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# Festinger and the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance: History and Research Application

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Leon Festinger played a pivotal role in the progression of psychology and the origin of experimental social psychology in the mid-1900s. As a young adult, he was known for his humility and personability, which he maintained throughout his career (Schachter, [1994](#)). Festinger's personality shines through his Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, which survived time and criticism and is woven through the fabric of science today. His work continues to promote research; the theory can potentially inform diverse contexts, like military science. Using Festinger's theory to inform research can promote insights for deployment readiness and health promotion, which aligns with his vision for society's progress.

## Festinger Background

Leon Festinger, one of social psychology's founding pioneers, was the mastermind behind renowned works like the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Reis, [2010](#)). He was widely known for his intellect, concentration, and candor while discussing theories and ideas (Moscovici, [1989](#)).

However, his colleagues focused on his conscientiousness, passion, and playfulness while reflecting on his character (Gazzaniga, [2007](#)). His humble, free-spirited nature was fostered by his upbringing as the son of a Russian-Jewish immigrant father who worked in an embroidery factory (Zajonc, [1990](#)). Festinger carried his father's dying sentiment through his educational pursuits, personal life, and professional work- people and their human connectedness represent life after death (Schachter, [1994](#)).

Festinger showed a profound interest in social science and research from a remarkably young age. He earned his Bachelor of Science in Psychology degree at 20 and published his first article a year later, a testament to his unwavering dedication and early success (Zajonc, [1990](#)).

Max Hertzman, Festinger's mentor, recognized his aptitude and encouraged him to pursue graduate education (Brehm, [2000](#)). Over the ensuing four years, Festinger collaborated with Kurt Lewin, earning his degrees, working as a research associate, and publishing several articles (Schachter, [1994](#)). His career continued as a senior statistician throughout World War II until he accepted an assistant professor position at the esteemed Research Center for Group Dynamics (RCGD) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Brehm, [2000](#)).

Reentering the Lewinian group ignited his passion for psychology and inspired his social influence, comparison, and communication work (Gazzaniga, [2007](#)). He followed the RCGD to Michigan, became a University of Minnesota Professor, and then transferred to Stanford University (Zajonc, [1990](#)). Finally, in 1968, he moved to the Else and Hans Staudinger Professorship, where he worked until he died of cancer in 1989 (Moscovici, [1989](#)). Festinger read broadly to diversify his knowledge and maintain an open mind; he also supplemented his academic pursuits by taking breaks from work to engage in leisure activities (Gazzaniga, [2007](#)).

Festinger's humility, curiosity, and broad-mindedness were evident in his pursuit of knowledge beyond psychology and engagement in hobbies. Schachter ([1994](#)) playfully described him as a "kibitzer" who enjoyed exploring new concepts and playing games. The same spirit of curiosity that interested him in puzzles and challenges also inspired him to think innovatively about global problems (Gazzaniga, [2007](#)).

Festinger's interests led him to study archeology through deep reading and archeological digs abroad and delve into studying religion and ancient civilizations (Schachter, [1994](#)). He wanted to understand how cultures foster innovation through ideas that yield tools and technology (Gazzaniga, [2007](#)). This exploration of his creative passions and broad topics, coupled with mentorship from Kurt Lewin and his expertise in social psychology, paved the way for his signature contribution- the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance.

## The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

Festinger harnessed his creativity, academic brilliance, and expertise to conceive the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. This theory combined knowledge about motivation, cognition, and attitudes to elucidate and justify human behavior (Moscovici, [1989](#)). The theory was accessible to learners at every level yet robust enough to effectively integrate complex phenomena. Festinger's theory emerged from a modest Ford Foundation grant and an observation of people's coping mechanisms to navigate cognitions following their experience in an earthquake in 1934 (Gazzaniga, [2007](#)). Festinger and his colleagues were con-founded by how anxiety from the aftermath spurred people to circulate rumors about future impending natural disasters (Gazzaniga, [2007](#)). He merged his perceptible

nature and innate problem-solving skills to articulate his theory with academic interests in social psychology, interpersonal communication, and religion. The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance posits that holding opposing cognitions results in psychological discomfort (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019).

Festinger describes how maintaining two correlated yet inconsistent thoughts leads to psychological tension and uncomfortable pressure (Cooper, 2007). The theory skillfully combines quantitative assumptions with qualitative observations of human cognition; cognitive dissonance's magnitude indicates the discrepancy between two cognitions (Reis, 2010). A greater dissonance ratio magnitude leads to more motivation for change. The thinker will analyze the resulting pressure by harmonizing the conflicting cognitions and making changes (Cooper, 2019). They can modify the dissonance ratio by either 1) changing behaviors to promote consistency with thoughts, 2) adjusting one of the dissonant thoughts, 3) adding consonant cognitions to adjust another thought's significance, or 4) reducing the perceived importance of one of the cognitions (Reis, 2010). The theory is broad enough so diverse academics can apply it to their work, yet it is still an integral component of the social psychology paradigm. His colleagues were amazed by the theory's intricate simplicity and reacted to the assertions, resulting in a scientific revolution within psychology (Kuhn, 2018).

### Colleague Feedback on the Theory

Peer reactions to the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance were predominantly positive, with some disagreement in its details. Subsequent social psychologists developed theories to either build on Festinger's work or clarify aspects that needed modifications or additional nuance (Cooper, 2019; Reis, 2010). Initially, his colleagues were shocked by his choice to test the theory by evaluating the response of conspiracy theorist Marian Keech's followers to her failed prophecy (Gazzaniga, 2007). In the Lake City Herald, Keech wrote that cosmic visitors would flood Lake City and rescue her followers in an extraterrestrial vehicle (Gazzaniga, 2007). No spaceships, aliens, or floods appeared, and Keech resolved her corresponding dissonance by asserting that God commended their faithful preparations by saving them from disaster (Gazzaniga, 2007). Festinger's peers were amazed that he selected such a controversial scenario to test his theory and were spellbound by the creativity of his experiment (Zajonc, 1990).

Festinger's colleagues recognized that the theory introduced no additional ideas but was intrigued by how he related concepts and produced an operational, generalizable assertion (Schachter, 1994). Most considered his theory innovative, stimulating, and intriguing (Cooper, 2007).

Outspoken supporters proclaimed that Festinger's work was "the most important development in social psychology to date" and were amazed by how it connected multiple concepts (Jones, 1976). In addition, the bold assumption that the subset psychology may not have arisen

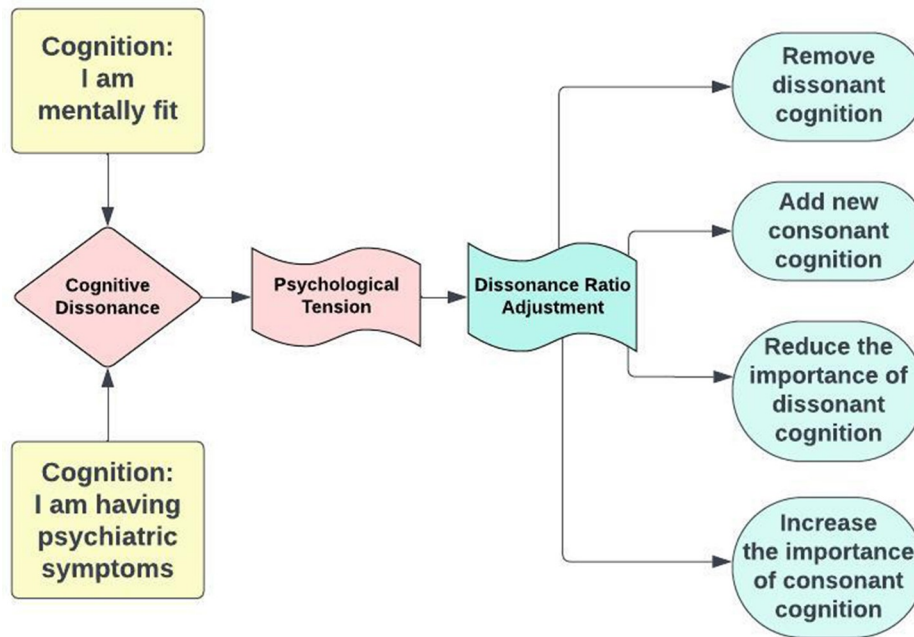
without the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance demonstrates his colleagues' ardent support. While mostly endorsed, Festinger's work also drew criticisms that ranged from minor to significant (Reis, 2010).

Some commentators suggested minimal adjustments to the theory, while others claimed the assertions contradicted their subdiscipline's paradigms. Festinger's graduate student, Elliot Aronson, recommended modifying the theory to reflect that one of the cognitions was about the self: dissonance was an incongruity between cognitions and self-perception (Cooper, 2007). Other scientists derived portions of the theory to formulate adjusted variations like the Theory of Behavior Justification, Bem's Model of Self-Perception, and Self-Affirmation Theory (Reis, 2010). However, the behaviorists were not so temperate with their feedback; they provided strong criticisms since the theory contradicted the fundamental assertions of their subdiscipline (Cooper, 2007; Reis, 2010). Rosenberg (1965) was a particularly outspoken critic who asserted that the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance is based on contaminated laboratory conditions and had limited real-world applicability. The behaviorists did not think the theory integrated social context and interpersonal dynamics, nor did they believe it considered the importance of situational factors in dissonance reduction (Reis, 2010; Rosenberg, 1965). Despite the negative reviews, Festinger's theory has stood one of life's most significant tests- time.

The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance has been reshaped but continues to be cited in modern topics studying relationships between cognition and motivation. Cooper and Hogg (2007) use the theory to support their discussion of how social bonds are strengthened and reinforced when people feel vicarious dissonance for others with whom they share a social identity. Then, Ciao and Latner (2011) developed a randomized controlled trial for a cognitive dissonance intervention study to address obesity stigma. The research team found that adjusting participant attitudes about people with obesity was a potential strategy to reduce the stigma surrounding obesity (Ciao & Latner, 2011). Pearce and Cooper (2007) used cognitive dissonance to study COVID-19 preventative behavior promotion. They found that introducing dissonant thoughts increased participants' likelihood of complying with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines (Pearce & Cooper, 2021). In addition, non-researcher writers have channeled Festinger's creativity while discussing the dissonance that readers experience while engaging with literary characters (Caracciolo, 2013). The theory's high level of abstraction and generalizability has allowed diverse scientists and writers to apply it to their work, demonstrating transferability to research on military members experiencing dissonance (Walker & Avant, 2019).

### Cognitive Dissonance and Military Research

Applying the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance to military research offers a robust framework through a social psychology lens (Reis, 2010). The literature indicates that national security and mission success hinge upon



**Figure 1.** *Cognitive Dissonance in Military Members with Psychological Symptoms*

the psychological strength of its servicemembers (Van Dillen et al., 2022). Military members must demonstrate mental fitness to maintain security clearance and gain workplace access. As a result, military members may perceive themselves to be mentally fit. However, the possibility of exposure to graphic images and disturbing information places military members at an increased risk for distress (Prince et al., 2015). Their security clearance level and commitment to mission confidentiality sometimes prohibit them from discussing mission-related stress with others (Van Dillen et al., 2022). Military members may experience dissonance when any resulting psychological symptoms challenge their self-perception as mentally fit (Cooper, 2007; Meyer et al., 2016).

The military members' dissonance causes them to view these symptoms as a cognitive vulnerability, leading to tension and distress (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). As a result, the servicemember experiences pressure to adjust the inconsistency, as demonstrated in Figure 1. Servicemembers can change the dissonant cognitions or modify their importance to adjust the dissonance ratio. Reducing the importance of their self-perceived mental strength or removing that cognition altogether may impact their ability to maintain mission readiness. In addition, focusing on their symptoms and increasing their importance could indicate psychological instability or accidental divulgence of mission information while receiving treatment. Military members may suppress their emotions to avoid impacting their jobs, leading to a discrepancy between inner and outer expression and further contributing to tension (Gross et al., 2006). Those who cannot remove the dissonant symptomology by seeking care or by self-treatment may instead add a new consonant condition, like stigma toward seeking mental health services (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019).

## Conclusion

Leon Festinger's innovation, charisma, and humility shaped his persona and groundbreaking contributions to psychology. The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance profoundly impacted experimental social psychology, other scientific disciplines, and modern culture. Festinger's legacy transcends generations as his theory informs contemporary research, with the potential for additional application and support for novel research. His theory can help explain dissonant cognitions experienced by military communities when they face contradictions in their self-perception and identity. Applying the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance to help evaluate novel research questions can promote innovation for global problems, aligning with Festinger's scientific priorities. Like Festinger's father, medical professionals caring for military members value people and their psychological well-being—there is life beyond the military.

## Author Note

The opinions and assertions expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences or the Department of Defense. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Felicia N. Katzovitz, MSN, RN-BC, at [finkatzovitz@gmail.com](mailto:finkatzovitz@gmail.com).

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