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Cognitive Dissonance: A Critique

James F Welles

East Marion, New York, USA

Corresponding author: James F Welles, P.O. Box 17, East Marion, New York, USA, Tel:631-323-8153 ; E-mail: JWelles103@aol.com**Received:** March 09, 2017; **Accepted:** March 24, 2017; **Published:** April 03, 2017**Citation:** Welles JF. Cognitive Dissonance: A Critique. Ann of Behav Sci 2017, 3:1

Abstract

The theory of cognitive dissonance is subjected to scientific criteria for a theory and found wanting. Measurement of dissonance is questioned, predictability is wanting, its occurrence outside the lab is anecdotal and it cannot be refuted because anything is interpreted as reducing psychic tension. A three-dimensional model is proposed to explain the relevant activity.

Introduction

As a behavioral biologist, I feel it is appropriate to examine the theory of cognitive dissonance [1] in terms of its scientific [2] merit and social relevance.

Before I address those matters, let me clearly state I question the scientific validity of any presumed determination of dissonance in an individual. The polygraph pops to mind as the most objective instrument to use, but no one has ever been able to determine just what such an apparatus detects when needles deflect. There is a change in respiration rate and Galvanic skin response, but it is never clear what these alterations indicate. They could indicate increased or diminished emotional conflict, but they also could be consciously, deliberately induced.

The teams of professors who test cogdis in labs would do well to go out on the street and do some ethological testing to see who, if anyone actually engages in the phenomenon. While their tests are routinely if not exclusively conducted on college students, it is, at best, a cultural process: the Japanese, for example, accept a personality model with two parallel, non-intersecting tracts. When there is inconsistency between creed and deed, it is accepted as normal, Nippon behavior.

I also find the theory of cognitive dissonance useless as a predictor of human behavior. When an individual entertains conflicting belief systems, can anyone predict what (s) he will do about it? Alter behavior or the standards for behavior? Rationalize some verbal blending of the two? Consult a psychologist? If anything is predictable, it is that cogdising people would alter their conduct to bring it into congruence with their conflicted super-ego verbal system, but there are two problems with this prediction. The first is that anything

done is interpreted as reducing dissonance whether it in fact does or not. The second objection is that there may be no reduction at all. Consider for a moment Pope Julius II riding at the head of an army. If he experienced cogdis, he certainly did nothing to reduce his commitment to fight for Christianity an oxymoron if ever there were one.

Hence, not only does the Theory of Cogdis fail to meet the most basic standards of a scientific theory, but it is useless when applied to behavior in the real world. If we examine, for example, the corrupt cop—and certainly many if not most cops are corrupt—what do we find? Do we find an individual wrestling mentally and emotionally with conflicting belief/behavioral systems? “Should I obey the law and honor the oath I took or go on taking the money under the table to ignore the crime on my beat?” Even phrasing the dilemma is absurd. The police officer takes the money and thinks (s) he is very clever to do so knowing full well that none of his/her colleagues will apply the law they all swore to uphold and arrest him/her. Rationalizations are invited but of dubious merit.

Better yet is the case of Lord Conesford, who was an inveterate smoker. One day, he happened to read a tract about the evils of smoking, so he.....? What did he do? Use the Theory of Cogdis to predict: Did he quit smoking? No! He resolved then and there to give up reading [3]. Is that what you predicted?!

If any further proof of the uselessness of the theory of cognitive dissonance is needed, just consider what happens should anyone blow the whistle and say what is going on. The answer is the whistle blower gets blasted. Police departments the world over get along fine with corruption day to day. What they cannot tolerate is someone pointing it out. That is taboo. After all, what the whistle blower is doing is introducing cognitive consonance into the system by saying what is going on so that the parties involved can adjust their behavior or beliefs to achieve consonance. The problem with this model is that the corrupt cop wants to be corrupt and is upset at being exposed as such. (s) He does not want consonance; (s) he wants to remain dissonant. It is nice and reasonable to think it should be otherwise, but it is not.

If you think otherwise, consider, the following rather bewildering case: On May 15, 1923, Upton Sinclair was arrested in Los Angeles for reading the Bill of Rights out loud. Shortly after reading the seditious section about freedom of speech, he was charged with expressing ideas “Calculated to

cause hatred and contempt” of and for the government [4]. Now, how does reading the law of the land become a crime? Why would it cause someone to hate or have contempt for the government unless government officials were doing something de-spicable or contemptible like breaking the law? But, if government officials are breaking the law, should not they be arrested? How does arresting someone for reading the law out loud reduce dissonance? The law re-mains the law, and the criminal conduct continues, so the dissonance continues too. The only thing reduced by arresting the person who reads the law is awareness that the dissonance exists.

This suggests that the current theory of cognitive dissonance is a three dimension model for a four dimensional phenomenon. What is needed would be pictured as an equilateral pyramid with belief, behavior, verbalization and self-image/awareness at the apexes and interacting arrows connecting all of them. Consider such a model as the next step toward a viable theory of human behavior and apply it in a world where the cops are criminals, the media spread fiction, scientists oppose the truth, the courts mock justice, music is cacophonous and painting off the wall while psychologists build careers proving the irrelevant theory of cognitive dissonance in isolated labs to explain trivial matters like the flavor [4] of grapes?!

When there is significant dissonance, it results from a clash of the top-down, super-ego values confronting lower impulses from the ID. Such matters commonly remain unresolved because that suits the powers that be, with the resulting tension defining Life cultural life. Meanwhile, woe unto any whistle blower who points any of this out so people can deal rationally with the problems and correct them i.e., bring consonance to the otherwise very human (errant) system.

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