

Cognitive Dissonance

This video introduces the notion of cognitive dissonance, which has been a popular term in psychology since Leon Festinger coined it in the 1950s. As noted in the video, when dissonance involves moral issues, it is often called “moral dissonance” or “ethical dissonance.” If I resist contradictory evidence regarding my stated position that I am the smartest person I know, that’s probably a manifestation of cognitive dissonance. If I resist contradictory evidence regarding my personal view of myself as a good person, that’s likely a manifestation of moral dissonance.

When teaching cognitive dissonance, some like to quote Upton Sinclair: “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.” Does that sound like a version of cognitive dissonance at work?

Because the prosecutors and police officers in the case study took actions that had profound impacts on other people, their actions had a strong moral dimension so the case definitely raises questions of moral dissonance.

As the video notes, one of the primary ways that people reduce cognitive dissonance arising from the clash between their vision of themselves as good people and the reality that they have done something that they shouldn’t have is to resort to rationalizations. Therefore, a viewing of our “In It to Win” video—“Jack and Rationalizations” is definitely in order when discussing cognitive dissonance.

An example of the impact of cognitive dissonance arises from pharmaceutical companies paying doctors to give talks on the efficacy of their drugs:

[Big Pharma] found that after giving a short lecture about the benefits of a certain drug, the speaker would begin to believe his own words and soon prescribe accordingly. Psychological studies show that we quickly and easily start believing whatever comes out of our own mouths, even when the original reason for expressing the opinion is no longer relevant (in the doctors’ case, that they were paid to say it.). This is cognitive dissonance at play.

The final discussion question asks what other Ethics Unwrapped videos might be relevant to the original conviction of the Central Park 5. Among others would be: (a) the conformity bias, (b) groupthink, (c) the overconfidence bias, (d) implicit bias, and (e) moral myopia.



Discussion Questions

1. In 1954, a cult leader predicted the end of the world. The world did not end, yet her followers believed in her more fervently than ever when she began making new predictions. Does this sound like there might be some cognitive dissonance at play? Explain.
2. Can you think of a time when you suffered from cognitive dissonance? Explain.
3. How about moral dissonance?
4. Have you ever seen someone, perhaps in your private life or maybe a public figure you were observing, act as Professor Luban describes? Perhaps they had long opposed a particular policy or practice and then, all of a sudden when their interests changed, so did their position on that policy or practice. Explain.
5. Can you think of a time when your gut got that guilty feeling and kept you from making a moral mistake?
6. Can you think of a time when you ignored your gut and later wished you hadn't?

Additional Resources

Rachel Barkan, et al., *Ethical Dissonance, Justification, and Moral Behavior*, Current Opinions in Psychology 6:157 (Dec. 2015).

Leon Festinger, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (1957).

Dennis Gentilin, The Origins of Ethical Failures: Lessons for Leaders (2016).

Jonathan Lowell, *Managers and Moral Dissonance: Self Justification as a Big Threat to Ethical Management?*, Journal of Business Ethics (105:1) (Jan. 2012).

David Luban, *Making Sense of Moral Meltdowns*, in Moral Leadership: The Theory and Practice of Power, Judgment, and Policy (D. Rhode, ed. 2006).

The latest teaching resource from Ethics Unwrapped is an article, written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice, that describes the basics of behavioral ethics, introduces the videos and supporting materials along with teaching examples, and includes data on the efficacy of Ethics Unwrapped for improving ethics pedagogy across disciplines. It was published in *Journal of Business Law and Ethics Pedagogy* (Vol. 1, August 2018), and can be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics \(Using "Ethics Unwrapped" Videos and Educational Materials\).](#)"

For more resources on teaching behavioral ethics, an article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduces key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—including sample classroom assignments. The article, published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, may be downloaded here: [“Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making.”](#)

A detailed article by Robert Prentice with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics, published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education*, may be downloaded here: [“Teaching Behavioral Ethics.”](#)

An article by Robert Prentice discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*, may be downloaded here: [“Behavioral Ethics: Can It Help Lawyers \(And Others\) Be their Best Selves?”](#)

A dated but still serviceable introductory article about teaching behavioral ethics can be accessed through Google Scholar by searching: Prentice, Robert A. 2004. “Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases.” *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 1 (1): 57-74.

Transcript of Narration

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Cognitive dissonance is the psychological discomfort that we feel when our minds entertain two contradictory concepts at the same time. For example: I should smoke because I enjoy it, and I shouldn’t smoke because it causes cancer. When the concepts have ethical implications, this discomfort is called moral dissonance or ethical dissonance.

Almost all people except psychopaths have a mental picture of themselves as ethical people. But sometimes people find themselves acting in unethical ways. This creates cognitive dissonance. The important thing is how people resolve that moral dissonance.

Suppose you think of yourself as a good person, but your boss asked you to mislead customers about the reliability of your company’s new product. This situation creates cognitive dissonance that is psychologically and emotionally uncomfortable. In this context, the dissonance seems to manifest as guilt, an unpleasant emotion that you will wish to resolve.

Now some people will react to this dissonance by refusing to mislead customers, opting to resolve the conflict by acting honestly in order to preserve their self-image.

Unfortunately, many people will resolve the dissonance without doing the right thing. For example, they may decide that product misrepresentations are not so unethical after all, because

well, customers should be able to look out for themselves. Or they may rationalize that they are only doing what they've been ordered to do and therefore they are still good people even though they are doing bad things it's someone else's fault. Or they may try to learn as little as possible about the product so they can view their misrepresentations as innocently ignorant rather than intentionally dishonest.

Professor David Luban has noted: "In situation after situation, literally hundreds of experiments reveal that when our conduct clashes with our prior beliefs, our beliefs swing into conformity with our conduct, without our noticing this is going on." In other words, too often we remind ourselves that we are good people and conclude that what we are doing must not be bad because we are not the kind of people who would do bad things. The human ability to rationalize or in other ways distance ourselves from our bad acts sometimes seems unlimited and unfortunately we can quickly begin to see our wrongdoing as acceptable.

There are no easy answers to cognitive dissonance's potential for adverse effects upon our moral decision making and actions. But here are three quick suggestions to help minimize or combat cognitive or moral dissonance. First, never ignore that guilty feeling you sometimes get. Stop and honestly analyze why you are feeling it. Second, study the many means our minds use to distance us from our immoral actions and guard against them. Third and last, get to know the most common rationalizations that people use to excuse themselves from living up to their own ethical standards and let those rationalizations be a warning to you whenever you hear yourself using them.