



MR-06 Cognitive Dissonance

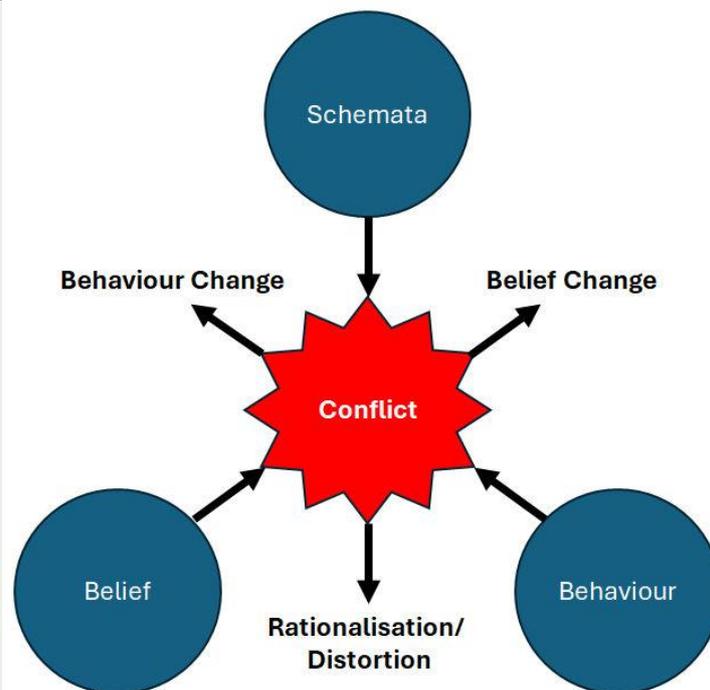


Formal Description

Cognitive Dissonance is a state of psychological discomfort arising from perceived inconsistency between beliefs, between beliefs and behaviour, or between conscious beliefs and underlying cognitive schemata. This discomfort motivates attempts to restore coherence, which may involve revising beliefs, changing behaviour, or reinterpreting evidence. While cognitive dissonance can prompt learning and adaptation, it more commonly leads to defensive processes that preserve existing belief structures at the expense of accuracy or ethical alignment.

Plain English Explanation

Cognitive dissonance is the uncomfortable feeling that *something doesn't quite fit*. It can happen when you notice a clash between what you believe and what you do, or when new information conflicts with how you see yourself or the world. Often, the discomfort appears before you can clearly explain what's wrong — a sense of tension, irritation, or unease. Because this feeling is unpleasant, the mind usually tries to get rid of it quickly. Unfortunately, that often means *explaining the problem away* rather than addressing it honestly. Motivational Reflexivity turns cognitive dissonance from something to be avoided into something to be used.



Example 1 – Personal / Individual

A person believes they value honesty but avoids giving truthful feedback to avoid conflict. The resulting discomfort is cognitive dissonance. They may resolve it by changing behaviour (giving feedback), changing belief (“honesty isn’t always kind”), or rationalising (“it wouldn’t help anyway”).

Example 2 – Professional / Societal

An organisation publicly commits to sustainability while pursuing practices that increase environmental harm. Employees experience dissonance, which may lead to disengagement, justification (“this is just how business works”), or, more rarely, meaningful change.

Provenance and Links

Foundational research:

- **Leon Festinger:**
Originator of cognitive dissonance theory, demonstrating that inconsistency generates psychological discomfort and motivates resolution.
- **Post-decisional dissonance:**
Experimental evidence showing belief adjustment after decisions to reduce discomfort.
- **Motivated reasoning:**
Research indicating that dissonance often leads to biased evaluation rather than neutral reassessment.

Extensions and integrations:

- **Schema–belief conflict:**
This work extends classical dissonance theory by recognising that dissonance may arise between conscious beliefs and subconscious schemata, explaining discomfort without explicit contradiction.



- **Effort after meaning:**
Bartlett's concept explains why dissonance often leads to reinterpretation rather than revision.
- **Morphogenetic reflexivity:**
Archer's work situates dissonance as the trigger for reflexive agency in response to unsatisfactory cultural or structural demands.

Links to other Knowledge Objects:

- Schemata
- Effort After Meaning
- Motivational Reflexivity
- Needs-Driven Belief

Exercise: Listening to Discomfort

1. Recall a recent situation that left you feeling uneasy or defensive.
2. Describe the situation briefly.
3. Ask:
 - What belief or value felt challenged?
 - What behaviour or evidence conflicted with it?
4. Notice how you initially tried to reduce the discomfort.
5. Reflect:
 - Did this response increase clarity, or merely reduce discomfort?

This exercise trains you to recognise cognitive dissonance as *informational*, not threatening.