deceptively, this reward appeared to have caused minimal levels of cognitive dissonance on them. The environment in which they were may have influenced them to pay more attention to the tangible reward given to them than to their actual feelings and attitudes.

An individual's attitude can be affected in many ways by cognitive dissonance and self-perception. Persuasion plays a major role in the effectiveness of an individual's attitude. Fiske (2004) explains two main issues when using persuasion. Receiving and yielding are important parts to a person forming or changing an attitude. It is possible that an individual can understand and form an attitude from a message like a television advertisement, but not recall the wording of the message (Fiske, 2004). Yielding is important to the persuasion process because it is the actual use of the information. In the case of cognitive dissonance changing attitudes, yielding would ease the dissonance of the individual.

Even someone's self-esteem can play a role in persuasion. Individuals with low self-esteem have a difficult time receiving the message; therefore have a difficult time recalling the information or attitudes. Perhaps this is due to their withdrawn or distractive personality (Fiske,

2004). Individuals with higher self-esteem may not yield easily because they might have too much confidence and are not able to concede their own opinions. However individuals with a moderate self-esteem are more likely to be persuaded to a new or different opinion.

In Festinger and Carlsmith's experiment, receiving and yielding was used to persuade the subject to do certain things that went against the subject's attitudes. When the subject was asked to talk to the next subject about the level of entertainment the experiment provided, they first had to receive the message then yield to it. When offered the different denominations of money, the level of dissonance was different. It was easier for the subject to yield to the message when offered the lower denomination. There was also some data that was not used in the experiment. Some people did not feel comfortable receiving money to tell people things that went against their attitudes. This could be related to the level of self-esteem.

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