CHAPTER 16

Socio-psychological tradition

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

of Leon Festinger

Aesop told a story about a fox that tried in vain to reach a cluster of grapes dangling from a vine above his head. The fox leaped high to grasp the grapes, but the delicious-looking fruit remained just out of reach of his snapping jaws. After a few attempts the fox gave up and said to himself, "These grapes are sour, and if I had some I would not eat them."[1]

DISSONANCE: DISCORD BETWEEN BEHAVIOR AND BELIEF

Aesop's fable is the source of the phrase *sour grapes.* The story illustrates what former Stanford University social psychologist Leon Festinger called *cognitive dissonance.* It is the distressing mental state that people feel when they "find themselves doing things that don't fit with what they know, or having opinions that do not fit with other opinions they hold."[2]

Cognitive dissonance
The distressing mental state caused by inconsistency between a person's two beliefs or a belief and an action.

The fox's retreat from the grape arbor clashed with his knowledge that the grapes were tasty. By changing his attitude toward the grapes, he provided an acceptable explanation for abandoning his efforts to reach them.

Festinger considered the need to avoid dissonance to be just as basic as the need for safety or the need to satisfy hunger. It is an *aversive drive* that goads us to be consistent. The tension of dissonance motivates us to change either our behavior or our belief in an effort to avoid that distressing feeling. The more important the issue and the greater the discrepancy between our behavior and our belief, the higher the magnitude of dissonance we will feel. In extreme cases cognitive dissonance is like our cringing response to fingernails being scraped on a blackboard—we'll do anything to get away from the awful sound.

HEALTH-CONSCIOUS SMOKERS: DEALING WITH DISSONANCE

When Festinger first published his theory in 1957, he chose the topic of smoking to illustrate the concept of dissonance. Although authoritative medical reports on the link between smoking and lung cancer were just beginning to surface,

there was already general concern across the United States that cigarette smoking might cause cancer. Ten years prior, country-and-western singer Tex Williams recorded Capitol Records' first million-seller, "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)." The gravelly voiced vocalist expressed doubt that smoking would affect his health, but the chorus was unambiguous:

> Smoke, smoke, smoke that cigarette
> Puff, puff, puff until you smoke yourself to death
> Tell St. Peter at the Golden Gate
> That you hate to make him wait
> But you just gotta have another cigarette.[3]

At the time, many smokers and nonsmokers alike laughingly referred to cigarettes as "coffin nails." But as the number and certainty of medical reports linking smoking with lung cancer, emphysema, and heart disease increased, humorous references to cigarettes no longer seemed funny. For the first time in their lives, a hundred million Americans had to grapple with two incompatible cognitions:

1. Smoking is dangerous to my health.
2. I smoke cigarettes.

Consider the plight of Cliff, a habitual smoker confronted by medical claims that smoking is hazardous to his health—an idea that strongly conflicts with his pack-a-day practice. Festinger said the contradiction is so clear and uncomfortable that something has to give—either the use of cigarettes or the belief that smoking will hurt him. "Whether the behavior or the cognition changes will be determined by which has the weakest resistance to change."[4] For Cliff it's no contest. He lights up and dismisses the health risk. In his discussion of smoking, Festinger suggested a number of mental gymnastics that Cliff might use to avoid dissonance while he smokes.[5]

Perhaps the most typical way for the smoker to avoid mental anguish is to trivialize or simply deny the link between smoking and cancer. *I think the research is sketchy, the results are mixed, and the warnings are based on junk science.* After the surgeon general's report on smoking was issued in 1964, denial became an uphill cognitive path to climb, but many smokers continue to go that route.

Smokers may counter thoughts of scary health consequences by reminding themselves of other effects they see as positive. *Smoking helps me relax, I like the taste, and it gives me a look of sophistication.* These were the motives cigarette advertising appealed to when Festinger first published his theory. For example, Old Gold was the primary radio sponsor for Chicago Cubs baseball: "We're tobacco men, not medicine men," their ads proclaimed. "For a treat instead of a treatment, try Old Gold. . . . There's not a cough in a carload."

Although it's hard for smokers to pretend they aren't lighting up, they can elude nagging thoughts of trauma by telling themselves that the dire warnings don't apply to them since they are *moderate* smokers, or because they'll soon quit. *My boyfriend is a chain smoker, but I smoke less than a pack a day. As soon as I finish school, I'll have no problem stopping.* Conversely, other smokers manage dissonance by disclaiming any ongoing responsibility for a habit they can't kick. *Let's face it, cigarettes are addictive. I'm hooked.* To be sure, most behaviors are not as difficult to change as the habit of smoking, but Festinger noted that almost all of our

actions are more entrenched than the thoughts we have about them. Thus, the focus of his theory is on the belief and attitude changes that take place because of cognitive dissonance.

REDUCING DISSONANCE BETWEEN ACTIONS AND ATTITUDES

Festinger hypothesized three mental mechanisms people use to ensure that their actions and attitudes are in harmony. Dissonance researchers refer to them as *selective exposure, postdecision dissonance,* and *minimal justification.* I'll continue to illustrate these cognitive processes by referring to the practice of smoking, but they are equally applicable to other forms of substance abuse or addiction—alcohol, drugs, food, sex, pornography, gambling, money, shopping, work. Most of us can spot at least one topic on that list where we struggle with an inconsistency between our thoughts and our actions. So if smoking isn't an issue for you, apply these ways of reducing dissonance in an area that is.

Hypothesis 1: Selective Exposure Prevents Dissonance

Selective exposure
The tendency people have to avoid information that would create cognitive dissonance because it's incompatible with their current beliefs.

Festinger claimed that people avoid information that's likely to increase dissonance.[6] This *selective exposure hypothesis* explains why staunch political conservatives watch Sean Hannity on Fox News whereas stalwart liberals catch Rachel Maddow on MSNBC. Not only do we tend to listen to opinions and select reading materials that are consistent with our existing beliefs, we usually choose to be with people who are like us. By taking care to "stick with our own kind," we can maintain the relative comfort of the status quo. Like-minded people buffer us from ideas that could cause discomfort. In that sense, the process of making friends is a way to select our own propaganda.

Two communication researchers looked back over 18 experiments where people were put in dissonant situations and then had to choose what kind of information they would listen to or read. Dave D'Alessio (University of Connecticut–Stamford) and Mike Allen (University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee) discovered that the results consistently supported the selective exposure hypothesis.[7] People tended to select information that lined up with what they already believed and ignored facts or ideas that ran counter to those beliefs. But the strength of this tendency was relatively small. Selective exposure explained only about 5 percent of why they chose the information they did. That leaves 95 percent unexplained.

That modest finding hasn't deterred the sponsors of two media persuasion campaigns from taking the power of selective exposure quite seriously. A University of California–San Francisco survey taken in 2006 documented that 75 percent of Hollywood films show attractive actors smoking, and that this modeling encourages young teens raised in smoke-free homes to adopt the practice. With some success, Harvard School of Public Health researchers are now proactively challenging directors not to introduce smoking into their films. Nevertheless, a follow-up study by the same University of California group found that smoking incidences increased by 36 percent in 2011 for movies rated PG-13 and below. That includes more than 50 smoking incidents apiece in hit movies such as *The Help, Rango,* and *X-Men: First Class.*[8]

Entertainment is a tried-and-true way to get around people's selective exposure filters. Another way is humor. The "Don't Pass Gas" broadcast campaign

of the American Legacy Foundation uses barnyard comedy to convince the public of the intrusiveness of putrid gas. Presented in the style of a Dr. Seuss rhyme, one ad goes:

> I will not pass gas on a train. I will not pass gas on a plane.
> I will not pass gas in my house. I will not pass gas near my spouse.
> I will not pass gas in a bar. I will not pass gas in a car.
> I will not pass gas where little ones are, no matter how near or how far.
> I will not pass gas in your face, because the gas I pass is worse than mace.[9]

Only after listeners are either laughing or totally grossed out by the image of passing gas are they told that the limerick refers to secondhand smoke. It's a message most people would tune out had it not been for the use of humor with a twist.

German psychologist Dieter Frey surveyed all the pertinent research on selective exposure and concluded that even when we know we're going to hear discrepant ideas, the avoidance mechanism doesn't kick in if we don't regard the dissonant information as a threat.[10] Warm personal relationships are probably the best guarantee that we'll consider ideas that would otherwise seem threatening.

Hypothesis 2: Postdecision Dissonance Creates a Need for Reassurance

According to Festinger, close-call decisions can generate huge amounts of internal tension after the decision has been made. Three conditions heighten *postdecision dissonance:* (1) the more important the issue, (2) the longer an individual delays in choosing between two equally attractive options, and (3) the greater the difficulty involved in reversing the decision once it's been made. To the extent that these conditions are present, the person will agonize over whether he or she made the right choice.[11] Sometimes referred to as "morning-after-the-night-before" regrets, the misgivings or second thoughts that plague us after a tough choice motivate us to seek reassuring information and social support for our decision.

Postdecision dissonance Strong doubts experienced after making an important, close-call decision that is difficult to reverse.

A classic example of postdecision dissonance is the mental turmoil a person experiences after signing a contract to buy a new car. The cost is high, there are many competing models from which to choose, and the down payment commits the customer to go through with the purchase. It's not unusual to find a customer examining *Consumer Reports* auto ratings *after* placing an order. The buyer is seeking information that confirms the decision already made and quiets nagging doubts.

Many who recover from multiple addictions testify that quitting smoking is harder than giving up booze. Just as countless alcoholics turn to Alcoholics Anonymous for social support, people who try to give up tobacco often need at least one friend, family member, romantic partner, or co-worker who's also going through the pangs of withdrawal. They can remind each other that it's worth the effort. Of course, the decision to stop smoking doesn't fulfill Festinger's third condition of a once-and-for-all, no-going-back, final choice. One can always go back to smoking. In fact, those who swear off cigarettes typically have a few lapses, and total relapses are common. Encouragement and social support are necessary to tamp down the doubts and fears that follow this tough decision.

Smokers who consciously decide *not* to quit face similar qualms and anxieties. They are bombarded with messages telling them they are putting their health at risk. People who care for them deeply urge them to stop, and nonsmokers look down on them because they don't. University of Kentucky communication professor Alan DeSantis describes the camaraderie he found among regular customers at a Kentucky cigar shop. Just as smoke from cigars drives some folks away, DeSantis concludes that the friendship and collective rationalization of those who smoke cigars together hold postdecision dissonance at bay. He also sees *Cigar Aficionado* as serving the same function. He writes that although the magazine professes to simply celebrate the good life, it actually serves "to relieve the cognitive dissonance associated with the consumption of a potentially dangerous product by adding cognitions, trivializing dissonant information, selectively exposing readers to pro-smoking information, and creating a social support network of fellow cigar smokers."[12]

Hypothesis 3: Minimal Justification for Action Induces Attitude Change

Suppose someone wanted to persuade an ex-smoker who is dying of lung cancer to stop publicly bashing the tobacco industry and to respect cigarette companies' right to market their product. That is one of the assignments given to Nick Naylor, chief spokesman for tobacco companies in the movie *Thank You for Smoking*. His job is to convince "Big Tobacco's" former advertising icon—the Marlboro Man—to switch from outspoken critic to silent partner. Before cognitive dissonance theory, conventional wisdom would have suggested that Naylor work first to change the bitter man's *attitude* toward the industry. If he could convince the cowboy that the cigarette companies are well-intentioned, then the man would change his communication *behavior.* It seemed natural to think of attitude and behavior as the beginning and end of a cause-and-effect sequence.

Attitude → Behavior

But Festinger's *minimal justification hypothesis* reversed the sequence. This hypothesis suggests that the best way for Naylor to change the Marlboro Man's attitude toward his former employers is to get him to quit speaking out against them.

Behavior → Attitude

Minimal justification hypothesis
A claim that the best way to stimulate an attitude change in others is to offer just enough incentive to elicit counterattitudinal behavior.

Festinger attached one important condition, however. Instead of giving the cowboy massive incentives to abandon his public critique ($100,000 in cash, lifetime health care for his wife, or a threat to harm his kids), Naylor should offer the minimum enticement necessary to induce him to quietly step off his soapbox. Festinger concluded:

> Thus if one wanted to obtain private change in addition to mere public compliance, the best way to do this would be to offer just enough reward or punishment to elicit overt compliance.[13]

Naylor doesn't follow Festinger's advice. Instead, he does it the old-fashioned way by throwing lots of money at the Marlboro Man. He goes to his rundown

ranch with a briefcase filled with bundles of hundred-dollar bills, which he pours out on the floor. He labels the money a gift rather than a bribe, but makes it clear that the cowboy can't keep the money if he continues to denounce the tobacco companies. As it turns out, the offer is more than enough because the dying man is worried about how his family will manage after he's gone. So the Marlboro Man takes both the money and a vow of silence, but his antagonistic attitude toward his former employers hasn't changed. *Compliance* without inner conviction. For Naylor, that's enough.

Compliance
Public conformity to another's expectation without necessarily having a private conviction that matches the behavior.

There is, however, a brief moment in their discussion that suggests the potential of a minimal justification strategy. When the Marlboro Man looks longingly at the cash, he wonders out loud if he might keep half the money and still denounce the tobacco companies. His question reveals that somewhere between 50 percent and 100 percent of the cash on the floor there's a tipping point where the cowboy becomes willing to be bought off. Festinger predicted that if Naylor were to offer that "just-enough" amount, not only would the Marlboro Man alter his communication behavior, but the dissonance he would feel would also cause him to be less angry at the cigarette companies. Festinger's startling $1/$20 experiment shows how this might work.

A CLASSIC EXPERIMENT: "WOULD I LIE FOR A DOLLAR?"

There is nothing particularly radical about Festinger's first two hypotheses. His selective exposure prediction nicely explains why political rallies attract the party faithful and why the audience for religious radio and television tends to be made up of committed believers. As for postdecision dissonance, all of us have tried to convince ourselves that we've made the right choice after facing a close-call decision. But Festinger's minimal justification hypothesis is counterintuitive. Will a small incentive to act really induce a corresponding attitude change when heaping on the benefits won't? Festinger's famous $1/$20 experiment supported his claim that it will.

Festinger and social psychologist James Carlsmith recruited Stanford University men to participate in a psychological study supposedly investigating industrial relations.[14] As each man arrived at the lab, he was assigned the boring and repetitive task of sorting a large batch of spools into sets of 12 and turning square pegs a quarter turn to the right. The procedure was designed to be both monotonous and tiring. At the end of an hour the experimenter approached the subject and made a request. He claimed that a student assistant had failed to show up and that he needed someone to fill in. The experimenter wanted the subject to tell a potential female subject in the waiting room how much fun the experiment was. Dissonance researchers call this *counterattitudinal advocacy.* We'd call it lying.

Counterattitudinal advocacy
Publicly urging others to believe or do something that is opposed to what the advocate actually believes.

Some of the men were promised $20 to express enthusiasm about the task; others were offered only $1. After adjusting for inflation, that's $160 or $8 today.[15] It's comforting to know that six of the men refused to take part in the deception, but most students tried to recruit the young woman. The gist of the typical conversation was similar for both payment conditions:

SHE: "I heard it was boring."

HE: "Oh no, it's really quite fun."

What differed were the men's privately expressed attitudes after the study was over. Students who lied for $20 later confessed that they thought the task of sorting spools was dull. Those who lied for $1 maintained that it was quite enjoyable. (Festinger and Carlsmith practiced their own form of deception in the study—subjects never received the promised money.)

By now you should have a pretty good idea how Festinger analyzed the results. He noted that $20 was a huge sum of money at the time. If a student felt qualms about telling a "white lie," the cash was a ready justification. Thus, the student felt little or no tension between his action and his attitude. But the men who lied for a dollar had lots of cognitive work to do. The logical inconsistency of saying a boring task was interesting had to be explained away through an internal dialogue:

> I'm a Stanford man. Am I the kind of guy who would lie for a dollar? No way. Actually, what I told the girl was true. The experiment was a lot of fun.

Festinger said that $1 was just barely enough to induce compliance to the experimenter's request, and so the students had to create another justification. They changed their attitude toward the task to bring it into line with their behavior—in other words, to eliminate dissonance.

THREE STATE-OF-THE-ART REVISIONS: THE CAUSE AND EFFECT OF DISSONANCE

The $1/$20 study has been replicated and modified many times in an effort to figure out what creates dissonance and how people reduce it. Based on hundreds of experimental studies, most persuasion researchers today subscribe to one of three revisions of Festinger's original theory.

To illustrate these revisions, we'll consider the most famous American to struggle recently with smoking: President Barack Obama. Obama put away his cigarettes before his 2008 presidential bid, but relapsed during the campaign and his first two years in office. In 2011, however, Obama's doctors declared that he had broken his 30-year cigarette habit.[16] According to First Lady Michelle Obama, it seems that dissonance caused the president's decision to stop: "I think he didn't want to look his girls in the eye and tell them that they shouldn't do something that he was still doing."[17] That sounds like a straightforward explanation, but for cognitive dissonance theorists it isn't enough—they want to know what's going on in the mind of the president that generates and eliminates dissonance.

In order to understand each of the options described in the following sections, it will help you to picture the overall dissonance arousal and reduction process. Figure 16–1 shows that four-step sequence. So far we've discussed Festinger's belief that we experience dissonance when we face *logical inconsis-*

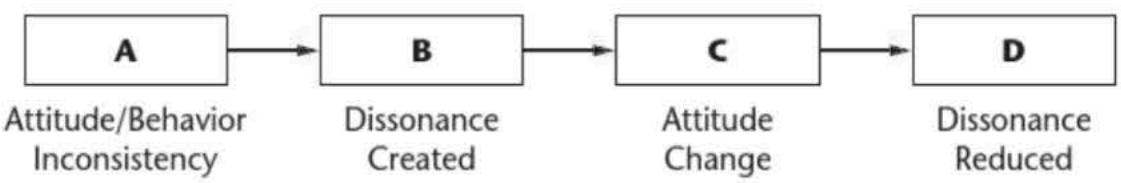


FIGURE 16–1 Festinger's Process Model of Cognitive Dissonance
Based on Festinger, *Cognitive Dissonance Theory*

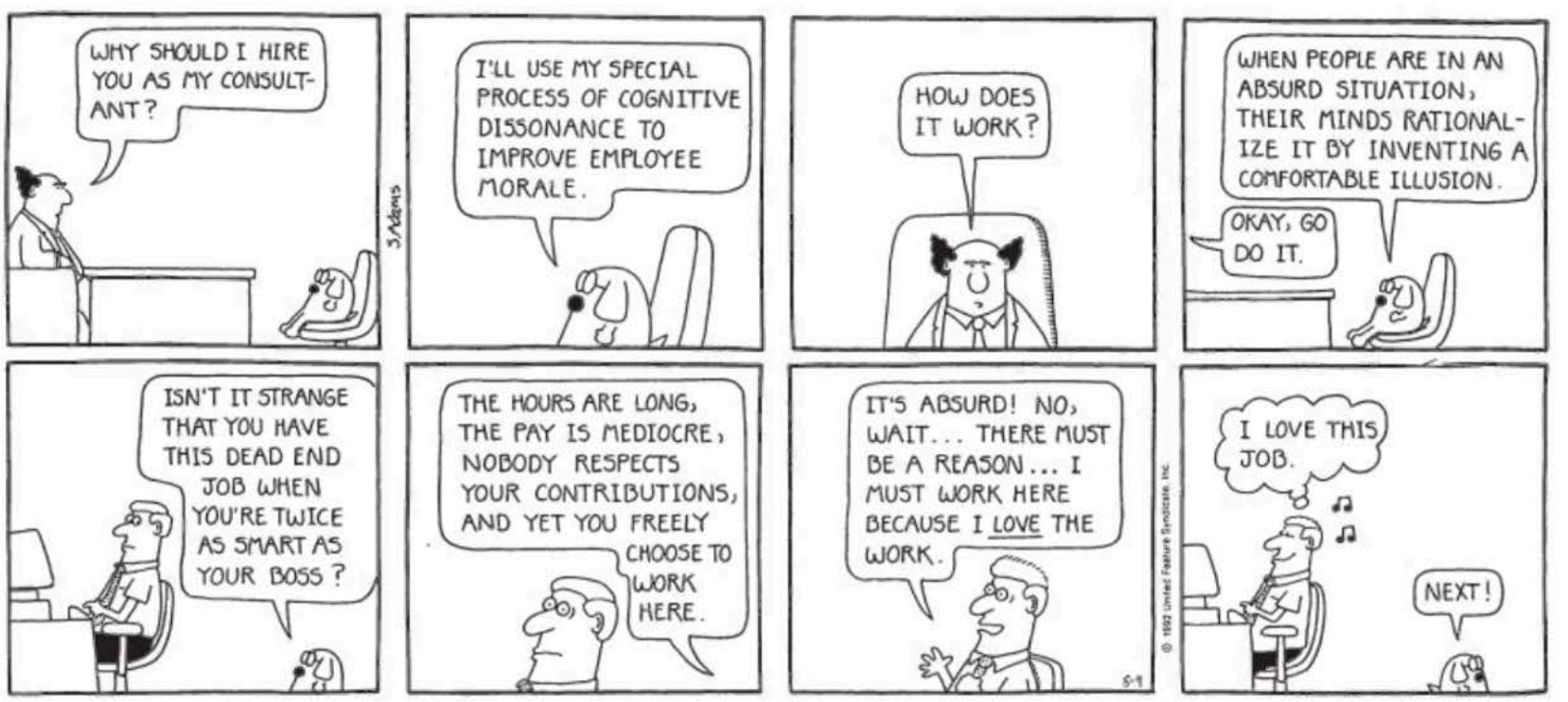
tency, or beliefs and behaviors that don't quite add up. *(I value my health. My cigarette habit damages my health.)* That's a claim about the A → B link in the figure. Festinger further asserted that the way to reduce dissonance was to remove the logical inconsistency (point D). The three revisions question these assumptions, and each provides a somewhat different explanation for why Obama finally kicked his smoking habit.

1. Self-Consistency: The Rationalizing Animal

One of Festinger's early graduate students, University of California social psychologist Elliot Aronson, wasn't convinced that logical inconsistency produces dissonance. He noted that we sometimes find such inconsistencies curious or even amusing. For example, Andrew once received a university parking ticket in the mail dated several months after he'd graduated and moved out of the state. Two thoughts crossed his mind: *(1) I was not parked at the University of Kansas in October* and *(2) I have a parking ticket that says I was.* That's a logical inconsistency, and it made him feel mildly annoyed—but that's not the aversive discomfort Aronson claims is at the heart of dissonance.

Instead, Aronson thinks what produces dissonance is an inconsistency between a cognition and our *self-concept*—how we perceive ourselves. He interprets the $1/$20 experiment as a study of self-presentation.[18] The Stanford men were in a bind because they regarded themselves as decent, truthful human beings, in contrast to their deceptive behavior. In fact, the higher their opinion of their honesty, the more dissonance they would feel when they told the waiting woman that the study was fun. Conversely, if they had seen themselves as liars, cheats, or jerks, they would have felt no tension. As Aronson puts it, "If a person conceives of himself as a 'schnook,' he will be expected to behave like a 'schnook.'"[19]

Andrew's student Caitlin, a vegetarian, wrote about her feelings of guilt after eating meat. Clearly, she perceived that her choice was inconsistent with her self-concept:



> When I ate meat for the first time in a year, I was at a hibachi grill where the chef gave each of us a sample of steak. At first I tried just one piece, but that provoked my decision to order fried rice and steak. This choice violated my vegetarian beliefs, but I justified it because it was only a small amount of meat. The day after, I experienced postdecision dissonance: I had strong doubts, a guilty conscience about my decision, and a very upset stomach.

If Aronson is right, what's the best way to persuade someone like President Obama to stop smoking? Showing him studies of tobacco's negative health effects might not be the route to go. Even if Obama acknowledges that his cigarette use is inconsistent with that information, Aronson doesn't think logical inconsistency is enough. The president will only feel dissonance if he sees smoking as inconsistent with his self-concept. Given the first lady's explanation ("I think he didn't want to look his girls in the eye . . ."), Aronson might suggest that the president perceived an inconsistency between his smoking and his fatherly image. Maybe Obama also thought that lighting up contradicted his appearance as a health-conscious person who regularly exercises through pickup basketball games. Throwing away his cigarettes reduced dissonance by removing those psychological inconsistencies.

2. Personal Responsibility for Bad Outcomes (the New Look)

For Princeton psychologist Joel Cooper, both Festinger and Aronson miss the true cause of dissonance. He doesn't think inconsistency—whether logical or psychological—is the main motivating factor. In his *new look* model of cognitive dissonance, Cooper argues that we experience dissonance when we believe our actions have unnecessarily hurt another person. For example, in the minimal justification condition of the $1/$20 experiment, the Stanford men willingly "duped a fellow student to look forward to an exciting experience" while knowing "full well that the waiting participant was in for an immense letdown."[20]

Cooper concludes that dissonance is "a state of arousal caused by behaving in such a way as to feel personally responsible for bringing about an aversive event."[21] Note that the acceptance of personal *responsibility* requires that the person know ahead of time that his or her action will have negative consequences for someone else, and yet still choose to do the dirty deed. The reactions of participants in minimal justification experiments show that they often feel bad about the potential effects of their messages.

Purdue University social psychologists Richard Heslin and Michael Amo used a pro-smoking message prepared for junior high kids, but in this case the setup was more involving and potentially more harmful. The researchers encouraged college students in public speaking classes to deliver impromptu speeches to persuade uninformed and uncommitted seventh grade kids that smoking pot wouldn't hurt them. The speakers saw their recorded speeches and were reminded that they'd be identified as actually having pro-marijuana sentiments. The speakers were quite aware that their message might harm kids. One speaker pleaded, "Please don't use my speech. I don't want the course credit; just don't use my speech!"[22] Clearly they felt dissonance, and new look theorists would argue that's because they perceived their actions as harmful (rather than inconsistent). Nevertheless, the speakers actually changed their attitude in the direction of their advocacy—dissonance reduction by concluding that their actions weren't all that harmful.

New look theorists don't think inconsistency is enough to persuade someone like Obama to stop smoking. Sure, he may perceive that his actions are logically inconsistent with scientific research or psychologically inconsistent with his self-image. But if he only lights up in private—and he's never smoked publicly while president—he might believe his actions don't hurt anyone else. For Cooper, the first lady's explanation might suggest that the president thought his smoking could hurt their daughters. If Obama quit smoking because he was afraid Malia and Sasha would imitate him, or because he was concerned about their exposure to secondhand smoke, that's the new look in action.

3. Self-Affirmation to Dissipate Dissonance

While the revisions offered by Aronson (self-consistency) and Cooper (new look) address dissonance *creation* at the front end of Festinger's model (the link from A to B in Figure 16-1), Stanford psychologist Claude Steele's self-affirmation approach speaks to the question of dissonance *reduction* at the back end of the model—point D of the figure. Steele doesn't assume that dissonance always drives people to justify their actions by changing their attitudes. He thinks some fortunate people can call up a host of positive thoughts about themselves that will blot out a concern for restoring consistency. If he's right, high self-esteem is a resource for dissonance reduction.

According to Steele, most people are greatly motivated to maintain an overall self-image of moral adequacy. For a participant in the $1/$20 experiment, there's no question that lying to a fellow student makes it harder to preserve that favorable self-concept. But if the guy ignores the ethical slip and focuses instead on his good grades, athletic ability, social skills, and helpfulness to friends who are hurting, the dissonance will be only a blip on the radar screen of his mind and will quickly fade away. Thus, Steele believes that denial, forgetfulness, and trivialization of the incident are alternatives to attitude change, but only for the person who already has high self-esteem.

According to Steele's self-affirmation approach, Obama might have excused his smoking by reminding himself of his esteem-raising qualities, which include "gifted orator, award winning author, and proven intellect who was the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*,"[23] not to mention president of the United States, winner of a Nobel Peace Prize, and the commander in chief who stopped Osama bin Laden for good. In light of these accomplishments, Obama might regard relapse as a minor inconsistency rather than a major contradiction. In Steele's view, the first lady's comment suggests that the president eventually couldn't rationalize that way anymore. As the son of a man who ignored his family obligations, perhaps Obama came to believe that smoking is a parenting flaw for which career success can't compensate.

Aronson, Cooper, and Steele offer their respective revisions as more accurate accounts of what goes on in people's heads than Festinger's original theory provided. But we don't have to pick one and trash the others. Self-consistency, personal responsibility for bad outcomes, and self-affirmation aren't mutually exclusive explanations. As Cooper suggests, "They each describe a distinct and important piece of the overall dissonance process and, in doing so, make a unique contribution to our understanding of how cognitions about the self mediate cognitive dissonance and arousal and reduction."[24]

THEORY INTO PRACTICE: PERSUASION THROUGH DISSONANCE

I've placed this chapter in the section on interpersonal influence because Festinger and his followers focused on attitude change as an end product of dissonance. Suppose you know someone named Sam who holds an opinion that you're convinced is harmful or wrong. What practical advice does the theory offer that might help you alter Sam's conviction?

For openers, don't promise lavish benefits if Sam abandons that attitude or warn of dire consequences if he doesn't. A massive reward–punishment strategy may gain behavioral compliance, but the hard sell seldom wins the heart or mind of the person being bribed or pressured. Instead, work to develop a friendly relationship with Sam. That way your own position will tend to bypass the *selective exposure* screen that Sam and the rest of us put up to avoid threatening ideas. And if Sam eventually adopts your viewpoint, an ongoing bond means you'll be around to offer reassurance when *postdecision dissonance* kicks in.

To be an effective agent of change, you should offer just enough encouragement *(minimal justification)* for Sam to try out novel behavior that departs from his usual way of thinking. Avoid making an offer that Sam can't refuse. As long as *counterattitudinal actions* are freely chosen and publicly taken, people are more likely to adopt beliefs that support what they've done. The greater the effort involved in acting this way, the greater the chance that their attitudes will change to match their actions.

Finally, as you seek to *induce compliance,* try to get Sam to count the cost of doing what you want and to grasp the potential downside of that behavior for others *(personal responsibility for negative outcomes).* That kind of understanding will increase the probability that Sam's attitude will shift to be consistent with his actions. And if things turn sour, your relationship won't.

CRITIQUE: DISSONANCE OVER DISSONANCE

When Festinger died in 1989, his obituary in *American Psychologist* testified to the impact of his work:

> Like Dostoyevski and like Picasso, Festinger set in motion a *style* of research and theory in the social sciences that is now the common property of all creative workers in the field. . . . Leon is to social psychology what Freud is to clinical psychology and Piaget to developmental psychology.[25]

As the *Dilbert* cartoon in this chapter suggests, cognitive dissonance is one of the few theories in this book that has achieved name recognition within popular culture. Yet despite this wide influence, Festinger's original theory and its contemporary revisions contain a serious flaw. Like my boyhood friend's never-miss shot in his driveway basketball court (see Chapter 3), it's hard to think of a way the theory can be proved wrong.

Look again at the four stages of the dissonance process diagram in Figure 16–1. Almost all the creative efforts of dissonance researchers have been aimed at inducing counterattitudinal advocacy at point A—getting people to say something in public that is inconsistent with what they believe in private. When researchers find an attitude shift at point C, they automatically *assume* that dissonance was built up at point B and is gone by point D. But they don't test to see whether dissonance is actually there.

Dissonance thermometer A hypothetical, reliable gauge of the dissonance a person feels as a result of inconsistency.

Festinger never specified a reliable way to detect the degree of dissonance a person experiences, if any. Psychologist Patricia Devine and her University of Wisconsin–Madison colleagues refer to such an instrument as a *dissonance thermometer.* They applaud researchers' occasional attempts to gauge the *arousal* component of dissonance through physiological measures such as galvanic skin response. (When our drive state increases, we have sweaty palms.) But they are even more encouraged at the possibility of assessing the *psychological discomfort* component of dissonance by means of a self-report measure of affect. Until some kind of dissonance thermometer is a standard part of dissonance research, we will never know if the distressing mental state is for real.

Cornell University psychologist Daryl Bem doesn't think it is. He agrees that attitudes change when people act counter to their beliefs with minimal justification, but he claims that *self-perception* is a much simpler explanation than cognitive dissonance. He believes we judge our internal dispositions the same way others do—by observing our behavior.

Self-perception theory The claim that we determine our attitudes the same way outside observers do—by observing our behavior; an alternative to cognitive dissonance theory.

Bem ran his own \$1/\$20 study to test his alternative explanation.[26] People heard a recording of a Stanford man's enthusiastic account of the spool-sorting, peg-turning task. Some listeners were told he received \$1 for recruiting the female subject. Since he had little obvious reason to lie, they assumed he really liked the task. Other listeners were told the man received \$20 to recruit the woman. These folks assumed the man was bored with the task and was lying to get the money. Bem's subjects didn't speculate about what was going on inside the Stanford man's head. They simply judged his attitude by looking at what he did under the circumstances. If people don't need an understanding of cognitive dissonance to forecast how the men would react, Bem asks, why should social scientists? Bem is convinced that cognitive dissonance theory is like the mousetrap pictured on page 26—much too convoluted. He opts for simplicity.

Advocates of cognitive dissonance in the field of communication counter that nothing about mental processes is simple. When we deal with what goes on behind the eyes, we should expect and appreciate complexity. Festinger's theory has energized scientifically oriented communication scholars for more than 50 years. I feel no dissonance by including cognitive dissonance theory in this text.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Cognitive dissonance is a *distressing mental state.* When did you last experience this *aversive drive?* Why might you have trouble answering that question?
2. The results of Festinger's famous *\$1/\$20 experiment* can be explained in a number of different ways. Which explanation do you find most satisfying?
3. Suppose you want your friends to change their sexist attitudes. What advice does the *minimal justification hypothesis* offer?
4. I see cognitive dissonance theory as a "never-miss shot." What would it take to make the theory *testable?*

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: 50 Years of a Classic Theory,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2007, (see especially Chapter 1, "Cognitive Dissonance: In the Beginning," pp. 1–27, and Chapter 3, "The Motivational Property of Dissonance," pp. 42–61).

Original statement: Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance,* Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 1957.

Toward a dissonance thermometer: Patricia G. Devine, John M. Turner, et al., "Moving Beyond Attitude Change in the Study of Dissonance Related Processes," Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills (eds.), *Cognitive Dissonance: Progress on a Pivotal Theory in Social Psychology,* American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 1999, pp. 297-323.

Engaging account of theory's development: Elliot Aronson, "The Evolution of Cognitive Dissonance Theory: A Personal Appraisal," in *The Science of Social Influence: Advances and Future Progress,* Anthon Prankanis (ed.), Psychology Press, New York, 2007, pp. 115–135.

Selective exposure: Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Jingbo Meng, "Looking the Other Way: Selective Exposure to Attitude-Consistent and Counterattitudinal Political Information," *Communication Research,* Vol. 36, 2009, pp. 426–448.

Postdecision dissonance: Dave D'Alessio and Mike Allen, "Selective Exposure and Dissonance after Decisions," *Psychological Reports,* Vol. 91, 2002, pp. 527–532.

$1/$20 experiment: Leon Festinger and James Carlsmith, "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology,* Vol. 58, 1959, pp. 203–210.

Self-consistency revision: Ruth Thibodeau and Elliot Aronson, "Taking a Closer Look: Reasserting the Role of the Self-Concept in Dissonance Theory," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* Vol. 18, 1992, pp. 591–602.

New-look revision: Joel Cooper and Russell Fazio, "A New Look at Dissonance Theory," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 17,* Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), Academic Press, Orlando, FL, 1984, pp. 229–262.

Self-affirmation revision: Claude Steele, "The Psychology of Self-Affirmation: Sustaining the Integrity of the Self," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 21,* Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ, 1988, pp. 261–302.

Role of weapons of mass destruction and dissonance in the invasion of Iraq: Jeff Stone and Nicholas Fernandez, "How Behavior Shapes Attitudes: Cognitive Dissonance Processes," in *Attitudes and Attitude Change,* William Crano and Radmila Prislin (eds.), Psychology Press, New York, 2008, pp. 313–334.

Critique: Daryl Bem, "Self-Perception: An Alternative Interpretation of Cognitive Dissonance Phenomena," *Psychological Review,* Vol. 74, 1967, pp. 183–200.

Critique: Daniel O'Keefe, "Cognitive Dissonance Theory," in *Persuasion: Theory and Research,* 2nd ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002, pp. 77–100.

Experiencing cognitive dissonance may require a strong need for esteem.
To access a chapter on Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation,
click on Hierarchy of Needs in Archive under Theory Resources at
www.afirstlook.com.