



Egocentrism and vicarious dissonance

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Tested an egocentric model for the underlying process of vicarious dissonance.
- For the first time, showed effects of vicarious dissonance in both free choice and induced compliance.
- Vicarious dissonance was facilitated when participants adopted an egocentric perspective.
- Results show that vicarious dissonance is “about me” rather than about a group member.

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ABSTRACT

Past research on vicarious dissonance (Monin, Norton, Cooper, & Hogg, 2004; Norton, Monin, Cooper, & Hogg, 2003) has demonstrated that participants experience vicarious discomfort and change their attitudes when witnessing counterattitudinal behavior from a fellow ingroup member. It has not been shown, however, whether witnessing this counterattitudinal behavior arouses vicarious dissonance because it contradicts the attitudes of the observed ingroup member or for egocentric reasons – that is, because it contradicts the attitudes of the observer. In three experiments, we test the hypothesis that the conditions necessary for arousing vicarious dissonance—namely, observing an ingroup member's responsibility for aversive consequences and level of choice—are processed egocentrically by the observer. By manipulating perspective taking in a vicarious induced compliance task, and manipulating choice difficulty in a vicarious free-choice dissonance paradigm, we show that the arousal of vicarious dissonance crucially depends on the consequences of the ingroup member's actions for the observer, and not for the observed ingroup member. Implications for other aspects of vicarious dissonance and vicarious experience in general are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In our daily lives, we are motivated to maintain consistency among our beliefs and behaviors (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958). We strive to maintain and preserve harmony between our own attitudes and those espoused by important groups and important others within those groups (Cooper & Mackie, 1983; Festinger, 1954; Glasford, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009; Glasford, Pratto, & Dovidio, 2008; Hogg & Smith, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As decades of research in the cognitive dissonance tradition have taught us (Cooper, 2007; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999), when we perceive contradiction, we feel pressure to resolve that inconsistency through justification or rationalization, attempting to bring our changeable attitudes in line with our immutable past behavior.

Norton et al. (2003) expanded the reach of dissonance theory to examine the impact of witnessing other people behaving in ways that contradict their attitudes (see also, Monin et al., 2004). They suggested that

people who observe dissonant behavior by another member of a valued ingroup experience dissonance vicariously, and are motivated to change their own attitudes. Tied as we are to an actor by the strong bonds that hold an ingroup together, they predicted that people would experience dissonance vicariously and change their attitudes as a consequence. Simulating a classic induced compliance procedure (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959), Norton et al. (2003) had participants witness a fellow group member agree to write an essay advocating a position they actually opposed. The results of several experiments showed that participants who were strongly identified with their ingroup changed their attitudes in the direction of the ingroup member's advocacy simply by observing the confederate's agreement to write a counterattitudinal speech.

2. Personal vs. vicarious dissonance

A crucial question left open by the set of studies on vicarious dissonance is the process that motivates people to change their attitude. Results have shown that vicarious dissonance is sensitive to many of the moderators that affect personal cognitive dissonance. For example, the

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ingroup member whom people witness acting in a counterattitudinal fashion must have had the freedom to decline the request, the behavior must be counterattitudinal for the writer, and there must be a plausible unwanted consequence pursuant to the behavior. Prior research has also shown that there is discomfort associated with vicarious dissonance: people who change their attitudes in the high dissonance condition report a feeling of greater discomfort.

The current research is designed to shed light on the basis of people's motivation to change their own attitudes after observing a group member's behavior. One plausible view is that people take the perspective of someone to whom they feel close (e.g., a member of their social group) and experience the discrepant situation from that person's perspective. The tendency of group members to fuse their identities with those of other members of their group (Hogg & Smith, 2007) gives credence to this possibility. Adopting my fellow group member's perspective, I may experience what she experiences and change my attitudes to reduce the discomfort.

On the other hand, research has shown that adopting the perspective of others – even those to whom we feel close – is not an easy task (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004; Savitsky, Keysar, Epley, Carter, & Swanson, 2011). People seem to begin their attempt at perspective taking by adopting an egocentric point of view, often making insufficient corrections from there. This prompts us to consider the possibility that the process that leads to attitude change in a group situation may be fundamentally an egocentric one. It is possible that it is more about 'me' (the observer) and less about taking the perspective of the actor. That is, it is more about how the actor would be affected by the group member's actions. Instead of viewing observers as changing their attitudes because of their fused identity with the group member who is in the throes of dissonance, the egocentric view is that vicarious dissonance feels uncomfortable because it is the way I think I would feel were I in the shoes of the actor. Prior research suggests that the egocentric view of vicarious dissonance is a viable approach. In one of Norton et al. (2003) studies, participants were asked about their discomfort after witnessing the counterattitudinal behavior of their fellow group member. They found that the magnitude of attitude change was not related to how they thought their fellow group member felt, but rather how they thought they would feel if they were in their partner's shoes. Rather than sharing their partner's discomfort, the participants seemed motivated by how they thought they would feel if they were in the essay writer's situation.

The present research seeks to clarify the mechanism underlying vicarious dissonance by assessing two possible processes. We differentiate *other-oriented perspective taking* from *egocentric simulation*. In the first view, people experience the dissonance situation from the perspective of the actor, feeling or imagining what the actor feels. Adopting the tension state of cognitive dissonance on behalf of the actor, the observer reduces dissonance in the same way as the actor. In the second view, ingroup members cognitively simulate the dissonance situation. They imagine what they would experience if they were in the actor's situation. In the egocentric view, observers make the actor's situation their own and respond accordingly.

We first report the results of two studies using the previously validated vicarious induced compliance paradigm and directly manipulate participants' perspective. In the third experiment, we report the first use of a new paradigm, adding converging evidence to the notion that people take an egocentric approach when observing a fellow group member engage in a dissonant act.

3. Study 1

Study 1 is designed to systematically investigate the role of perspective taking in vicarious dissonance. Participants observed a member of their ingroup engage in behavior that contradicted their attitude. In order to facilitate the shared connection between the participant and group member, some of our participants were instructed to view the

situation from the perspective of the group member. By contrast, in order to facilitate egocentric simulation, we asked other participants to adopt their own perspective, imagining how they would feel if they were in the group member's situation. Although both processes are viable, our prediction—based on the clue provided by Norton et al.'s (2003) discomfort findings—is that vicarious dissonance is facilitated when taking one's own egocentric perspective and diminished when trying to take the perspective of the ingroup member.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Participants were recruited online via Amazon's Mechanical Turk service. Because no vicarious dissonance experiment has been reported using an on-line procedure, we chose to recruit at least 20 participants per condition to provide sufficient power. Our strategy was to leave mTurk open for 48 h with the constraint that a minimum of 120 workers participate. 156 people volunteered for the experiment. Of these, 147 completed the entire survey. Three were ultimately excluded for failing to follow all of the instructions, resulting in a sample of $N = 144$. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 74 ($M = 33.9$). 59% of the sample were women.

4.2. Procedure

Participants gave their consent to participate in an experiment comparing the writing styles of people in different countries. They believed that they were participating at the same time as another American MTurk Worker (i.e., a member of their ingroup)—making their ingroup identity as an American salient through highlighting metacontrast (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1979)—and were told that they had been assigned to read an essay written by that Worker. They then saw instructions indicating that their partner was either told (low choice condition) or asked (high choice condition) to write an essay in favor of government influence in the media. Specifically, in the high choice condition, the partner was asked, "Are you willing to write the essay?" and the participant was permitted to decline to write. In the low choice condition, there was no permission to decline. Participants were also informed that the other Worker did not personally agree with the position they wrote about. While their partner was ostensibly writing the essay, participants in the experimental conditions were given a perspective-taking priming manipulation. In the *egocentric* condition, participants were told, "While your partner is writing his/her essay, we would like you to take this moment to write a few sentences about what you imagine *you* would be feeling if *you* were writing this essay. What would be going through your head?" In the *other-oriented* perspective taking conditions, they were asked to imagine what their partner is feeling while writing the essay. In a control condition, no instructions about perspective taking were given and participants went directly to the dependent measures.

After the priming manipulation (or control), participants filled out the study's dependent measures. Attitudes towards government influence in the media were measured by asking participants, "To what extent are you in favor of government influence in the media?", assessed on a 15 point scale. We also collected data on participants' perceptions of their own and their partner's representativeness and typicality, their identification with the ingroup (Americans), their liking and perceived similarity to their partner and their level of personal and vicarious discomfort. In addition, we collected measures of their perceptions of the attitude of the average American and participants' perceptions of the importance of the issue. Participants were led to believe that they would read their partner's essay after hearing some information about it in the instructions. However, after filling out the study's dependent measures the participants were instead thanked and debriefed.

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