Theory Of Cognitive Dissonance As It Pertains To Morality

Rachel D. Graham
Oklahoma Christian University

Abstract

Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance has not been adequately researched in its application to morality (i.e., a person may believe one way but act another). The present experiment sought to demonstrate the presence of cognitive dissonance after making a difficult decision concerning morality. The results are congruent with the literature, which indicates that people experience significant cognitive dissonance after making a difficult decision. Different types of moral dilemmas elicit differing levels of cognitive dissonance. The theory that a person may reduce cognitive dissonance by changing their thoughts or decisions was not supported by the results.

A theory concerning cognitive dissonance was put forth by Leon Festinger in his 1957 book, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Festinger defines cognition as "the things a person knows about himself, about his behavior, and about his surroundings" (p. 9). Dissonance and consonance he defines as "relations which exist between pairs of elements" (p. 9). Festinger states that "two elements are in a dissonant relation if, considering these two alone, the obverse of one element would follow from the other" (p. 9). Essentially, cognitive dissonance is the situation in which two or more cognitions or thoughts are in disagreement with one another.

Festinger (1957) gives several examples of situations in which dissonance may arise. Simple logical inconsistency may cause cognitive dissonance. If a person believes smoking is bad for one's health yet continues to smoke, he is experiencing cognitive dissonance. Another situation where dissonance may be present is one of past experience. Festinger gives an example of a person standing in the rain. Past experience would tell the person that standing in the rain will cause one to get wet, but if the person had never experienced rain before, he would not have cognitive dissonance when standing in the rain.

People are naturally inclined to try to reduce cognitive dissonance because it is an uncomfortable state of mind. Festinger (1957) says that people can reduce dissonance in three major ways:

- Changing one or more of the elements involved in dissonant relations.
- Adding new cognitive elements that are consonant with already existing cognition.
- Decreasing the importance of the elements involved in the dissonant relations. (p. 264)

One can reduce cognitive dissonance by changing either his opinion on the matter, or his behavior on the matter. If one changes his opinion about the issue at hand, the behavior is no longer dissonant with the opinion, and dissonance is reduced. Also, if one changes his behavior and the behavior now matches the opinion, dissonance is reduced. Another way to reduce dissonance is to simply decrease the importance placed on the elements in question. If a person no longer cares that his behavior and his thoughts are different, dissonance will be reduced (Festinger, 1957).

Jack Brehm and Arthur Cohen (1962) co-authored a book on cognitive dissonance titled *Explorations in Cognitive Dissonance*. They did five years of intensive research on the theory of cognitive dissonance along with several experimental studies assessing the usefulness of the theory. They describe cognitive dissonance as a "psychological tension having motivational characteristics" (p. 3).

Burris, Harmon-Jones, and Tarpley (1997) published an article concerning a specific aspect of cognitive dissonance theory called the "belief disconfirmation paradigm." This paradigm states that cognitive dissonance may occur when a certain belief is disconfirmed. The article was novel considering the scarcity of psychological literature concerning this paradigm. The authors conducted two experiments. The first consisted of 38 psychology undergraduate student participants. Most of them professed to believe in God and considered themselves religious people.

Rachel Graham, Department of Psychology, Oklahoma Christian University. This paper was presented at the 25th annual meeting of the Oklahoma Psychological Society in Edmond, Oklahoma. Correspondence regarding this manuscript may be directed to Rachel Graham, Department of Psychology, Oklahoma Christian University, Edmond, Oklahoma, USA 73136. rachel.graham@oc.edu

Each participant completed a questionnaire assessing how important religion was to them. There were two experimental conditions: a transcendence-opportunity condition and a no-transcendence-opportunity condition. The participants read a newspaper article describing a drive-by shooting that involved an infant being killed. In the transcendence-opportunity condition, participants then filled out a transcendence measure, which consisted of 6 questions (on a Likert scale of 1 to 9) about God's role in the life of people. They also filled out an "Emotional Reactions Questionnaire" designed to measure three different affects: agitation, discomfort, and pity. In the no-transcendence-opportunity condition, participants did not have the opportunity to fill out the transcendence measure (Burris et al., 1997).

The second experiment included 84 participants (also psychology undergraduates who were somewhat religious). There were three experimental conditions: religious-affirmation condition, no-affirmation condition, and a distraction condition. In the religious-affirmation condition, participants read the shooting article (from the first experiment), completed a locus-of-control scale and a "Religious Life Inventory," and then completed a questionnaire on measures of affect. The "Religious Life Inventory" is similar to the *Religious Background and Behaviors Questionnaire* set forth by Connors, Tonigan, and Miller (1996) which measures the religious feelings and practices of a person. In the no-affirmation condition, participants completed the same measures, but in a different order (Burris et al., 1997).

The authors of this study measured cognitive dissonance in terms of Discomfort and Agitation as measures of affect. Some participants were allowed to reduce their dissonance by choosing transcendence and religious affirmation in the treatment conditions of the experiments. In both experiments, participants experienced significant reduction in cognitive dissonance (or Discomfort and Agitation) when they chose to believe more strongly in their convictions, even when faced with situations that made it hard to do so (Burris et al., 1997).

Rosenfield, Kennedy, and Giacalone (1986) investigated the postdecision dissonance effect, which is another aspect of the cognitive dissonance theory. This effect takes place when a person enhances his opinion of a decision that has already been made. If the person increases his confidence in his decision, dissonance will be reduced. If he questions his decision, dissonance will remain. The authors conducted their experiment in a shopping mall. They asked the shoppers to guess how many gumballs were in a container. Some of the participants were asked to estimate their own chance of winning the game. Some were asked this before their guess, some were asked after their guess, and some participants (those that did not guess) were asked to estimate their chance of winning. The results revealed that the pre-guess group and the no-guess group were not significantly different from one another, but both were different from the post-guess group. Those in the post-guess group estimated their chances of winning to be much higher than either of the other two groups. These results indicate that by making a prior decision seem more attractive, people reduce cognitive dissonance .

Arthur Cohen (1960) reviewed the theory of cognitive dissonance in relation to attitude change. Like Rosenfield, et al. (1986), Cohen suggests that dissonance may be reduced by placing more confidence in a prior decision. By making the unchosen alternative seem less desirable and the chosen alternative more desirable, one may reduce cognitive dissonance.

The present experiment posited three hypotheses. The first hypothesis questioned whether the participants would experience cognitive dissonance if they made a difficult decision that was contrary to their pre-affirmed morals. The second asked whether cognitive dissonance would be reduced if participants were given an opportunity to change at least one element of cognition. The third hypothesis looked at different moral dilemmas that would elicit different amounts of cognitive dissonance, with Lying eliciting the most dissonance and Cheating eliciting the least.

Method

Participants

The participants were students enrolled in general psychology classes at Oklahoma Christian University. They participated in the experiment in order to fulfill class requirements. There were 43 males and 45 females aged 17 to 27, with a mean age of 19.2. Six of the participants were African American, 15 were of various ethnicities, and 67 were White. Most of the participants were Freshmen.

Materials

The materials consisted of a Morals Questionnaire, a reading of a moral dilemma, a question about how one would react to the moral dilemma, the Cognitive Dissonance Questionnaire, and the Reducing Dissonance Questionnaire.

Procedure

The participants were randomly assigned to six treatment groups of about 15 people each. They were first asked to complete a questionnaire about morals. The participants then read one of three moral dilemmas. One of the moral dilemmas had to do with cheating, another with lying, and the last with stealing. Each moral dilemma detailed a difficult situation in which a person did something that might be considered justifiable in their particular situation. The participants were asked to write whether they thought the person in the moral dilemma was wrong for doing what they did.

All participants were then given the Cognitive Dissonance Questionnaire, in which they were asked to rate their subjective level of cognitive dissonance. After completing the Cognitive Dissonance Questionnaire, half of the groups were given the Reducing Cognitive Dissonance Questionnaire.

Results

A 3 X 2 (Group X Ability to Reduce Dissonance) ANOVA was used to determine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The "Group" variable had three levels: Cheating, Lying, and Stealing. The "Ability to Reduce Dissonance" variable had two levels: Yes and No. A significant main effect was found for the Stealing variable, $F(2, 85) = 3.41$, $p < .05$. The Tukey post-hoc test revealed that there was a significant relationship between Stealing and Cheating, $p < .05$, with Stealing being higher.

Table 1 : *ANOVA of Group and Ability to Reduce*

Source	SS	*df*	MS	F	*p*	η^2
Group	40.438	2	20.219	3.415	.038	.077
Reduce	2.410	1	2.410	.407	.525	.005
Group * Reduce	10.460	2	5.230	.883	.417	.021

As shown below, the means for Stealing were considerably higher than the means for the other two groups. Likewise, the standard deviations for Stealing were higher than those of the other two groups.

Table 2: *Means and Standard Deviations of Groups*

Group	Reduce	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Cheating	Yes	1.71	1.312	17
	No	2.86	1.791	14
	Total	2.23	1.627	31
Lying	Yes	2.77	2.048	13
	No	2.21	2.326	14
	Total	2.48	2.173	27
Stealing	Yes	3.60	3.334	15
	No	4.00	3.162	15
	Total	3.80	3.199	30
Total	Yes	2.64	2.442	45
	No	3.05	2.563	43
	Total	2.84	2.495	88

Homogeneity of variance was violated, but this factor was overlooked because of similar sample sizes (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1994).

Discussion

This study determined to find the effects of making a difficult moral decision on levels of cognitive dissonance. The results of the study were consistent with my first hypothesis and Festinger's research (1957) that claim that two dissonant thoughts will cause cognitive dissonance. Even though the levels of dissonance were not as high as predicted, some dissonance was observed. As mentioned earlier in this paper, dissonance will not be as high if people place less importance on the dissonant relations. This factor may account for the low levels of dissonance; the participants did not care that their moral choices were in conflict with their dilemma decision, thus they did not experience high levels of dissonance. Many of the participants noted that the people involved in the moral dilemmas were justified in what they did because of the circumstances of their situations, but still thought that lying, cheating, and stealing would be wrong in most situations.

The results did not support the second hypothesis and Festinger's research (1957) that cognitive dissonance would be reduced when the participants were given the opportunity to change their decisions. Only in the Stealing condition was the mean lower for those that were able to change their decision. In both of the other groups, means were higher in the No (Ability to Reduce) condition than in the Yes condition. One reason for this may be that most of the participants did not choose to change their decisions when given the opportunity. They stayed with their initial decision and therefore did not reduce their levels of dissonance.

As predicted in the third hypothesis, different moral dilemmas elicited different amounts of cognitive dissonance. However, my hypothesis that lying would elicit the most amount of dissonance was wrong. The Stealing dilemma mean was considerably higher than the other two group means, indicating that the Stealing dilemma caused more dissonance. The Lying condition was the next highest in terms of amount of cognitive dissonance, followed by Cheating, which elicited the least amount of dissonance. Part of the reason for this was that the participants did not adequately sympathize with the person in the Cheating dilemma. Most of the participants answered that the person who cheated in her difficult situation was still wrong for doing what she did, whereas the people in the Stealing and Lying conditions were justified in doing what they did.

There were a few significant limitations in the present study. The unsophisticated dependent variable made the data difficult to analyze. There was only one quantitative question in each of the two dependent questionnaires, which made analysis of the dependent measures complex. A suggestion for further research would be a more thorough but simpler dependent measure. Another limitation was the irregularity of the moral dilemmas. Some participants sympathized with the people in the moral dilemmas, and others did not. For further research, dilemmas that are more stable and consistent would make the study more secure.

References

Brehm, J. W., & Cohen, A. R. (1962). *Explorations in cognitive dissonance*. New York: Wiley.

Burris, C. T., Harmon-Jones, E., & Tarpley, W. R. (1997). 'By faith alone': Religious agitation and

cognitive dissonance. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, *19*(1), 17-31.

Cohen, A. R. (1960). Attitudinal consequences of induced discrepancies between cognitions and behavior. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, *24*(2), 297-318.

Connors, G. J., Tonigan, J. S., & Miller, W. R. (1996). A measure of religious background and behavior for use in behavior change research. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, *10*(2), 90-96.

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hinkle, D. E., Wiersma, W., & Jurs, S. G. (1994). *Applied statistics for the behavioral sciences*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Rosenfield, P., Kennedy, J. G., & Giacalone, R. A. (1986). Decision making: A demonstration of the postdecision dissonance effect. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *126*(5), 663-665.