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Harold E. Nelson

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

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ANTHROPOLOGY

A Cross-Cultural Evaluation of Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

HAROLD E. NELSON

University of Minnesota. Minneapolis

Festinger's Dissonance Theory: The purpose of this paper is to attempt an evaluation, in cross-cultural terms, of Leon Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, as a research tool. The specific problem to be treated is a consideration of the extent to which dissonance theory can be made applicable in varying situations in diverse cultural settings. Prior to an exposition of methodology, a short abstract of the hypothesis and some of its ramifications is appropriate.

Festinger (1957:3) has used the term, "cognition" or "cognitive element", to categorize "knowledge, opinion, or belief" held in regard to the nature of one's universe, observable or otherwise, and to man's relations within that universe. Cognitive dissonance refers to a state of inconsistency between two or more of these cognitions, and its counterpart, consonance, refers to consistency between those cognitive elements which bear any relevance to one another. The essence of Festinger's basic hypothesis is that dissonance by nature generates psychological discomfort and will produce in those affected: (1) efforts or pressure to achieve consonance through reduction or elimination of dissonance; and, (2) a tendency to avoid any cognitions which might cause or increase dissonance (Festinger, 1957:3).

A dissonance situation can serve to illustrate the theoretical working of these processes. For this purpose, an application of a dilemma of the contemporary American taxpayer will suffice. The theory states that dissonance exists when two or more cognitions are not consistent with one another. Assuming this to be the case, the taxpayer experiences dissonance when: (1) he believes that additional governmental services are necessary; and,

(2) he recognizes that such services will cause increased expenditures by the government, and he believes that taxes are already too high. According to the theory, the taxpayer will try to reduce dissonance. Here alternatives are present. He may press for reduction in administrative costs to allow a reallocation of funds to favor services, or he may favor increased expenditures with no tax increase by increasing indebtedness. Furthermore, the taxpayer will try to avoid additional dissonance. If he chose the first alternative course above, he might ignore warnings that reductions in administrative costs may contribute to unemployment. If he chose the latter alternative, he might ignore warnings that a heavy insolvency is inflationary and injurious to international credit. In either case, the taxpayer could be considered as avoiding dissonance—increasing cognitions. As other ramifications of the theory are discussed below, they will likewise be applied to our hypothetical example of the taxpayer.

Festinger's theory provides for a theoretically calculable means of deriving the amount of dissonance which might arise out of any given relation. Factors here in consideration would include, first of all, the degree of relevance between cognitions (Festinger, 1957:13). For instance, to the average taxpayer, not being of high economic sophistication, the amounts of taxes paid and governmental services received are more relevant to one another than is either to the current Dow-Jones Industrial Averages. A second factor for measuring dissonance is the magnitude of dissonance between cognitions, as a function of their importance (Festinger, 1957:16). To the taxpayer, the amount of taxes paid is likely to be

more important than the Industrial Averages; therefore the dissonance arising from a relation involving the former is likely to exceed that arising from a relation involving the latter. A third factor is the number of elements in each of two clusters which are inconsistent with each other in any set of relevant cognitions (Festinger, 1957:17). Thus there may be a number of related cognitions, such as ideas about economic growth, which would either strengthen or oppose a cognition favoring lower taxes, and which could be lumped in opposite categories and enumerated.

The total amount of dissonance derived from the tabulation of factors above would determine a proportional amount of pressure to reduce dissonance (Festinger, 1957:18). Using those same factors which contribute to dissonance, it becomes evident that, in order to achieve consonance through the reduction of dissonance, one must: (1) change the relevance between cognitions (if the taxpayer became an investor, the Industrial Averages would be somewhat more relevant to tax rates than previously); (2) change the importance of one or more cognitions (if the taxpayer became an investor, he might become concerned about government performance of those services which are in competition with comparable private services, such as utilities); or, (3) change the number of cognitive elements in one or both of the inconsistent clusters. For instance, our taxpayer-investor might develop a cognition about economic growth through private investment, which would tend to support lower taxes, and which at the same time would negate some cognition about governmental services designed to stimulate economic growth. He would then add a cognition to the lower taxes cluster of elements and subtract a cognition from the government services cluster of elements. Such changes might in turn cause him to change the relevance or importance of cognitions about economic interest groups, such as his Chamber of Commerce or political affiliation. Each of these changes would generally represent a strain toward consonance.

As a social and psychological stimulus, Festinger has attributed dissonance an importance of the first order. "Cognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction. It is a very different motivation from what psychologists are used to dealing with but, as we shall see, nonetheless powerful" (Festinger, 1957:3). Festinger (1957:4) also calls dissonance reduction "a basic process in humans". Thus an equation is made between dissonance and the biological requisites as primary stimuli.

In testing the value and/or validity of this hypothesis as a cross-cultural research tool, one must find a means of circumventing a serious problem inherent in the theory itself. This problem is that the theory has a built-in self validating system based upon an assumption of a universal psychic tendency for logical consistency. A clue to a test of this validity might be found in the equation of consonance, as a behavioral and perceptive stimulus, with the primary biological drives. The process of dis-

sonance reduction to achieve consonance can be considered essentially a functional problem. If behavioral and perceptive phenomena can be shown to have collateral functions to which are attached greater social importance, or which have a wider and more general application than the function of dissonance-removal, dissonance as a primary stimulus may have to be reconsidered. For instance, using the taxpayer example, ideas held with regard to investment and economic growth can be attributed much more comprehensive functions than merely the reduction of dissonance for the taxpayer. Their primary function is instead in support of a large integrated economic system. The same ideas thus function somewhat differently on different levels, making the primacy of the function of dissonance removal subject to other circumstances.

Furthermore, a consideration of dissonance and consonance as a functional problem reveals that the theory, through its equation of dissonance with biological stimuli which require fulfillment, establishes dissonance as dysfunctional, and consonance as functional, to the psychological comfort of those persons affected. If it can be demonstrated that under certain circumstances, the perpetuation of some dissonance is actually functional to psychological comfort, or to the maintenance of vital institutions (Gibbs, personal communication), the applicability of the theory can be further delimited. It might be shown, for instance, that a continuance of a dissonant relation between cognitions about taxation and governmental services is necessary to provide a moderation between the one extreme, insufficient government, and the other, spending beyond the means of the economy, either of which could create a greater discomfort. Perpetuation of the dissonant relation could also function to allow a continued opportunity for mobility within the economic system.

Such functional considerations will provide the methodological basis for further evaluation of consonance achievement in this paper. First, however, it is necessary to establish criteria for ranking functions with one another according to which are the more general and comprehensive.

According to Radcliffe-Brown (1952:180), "The function of any recurrent activity, . . . , is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it makes to the maintenance of the structural community". He likewise defines the term, "function", as the "contribution which a partial activity makes to the total activity of which it is a part" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952:181). An activity functions specifically within the more general functioning of a larger complex of activities, eventually coalescing with all other functions of activities in the functioning of the total social system. Thus a ranking of functions can be inferred in a relationship between those which are more general and comprehensive and those which are more specific and limited in applicability.

Having discussed implications of the theory, one may now proceed to cross-cultural considerations. For this purpose, two situational problems have been selected

involving cognitive inconsistency from literature on a Micronesian ghost complex and on Nupe witchcraft.

Ghosts and Non-Aggression on Ifaluk Atoll: Ethnographic material for this culture is taken from the works of Melford Spiro and Edwin Burrows done in conjunction with the CIMA (Co-ordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology) project provided in several articles cited below. Ifaluk is a small atoll (about one-half square mile of land surrounding a lagoon about 1 square mile in area) inhabited by about 250 people, located in the central Carolines. The population is divided into eight matrilineal clans, five of which are ranked in the first five positions, the last three being about equal in rank. The ranking is as follows: (1) Kovalu; (2) Sauvelarik; (3) Mangaulevar; (4) Rapevelu; (5) Sauwel; (6) Kailangailuk, Kailangalualea, and Bwel (Burrows, 1952: 13-25).

Government is through five hereditary chiefs whose titles are held by the first four ranked clans (i.e. Clan No. 1 holds title No. 1, Clan No. 2 holds titles No. 2 and 4, Clan No. 3 holds title No. 3 and Clan No. 4 holds title No. 5). The fifth clan, Sauwel, holds the title of a special messenger. Kovalu is privileged with sole rights to sea turtle, the most highly prized food. Sauvelarik has a similar privilege with respect to yellow-finned tuna. In addition, these two clans each enjoy sole rights of access to one of two special tracts of land (Burrows, 1952:13-25).

Residence is matrilineal, and each of thirty homesteads is inhabited by a matrilineal extended family. Uelep, the restricted tract of Kovalu, is inhabited by the senior matrilineage of that clan, and the husbands of the women in that lineage (Burrows, 1952:17-18).

Despite a strong emphasis on rank and an aversion to insubordination, there is an overshadowing emphasis on equivocation and non-aggression. This emphasis has been termed the supreme value of Ifaluk society (Spiro, 1953: 381). Spiro (1952:501) has established a functional relationship between this "ethic of non-aggression" and the size of the atoll: "a necessary condition for the optimal adaptation of a society inhabiting a minute atoll". Any trouble cases would likely be unusually disruptive due to the maximal incidence of face-to-face contacts. Furthermore, Spiro (cited by Burrows, 1952:25) has shown that behavior corresponds almost without exception to this ethic. "What is striking about Ifaluk, however, is the fact there is no discrepancy between its cultural values (the ideal culture) and its actual behavior patterns (the real culture). Not one individual could remember a single case of murder, rape, robbery, or fighting; nor did the ethnographer witness such behavior in his seven-month study".

Along with this non-aggression ethic goes a belief that "man is born 'good' and 'normal'" (Spiro, 1952:448). Spiro (1953:381) has noted: "according to both the Ifaluk and ethnographic observation there are no evil people in Ifaluk." The innate predisposition of the Ifaluk would fall roughly within the "good and unalterable" category in the Kluckhohn (1950:378) scheme. However, it

is reported that children, upon the sudden lapse of indulgence accompanying the birth of younger siblings, engage in an extremely aggressive and antisocial set of behavior patterns. Spiro (1953:380) reports the following behavior: "fighting and attacking, wilful disobedience, destruction of property, temper tantrums, shyness, and 'negativism'." Festinger (1957:23) has postulated a dissonance relationship in this situation. "It seems clear that the belief about the nature of people is dissonant with the knowledge of the behavior of the children in this culture." Spiro (1953:381) has further pointed out that Ifaluk can perceive evil not only in children, but in themselves, as a projection of their aggressive drives which they have, of necessity, internalized.

Ifaluk religion is characterized by a preoccupation with ghosts. "Ghosts are of two varieties, benevolent and malevolent. The former are the immortal souls of dead, benevolent mortals; the latter are the immortal souls of dead, malevolent mortals" (Spiro, 1953:377). Belief in the malevolent ghosts, by virtue of their putative origins, could also be considered dissonant with the beliefs regarding the nature of people, as the Ifaluk maintain that there are not, nor have ever been, any malevolent people.

The malevolent ghosts, *alusengau* (ghosts in general are *alus*; the benevolent ones, *alusisalup*), are believed responsible for the initiation of disease in anyone belonging to their lineage. They are also responsible for other unexplained phenomena, such as falling trees, noises, typhoons, etc., as well as for irregular or immoral behavior (Spiro, 1952:497). Spiro attributes functionality to this belief in ghosts in that it "restricts uncertainty" in areas where the Ifaluk have no technological control. However, that ethnographer also claims a greater dysfunction for the ghost belief, that of anxiety and fear of the *alusengau*, sometimes of sufficient intensity to cause sickness and death. This observation led Spiro to seek a yet more crucial and important function of the belief. He found that function in the maintenance of the non-aggression ethic which is so vital to internal order in Ifaluk society. Without the *alus*, upon which internalized aggressive tendencies could be projected, those tendencies might be directed toward persons, contributing to a breakdown of non-aggression (Spiro, 1952:498-501).

We have noted above that Festinger observed a dissonant relation between cognitions about the nature of people and observation of child behavior. He has pointed out that this dissonance is alleviated by the Ifaluk belief that aggressive behavior on the part of children is caused by these *alus*. This is an instance of dissonance reduction through the addition of a new cognitive element in support of the non-aggression cognitions (Festinger, 1957:23). According to this view, the behavior of the children would be consistent with the non-aggression and 'people are good' beliefs, since it is the ghosts, rather than the children, which are acting (through possession of the children's bodies) in an aggressive manner. However, Festinger's basic hypothesis includes a stipulation that additional dissonance will be avoided (Festinger, 1957:3). In this case, as we have seen, the interjection of these *alus*, as souls of malevolent decedents, is inconsistent with the

idea that people are intrinsically good, thus producing at least potential dissonance.

It seems doubtful that the Ifaluk would introduce such a cosmologically inconsistent element as the *alus* merely to justify functionally the behavior of their children, as Festinger has suggested. In consequence, we must view this dissonance case in the context of a larger frame of reference; namely that mentioned above regarding the functions of *alus* in the maintenance of the ethic of non-aggression. Projection of the blame for aggressive and anti-social behavior of children upon ghosts appears to be part of the socialization process through which children learn to internalize tendencies for such behavior, as they must in adult life, and to project resultant frustrations and aggressions upon the *alus*, a common enemy of all the Ifaluk. According to Spiro (1953:381), "the Ifaluk child accepts the culturally-given belief in ghosts because this belief is in accord with his previous experiences. The Ifaluk child has learned to perceive his world as both threatening and gratifying and, hence, he can give ready assent to a belief which postulates the same kind of a world." Assuming the accuracy of Spiro's assessment of the importance of non-aggression in Ifaluk, the latter function would be clearly more important than Festinger's function of removal of psychological discomfort due to an inconsistency between behavior and belief.

Furthermore, it is apparent that in this Ifaluk case, a significant amount of dissonance persists in the rationalization of child behavior regardless of the solution. We have seen that two factors are invariable. The ethic of non-aggression and the orientation of the goodness of people are indispensable to the orderly maintenance of society. The aggressive tendencies of children persist because of reactions to their rejection by their mothers in favor of new-born siblings. With respect to children's behavior and non-aggression, the interjection of the ghost complex eliminated dissonance, but at the expense of creating other dissonance, real or potential, between the cognitions of intrinsically good people and malevolent ghosts. Thus a certain amount of dissonance must be necessary to serve the primary function of the ghost complex, according to Spiro, a siphon for the aggressive tendencies of Ifaluk individuals.

Power as a Factor in Nupe Witchcraft: The Nupe inhabit a low open region in Central Nigeria, just north of the Niger and west of the Kaduna River. The population of about 500,000 lives in scattered villages of thatched huts, each village accommodating about 1,000 inhabitants, and in smaller settlements in the bush which are politically attached to the villages. Residence is patrilocal and a family compound houses a patrilineal extended family and sometimes miscellaneous relatives, friends, or slaves (Nadel, 1935a:257-65). The villages are governed by councils of elders, made up of *nusazhi*, the titled heads of the extended families. The village chief, or *zhitsú*, holds his office either through promotion, or through heredity, the latter being either in one family or rotated between two or more (Nadel, 1935a:265-68).

Villages are loosely federated into sub-tribes with a

recognized identity, and these in turn are grouped together in the vague tribal category known as Nupe. A state organization is headed by a king who owes tributary allegiance to the Fulani kingdoms to the North. His authority over the villages included taxation, adjudication, and confirmation of appointments of village chiefs. This administration is usually handled by agents, generally slave officials (Nadel, 1935a:271-94).

Nupe religion is characterized by a thin crust of Islam overlying a belief in spirits, ghosts, and the reincarnated souls of ancestors. The human soul is conceived dualistically: the "life soul," or *ráyí*, encompassing life substance and perception; the "shadow," or *fifingi*, being detachable, as in dreams (Nadel, 1935b:428-29). This "life soul" may be destroyed by the shadow souls of witches which roam invisibly at night (Nadel, 1935b:428-29).

Material pertaining to Nupe witchcraft has been obtained from S. F. Nadel's paper, "Witchcraft in Four African Societies" (Nadel, 1952:18-29). Witches in Nupe are women. They are believed to be organized in an association headed by a woman who is also head of the female traders. Their victims are usually men who have somehow come under their dominance. Yet, it is believed that, for witchcraft to be effective, it is necessary that the women's power be complemented by the men's. Men's power, *eshe*, is considered essentially good and can be used to combat witchcraft. Although men's power is necessary for effectiveness, men are never accused of witchcraft (Nadel, 1952:19).

There is an apparent dissonant relation between the cognition that men possess the power to defeat witchcraft, and the cognition that men's power is necessary to complement a witch's power. However, no pressure to remove this dissonance is evident. The dissonant relation appears to be a function of sex antagonism caused by an independent and often superior economic position held by women who have become successful as itinerant traders. According to Nadel, husbands resent indebtedness and loss of financial prerogatives to their wives, but since most are peasant agriculturists, they have little redress. In addition, the trading patterns create a morality problem. Ideally, the trade is reserved for childless women, but the lure of financial independence leads many women to ignore this norm. Many women are also prompted to remain voluntarily childless through abortion or contraceptives, in order to continue their trade. In consequence, "the men must submit to the domineering and independent leanings of the women; they resent their own helplessness", building a definite feeling of hostility toward women (Nadel, 1952:21-22).

This hostility is projected by the men upon witches who are "scapegoats" (Nadel, 1952:27-29). By possessing power which can counteract witchcraft, men can retain at least some mastery over the situation. Without the concession that a man's power had been compromised in an act of witchcraft any successful incidence of witchcraft would deny this mastery. Hence, the dissonance is necessary to maintain a means by which men can counter a threatening position of women in the economic and social order.

Conclusions: Ethnographic material in Nupe witchcraft and the Ifaluk ghost complex, which have been here considered as problems involving cognitive inconsistency, demonstrates that there are situations in which cognitive readjustment is an important aspect of adaptation of society to a specific set of social or environmental circumstances. However the material does not substantiate Festinger's claim that the presence of cognitive dissonance will invariably cause attempts to eliminate or reduce that dissonance. In this paper we have shown:

(1) There are functions for institutions which are clearly more important to the maintenance of society than the reduction of dissonance. Such is the case with Nupe witchcraft which functions to maintain a fictional social position for males, even though they lack the economic basis for that position. Likewise the Ifaluk ideal of non-aggression and the projection of hostile tendencies upon ghosts are more important than the dissonance which might be obvious between a cognition that people are intrinsically good and the observable behavior of their children. This indicates that Festinger's emphasis on dissonance as a stimulus is overextended. Dissonance removal is clearly subordinate to socialization and integrative functions.

(2) There are circumstances in which the perpetuation of some dissonance is necessary in order to maintain contradictory institutions, such as the marriage system and the economic order in Nupe. Thus it is evident that inconsistencies between cognitions, or dissonance, can actually be beneficial to psychological comfort, since, as in Nupe, the suspension between the two possible solutions of the problem—involving the restructuring of either the marriage institutions or the women's trading institutions—is less likely to cause discomfort than would the loss of either institution. Gibbs (personal communication) has suggested that Festinger could counter this with the argument that discomfort would result only when such inconsistencies are consciously perceived. While Festinger's theory allows for reinterpretation of cognitions, such an admission would require him to re-examine his conclusions about the Ifaluk, for whom he assumed a dissonant relation (between the cognitions about the nature of people and the behavior of children) must be obvious (Festinger, 1957:23).

It might be argued that the witchcraft itself is a response to a dissonant relation between cognitions about the marriage and economic institutions. This would mean that the dissonance engendered by inconsistent views of

a man's role in witchcraft would be functional because its magnitude is less than the dissonance which would result from a clash between the contradictory institutions. However, Nadel points out specific dysfunctional aspects of witchcraft itself; namely that the stresses on society are markedly increased by the accusations of witchcraft, the resultant punishments, and retaliations by the kin of the accused. He calls witchcraft "a poor and ineffectual palliative", rather than a cure for the problem (Nadel, 1952:29). All of this emphasizes that the functional aspects of dissonance and consonance are more complex than Festinger has been aware.

Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance appears a valuable resource for cross-cultural studies primarily because it points up the fact that a theoretical base for handling problems of cognitive readjustment is necessary. This paper has demonstrated some of the inadequacies inherent in the theory. Undoubtedly there are many other weaknesses for which refinements would be in order. These refinements must come from applications of the theory to specific problems. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the theory shows much promise as a methodological approach to cognition studies in both individual psychology and dynamics of social change.

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