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[Home](#) > Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive Dissonance

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Festinger & Carlsmith's Study

Every individual has his or her own way of evaluating their own selves and usually this is done by comparing themselves to others. This is manifested in the phenomenon called cognitive dissonance. This is further explained in Leon Festinger and James Carlsmith's study in 1954.

Cognitive dissonance is one form of social comparison. The Social Comparison Theory was originally proposed by Leon Festinger in 1954. According to the social psychologist, the social comparison theory is the idea that there is a drive within individuals to search for outside images in order to evaluate their own opinions and abilities. The said images can be a reference to physical reality or in comparison to other people.

In the process, people look at the images portrayed by others as something obtainable and realistic, and subsequently, make comparisons among themselves, others and the idealized images.

Generally speaking, the social comparison theory explains how individuals evaluate their opinion and desires by comparing themselves to others.



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The Sample

Leon Festinger and James Carlsmith conducted a study on cognitive dissonance investigating on the cognitive consequences of forced compliance. In the study, undergraduate students of Introductory Psychology at Stanford University were asked to take part of a series of experiments.

It was explained to them that the Department of Psychology is conducting the study and they are therefore required to serve in the experiments. They were told that the study aims to evaluate these experiments to help them improve these in the future. The students will be interviewed after participating in the experiment and were encouraged to be completely honest in these interviews.

The participants [1] were 71 male students in totality.

Methodology

The 71 subjects were informed that the experiment focuses on the "Measures of Performance." The participants were asked to carry out series of monotonous tasks that were meant to be boring and nonsensical. Specifically, subjects were asked to put spools onto and then off the try with the use of only one hand for half an hour, and then for the next half hour, turn square pegs clockwise in quarter turns, and then start all over again once the whole cycle's been finished for all 48 square pegs.

The subjects were divided into two groups, A and B, where Group A was provided no introduction regarding the tasks they will be performing and Group B was given introduction by an experimenter, presenting the tasks in an interesting and enjoyable tone.

After performing the tasks, each of the subjects was then interviewed regarding how enjoyable the tasks were to him. Festinger and Carlsmith then investigated whether there's a standing evidence of cognitive dissonance where boring tasks were seen as enjoyable.

A fraction of the subjects were thanked and let go after being interviewed by another experimenter regarding ways on how the presentation of the boring tasks can be improved for future purposes. The said group served as the control group of the experiment.

The remaining subjects were asked to take the place of an experimenter, if they would want to. Their job is to give the next group of participants a delightful introduction of the tasks they have previously performed. Half of them were offered \$1 to do the job, while the remaining half was offered \$20.

The subjects were then again interviewed afterwards and were asked to rate four different areas of the experiment. The first area is whether the tasks were interesting and enjoyable at all. Subjects rated this using a scale of negative 5 to positive 5 (-5 to +5).

The second area is whether the experiment gave the participant an opportunity to discover their own skills, using the scale of 0 to 10. The third asks whether that subject finds the activity important, again using the scale of 0 to 10. And lastly, participants were asked whether they

would want to participate again in the future in a study the same as this, using the scale -5 to +5.

Results

Like in every other study, there are some responses that are deemed to be invalid. In Festinger and Carlsmith's experiment, 11 of the 71 responses were considered invalid for a couple of reasons.

Among the paid participants, 5 had suspicions about getting paid for the designated task. These made them question what the real purpose of the study is. In addition to these 5 exceptions, another 2 of the paid participants told the girl the truth that the tasks she will be performing are boring and uninteresting, and that they were just being paid to say otherwise. Three other participants declined the offer and another one, though he gave the girl a positive briefing, he asked for the girl's number afterwards so he can, according to him, explain to her further what the study is about.

Putting these 11 in exception, the 60 remaining responses are the following:

Question on Interview	Experimental Condition		
	Control (N=20)	One Dollar (N=20)	Twenty Dollars (N=20)
How enjoyable tasks were (rated from -5 to +5)	-0.45	+1.35	-0.05
How much they learned (rated from 0 to 10)	3.08	2.80	3.15
Scientific importance (rated from 0 to 10)	5.60	6.45	5.18
Participate in similar exp. (rated from -5 to +5)	-0,62	+1,20	-0,25

One of the questions that Festinger and Carlsmith were aiming to answer is how enjoyable were the tasks for the participants. Results of the experiment showed that even though the tasks were indeed boring and uninteresting, the unpaid control group rated the activity a negative 0.45 (-0.45). Those who were paid \$1 rated the activity a positive 1.35 (+1.35), while those who were paid \$20 gave it a rating of negative 0.5 (-0.5). The results, according to the researchers, display the cognitive dissonance phenomenon.

According to Festinger and Carlsmith, the participants experienced dissonance between the conflicting cognitions of telling someone that a particular task is interesting when the truth is, they found it rather uninteresting and boring. Those who were paid \$1 were forced to rationalize their own judgments and convinced themselves that what they were doing is enjoyable because they had no other justification. On the other hand, the ones who were paid \$20, apparently had the money as their primary justification for carrying out their task.

The researchers further concluded, with the help of the said results, that with \$1, participants found no significant justification thus the occurrence of cognitive dissonance. When they were asked to lie about how they truly feel about the task, they force themselves to feel what they

were induced to feel and express. This hypothetical stress brings the subject to intrinsically believe that the activity is indeed interesting and enjoyable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, people, when persuaded to lie without being given enough justification, will perform a task by convincing themselves of the falsehood, rather than telling a lie.

While it is true that the experiment took place in the 50s, the results are still being recognized up to this date. It has received widespread attention after recently being published in an academic journal.

Sources

Wikipedia: Social Comparison Theory [2]

Festinger and Carlsmith - cognitive dissonance , Cognitive consequences of Forced Compliance

Festinger, L. and Carlsmith, J. M. (1959). "Cognitive consequences of forced compliance". Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 58, 203-211.

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Links

[1] <https://explorable.com/social-science-subjects>

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_comparison_theory