DISSONANCE OR DEFENSIVENESS?

By

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A considerable body of research evidence indicates that the individual attempts to perceive, cognize, or evaluate the various aspects of his environment and of himself in such a way that the behavioral implications of his perceptions are not in contradiction. Much of this research has been stimulated by Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). A unique aspect of Festinger's theory as compared with other similar theories—e.g., Heider's theory of cognitive balance (Heider, 1958), Osgood's theory of attitudinal congruence (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955), Newcomb's theory of communicative acts (Newcomb, 1953)—is the emphasis which his theory places upon the consequences of decisions. He states (Festinger, 1957, p. 35): "Dissonance then will be a result of the simple act of having made a decision. Consequently, one may expect to see manifestations of pressures to reduce dissonance after a choice has been made."

Postdecision dissonance results, according to Festinger's view, from the fact that the decision in favor of the chosen alternative is counter to the beliefs which favor the unchosen alternative(s). To stabilize or freeze the decision after it has been made, the individual will attempt to reduce the dissonance by changing his cognitions of the alternatives so that the relative attractiveness of the chosen as compared to the unchosen alternative is enhanced, or by developing cognitions which permit the alternatives to be substitutable for one another (i.e., functionally identical). He may or may not be successful in his attempt to reduce dissonance.

A variety of interesting and ingenious experiments in heterogeneous contexts appear to support Festinger's view that dissonance and, therefore, attempts to reduce dissonance, result from decisions. (See Festinger [1957], Festinger & Aronson [1960], and Cohen [1960], for a review of these experiments.) The concordance of results from these varied experiments is impressive. Yet we still retain doubt that dissonance and attempts at dissonance reduction are necessary consequences of decision, even when the decision is between highly valued but not functionally identical alternatives.

Our doubt is primarily stimulated by the fact that the theory of cognitive dissonance as applied to postdecisional phenomena leads to the view that man in order to stabilize his decisions must, to some extent, maladapt himself to his environment. Thus, presumably the more evidence a person gets that his decision was wrong, the more ardently will he support his original decision (until, belatedly, he revokes his decision). Maladaptive behavior obviously occurs but its occurrence is not proof that it must occur as a result of such a basic psychological function as decision-making. While it is indeed possible that nature may have built a maladaptive mechanism into the decision-making process in order to facilitate the "freezing" of decisions, it is, of course, not necessary to posit dissonance reduction as the mechanism by which decisions are stabilized or frozen.

An alternative explanation is that a decision becomes stabilized when the activities in the pursuit of the chosen alternative are such that they either enhance the subjective probability of the occurrence of the chosen as compared with the unchosen alternatives, or they change the situation confronting the individual in such a way that new additional consequences become associated with the chosen and nonchosen alternatives. Thus, if an individual decides to accept a dinner invitation rather than go to a concert, his decision becomes stabilized as a result of such activities as telling his host that he will come to the dinner (going to the concert will now have the new, additional negative consequence of breaking a promise) or such non-activities as not getting tickets for the concert (which may reduce the subjective probability that he can be admitted to the concert). The point is that it is not necessary to depurate the concert or to enhance the value of the dinner engagement for the decision to become stabilized.

Our discussion, so far, has led us to consider the alternative view that dissonance is not a necessary consequence of decisions and that one can explain the stabilization of decisions without reference to the theory of dissonance reduction. We do not deny the fact that
postdecisional dissonance occurs but rather ask, since we deny its inevitability, under what conditions does it occur? A clue to these conditions is offered by Festinger's statement (1957, p. 44) that dissonance resulting from a choice may be reduced by revoking the decision psychologically, i.e., by admitting to having made the wrong choice or by insisting that really no choice has been made for which the person had any responsibility. This statement suggests that it is the inconsistency between the cognitions of the chooser and of the choice, rather than the inconsistency in selecting one alternative and not the other, that is critical to the occurrence of postdecisional dissonance. Hence, according to this view, when an individual experiences dissonance after making a choice he is attempting to defend himself against a perceived implication of his choice which is contrary to his self-conception. The objects involved in the choice have relevance to the postdecisional dissonance only insofar as they determine what the act of choice signifies concerning the chooser (e.g., to what extent and how reliably it signifies that the chooser is "intelligent," "prudent," "moral," "tasteful," "nice").

Thus, we offer the hypothesis that a chooser will experience postdecisional dissonance only when he perceives his choice in a given situation to be inconsistent with the conception of some aspect of himself which he tries to maintain (for himself or for others) in that situation. Presumably most people have an interest in maintaining a positive conception of themselves as honest, fair, reasonable persons who do not err in judgment, deliberately mislead, or do anything contrary to their personal preferences unless compelled to do so by forces which it would be unreasonable to resist. However, as Deutsch and Solomon (1959) have pointed out, it is by no means rare to find people who have a vested interest in maintaining a negative conception of themselves as "sick," "incompetent," "un-likeable," or "unworthy."

The hypothesis stated in the preceding paragraph is a more specific formulation of the general proposition, adapted from Heider (1958) that any event (X) which is conceived to be a function of the characteristics of a person (P) and of his environment (E) will tend to be perceived in such a way that the perception of the P, E, X, and their interrelationships are not inconsistent with one another. The more general formulation implies that an individual may experience dissonance in relation to his conception of another—i.e., when P is another person. Thus, it is dissonant with one's conception of his friend to see him cheat or to see him make an untasteful choice. It further implies that an individual may experience self-dissonance (i.e., the need to defend his self-conception) even when X is produced by another person as long as he attributes X to some characteristics of himself. Thus it is dissonant with one's conception of himself as a father to learn that his son has stolen some money. It is dissonant with one's conception of himself if someone he respects (e.g., a teacher, an experimenter, an expert) thinks that he may have shown poor judgment in making a given choice.

Thus, self-dissonance may arise either because one wishes another to have a given conception of himself and his behavior is contrary to his conception; or it may arise because one's or another person's behavior is directly contrary to his self-conception. The former type of self-dissonance is often described as "shame" or "embarrassment" (the feeling of a loss in social esteem) while the latter is often described as "guilt" or "inadequacy" (the feeling of a loss in self-esteem). It is evident that these two types of self-dissonance lend themselves to different modes of dissonance reduction. Our discussion below will largely be expressed in terms of the latter type; the reader can easily extrapolate to the former type.

With regard to postdecisional dissonance, it can be seen that our general proposition implies that:

1. The magnitude of self-dissonance will be a function of the degree of responsibility that an individual perceives himself to have for his self-discrepant behavior. Hence, an individual will not experience self-dissonance after he makes a choice if he attributes the choice X to the characteristics of E rather than to the characteristics of P. This would be so unless the individual attributes the characteristics of E to the characteristics of P. Thus, if an individual perceives that his choice is directed by circumstances, by the E, or by the objective properties of the alternatives being considered, then he will not experience postdecisional dissonance. Hence, the individual will experience postdecisional dissonance only if he, to some degree, attributes the choice to some personal characteristics for which he accepts responsibility. Experiments by Brell and Cohen (1959), by Cohen, Terry, and Jones (1959), and by Davis
and Jones (1960) have already demonstrated the fact that the feeling of personal choice is, in fact, critical to the occurrence of dissonance when an individual takes a position which is discrepant with his personal attitudes.

2. The magnitude of self-dissonance will be a function of the degree to which the person perceives he cannot negate the consequences of his self-discrepant behavior. Hence, an individual will not experience self-dissonance if he perceives that the self-discrepant consequences of his behavior have been or will be negated. The experiment by Davis and Jones (1960) provides support for this assertion.

3. The magnitude of self-dissonance will be a function of the degree to which the person ascribes to his behavior validity as a measure of his self-conception. Hence, an individual will not experience self-dissonance if he does not consider his behavior to be a valid measure of some aspect of himself. The experiment to be reported in this paper is concerned with testing this assertion.

4. The magnitude of self-dissonance will be a function of the degree of inconsistency which the person perceives between his behavior and his self-conception. The degree of inconsistency of one belief with another refers to the potential decrease in the strength of the (undistorted) stronger belief which would follow from the acceptance of the (undistorted) weaker belief, divided by the initial strength of the stronger belief. By "undistorted" we denote that the distorting effects of dissonance reduction have been eliminated from consideration. Thus, of two beliefs, the one which would reduce confidence in a third belief by a greater amount is inconsistent with it to a greater degree. From our definition of inconsistency, it is apparent that an individual confronted with a given self-discrepant behavior will feel less self-dissonance if his self-conception is strong rather than weak. Similarly, the more doubts an individual has about his self-conception, the more ambivalent he is about it, the greater will be his self-dissonance when he perceives self-discrepant behavior. Thus, an individual who has considerable confidence in his belief that he is a good student will experience less self-dissonance if he performs poorly on a given test than someone who has less confidence that he is a good student. Here we assume that the individual is most comfortable believing he is a good rather than poor student.

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For the purposes of the present experiment, we emphasize from the preceding discussion our assumption that postdecisional dissonance will only occur if the decision is perceived to reflect or measure aspects of the individual's self which the S has a vested interest in maintaining. In the experiment to be described below Ss were asked to choose between consumer objects under conditions which led them to believe that their choices were good indicators of their leadership aptitude, executive potential, and artistic judgment (the high self-involvement conditions) and under conditions in which no linkage was made between the choice and personality characteristics (the low self-involvement condition). The objects involved in the choice were selected so as to make it unlikely that a choice among them would spontaneously be seen to be a measure of any valued personal attribute. Our expectation was that postdecisional dissonance would occur in the high self-involvement conditions but not in the low self-involvement condition.

Two high self-involving conditions were studied. In one condition, the self-involving instruction was administered immediately prior to the Ss' choices and in the other condition it was administered immediately after their choices. We hypothesized that Ss who were self-involved prior to their choice might make their choice in such a way that their choice would be well-defended and, hence, they would have no need to engage in additional defensive maneuvers after their choice. Unfortunately, our procedures were such that we did not obtain any measure of changes in the evaluations of the objects in preparation for the choice between them. The measures we did get do not permit us to sort out the effects due to predilection defensiveness or postdecisional defensiveness in the two self-involving experimental conditions.

Method

Fifty-eight college undergraduates, 22 males and 36 females, served as Ss. Their ages ranged from 18 to 41 with a mean of 22.7. All were paid volunteers, naive to the purpose of the experiment, who had offered to participate in a study of "consumer preferences." The experiment was run in groups of from three to six, with Ss seated in separate booths. On a table in each booth were six identical jars labeled A through F, each containing a different spread for bread (e.g., jam, jelly, peanut butter), some crackers, a glass of water, paper napkins, and some tongue depressors to be used as spreaders.

* We wish to thank Dean Samuel Pratt and Mr. Walter Heimer of Fairleigh Dickinson University, Madison, New Jersey, for their cooperation in obtaining Ss.
Two Es, one female and one male, were present in the room. The male E introduced the experiment as a study of consumer preferences. The Ss were asked to taste the spreads and rate each on two nine-point bipolar rating scales. The first scale asked the S to rate “Over-all, how does this spread compare to others which you have used?” The scale extremes ranged from “worst I’ve ever tried” to “best I’ve ever tried.” The second question asked “How do you rate this brand’s flavor?” The scale extremes ranged from “very poor flavor” to “excellent flavor.” Ss tasted a given spread and rated it on both scales before going on to the next sample. When all six samples were rated, the questionnaires were collected and a new questionnaire containing some dummy questions and the same rating scales, was distributed.

Up to this point, Ss in all the experimental treatments were treated alike. The experimental inductions took place here as described below.

1. High self-involvement, post-decision induction (HSI post). While Ss were busy filleting out the dummy questions on the new questionnaire, E looked through their ratings of the six samples and selected, for each S, a pair of samples which on the first scale had received equivalent ratings, if possible at the center of the scale. These two samples were moved in front of the S, apart from the other samples on S’s table. The male E then announced that “the company that’s sponsoring this research would like to give you a sample jar of either of the two products in front of you. You may have a jar of either brand, whichever you want.” The Ss were allowed to taste the two samples if they wanted to. Then they were asked to select one or the other.

As this point, the male E introduced the female E as “an expert in the field of food-selection factors” who was going to conduct a panel interview in which she would “probe for some of the reasons behind your food preferences.” He stated that recent research had revealed that “personality factors play an extremely important role in food-taste preferences” and asked the female E to tell a little about “what she has learned in some of her past research.”

The female E’s message was as follows:

One of the most interesting of our findings to date concerns the relationship between people’s ability to judge subtle differences in the quality of foods and their judgmental ability in a number of other areas. Recently, we completed a large-scale investigation of food-taste-judgment ability among adults in a number of different professions and occupations. These included law, medicine, creative writing, advertising, corporate executives, engineering, and teaching. It was clear that among our subjects, people who had high food-taste-judgment ability also had superior ability on a number of other tasks where creative judgment was an important factor. These included tests of leadership aptitude, executive potential, and artistic judgment. We also found that these people tended to be among the highly successful individuals in their chosen occupations. Just the opposite was true for individuals who had

In general, it was possible to find two items assigned equal ratings at the center of the scale for each S. In those cases where it was not possible to select two items with equivalent ratings, items were chosen so as to minimize the discrepancy.

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low food-taste-judgment ability. These people tended to score low on tests which involved judgmental abilities, showed little leadership aptitude and executive potential, and showed a low degree of ability to make artistic judgments. It was also the case that such individuals tended to have achieved little in the way of their vocational or professional goals. So, as you can see, it’s quite clear that one’s food preferences are indicative of many facts about him as a person. In our consumer panel interview we would like to learn something about your food preferences and I think you will find the interview to be both interesting and revealing.

At this point, the male E asked the Ss to rate all six of the samples, including the two from which they had chosen. Then, the experiment over, the Es revealed the purpose and the reason for the deception. The Ss were encouraged to ask questions and, finally, their aid was enlisted in keeping secret the purpose of the experiment from prospective Ss. Sixteen Ss were run in this treatment.

2. High self-involvement, pre-decision induction (HSI pre). This treatment condition was exactly the same as the preceding one, except that the self-esteem involving message (from the female E) was inserted before the Ss made their choice between the two samples. Fifteen Ss were run in this treatment.

3. Low self-involvement (LSI). This condition was exactly the same as the two previous ones, except that the self-esteem involving message was omitted. Fourteen Ss were run in this treatment.

4. Control Condition. Ss in this treatment made no choice. They merely rated the six samples, then rerated them. Thirteen Ss were run in this treatment.

Results

The data summarized in Table 1 indicate that more Ss in the high, as compared with the low, self-involving conditions change their ratings of the chosen and nonchosen objects in such a way that the difference between them is enhanced. This difference is significant by the chi-square test for the flavor scale, but not for the over-all scale. However, the direction of the difference is consistent for both scales. The pre and post self-involved groups do not differ significantly from one another on either scale. The low self-involved group, in effect, revealed no evidence of postdecisional dissonance while both of the high self-involved groups revealed clear evidence of it.

Table 2 permits a comparison of the initial rating and changes in rating for the chosen item, the rejected item, and a matched noncritical item. The matched noncritical item was one which received approximately the same value on the initial rating as the chosen and rejected items, but was not involved in the choice. It is evident that Ss tended more to enhance the chosen item than to
Depreciate the rejected item. On the over-all scale, there is change significantly greater than zero for the chosen item in all three conditions. Additionally, significant changes take place on the matched noncritical item for the pre condition. On the flavor scale there is

**TABLE 1**

**Changes in Preference Ratings**
(Number of Ss in each experimental condition showing an increase (+) or no increase (0 or —) in the difference between the ratings of the chosen and rejected items as a consequence of making a choice between them \((C_2-R_2) - (C_1-R_1)\)).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HSI Pre</th>
<th>HSI Post</th>
<th>LSI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Over-All Rating</td>
<td>0 or —</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(x^2 ) (HSI vs. LSI) = not significant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(x^2 ) (pre SJ vs. post SJ) = not significant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Flavor Rating</td>
<td>0 or —</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(x^2 ) (HSI vs. LSI) = 6.57 (p &lt; .02)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(x^2 ) (pre SJ vs. post SJ) = not significant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2**

**Initial Ratings and Rating Changes**
(Means for the chosen, rejected, matched noncritical, and all noncritical items.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre HSI</th>
<th>Post HSI</th>
<th>LSI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Over-All Rating</td>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Initial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chosen</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matched noncritical</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>5.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All noncritical</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>5.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Flavor Rating</td>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Initial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chosen</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matched noncritical</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All noncritical</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>(-0.29)</td>
<td>5.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| N = 15 | N = 16 | N = 14 | N = 15 |

*Significantly different from zero (p < .05).

A 3 X 3 analysis of variance found a significant main effect for “alternatives” but none for treatments. The interaction was not significant. (See text for details.)

**DISCUSSION**

The results are not free from ambiguities. Only an ad hoc explanation can be offered as to why significant findings were obtained on the flavor and not on the over-all rating scale; flavor seems to be more directly linked to the self-involving instructions, which stressed the significance of “taste,” than the over-all rating. Hence the rating of flavor would have more self-significance. Similarly, we have no adequate explanation for the finding that the matched noncritical items, not directly involved in the choice, were apparently affected favorably by the self-involving instructions. Every explanation we might offer seems inconsistent with some of the data. However, over-all, the results support the thesis that self-involvement in a choice leads to postdecisional dissonance or self-defensiveness.

Due to the **pervasive concern in our society about being “correct,” “popular,” “successful,” “free of blame,” etc., one can expect defensiveness about decisions—i.e., postdecisional dissonance—to be a fairly widespread phenomenon. One can expect postdecisional dissonance to be accentuated under the conditions which enhance self-defensiveness: when the individual has doubts that he conforms to his vested self conception; when the “correctness,” “popularity,” “successfulness,” etc., of his decision is seen to be a relevant measure of some aspect of his self; when his sense of responsibility for the decision is strong; when the external or social challenge to his self conception is strong; etc. On the other hand, one would expect postdecision dissonance to be minimized: if the individual feels secure in his self-evaluation; if his self conception permits him to
recognize and acknowledge fallibility in the area of the given decision; if the area in which the decision has been made has little evaluative significance for his self-concept; if he feels his decision conforms with self-evaluation; if he does not anticipate that his decision will be challenged by others; if he does not view the decision as self-determined; etc.

In concluding our discussion, it should be noted that, according to Festinger's theory of dissonance, the magnitude of dissonance is a function of the importance of the dissonant elements. Presumably, then, our results might be explained by assuming that self-involvement made the decision sufficiently important for dissonance to be manifested and that, without self-involvement, the decision was so trivial that little or no dissonance could be expected. Let us grant the possibility that in the condition of low self-involvement the choice was so unimportant that the amount of dissonance produced might have been too little to be detectable. The question, then, naturally arises as to what makes a decision important? Unfortunately Festinger does not define "importance," apart from equating the importance of a cognitive element with the extent to which it is valued by the person or with how "consequential" it is to the person (Festinger, 1957, p. 16). It is obvious from our results with the self-involvement conditions that it is the perceived value of the items directly involved in the choice which is critical in determining the importance of a choice: a choice can be important because of its self-relevance even when the items involved in the choice have little perceived value. There are two important, related questions to be distinguished here. First, we may ask whether self-involvement is a necessary condition for the occurrence of postdecisional dissonance. A second and different question is whether choices between highly valued alternatives frequently elicit self-defensiveness. If this second question can be answered in the affirmative, it may be difficult to determine experimentally what the correct answer to the first question is.

The difficulty of obtaining a critical experimental test of Festinger's theory of postdecisional dissonance and of our alternative explanation in terms of self-defensiveness is compounded further by the ambiguous status of "the sense of personal choice" and "personal responsibility" in Festinger's discussion of postdecisional dissonance. Thus, suppose a dress buyer has to make a decision between ordering one dress style or another, both of which she felt were very attractive. Now let us assume that her assessments of attractiveness are made according to certain decisional rules as applied to specified characteristics of the garments and that the assessments favor one garment slightly more than the other (but sufficiently more for a decisional rule to have unequivocal application). She makes the decision, feeling that the objective facts in conjunction with the decisional rule "require her to favor one style rather than the other." If she had had a computer available, it might have helped her to make the decision. We would not expect postdecisional dissonance in such instances (i.e., wherever the person feels that the objective situation—the facts in conjunction with accepted decisional rules—selects one alternative rather than another). It is not clear what Festinger would predict in such a situation.

**Summary**

We have examined one part of Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, the part which asserts that dissonance is an inevitable accompaniment of decisions. Alternatively, we have proposed that postdecisional dissonance occurs only under conditions which stimulate self-defensiveness about one's decision. An experiment was conducted in which subjects rated different foods, were then given a choice between two of them, and then rerated the different foods. Under conditions in which the choice was made to be relevant to valued attributes of the self (the high self-involvement conditions), postdecisional dissonance occurred; when the choice was not self-relevant (the low self-involvement condition), postdecisional dissonance did not seem to occur. The changes in ratings of the objects involved in the choice were almost exclusively confined to an increase in the attractiveness of the chosen object; the ratings of the rejected object did not show a significant decrease.

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