

Cultural Dissonance

James F Welles*

Department of Psychology, New York University, East Marion, New York, USA

Description

Cognitive dissonance (cogdis) is defined as an uncomfortable condition resulting when an individual holds contradictory beliefs. Obviously, stupidity helps in the process, in that the dumber a person is, the easier it is for her to hold contradictory beliefs. For us, we expand cogdis to cover the condition of a deeply held belief at odds with relevant behavior as in Crusaders who killed for Christ or a corrupt cop. In addition, we extend the principle beyond the individual to society in general, in that we find a culture may profess a belief which is contradicted by the conduct of its members (culdis), as when the institution of science is set up to protect errant members rather than correct their errors [1].

While it is reasonable to presume that a dissonance creates a psychic tension which humans ache to resolve, this commonly is not the case: people simply live with their contradictions. As Walt Whitman observed, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then. I contradict myself." [2]. This is not much of a stretch, since one can posit that a behavioral system is an expression of an underlying belief system—so you have a behavioral belief system at odds with a theoretical/ethical belief system. The expected dissonance is common mitigated by word games, which reduce cognitive tension by redefining everything to suit the super-ego individual and society. The oddity is that people then get upset when confronted by some aggravating person who, like the honest cop, presumes to act according to the explicit verbal creed and challenges the society to adapt to her, live up to itself or admit its basic ethic is a not particularly amusing self-inflicted joke.

Not so amusing is the plight of music in the 20th century. Barbershop and marches sufficed for the 19th, when a case for cogdis could be made—people tried to make sense of their world or find some common functional relationship between what they said and did. The syncopation of the rags was the first hint at fragmentation. This was followed by deliberate dissonance—flatted fifths, major sevenths, ninths, elevenths, thirteenth and sounds indescribable. The Modernaires of the '50's and 60's pop to mind as representative of music of the overpopulated. There just were not enough notes to go around. Someone always had to be and was off.

If they hit a perfect chord, something was wrong. It was music for discomfort/dissonance. Not only did it not sound nice, it was not supposed to, and no one wanted it to. Generally, all that remains steady is the most basic element of music

—tempo: When we are doomed, constant rhythm will go haywire.

Opposed to cogdis is F. Scott Fitzgerald's insight, that the mark of first rate mind is the ability to hold contradictory ideas at the same time and still function. For my money, Festinger—the original champion of cogdis—was being superegoish [3]: His view was the way a reasonable mind should function. He and his have gathered a lot of supporting data, but to maintain their theory, they have to ignore a lot of street behavior which contradicts their view. For example, as a refutation of the theory of cognitive dissonance, Adolf Hitler was a case study in stupidity in that the more his belief in Providence (i.e., an Aryan God) was contradicted by facts from his environment, the stronger he embraced it [4]—clearly a road map for a disastrous one-way, dead-end street. The test set up by scientist's show how the mind can function—not necessarily how it does function. More perplexing and confusing is the fact that even a first rate mind or civilization can function well with or based on just a half-baked idea if it is appealing [5].

References

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*Address for Correspondence: James F Welles, Department of Psychology, New York University, East Marion, New York, USA; E-mail: JWelles103@aol.com

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