

# INCREASING COGNITIVE DISSONANCE BY A *FAIT ACCOMPLI*<sup>1</sup>

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**A** RECENT theory by Festinger (1957) attempts to state the conditions under which discrepancies between cognitions produce "cognitive dissonance," a state of tension that motivates the individual to reduce or eliminate the discrepancies. One of the conditions that may be necessary for the creation of cognitive dissonance is that there be some element of volition. The theory states, for example, that a person who is completely forced to behave in a manner he would avoid if possible, experiences no dissonance. On the other hand, a *fait accompli*—i.e., an event outside of the person's control—might conceivably create dissonance if that same event would have led to the opposite behavior had it been predictable at a prior choice point. The purpose of this paper, then, is to report an experiment in which a *fait accompli* does appear to have increased cognitive dissonance.

The theoretical expectations may be stated succinctly. If a person is induced by the promise of a small prize to eat a disliked food, he should experience dissonance. If other things are held constant, the amount of dissonance can be increased by increasing the amount of the disliked food to be eaten. A person who is experiencing such dissonance should try, in proportion to its magnitude, to reduce it by convincing himself that he likes the food more than he originally thought.

If, then, the amount of expected eating is increased by a *fait accompli* after the initial decision to eat has occurred, and this is accompanied by increased liking, it may be concluded that a *fait accompli* can affect the magnitude of dissonance.

## METHOD

In order to examine the effect of a *fait accompli*, eighth-grade students were offered attractive prizes for eating a small portion of a disliked vegetable.

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About half of them were told, after eating the vegetable, that their parents would be informed which vegetable they ate. Liking for the vegetable was measured before and after this procedure.

*The pre-experimental questionnaire.* Approximately three weeks prior to the beginning of the experiment, questionnaires were given by teachers to all eighth-grade students in a New Haven Junior High School.<sup>3</sup> Students were told that the questionnaire was sponsored by a nonprofit organization interested in people's eating habits. The questionnaire asked for each of 34 vegetables, "Considering everything about it (taste, smell, appearance, texture), to what extent do you like or dislike this vegetable?" Answers were indicated by making an X on any one of 61 dots running along a straight line and identified each 10 points by the following labels: like very much; like a lot; like a little; neither; dislike a little; dislike a lot; dislike very much. Subjects' responses were then scored from plus 3.0 for "like very much" to minus 3.0 for "dislike very much."

*Experimental procedure.* Subjects (Ss) were given passes during school hours to come one at a time to take part in a food-testing program. When an S arrived, the experimenter (E) introduced himself as being a representative of a fictitious consumer organization, whose business it was to test products and publish reports on them in order to help people in their shopping. It was explained that the organization was at present conducting a study of a number of vegetables by testing each for its food value in terms of vitamins and minerals and also by asking all kinds of people what they thought about them. E then said that what he wanted the S to do was answer some questions but only about one vegetable in order to get good information about that one. Before being given the main experimental questionnaire, the S was asked to answer some simple questions about his age, his favorite and most disliked foods, how often the vegetable picked for him was served in his home, and how often he ate it when it was served. It was also explained at this point that the vegetable in question had been picked at random, though actually it had been picked because it was one of the ones he most disliked (it was at least at -2.0 on the prequestionnaire). The S was then asked to fill out the main questionnaire carefully and accurately. To stress the anonymous nature of the questionnaires, the S was given a plain Manila envelope in which to put them when completed.

After the main questionnaire was completed, E said,

While we feel we get good information by asking a person to carefully fill out a questionnaire this way, we also know that we may get different kinds of

<sup>3</sup>For their help in conducting this study, the author wishes to thank Louisa Willard, Psychologist for the New Haven Schools, Frank Carr, Principal of Troupe Junior High School, Mrs. Connolly, and the eighth-grade teachers, especially Mrs. Himmelfarb.

answers to these questions if a person actually tastes some of the vegetable before filling out the questionnaire. So we would like to have everyone eat a little of the vegetable and then answer some further questions about it. But we also realize that you might not like to eat just anything we put in front of you so the rest of this is completely up to you. You can stop right here without doing anything more at all, or you can eat a small dish of the vegetable and answer some more questions. However, to get as many people as possible to give us this further information, we are offering a prize to those who do go on. The prize consists of either two 45 or 78 rpm records of your own choice, or two tickets for movies of your own choice. You can do whichever you want. You can leave right now, or you can eat a small dish of — (name of vegetable) and get whichever of the two prizes you want, two phonograph records or two movie tickets.

If the *S* chose to quit he was thanked for his help and allowed to return to class. If he chose to continue, he was served a small dish of the vegetable, heated if appropriate. This constituted the *Low Consequence* experimental condition.

In the *High Consequence* condition, *Ss* were given exactly the same instructions. However, in order to create the impression that their choice to eat the vegetable would result in consequent further eating of it, they were casually given, when nearly finished eating, these further instructions:

Oh, I almost forgot to mention that one of the reports we plan to put out from this study will simply be a letter to the parents of each person who takes part, just indicating which vegetable that person ate.<sup>4</sup> This information, which would likely have made many hesitate to go ahead with the eating if they had known about it, may be considered a *fait accompli*.

When the *S* had finished eating, he was asked to fill out again the main questionnaire. In making the request *E* mentioned that some people changed one way, some another, and some didn't change at all. He also stressed that the *S* should be as careful and accurate as possible and, finally, that the second questionnaire, like the first, was completely anonymous and to be slipped into the Manila envelope when completed.

When the *S* had finished the questionnaire, he was asked to choose which prize he wanted and told that the prizes would be sent in two or three weeks. He was also asked not to talk to other students about what happened in the testing procedure.<sup>5</sup>

When the study was completed, its true purpose was

<sup>4</sup> The idea for this manipulation came from some pretest *Ss* who spontaneously said, "Boy, would my mother like to know I'm eating this!"

<sup>5</sup> Informal interviewing of *Ss* in the later part of the experiment indicated that there was a moderate amount of talking about the experiment. Most *Ss* had heard, before participating, what some of the vegetables were, that some people actually ate the vegetables, that prizes were being given away, and what the prizes were. None showed evidence, however, of being aware of the High Consequence Manipulation.

fully explained to all *Ss*. The prizes were given as promised.

*The experimental questionnaires.* The first experimental questionnaire contained two important questions. The first of these asked *Ss* to indicate on a 51-point line with six equally spaced labels running from "every meal" to "never," how often the vegetable chosen for them was served at home. The second question, using an identical scale, asked how often they ate the vegetable when it was served. The main experimental questionnaire contained a question identical to that used on the pre-experimental questionnaire to measure liking for the vegetable.<sup>6</sup>

*Design.* In all, 20 *Ss* were run in the Low Consequence condition, 19 were run in the High Consequence condition. While an attempt was made to use the vegetables with equal frequency, this was only partly successful. Inspection of the dependent variables, however, reveals no large differences between vegetables.

## RESULTS

Eating a small amount of a disliked vegetable should create some dissonance and consequent increase in liking in order to reduce the dissonance. If, in addition, the *fait accompli* (the High Consequence manipulation) increases dissonance, then persons exposed to it should experience greater dissonance and thus increase their liking for the vegetable more than those who are not exposed to it.

The mean change in Liking was therefore computed for *Ss* in each of the two experimental conditions. The prediction was confirmed in that the mean increased Liking for the High Consequence condition (3.76) was greater than the mean increased Liking for the Low Consequence condition (2.32). The difference between the conditions is significant at beyond the .01 level.<sup>7</sup>

While the instructions for the High Consequence condition do not obviously advocate liking the vegetable, it is conceivable they were interpreted in that way by the *Ss*. The differential increased liking for the vegetable between the two conditions might simply reflect differential "endorsement" of the vegetable by the "consumer organization." Thus our original explanation in terms of "dissonance reduction" requires further support to be cogent. We must therefore examine the manipulation and its effect more closely.

<sup>6</sup> The main questionnaire also contained several questions included to gather data for a larger study of which this experiment was a part.

<sup>7</sup> All *p* values in this paper were obtained by two-tailed *t* tests.

It will be remembered that right at the beginning of the experiment all *Ss* were asked to show how often their vegetable was served at home, and how often they ate it when it was served. If the "dissonance" explanation is correct, then the High Consequence manipulation, which depends on an implied increase in frequency of eating at home, should work best for *Ss* who indicated a large discrepancy between frequency of serving and frequency of eating. *Ss* who indicated little or no discrepancy between serving and eating should have experienced little or no increase in dissonance from the High Consequence manipulation. Therefore, those *Ss* who indicated a high discrepancy in frequency should show a greater increase in Liking from the Low to the High Consequence condition than should those who indicated a low discrepancy in frequency. If, on the other hand, the "endorsement" explanation is correct, there would be no reason to expect differential results between *Ss* indicating high, and *Ss* indicating low, discrepancy.

To make the indicated analysis, *Ss* within each experimental condition were split at the median into high and low discrepancy groups. For each of these groups the mean change in Liking was computed. It was found that for those individuals who indicated a low discrepancy in frequencies, the mean difference in Liking change (.67) between Low and High Consequence conditions was negligible, while for those who indicated a high discrepancy the difference (2.01) was significant at beyond the .01 level. These data thus support the conclusion that the High Consequence manipulation implies an increased frequency of eating at home and thereby increases the magnitude of dissonance and pressure to increase one's liking.

Further examination of the present data for evidence relevant to the "dissonance" explanation turned up an interesting phenomenon. *Ss* within each condition were divided, as close to the median as possible, according to their initial dislike for their vegetable. For each of these subgroups the final mean Liking score was computed.<sup>8</sup> In this way it was found that

<sup>8</sup> Increased Liking from regression should increase with more extreme initial dislike and thus make the change scores unequal. For this reason, final Liking scores, which are not biased by regression or ceiling effects, were used for this analysis.

within both conditions those persons who indicated the greater initial dislike subsequently indicated greater Liking than did those with less initial dislike. Within the High Consequence condition, this difference is significant beyond the .01 level, and within the Low Consequence condition the difference yields a two-tailed *t* of about 1.0. It is improbable that persons with extreme initial dislike have less resistance to increasing their liking than do those with moderate initial dislike. We may therefore conclude that the greater was the individual's initial dislike, the greater was the experimentally produced pressure on him to increase his liking for the vegetable. This finding is consistent with dissonance theory, for as initial dislike increases, so should the dissonance from having to eat the vegetable.

#### DISCUSSION

Other research on the effects of a *fait accompli* has been imprecise as a result of the limitations of field studies (e.g., Clark, 1953), or, if done in the laboratory, has failed to produce experimentally adequate information (e.g., Brehm & Cohen, 1959). The present experiment, however, unequivocally demonstrates attitude change from a *fait accompli*, which is relevant to prior induction of unpleasant behavior.

If the differential increases in liking in the present experiment were indeed a result of differential amounts of dissonance, then the conceptual definition of dissonance has been further specified. The specification is not complete, however, for it may be that a *fait accompli* affects the magnitude of dissonance only when it is related to a previous choice. Further research is necessary to supply the answer to this and similar hunches.

A finding of perhaps equal theoretical interest was the relationship between initial strength of attitude and subsequent change. The more unfavorable was the initial attitude, the more favorable it tended to be at the end of the experiment. This relationship would be inconsistent with any theory of attitude change that ignores the size of discrepancy between positions held and advocated. It is, however, entirely consistent with dissonance theory. As the discrepancy between attitude and behavior increases, the amount of dissonance

and consequent pressure to reduce it increase. Thus, the greater is the discrepancy between attitude and behavior, the greater will be the subsequent pressure to change the attitude. There is, of course, some resistance to changing one's attitude. The magnitude of this resistance might be expected to increase as the individual's position becomes more extreme. Under the conditions of the present experiment, the pressure to reduce dissonance apparently increased more rapidly with increasing discrepancy than did the resistance against change. This experiment centered around a relatively individualistic attitude (food preference). If, on the other hand, the initial attitude were supported by stronger, external sources of reality, it might not be overcome by the pressure to reduce dissonance. Again, further research is needed to explore the problem.

#### SUMMARY

This paper presents a study illustrating the effect of a *fait accompli* on cognitive dissonance. Eighth-grade boys and girls were induced by the promise of a prize to eat disliked vegetables. Some were additionally told, while eat-

ing, that their parents would learn what vegetable they had eaten, with the implication the Ss would have to eat more at home. A questionnaire measured liking for the vegetable before and after the experiment.

It was found that the *fait accompli* of implied further eating produced a greater increase in liking. This experiment therefore further specifies Festinger's concept of cognitive dissonance. In addition, it was found that persons initially least favorable toward the vegetable tended to be most favorable after the experiment. This result was seen as consistent with dissonance theory but not with some other theories of attitude change.

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