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Self-affirmation versus self-consistency: a comparison of two competing self-theories of dissonance phenomena ☆

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Abstract

High or low self-esteem individuals participated in a role-playing paradigm in which a friend stood them up for a dinner date. The participants received either a good explanation from the friend for the missed date (sufficient justification) or a poor explanation (insufficient justification). As predicted by self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988), but not self-consistency theory (Aronson, 1999), low-esteem participants derogated the friend more than high-esteem participants under both insufficient and sufficient justification. Also supporting self-affirmation theory, sufficient/low-esteem participants reported more offense for being stood-up than sufficient/high-esteem participants. Discussion centers on the role of self-esteem in dissonance processes and on the need for more research that focuses on dissonance/self-threats that result from the behavior of other(s) rather than one's own behavior.
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1. Introduction

Few theories in social psychology have been as influential or enduring as Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory. The 1990s and early 2000s, in fact, have seen a revival of interest in dissonance phenomena as evidenced by the publication of two books (Beauvois & Joule, 1996;

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Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999) and numerous journal articles (e.g., Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995; Blanton, Cooper, Skurnik, & Aronson, 1997; Harmon-Jones, 2000; Nail et al., 2001; Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995; Stone & Cooper, 2001; Van Overwalle & Jordens, 2002). In the first published statement of the theory, Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) proposed that two cognitions are dissonant "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" (p. 25). Dissonance results in a feeling that is psychologically aversive or unpleasant. Accordingly, it creates a drive-like state toward reducing this unpleasantness. Dissonance can be reduced in numerous ways, for example, by changing one of the dissonant cognitions, decreasing the importance of the dissonant cognitions, and/or obtaining social support (Festinger, 1957; Festinger et al., 1956).

One popular method of testing the theory is known as the *free-choice paradigm* (Brehm, 1956). Here, participants are asked to evaluate several similar items in terms of how desirable they are (i.e., music CDs). After the ratings, participants are given the opportunity to possess one of the items, but they must chose between two items that they initially rated almost equally. Because the items are similarly valued, participants presumably do not have *sufficient justification* for picking one item over the other. Being forced to make this choice creates dissonance because the chosen alternative invariably has some negative qualities, whereas the non-chosen alternative has some positive qualities (i.e., some bad songs, some good, respectively). After the choice, participants are asked to re-rate the items. Typically, they increase their rating of the chosen alternative but decrease that of the non-chosen alternative. Dissonance is measured by the absolute difference in the change of these ratings, the so-called *spread of alternatives*.

Although early dissonance research generated a substantial body of evidence supporting the theory (e.g., Aronson & Carlsmith, 1963; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Gerard & Mathewson, 1966), researchers soon discovered that inconsistency, in and of itself, is not enough to create the cognitive/behavioral changes postulated by the theory. Specifically, dissonance-arousing behavior must be perceived as: (a) having been freely chosen (Davis & Jones, 1960; Sherman, 1970), (b) having little external justification (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1963; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959), and (c) entailing a commitment (Carlsmith, Collins, & Helmreich, 1966). These exceptions to the conditions that produce dissonance "strained the limits of the original inconsistency-based explanation" for dissonance phenomena (Scher & Cooper, 1989, p. 899). Consequently, several theorists proposed modifications in dissonance theory's tenets in an effort to offer a more parsimonious account of dissonance effects (e.g., Aronson, 1968, 1999; Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). Other theorists offered alternative theories (e.g., Collins & Hoyt, 1972; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Steele, 1988; Van Overwalle & Jordens, 2002). [1]

1.1. Self-consistency theory

One prominent modification is Aronson's (1968, 1999) self-consistency theory. The theory proposes that it is not just any two inconsistent cognitions that produce dissonance; rather,

[1] Scher and Cooper (1989) proposed a fourth qualifying condition that must be met for inconsistent behavior to cause dissonance—that the behavior produces aversive consequences. Research by Harmon-Jones and colleagues, however, has challenged this notion (Harmon-Jones, 2000; Harmon-Jones, Brehm, Greenberg, Simon, & Nelson, 1996).

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