



Supine body posture decreases rationalizations: Testing the action-based model of dissonance



Eddie Harmon-Jones^{*}, Tom F. Price, Cindy Harmon-Jones

School of Psychology, The University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia

HIGHLIGHTS

- A supine body posture has been found to reduce approach motivation.
- Cognitive dissonance reduction involves approach motivation.
- We test whether a supine posture will also decrease cognitive dissonance reduction.
- The supine posture decreased cognitive dissonance reduction.

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ABSTRACT

The action-based model of dissonance theorizes that when individuals have conflicting cognitions *with action implications*, they experience dissonance. This dissonance motivates the individual to value one action tendency over the other, thereby facilitating effective action. Thus, a decrease in the motivation to act (decreased approach motivation) should decrease this tendency to value one action tendency over the other (dissonance reduction). The present research tested this prediction by using an embodied manipulation, a supine posture, to decrease approach motivation. In Experiment 1, relative to an upright posture, a supine posture decreased dissonance reduction in an effort justification paradigm. In Experiment 2, a supine posture decreased the spreading of alternatives following a difficult decision. These results suggest that embodied manipulations that reduce approach motivation decrease dissonance reduction. The findings support the action-based model of dissonance, and suggest that embodied manipulations of reduced approach motivation reduce the rationalization of behavior.

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Introduction

We humans often think of ourselves as rational animals, but it may be more accurate to characterize us as *rationalizing* animals (Aronson & Aronson, 2007). That is, rather than using our cognitive faculties to determine the most judicious course of action, we more often use those faculties to justify the course of action in which we previously chose to engage. Indeed, research on cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) has produced over 3000 experiments, in 50 years of research, demonstrating this tendency (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; Tavis & Aronson, 2007). Individuals justify their difficult decisions and effortful behavior by viewing the outcomes associated with those actions as more positive than would be expected based on rational logic. Would something as simple as lying flat on one's back, as compared to sitting upright, influence these rationalizations? A theoretical perspective

that conceptualizes rationalization as an approach-related, action-oriented response would predict such a difference.

The action-based model of cognitive dissonance is a theoretical perspective that predicts that these simple body postures may influence rationalizations (Harmon-Jones, 2009; Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Harmon-Jones, 2009). Before explaining why this model makes this prediction, we briefly describe the theory of cognitive dissonance and the action-based model. Festinger's (1957) original conception of dissonance theory predicted that when an individual has in mind two or more elements of knowledge that are relevant to each other but inconsistent with one another, he or she experiences a state of discomfort (dissonance affect) and is motivated to decrease the inconsistency between cognitions (dissonance reduction).

A paradigm for evoking cognitive dissonance, the "effort justification" paradigm, is based on this prediction. When an individual engages in an unpleasant or effortful activity, dissonance occurs because engaging in the activity is inconsistent with the knowledge that one would not want to engage in the activity (Aronson & Mills, 1959). In other words, "The information that the animal has concerning the expenditure of energy and effort is dissonant with continuing to engage in the

^{*} Corresponding author. Fax: +61 2 9385 3641.

E-mail address: eddiehj@gmail.com (E. Harmon-Jones).

action...” (Lawrence & Festinger, 1962, p. 139). In the effort justification paradigm, dissonance can be reduced by increasing the subjective desirability of the goal. Or as Lawrence and Festinger (1962, p. 139) wrote, “The greater the effort required, the greater would be the magnitude of dissonance, and, hence, the greater the development of extra attraction for something in the situation in order to reduce dissonance.” Research has found that individuals have more positive attitudes toward goals after engaging in effortful activities, compared to easy activities, to obtain the goals. In one classic experiment (Gerard & Mathewson, 1966) utilizing this paradigm, participants underwent mild or severe electric shocks to gain access to a group, or they underwent mild or severe shocks and then were placed in the group (non-contingent condition). Consistent with predictions derived from dissonance theory, participants who underwent severe shocks in order to gain access to the group had the most positive attitudes toward the group. In contrast, participants who underwent severe shocks and were simply placed in the group had the least positive attitudes toward the group. This latter result suggests that the former one was not due to a simple contrast effect (i.e., negative experience of shock caused participants to view the group more positively). Furthermore, effort justification is not specific to human animals. Rats also show evidence of effort justification (Lawrence & Festinger, 1962).

According to the action-based model, many perceptions and cognitions activate action tendencies. When perceptions or cognitions with action implications are inconsistent with one another, dissonance occurs, because these conflicting action-based cognitions have the potential to interfere with effective action (Harmon-Jones et al., 2009). The dissonance then motivates the organism to subjectively value one action tendency over the other so the organism can behave effectively. This process of dissonance reduction is often an approach-motivated process aimed at successfully translating a behavioral intention or commitment into effective action.

The action-based model of dissonance views dissonance reduction as an adaptive response that is present across many animal species (Egan, Bloom, & Santos, 2010; Lawrence & Festinger, 1962). Instead of being primarily harmful, dissonance reduction is posited to often assist in goal-direction actions, as “justifying” a recent behavioral commitment may insure that the organism does not waste energy but instead successfully follows through with the commitments or decisions. Thus, dissonance processes may have evolutionary value, with survival benefits.

Support for the action-based model comes from research that has found that individuals who score higher in trait approach motivation show more dissonance reduction (Harmon-Jones, Schmeichel, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones, 2011), from research that has found that cognitive manipulations that increase approach motivation cause more dissonance reduction (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002), and from research that has found that the process of dissonance reduction is associated with greater activity in the left frontal cortical region, an area involved in approach motivational processes (Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, Fearn, Sigelman, & Johnson, 2008; Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, Serra, & Gable, 2011). Based on this evidence, we would predict that manipulations that decrease approach motivation should decrease dissonance reduction.

It may be important, at this point, to specify what is meant by “approach motivation,” because various scientists define this term in slightly different ways. We define approach motivation as “the impulse to go toward, without specifying the valence of stimuli toward which the impulse is directed, indeed, without the requirement of any evoking stimulus.” (Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, & Price, 2013, p. 291). Based on research, this definition is broader than other definitions. It does not preclude goal-directed urges, but it also does not presume that goals are necessary. Approach motivation may arise from an evoking stimulus, but may also derive from internal processes at the trait or state level. Approach urges are a fundamental capability of organisms that are capable of movement.

Embodiment, motivation, and evaluations

One manipulation that has been found to influence approach motivation is whole body posture. Relative to sitting upright and/or leaning forward, being supine has been found to reduce activity in the left frontal cortical region, which is related to approach motivation, in a resting, baseline state (Price & Harmon-Jones, 2011), in response to desirable dessert stimuli (Harmon-Jones, Gable, & Price, 2011), and in response to an anger evocation (Harmon-Jones & Peterson, 2009). Moreover, a supine posture has been found to reduce approach motivation as measured by startle eyeblink responses and event-related potentials to appetitive but not to neutral stimuli (Price, Dieckman, & Harmon-Jones, 2012).

The idea that bodily postures and movements can influence motivational and evaluative responses has received previous support (for a recent review, see Price, Peterson, & Harmon-Jones, 2012). For instance, Laird (1974) found that individuals evaluated cartoons as being more humorous when they were unobtrusively induced to smile (as compared to induced to frown). Wells and Petty (1980) found that nodding the head back and forth caused more positive attitudes toward pro- and counter-attitudinal editorials than nodding the head side to side. Cacioppo, Priester, and Berntson (1993) found that when individuals were asked to evaluate novel, neutral stimuli, they evaluated them more positively when activating arm flexion as compared to arm extension; they suggested that these results occurred because arm flexion is associated with actions such as bringing food to one’s mouth. Briñol, Petty, and Wagner (2009) found that positive and negative thoughts had more of an influence on self-related attitudes when individuals adopted a body posture associated with confidence (back erect and pushing chest out) as compared to doubt (slouched forward with back curved).¹ Although these studies and others reveal that body movements and postures can influence evaluative processes, they have not examined how body movements and postures influence dissonance-related attitude change via changes in approach motivation.

The present research

Given research suggesting that dissonance reduction is associated with approach motivation and research suggesting that a supine body posture reduces approach motivated responses, we predicted that assuming a supine body posture would decrease dissonance reduction. If the results support the hypothesis, the present research would extend past research in two important ways: It would reveal that manipulated decreases in approach motivation decrease dissonance reduction, and it would reveal that embodied manipulations of approach motivation decrease dissonance reduction.

In addition, the extension of previous research on trait approach motivation with the present experimental approach motivation studies is important because trait measures of approach motivation are correlated with other trait measures, which in turn may explain the previously published trait approach and dissonance results. For example, the agency model of narcissism (Campbell & Foster, 2007; Foster & Trimm, 2008) describes approach motivation as a key feature of narcissism. And narcissists have been found to show more dissonance reduction than non-narcissists (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003). Thus, the present studies are needed as a complement of the previous trait approach motivation and dissonance studies, to more convincingly demonstrate the role of approach motivation in dissonance phenomena.

¹ We believe that the supine posture used in our research is not a submissive posture, because participants are simply reclined in a chair. Submissive postures, as manipulated in past research, have had individuals slouch (Briñol et al., 2009) or have had individuals slump in closed positions (Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010). These postures are very different from how individuals recline as they might do while watching television or after eating a meal.

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