Cognitive Dissonance and Choice Rationalization

**Background**
Cognitive dissonance theory says we tend to rationalize decisions that we make in order to, among other things, protect our “self-concept”.

**Brehm experiment:**

1. subjects were shown a variety of objects
- electric sandwich press; desk lamp; stopwatch, transistor radio
- asked to rate the for attractiveness

2. Given choice between two items they considered equally attractive
- told they could take one home at end of the experiment

3. After making a choice, asked to rate all items again.

**Result:** upgraded the item they had chosen, downgraded the alternate not chosen.

Interpretation- convinced them selves they had made the right choice (buyer’s remorse)

**Questions:**
when does cognitive dissonance develop?

Does it occur only after a lot of experience with aversive consequences of dissonant cognitions?

Are humans unique in drive to avoid dissonant cognitions, or is it shared with primates?

Aronson & Carlsmith (1963) 4 yr olds who obeyed and experimenter’s warning not to play with an attractive toy later liked the toy less than children who didn’t follow warning.

Conclusion: children seek to make attitudes consistent with their beliefs; changed belief to rationalize not playing with toy.
Problem: didn’t look at self-driven decision

Pigeons prefer to eat from feeder that is associated with greater rather than lesser effort. Attributed to effort justification.


**Question**: would children and primates shift their attitude to fall in line with their decisions?

**Methods**: Modified free-choice paradigm used by Brehm for use with non-verbal populations

- assessed individuals’ preference for similar objects and determined 3 that were equally attractive (A, B, C)

- **Phase 1**: subjects received a choice between A and B

- **Phase 2**: second choice between whatever they did not select (either A or B) and C

**Prediction**: is subjects experience dissonance in choosing one equally preferred object over the other, then they would change attitude toward the unchosen item, liking it less.

So, in Phase 2, would choose the unchosen item less.

**Children**: children given different stickers, used smiley face rating scale to mark preference.

When subjects had rated the stickers repeatedly, experimenters determined triads of equal liking

Choice Condition: given one choice between A and B (chose one to take home) Then given similar choice between unchosen alternative and C (novel yet equally preferred one)

**Monkeys**: Monkeys offered M&Ms

**Results**: Children and monkeys more likely to prefer Option C in choice condition, but not in non-choice, when experimenter had chosen item.
**Conclusion:** suggests that monkeys and children change their current preference to fit with past decision.

Is this rationalization very complex (explicit agenda to rewrite history to make ourselves look or feel better) or is it simpler than we thought?

-Since it is seen in young children and monkeys, suggests that that drive to reduce dissonance is innate and automatic

**Lieberman et al (2001)**

-looked at cognitive dissonance in amnesics

-asked to rank paintings

-then chose among selected ones and ranked whole group again

-Second ranking was presumably after conscious recall, so they wouldn’t have need to rewrite history.

-yet, still showed decreased preference for paintings they had not chosen.
Evolutionary advantage of “sour grapes”?

- Once decision has been made, second guessing may just interfere with more important business. Agonizing over food choice wastes energy that could be better expended in looking for next meal.

Challenge to Cognitive Dissonance

- Chen (2008) says there is a logical fallacy in experiments

-Monty Hall Problem

3 doors, chose one Door #1

Monty opens door #2 (no car)

Stick to Door #1 or switch?

You should always switch.

If you stick with Door 1, you’ll win only if original choice was right (happens 33% of time on average)

If you switch, you’ll win whenever your original choice was wrong (happens 66% of time)

Monkey Dissonance example:

Monkey chooses R over B.

Given B and G

Chooses G (66%) B (33%)

- Seems to be consistent with choice rationalization
- But, Chen says monkey’s distaste for unchosen color can be explained with statistics alone

Relative preference might be very slight, so initial choice wasn’t arbitrary

- monkey’s original choice discloses info that changes odds: if monkey favors R over B, 66% chance that it also started out with preference for G over B - explains why monkeys chose G 66% of time