

Cognitive Dissonance



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Introduction

■ Cognitive dissonance:

- Is an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two contradictory ideas (cognitions) at the same time
- The terms comes from two words:
 - *Cognition* = the act or process of knowing; perception
 - *Dissonance* = lack of harmony

■ Exercise:

- Think of somebody you dislike *intensely*
- It can be somebody you know personally or somebody famous
- Now try to think of something you like or admire about that person
- If doing so makes you feel uncomfortable then that is an example of cognitive dissonance

Cognitive dissonance can cause confirmation bias

- Assume we have a strong opinion about Fred's personality:
 - Either he is very charming (good) or obnoxious (bad)
- We might assume that Fred is equally “good” or “bad” in *unrelated* ways. Examples:
 - We assume he is hard-working (good) or lazy (bad)
 - We assume he is honest (good) or dishonest (bad)
- In this way, we can maintain a polarized opinion:
 - Fred is *totally good* (charming, hard-working and honest). Or...
 - Fred is *totally bad* (obnoxious, lazy and dishonest)
 - Confirmation bias suggests that we may ignore any evidence that contradicts our belief about Fred
- It might be better to recognize both good and bad in Fred:
 - But that could result in cognitive dissonance

How other people perceive you

- Cognitive dissonance and confirmation bias:
 - Can affect how you view other people
 - Can also affect how other people view you
- Most people do not have a strong opinion about you:
 - But a few people do have a strong and very polarized opinion of you
 - Some of them think you are totally great
 - And, unfortunately, some others think you are a total jerk

Managing your career

■ Question: What happens if:

- Your colleagues think you are a total jerk, and...
- You have a great idea for improving business (or changing the world)?

■ Answer:

- This can produce cognitive dissonance in the minds of your colleagues
- They find it difficult to like your idea while simultaneously disliking you
- Confirmation bias will probably result, and they will ignore or ridicule your idea

■ Moral:

- Your career will go *much better* if you do not give people reasons to think you are a jerk. So...
- *Always* be polite
- Do not win an argument in a way that makes people think you are a jerk

Receiving personal insults

- People who try to bring about change often face criticisms:
 - They expect criticisms of their ideas
 - But they also receive personal insults
- Example:
 - Richard Stallman is an activist for “free software”
 - Some people criticise his ideology
 - Some of those people also criticise his personality and appearance
- Cognitive dissonance can explain why this happens:
 - It is difficult to dislike one aspect of a person while liking another aspect
 - Therefore you dislike (or like) *everything* about the person
 - Therefore, arguing that a person has a character fault is subconsciously thought of as being equivalent to arguing against that person's ideas

Summary

■ Cognitive dissonance:

- Is an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two contradictory ideas (cognitions) at the same time
- The terms comes from two words:
 - *Cognition* = the act or process of knowing; perception
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■ Cognitive dissonance:

- Can be a cause of confirmation bias
(you can remove dissonance by ignoring one of the conflicting views)
- Can cause us to have polarized views of people
(a person is “totally good” or “totally bad”)
- Colleagues who think you are a “total jerk” will ignore your great ideas
- People may attack you personally instead of attacking your ideas