

CASE TEACHING NOTES

for

“War, Death, and Cognitive Dissonance: A Case Study for Social Psychology”

by

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INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

Leon Festinger (1957) proposed cognitive dissonance theory as a way to explain the tension that exists when people’s attitudes are incongruent with their behaviors. He also described several mechanisms through which this tension could be reduced. The theory remains popular among social psychologists who study attitudes and attitude-behavior consistency.

This case study focuses on excerpts from a news article that was published in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*. The article describes how some residents in Ohio have dealt with an increasing number of deaths among Ohio soldiers fighting in Iraq. The case gives students an opportunity to explore cognitive dissonance theory and to generate reasonable hypotheses related to information in the article. Students are also asked to evaluate the theory and to propose alternative explanations for the evidence in the article, and then to reflect on their own attitudes toward international policy and intergroup relations.

This case study is designed for use in social psychology courses, but it would also be appropriate for introductory psychology courses.

Objectives

- To provide students with an opportunity to explore cognitive dissonance theory in more depth than what is covered in a social psychology textbook.
- To explore such questions as “Why does support for the war in Iraq strengthen among some Ohioans when soldiers from their area have died?” This may help us to understand one set of social psychological principles that underlie people’s support or criticism of the war. Further, these questions raise deeper considerations about why people hold onto their beliefs in the face of sacrifice or loss, and why people sometimes express attitudes that seemingly contradict their personal interests.
- To show how psychologists use theory to explain social phenomena; to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a theory as an explanatory tool; to generate alternative explanations for data.
- To develop analytical and critical thinking skills; to identify key social psychological constructs and to apply them to current social attitudes.
- To allow students to explore their own feelings about the war in Iraq specifically or about war, aggression, and intergroup relations more broadly.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

This case was developed for use in a 60-minute classroom period (approximate size of class is 25 students). Students did not read the case beforehand, but they did read chapters in their textbook that related to attitudes and to cognitive dissonance theory.

At the beginning of the class, students created four-person groups and discussed the major tenets of cognitive dissonance theory. Each group was also asked to generate one example to illustrate the theory and to share it with the class. This discussion and sharing lasted for five minutes. The group discussion allows students to verify their understanding of cognitive dissonance theory with their peers; the class sharing allows students to discover how cognitive dissonance theory can explain a variety of real-world phenomena.

For the next five minutes, students were given and asked to read the entire case article that describes how some Ohio residents have responded to growing casualties among Ohio soldiers serving in Iraq. Once students had finished reading the article, they were given five minutes to answer each of the four questions at the end of the case as a group. These questions encouraged students to reconsider the principles of cognitive dissonance theory and to apply them to current social attitudes that they themselves may also have. At the end of each five-minute discussion, several groups were asked to share their discussions with the entire class during a four-minute interval. Different groups were called upon for different questions so that all groups had a chance to share. In the time remaining after the four questions had been answered, the instructor facilitated an all-class debriefing with students to discuss the merits of cognitive dissonance theory to explain evidence in this article, and to reflect on alternative explanations and their merits.

Additional Activities

After students have worked through the case, several activities could be used to help them explore cognitive dissonance theory in a more personal, deeper way. For example, students could be asked to reflect on their own attitudes toward the war in Iraq or future wars in other countries, and explore instances where they feel dissonance. They could also be asked to discuss or write about ways they cope with this tension. Follow-up assignments could also expand beyond a psychology classroom and result in a cross-disciplinary paper where students discuss how theories from other disciplines (e.g., peace studies, political science, international affairs, etc.) would address the Ohioans' feelings about the war. The goal would be to allow students to examine their personal beliefs and to find ways to explain them with a multidisciplinary approach.

General Discussion Note

It is possible that the discussion of this case will turn partisan, reflecting students' personal political ideology and values. It is important to remind students that the goal of the case is not to discuss the merits of political decision-making, the efficacy of the current administration or its members, or the outcome of American efforts in Iraq. Rather, the goal is to evaluate how well one theory explains evidence that relates to a current social event.

BLOCKS OF ANALYSIS

This case study explores the application of a classic social psychological theory to current attitudes. Students are asked to discuss the principles of cognitive dissonance theory, a theory that addresses the consequences of cognitive-behavioral incongruence. This theory may be useful for understanding how people reconcile potentially conflicting attitudes regarding war. On the one hand, people may believe that supporting the policies of the President (e.g., going to war) is a sign of patriotism; on the other hand, they may feel tension when a policy leads to death in their towns and/or families. Similarly, they may want to remove their soldiers from danger (i.e., withdrawing troops), but to do so may imply disrespect for those soldiers who have already died. Students may feel similar tension as it involves war, and this case study will help them explore that tension in a critical, analytical way.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The primary principles of cognitive dissonance theory are summarized below.

1. People are motivated to maintain consistency between their attitudes and their behaviors, or between different attitudes that they hold. That is, they want their behavior to match what they believe, or they want to have attitudes that match each other.
2. When people have inconsistent attitudes and behaviors—for example, when they behave contrary to their values—they are likely to experience dissonance. *Dissonance* is an aversive state of tension that people are motivated to reduce or eliminate (Festinger 1957). Dissonance is particularly strong when attitudes/behaviors that are important to the self are involved (Aronson, 1968).
3. There are several strategies for reducing dissonance, including:
 - a. Changing the behavior to match one's attitude.
 - b. Changing the attitude to match one's behavior.
 - c. Cognitively minimizing the degree of inconsistency or its importance.

ANSWER KEY

Answers to the questions posed in the case study are provided in a separate answer key to the case. Those answers are password-protected. To access the answers for this case, go to [the key](#). You will be prompted for a username and password. If you have not yet registered with us, you can see whether you are eligible for an account by reviewing our [password policy and then apply online](#) or write to answerkey@sciencecases.org.

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