

An Analysis of “COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: A Critique”

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Cognitive Dissonance: A Critique is a masterful analysis of the theory of cognitive dissonance from the standpoint of a behavioral scientist examining the social relevance of a theory of human behavior. This amply documented tract calls into question the validity of any theory which relies on dubious means of measurement as, for example, the polygraph checking respiratory rates and Galvanic Skin Responses. Just exactly what is being measured is a matter of some conjecture, and what such measurements mean is yet another matter altogether.

There is a call for those investigating the alleged phenomenon of cognitive dissonance to get out of their labs and into the streets to determine just what people engaging in cognitive dissonance are actually doing. The Japanese culture is mentioned explicitly in this context because people in that context routinely accept something of a bipolar form of interaction in which the classic Western modes of interaction-speaking and doing-do not intersect. The simple fact is that even many Occidentals commonly engage in behavior which contradicts their expressed beliefs and do so with apparently complete psychological equanimity.

Furthermore, the theory of cognitive dissonance is dismissed as a useless predictor of human behavior. At best, there is some value in the theory for superficial behavioral traits, like which necktie to wear with a given suit. So what? When it comes to significant values like ethical conduct, the theory is essentially useless as a means of forecasting human conduct. Physicians should wash their hands between examinations of patients, but the AMA admits that a third of doctors do not do so. Is there some behavioral mechanism in place to ensure compliance? Obviously not, but so what? What is anyone going to do about it?

The fact is that the theory of cognitive dissonance is of little or no value in dealing with human behavior in the real world. The case of corrupt cops is cited as an operative example of its irrelevance. As detective Serpico found to his dismay, pointing out corruption cost him the support of his fellow officers on the job. They did not jump for joy when he pointed out that some of his colleagues were doing less than their ethical best to abide by much less than enforce the law. Better yet was the example of a Lord Conesford, and inveterate smoker, who, upon reading that smoking was bad for his health, gave up reading.

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Further, the theory is simply wrong much of the time. Humans routinely lie. Some are especially good at it. Is this news to psychological theorists? It seems our culture has adapted well to people who, far from calling for corrective measures when detecting improper conduct, line up to support their pals when anyone presumes to point out discrepancies between t creed and deed. The matter of whistle blowers is treated with objectivity rarely applied to those who tell the truth about the conduct of members of a reference group. Is the whistle blower rewarded for pointing out that a teammate took advantage of his position to enhance his station? Rarely if ever. In most cases, the standard reaction is a knowing, understanding smile and resumption business as usual-with perhaps punishment dished out to the whistle blower who embarrassed the loyal colleague.

Finally, a call for a model of human behavior which accommodates understanding of the x`actual complexities of human interaction is presented. We would do well to give it due consideration.