

## Cognitive Dissonance Theory

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Cognitive dissonance is a theory developed in the late 1950s by US psychologist → Leon Festinger, which claims that people tend to avoid information and situations that are likely to increase a dissonance with their existing cognitions, such as beliefs, attitudes, or other value judgments. The author proposed the following basic hypotheses: “(1) The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance. (2) When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance” (Festinger 1957, 3). For him, “two elements are in a dissonant relationship if, considering these two alone, the obverse of one element would follow from the other” (Festinger 1957, 13).

The theory has become by far the most influential of all theories based on the consistency paradigm. At the same time, it was one of the most controversial ones. In 1968 Aronson wrote, “Over the past three years, dissonance theory continued to generate more research and more hostility than any other one approach” (Aronson 1968, 5). And other authors noted with irony that the scientific career of the theory proved it to be right because its proponents did not take note of successful falsifications, or its opponents of confirming results. Nevertheless, it became widely adopted in communication research, where researchers linked it to findings about selective exposure to media content as, for instance, in the pioneer study *The people's choice* by → Paul Lazarsfeld et al. (1944), and treated it as a basic psychological “law” behind these findings of de facto selectivity (→ Exposure to Communication Content; Selective Exposure; Selective Perception and Selective Retention).

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEORY IN PSYCHOLOGY

Like several other → *consistency theories*, Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance was based on the “law of good gestalt.” Accordingly, the protagonists of consistency theories suggested that individuals will try to avoid dissonance and pursue consonance between their many cognitions or even social relations. For instance, if a person, for whatever reason, perceived an argument against a political leader whom he or she otherwise admired, this person would try to resolve the tension between the two conflicting cognitions. As mentioned above, Festinger's theory takes an already existing dissonance as the starting point for predictions about subsequent behavior. In his famous card game experiment, he created either consonance or dissonance with a decision taken by his subjects by means of manipulated results in the game, and had them then look at information supporting or contradicting their prior decision. The results confirmed the author's assumption about a U-shaped curve between dissonance and selective exposure: selectivity was highest among subjects who had experienced a mean degree of dissonance. In cases of no or very little dissonance and in cases of very high dissonance, individuals had no reason to avoid further dissonant information.

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Because of its compliance with day-to-day experience on the one hand and its contradiction to the normative image of a tolerant individual on the other, the theory immediately triggered numerous studies. Their results, however, remained all in all unclear. A first meta-analysis of 18 studies on selective exposure by Sears and Freedman (1967) found as many confirming as disconfirming results of the theory. A radical cooling down ensued, which was evidenced by a sharp decrease in the number of consistency theory studies in the 1970s.

The theory had *two main theoretical problems*. First, from the state of dissonance, only search can logically follow, but not the avoidance of information, because only active search can reduce the state of tension. In a state of consonance, however, only avoidance is reasonable, because every search could create dissonance. Second, the theory did not distinguish between simple cognitions (or "protocols") and hypotheses-cognitions (more general cognitions, norms, laws, etc.).

The early dissonance research also showed several *methodological problems*. Often the question arose whether other variables besides dissonance – for instance, a person's degree of dogmatism or the utility of the information offered – might have generated the behavior interpreted as the consequence of cognitive dissonance. Others criticized the theory and the experiments derived from it for radically simplifying the cognitive system of an individual by reducing it to the relationship between just two cognitions. However, in subsequent psychological research, some methodical problems could be overcome. For example, by using a skin galvanometer it was possible to prove that being exposed to dissonant information indeed creates a state of tension, and by using an EEG that dissonance is a motivational condition.

The history of the dissonance theory can be described as an ongoing limitation of the original hypothesis through intervening variables. Certainly, Festinger's personal hope to establish the theory of cognitive dissonance as a general psychological-biological law that applies to all living creatures (as his dissonance-theoretical experiments with rats show) has clearly failed. Nevertheless, today we observe again an increasing interest in Festinger's assumptions – such as in Beauvois and Joule's (1996) "radical dissonance theory," which aims at a return to the original theory but with an alternative understanding of Festinger's basic assumptions. Over 30 years after Sears and Freedman (1967), D'Alessio and Allen (2002) conducted another meta-analysis with 16 experimental studies on cognitive dissonance fulfilling several requirements. The correlation between attitude and selection of consonant or dissonant information was highly significant – albeit with a relatively low correlation coefficient of 0.22.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEORY IN COMMUNICATIONS

"By and large about two-thirds of the constant partisans – the people who were either Republican or Democratic from May right through to Election Day – managed to see and hear more of their own side's propaganda than the opposition's" (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944, 89). With this statement the paradigm of weak media effects was born. Its basic presumption was that people selectively expose themselves to media contents according to their predispositions. It is worth mentioning that Lazarsfeld and his co-authors had already noted the basic assumption of dissonance theory in a footnote of their book: "The fact that

people select their exposure along the line of their political predispositions is only a special case of a more general law which pervades the whole field of communication research. Exposure is always selective; in other words, a positive relationship exists between people's opinions and what they choose to listen or to read" (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944, 164).

Together with Festinger's theory, published 13 years later, the findings in *The people's choice* paved the way for the concept of selective exposure and the *paradigm of weak media effects*: when people selectively expose themselves to media content according to their already existing predispositions, persuasion through media content is almost impossible. This paradigm dominated the notions about media effects for three decades. There are several reasons why cognitive dissonance theory became such a widely recognized theory in communications, and persisted there for much longer and almost unchallenged as compared to psychology. Two of these reasons were rather administrative than academic. First, the paradigm of weak media effects made rising questions about the legitimacy of the media's social power less prevalent. Second, cognitive dissonance theory offered the opportunity to the still young field of communications to link its findings to another, much more established, discipline (→ Media Effects; Media Effects, History of).

However, while psychologists tried to prove the causal relationship between dissonance and exposure to information mainly through experimental research, communication researchers most of the time supplied only evidence for *de facto selectivity*, i.e., a correlation between qualities of a particular media content and the predispositions of the audience. Cognitive theory was mostly used as an interpretation for the correlation obtained. Typical examples were and still are the relation between political preferences of readers and the editorial biases of newspapers used by them. However, there were also a few early quasi-experimental and experimental studies in communications. Atkin (1971), for instance, produced eight different front pages for a university newspaper that were different only in terms of layout and headline of an article (partisan bias). The results showed that supporters of both parties picked the articles that endorsed their opinions, even when the articles were not prominently positioned.

A field study by Donsbach (1991), combining content analysis, a reader → survey, and a copy test with readers of real newspapers, found across the board only a small influence of readers' predispositions on their exposure to political news (→ Content Analysis, Quantitative; Copy Test and Starch Test). However, when distinguishing by valence of the news, the data showed a very clear selectivity for consonant news when it is positive. The avoidance of selective exposure also to negative news complies with findings in psychology about a generally higher attention for negative, i.e., potentially "dangerous," information as in the theory of *automatic vigilance* (→ Negativity).

The adaptation of cognitive dissonance in communication research actually contains a serious misunderstanding. As cited in the beginning, Festinger only made assertions about an individual's state of dissonance but not about a state of consonance. Communications all but completely ignored this limitation and simply took the transferability of the basic hypothesis for granted. There is an easy explanation for this: for communication researchers, media content is not conceptualized as a potential instrument to reduce dissonance, but selectivity is seen as an instrument to channel media content according to one's own cognitive needs. Thus, it is relevant to communications whether selectivity in order to

avoid dissonance can also occur in a state of consonance or is only used – as Festinger asserted – to reduce already existing dissonance.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THEORY FOR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TODAY

Over the years the theory of cognitive dissonance has been linked to several other theories in communication research. One example is → mood management. As Festinger himself pointed out that dissonance, “*being psychologically uncomfortable*” (see above), is a mood state, Zillmann considered the theory as being just another case of his own mood management approach, viewing it as a “bad mood that is produced by exposure to counter-attitudinal persuasive messages” (Zillmann 1988, 329). Further research is needed to answer the question of how the emotional attractiveness of media content (as conceptualized, for instance, in the mood management theory) and its consonance or dissonance for the recipient’s cognitive system interact. A magazine story about a politician’s private affair might serve affective needs for personality stories but at the same time, if read, create cognitive dissonance because the reader likes this particular politician, whose career might be endangered by the story. Another example for the integration of cognitive dissonance theory with other theories of exposure is the information utility approach. Here, the avoidance of dissonance is one among many considerations of utility that can motivate people to expose themselves to information from the media (Atkin 1973).

The theory today still offers a lot to communication research because it applies to all phases of the communication process. While the theory so far has been predominantly applied to audience behavior, it is also relevant to journalists’ news decisions. Journalists are under a considerable constraint to make selections. The possibility of deciding unconsciously in favor of their own predispositions occurs for them in various phases, for example in the selection of issues to investigate, in their attention toward arguments in political speeches, or in the evaluation of the newsworthiness of stories in wire reports. As the effects of dissonance on the selection of information seem to be even more prevalent in group than in individual behavior, and as journalists show a high degree of ingroup orientation, cognitive dissonance might explain findings on the influence of subjective beliefs on news decisions.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Consistency Theories ▶ Content Analysis, Quantitative ▶ Copy Test and Starch Test ▶ Experiment, Laboratory ▶ Exposure to Communication Content ▶ Festinger, Leon ▶ Instrumental Actualization ▶ Journalism: Group Dynamics ▶ Lazarsfeld, Paul E. ▶ Media Effects ▶ Media Effects, History of ▶ Mood Management ▶ Negativity ▶ Selective Exposure ▶ Selective Perception and Selective Retention ▶ Survey

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## Cognitive Science

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Cognitive science is the study of mind, and is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses psychology (→ Psychology in Communication Processes), philosophy, computer science, education (→ Learning and Communication), neuroscience, anthropology, and linguistics. The intellectual origins of the field can be traced back to the 1950s, when researchers first began to use formal mathematical representations and computational structures to model theories of mind (→ Cognition). Cognitive science became an “official” field in the late 1970s; in 1976, the first issue of the journal *Cognitive Science* was printed, and the first meeting of the Cognitive Science Society took place in 1979.

According to Thagard (1996, 5), “Cognitive science proposes that people have mental procedures that operate on mental representations to produce thought and action.” What binds researchers across the various contributing disciplines is the notion that the processes that occur during cognition can be represented abstractly by some type of predictive representation. The nature of that specific representation depends on the discipline; for example, philosophers rely on formal logic, artificial intelligence researchers employ computer code, neuroscientists are guided by biological structure, and cognitive psychologists often use statistical analyses to fit data resulting from experimentation. By building theoretically driven, empirically tested structures of cognitive processes, cognitive scientists seek to increase understanding of the mind, as well as to build systems that are able to understand, predict, and generate human thought and action (→ Information Processing).