Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Bonus Episode: Joel Cooper

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Andy Luttrell:
Hello. Last week on the podcast I did a deep dive on the theory of cognitive dissonance. The episode had clips from a handful of interviews that I did with people who study dissonance. If you haven't already, be sure to check it out. It was officially the last episode of season one of Opinion Science, but I talked to two people whose interviews I want to release in full as bonus episodes. Next week, I'll share my interview with Elliot Aronson, but this week you get to hear from Joel Cooper.

Joel Cooper is a professor of psychology at Princeton, where he's been since 1969. Before that, he got his PhD in social psychology from Duke University. Joel has been a key player in the theory of cognitive dissonance, particularly through his work with the New Look model. More recently, he's been involved in studying vicarious dissonance, which didn't make it into last week's episode, but you'll get to hear about it here today. In 2007, he wrote the book Cognitive Dissonance: 50 Years of a Classic Theory. If you're interested it all in dissonance, it is a great place to catch yourself up on all the research and theoretical development over the years. He also cowrote the textbook The Science of Attitudes, which I've used in my own teaching. His contributions go on and on, but we don't have time for all of that. Suffice it to say he is an expert in the area of cognitive dissonance and I'm excited to share our conversation with you, so let's get right into it.

Yeah, so I kind of just wanted, just I have a handful of questions, but we'll go where the conversation takes us if that's fine with you. And so, maybe we could start by just getting a definition of dissonance. So, when you talk about dissonance, you've written a book for the public about dissonance. How do you describe the basic idea of cognitive dissonance to a general audience?

Joel Cooper:
When I talk to a general audience, I generally use a definition of dissonance that's very much like Festinger's. When people hold cognitions that are inconsistent, or when one follows from kind of the opposite of the other, people feel uncomfortable. They experience tension. They experience a state of arousal. And in order to reduce that arousal, they have to change something. One of those cognitions, at least one of those cognitions has to change or something has to get added so that the discomfort and drive get reduced. That's the general definition. People generally understand that. I think it's actually not correct, but it's close, and most of the time it is correct. But there are

occasions when it's not, and when those occasions occur, I think dissonance is best understood by the definition that we gave in the New Look version of the theory.

Andy Luttrell:
Well, I'll pause there, and we'll get to the New Look in a little bit, but for the sort of genesis of dissonance and sort of the original version that Festinger talked about, is there kind of like a classic example that resonates? That sort of illustrates, "This is what we mean when we say that people experience cognitive dissonance?"

Joel Cooper:
Sure. Well, we think about situations in which people may find themselves saying something that they don't believe, and sometimes people wonder, "Does that ever happen? I mean, do I actually find myself saying something I don't believe?" But a few minutes thought suggests that it often happens. There are situations, circumstances where people ask you to say things that are not quite consistent with your belief. When you do that, as soon as you make the statement, you have a cognition that's contrary to your belief, and as soon as you face that, as soon as you realize that, you experience this uncomfortable tension state and you need to reduce it.

So, in that circumstance, someone may have been asked to speak to a class, to talk about their attitudes about their environment, but they were asked to make a statement that was not quite as consistent, let us say, with recycling and strong support for the environment. They're asked to make a somewhat different speech. When they think about it, they know they made the speech. They can't change that. So, the way to resolve their dissonance is to alter their attitude to make it more consistent with what they said. You also sometimes find that people's behavior belies their attitude, so someone who feels pretty strongly about the environment and thinks we should always recycle and we should always do things that protect the environment, may from time to time realize that they put a wrapper on the ground or they put a beverage cup in a regular trash can rather than a recycling can. That's not consistent with their attitudes, and so as soon as they realize it, they're driven to explain it. They're driven to resolve it. By explaining it, they can resolve it. They can reduce the tension.

And I think another example, perhaps the example that touches base with most people's experience, is when they have to make a choice between two courses of action, two products to purchase. We all have choices to make, and to my students I talk about even deciding what class you're going to take next semester. You have two classes, you have economics class, you have a psychology class, they're both, let us say even interesting, and well regarded, and have good reviews. But you can only pick one. So, you think about it and you try to make the best choice that you can. As soon as you make that choice, just as soon as you say, "I'm going to take the economics course as opposed to the psychology course," there's dissonance. And there's dissonance because you made a decision that contradicts all the positive features of the psychology course that you could have taken but didn't.

And then again, there were those negative features of the economics course, the hard exams, the difficulty getting a grade, whatever those negative features are, and with your decision, you've just bought it. So, all of those cognitions are inconsistent with your choice. You still may have made the best choice, but you have inconsistency. And in order to resolve that inconsistency, you have

to start making changes. And you do, and in the end we can talk about how you do it, and what… how you change your position, how you change the way you view the choice, but in the end, you're going to come to like your choice better than you did previously, and you're going to downgrade the rejected alternative, in this case the psych course, more than you had at the time that you made your decision. And the closer the choice, the harder the choice, the more difficult the choice, the more that's gonna happen.

So, those are the kinds of things I try to make people think about as they consider what dissonance is and how they need to resolve. Now, that resolution often leads to changes of attitude.

Andy Luttrell:
There's so much evidence for dissonance and the processes that people use to sort of grapple with it. Does it seem like it's fair to say that striving for consistency is sort of like a fundamental goal that people have for their mental life?

Joel Cooper:
I'm gonna hedge my bets on this one, but I do think that striving for consistency is ubiquitous in people's lives. Striving for balance, striving for harmony, but I want to hedge my bets a little on that, because the question of whether it's a fundamental motive is not 100% clear to me. I think it was clear to Festinger. I think it was more what drove Festinger's original theory of cognitive dissonance. I'm not sure that I buy into it quite as much as he did.

Andy Luttrell:
Did you ever the chance to meet Festinger?

Joel Cooper:
I did. I did. And he was… He had a reputation of being a very difficult person, and he had a reputation of giving people grief for any disagreement that they had with the theory, so Elliot Aronson, I don't know if you've spoken to him, but he can talk a bit about Festinger's reaction to Elliot's view that not every inconsistency created dissonance, because he had a different notion that dissonance was really about the self, and the way in which you compromise yourself and your view of yourself when you do something that's counterattitudinal or when you make a choice that… Let's say when you make a poor choice. But Festinger apparently was not all that pleased by a position that differed with his, and so you had to do it with finesse and aplomb and whatever.

By the time I met Festinger, he was older. He had already left social psychology. He was studying anthropology, actually, at the time. So, it was near the end of his life and he was very, very gracious. He had read the New Look, he had read most of my work, so I was very gratified about that, and he was very interested in the change in focus that Fazio and I made to his… the basic change that we made to his theory. So, he was unusually pleasant, and I have nothing but the kindest and fondest memory of several interactions that we had. Again, probably in the last four or five years of his life.

Andy Luttrell:
It does seem like he was a pretty ardent advocate for dissonance. I mean, and it makes sense, because it really changed the game in a lot of ways in social psychology. So, in some ways, I could

sort of see the passion behind it. But useful to note that eventually he was open to new versions of it.

Joel Cooper:
Well, remember, I think it's interesting that dissonance theory grew directly out of social comparison theory and drew directly out of his informal communications in groups paper. I think when he drafted dissonance theory, he was trying to bring those two notions together, and to change the focus of what he had already said from the idea that people in groups try to be consistent, and that people do a lot of things to change other members of groups, and to change other people. When he developed dissonance theory, I think he was taking those very same notions and putting it inside the head of the individual, so that the group no longer played such an important role.

But it was an outgrowth of what he had written since 1950. And I don't think he thought he was changing the landscape as much as it turned out he changed the landscape. I think, and I'm just guessing about this, but my view is that Festinger and Carlsmith, that study changed the landscape and made dissonance theory something very different from his social comparison, which was of course an important theory, informal social communications, which was… never got the play he thought it should. But I think it was with the publication of Festinger and Carlsmith, possibly When Prophecy Fails, but I think Festinger and Carlsmith fundamentally changed the position of dissonance.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. It's pretty remarkable. When I think back, because the Festinger and Carlsmith study came out two years after the Theory of Dissonance book, which itself came out after When Prophecy Fails, so it always strikes me that this thing was so well formulated before these formal empirical tests seemed to start cropping up from his lab.

Joel Cooper:
No, I think that's true, and Jack Brehm's study, which is really the first empirical laboratory study on dissonance, that's before the publication of the book, as well. It's '56. So, you get Brehm's study. I think it was interesting, but I think it was a sleeper. It didn't become important until later. You have the publication of Festinger's book, which was reasonably important, but I think it was Festinger and Carlsmith's study, which… Because in that one, he threw down the gauntlet to law of effect. Threw down the gauntlet to reinforcement theory. And that's when people started to go after it, like this couldn't be. It just can't be.

Yes, we know from Heider that people like balance. Yes, we know that from social comparison that we really prefer to have our relationships consistent and people to have the same opinions that we have, and we try to change them, or we change ourselves. Yeah, we knew all that. But now Festinger, with his study with Merrill Carlsmith, he says, "Yeah, not only do people want to be consistent, but they want to be consistent at the expense of rewards. That is rewards play an opposite role in dissonance theory that they play in any other theory that we were talking about as psychologists." It's a little before my time, but that psychologists were talking about at the time, and late '50s, learning theory is all Skinner arguing with Hull, and Hull is arguing with Tolman, but everybody believes that rewards are critical to motivating behavior.

Now, Festinger and Carlsmith come and say, "No, rewards actually can reduce motivation for important phenomena like attitude change." And then you find major players in the field going after the theory, trying to show you why it was wrong. So, you get Janus and Gilmore. You get Rosenberg. You get people well established in social psychology trying to indicate where Festinger and Carlsmith were wrong. And then it gets propelled, right? When people take you seriously and try to dispel your theory, then you're… And especially if subsequent data support your theory, you've really changed the game. And that's really what happened.

Andy Luttrell:
So, you think that if that original study hadn't directly confronted learning theory, that dissonance might not have taken off in the way that it did?

Joel Cooper:
I do. I think that's right. And I think that the companion piece in some now that we're looking back at it way is the Aronson and Mills effort justification. Because that was the same notion in reverse, right? You do something that you really, really, really didn't want to do. You suffered. You expended effort. You were embarrassed. You did all sorts of things that typically, in reinforcement theory, would be negatively motivating. Would cause you not to like the thing that you're suffering for. And yet there's Aronson and Mills saying, "Oh no, that creates motivation to change your attitude. You like what you suffer for." Just as Festinger and Carlsmith say you like, you come to agree with what you weren't rewarded for.

Now, those two pieces put together really challenged the zeitgeist of the day, which was reinforcement theory. Now you rediscover Brehm. Now you rediscover some of the work by Brehm and Cohen. It all now fits together as a corpus of work. But that's my view as to why it became so central in the… Oh, I would say early '60s, late '50s, early '60s in social psychology.

Andy Luttrell:
So, if we can pull back a little bit and talk about once dissonance occurs, right? So, people have an inconsistency. There are discrepancies between the thoughts that they're having. What are the ways in which people deal with that?

Joel Cooper:
Well, I think people need to come to terms with why they acted inconsistently, and so there are many ways that they can do that. Festinger and Carlsmith, for example, talked about you can change your attitudes. You can change your behaviors. You can change your perception of your behaviors. You can change the idea that you weren't responsible for your behaviors. You could come to believe that there was no harm, no foul. But what Festinger was really telling us, and I think this is key to understanding what we're looking for as, if you will, the dependent measure in dissonance studies, but in more general terms, the way in which people go about resolving dissonance, is that we have to do it.

Because he posited the notion of drive, because he posited the notion of discomfort, he was really telling us that people just don't let it pass. We can't let it pass anymore than we can let it go when we're thirsty and we need a drink of water, we've got to find the water. Festinger's saying, "Look,

when you are in a situation of inconsistency, you've got to find the proverbial water. You've got to do the resolution." And in his book, he talks about any number of ways that people can resolve the dissonance, can make the inconsistency seem better. In laboratory research, attitude change became the primary way, because that's the way the experiments were structured, but there are really so many things people can do to resolve the inconsistency. The point is we have to find something to do.

Andy Luttrell: And in that way, it's a little different than thirst, right? So, if you're in a thirst state, there's really one thing that's gonna get you out of it, and that's a drink of water. Whereas it seems like dissonance is one of those drive states that you've got some options to get out of that state, to resolve that uncomfortable feeling.

Joel Cooper:
Well, I would agree with that, with the caveat that if you think about drinking water as the most likely way that people resolve their thirst, but there are other things they can do, too. They can suck on a wet handkerchief, they can eat a peach, there are any number of things people can do as long as it's directed at the drive. Right? So, while I agree that resolving dissonance is broader than that, and it's not the same kind of a need, there are a limited number of ways. It's not limitless, right? There's not… You can't just do anything. You can't just go bang your head against the wall and say, "Oh, that feels better. I've resolved this." No, it has to be directed toward the inconsistency. And once you say that, there are still a large number of things that people can do.

Andy Luttrell:
So, when I hear people talk about dissonance in a sort of general sense, often it's sort of calling other people out for being dissonant, right? Or saying, "Wow, how could this people believe these two contradictory things at the same time?" And dissonance theory would say, "Well, that person shouldn't be able to hold those two thoughts at the same time." So, I'm curious what you think about when objective dissonance becomes that drive that a person feels to reduce it, and how conscious that is if we know anything about that part.

Joel Cooper:
I think people have to notice it. I think people can hold contradictory attitudes. We know they hold contradictory attitudes. We know they… that people really do things that they don't believe, and they do believe things that they don't do. But they hold those separately. They don't confront the discrepancy. I think when they do confront the discrepancy, there are a number of things that they can do. One is that they can actually do what Festinger said that they would try to do, and that is resolve it, try to understand how they fit together, change one if they need to. Just to feel or to show that they do in fact fit together. So, that's one thing they can do.

Another thing they can do is to deny the fact that those two thoughts actually are discrepant. You think they're discrepant. I don't think they're discrepant. You think it's discrepant to throw a recyclable package into the trash can, but I don't really think that's discrepant, because there should have been a recycling can. There's no recycling can. Oh, the trash man will take care of it.

So, as an observer, you may think I hold two discrepant cognitions. If you point them out to me, I still have the ability in certain occasions, I think, to deny that they are actually discrepant. So, that's another thing we can do.

Andy Luttrell:
So, let's talk about where you come into all of this, so in what ways, like what brought you into this world of cognitive dissonance research? What did the field look like when you entered it and what was bugging you about it that you needed to solve?

Joel Cooper:
When I entered the dissonance world, I was a graduate student, and I think graduate students… Well, my own experience as a graduate student was to think more methodologically than grandly, so I wasn't coming at dissonance trying to think of a new way to conceptualize it, or to try to think about what Festinger said wrong. I was coming in at a more methodological level. And in principle, that is in my heart of hearts, I thought cognitive dissonance theory was just fantastic. It was reasonably new theory. It was iconoclast in the ways that we talked about before, given the zeitgeist of the field, and so I was very much a fan. Emotionally, cognitively, I was a fan of dissonance. It's really why I went to graduate school. I went to graduate school at Duke because Jack Brehm was there. So, he was one of the founders of dissonance theory, so that was the place I wanted to go.

So, when I got to graduate school, Rosenberg published a very influential paper in which he showed that replicating Festinger and Carlsmith in a study that he did at Ohio State University, replicating Festinger and Carlsmith's design, he found evidence consistent with learning theory. Ask somebody to say something they don't believe, reward them for it, the more reward you give them, the more they change their belief. And so, he took on Festinger and Carlsmith. He said that Festinger and Carlsmith had not done their study well. There were lots of criticisms they had about the way in which Festinger and Carlsmith had done the study. Rosenberg said, "I'm gonna do this better. I'm going to do it in a more realistic way and people are going to respond." He predicted people would respond consistent with reinforcement theory and that's what he found.

So, that was a big either blow, or challenge, or something that people who believed in dissonance needed to deal with. So, as a graduate student poring over Rosenberg's methodology, I had the feeling, which I naturally took to my advisors, to say that actually, Rosenberg didn't replicate Festinger and Carlsmith. He did something different and that difference might be important. And I think that what Rosenberg did was take away people's choice to say something counterattitudinal. And maybe choice matters. Maybe choice matters more than Festinger ever thought that it did. You know, Festinger talked about people choosing to behave in a counterattitudinal way, but he didn't highlight it as an important aspect of dissonance.

Well, Rosenberg's procedure pre-committed people to doing a task whose content they didn't know. And when they found out what the content was, it was writing a counterattitudinal essay, so they virtually had no choice. And then it turned out that indeed they changed their attitude more when they were rewarded more for their behavior. So, Darwyn Linder and Ned Jones and I did the Linder, Cooper and Jones study that we published in 1967, in which we showed that if choice is specifically manipulated, when choice exists, when people can make a choice to do something counterattitudinal, write something counterattitudinal or not, then attitude change replicates what

Festinger and Carlsmith found. If you take away that choice and force people, require people to do something counterattitudinal, then dissonance simply doesn't apply, and reinforcement works, and people change their attitudes as a direct function of the magnitude of reinforcement.

So, we got the crossover interaction that we predicted, and that was really cool, and so that was my first entrée into cognitive dissonance theory. But it was as I said, it was reasonably methodological. We found what Rosenberg had done wrong, did a balanced replication, showed we could get his result, but we could also get Festinger and Carlsmith's result, so choice is really important.

Andy Luttrell:
So, it started for you as a methodological quirk. You said, "Wait a minute, something's up here."

Joel Cooper:
Yeah, I started, right, as a methodological fix, you know? So, we could say, "Leon," if I were talking to Festinger, "You really needed to highlight choice. Because choice is really important. People have to choose." And then later on, still in graduate school, working with Steve Worschel, Steve and I were thinking about what would happen if you did Festinger and Carlsmith's study, but nobody believed you? What if you were saying something you didn't believe, but you were saying it in a closet where nobody overheard you? Does that create dissonance? Well, in some ways, and you have choice, and you could put in reward or no reward, but does anybody care if nobody hears? And so, that brought us to the Cooper and Worschel study in which we wanted to say, "Gee, does it matter that your saying something contrary to your belief has or doesn't have a consequence?" And so, that was our next study, and we found out that it did have a consequence, that it has to have a consequence, rather, for people to be worried about it enough to change their attitude.

If they say something they don't believe and the person that they're saying to says, "You know, that's nice, that's your opinion, but I don't really believe you." It doesn't change your attitude. It doesn't create dissonance. So, that's kind of interesting, but it's not in the original paper. But it's kind of interesting and we thought it made sense that somehow somebody has to either hear what you're saying, or we have other studies later on in which people were writing counterattitudinal essays, and they get lost, you throw them away, nobody's gonna read them, and they don't create dissonance. And so, that was another piece of the puzzle. So, we were happy. I was happy working on the context in which dissonance works, the framework in which dissonance works, and if it's all right with you, I'll go on with my story about where the New Look comes from.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah, go for it.

Joel Cooper:
So, somewhere in the… I don't know, it must have been around 1980 or so, Paul Secord, who was a sociologist, but he had… Maybe he was a psychologist. Anyway, he was visiting at Princeton, and we were talking about dissonance, and I was still publishing a lot of stuff on dissonance, when it happens, when it doesn't happen, the importance of arousal when it does happen, and that was my research agenda. And Paul said, "You know, I used to like this dissonance, but it was so simple

and easy to comprehend. When you had inconsistent cognitions it created dissonance, and dissonance needed to be reduced." He said, "But that's not the case anymore. If you say something that's inconsistent it creates dissonance, but only if you have choice. Why would that be? There's still inconsistency. Conceptually, why does that matter? Oh, and only if there's a consequence. Why should that matter? You had a belief, you had a behavior, they're inconsistent. Why does convincing somebody make any difference?" Over at Stanford, Merrill Carlsmith and colleagues had found that commitment matters. You have to be committed to your counterattitudinal inconsistency. Why would that matter? He goes, "Now you need a scorecard to understand when there's dissonance and when there's not dissonance. It used to be a simple story. It's not a simple story. Just a basic idea and a full list of exceptions. Somebody really needs to sort of work on this."

So, we took up the challenge, and that's what brought Russ Fazio and I together to… Well, Russ was a graduate student at Princeton, but he had left to go to Indiana, but together, we decided to see if we could figure out whether all these conditions really suggested that we were looking at dissonance in a fundamentally wrong way. And that brought us to the New Look.

Andy Luttrell:
So, if I can just clarify, the idea of the dissonance as simple versus more complicated really comes down to Festinger said as long as two cognitions are inconsistent, we've got the makings of dissonance here. And then that's gonna activate a drive to reduce this unpleasant state. But then you're noticing all these findings coming out that say, "Well, yeah, you can have inconsistencies, but it doesn't necessarily activate that drive. One of those inconsistencies you have to be committed to, or one of those inconsistent thoughts you need to be more committed to." Or you had to have made the choice to do this thing, so it's suddenly started to get more complicated than just any two inconsistent cognitions equals dissonance.

Joel Cooper:
That's right.

Andy Luttrell:
The New Look, then, what's sort of the… If you were to summarize the main contribution of the New Look, what did it reframe?

Joel Cooper:
What we said in the New Look is that dissonance seems to be created when people feel responsible for creating an aversive state of affairs. And by aversive we mean any state that people would rather not have brought about. So, is it a little bit complex? Maybe in definition, but in reality not so complex at all. So, something you bring about that's aversive might be convincing somebody to believe in a position that you don't believe in, like who the next president should be. Then you say something, let us say if I can be a little political, pro Donald Trump, and somebody hears that and you say, "Oh my God, they might believe that. Or they do believe that. Oh my God, I can't." That's an aversive statement.

Or I got into that economics class and it has all these negative consequences. That's an aversive state. Or I suffered to get into this group and the group isn't even any good. That's an aversive state. Are you responsible for that? Did you cause it? If you take responsibility, then yes, now we

have cognitive dissonance. Anything that absolves you from responsibility eliminates cognitive dissonance. Anything that turns the state into a positive state eliminates the cognitive dissonance. So, you can work on cognitive dissonance in either of those ways, and we thought with that simple statement, not quite as simple as inconsistency leads to dissonance, but the notion of being responsible for having brought about an aversive state, that leads to dissonance and that brings in… That encompasses just about all the research we could think of in cognitive dissonance. They were no longer exceptions to the rule. That was the rule.

Andy Luttrell:
So, actually it's funny, I feel like when we met years ago I asked you this question and I'm forgetting what your response was. And the question is, is being able to say that I'm not responsible, does that prevent the dissonance from ever occurring? Or is that the tool I use to quickly reduce a dissonance that I do experience?

Joel Cooper:
You did ask me this before and I will say the answer is both. That is if the perception of lack of responsibility is clear to you in the first instance, then I think it prevents the occurrence of dissonance. So, someone holds a gun to your head and says, "You must say that the trees are blue, and Trump's a great president." It doesn't matter. You don't need to do a lot of cognitive work afterwards because the perception of who's responsible for this is very, very clear in the first instance.

Most times, it's not so clear. And so, I think the motivation to go back and absolve yourself of responsibility can occur after the fact, after you've engaged in the inconsistency you then ask yourself the question, "Was I responsible?" And you're motivated to say no, so that's why I think the default is that most of us don't go around the world thinking, "Oh my God, I am such a bad person. I'm so inconsistent. I have all these inconsistent thoughts. I did this, but I believe that." I mean, we could do this all the time, but we don't, because I think the default is I don't want to be responsible for that, or the default is I'm responsible but that's not so bad. That state that I brought about is… I don't think it's so aversive. I don't think it's so bad. I doubt that many people would have agreed with me. I doubt that people noticed that I was throwing the can into the trash and so on.

Because the default is we want to absolve ourselves of responsibility and the default is that we don't want our aversive consequences to be aversive. Sometimes that's more difficult. We're confronted by the fact that we let us say did bring about an aversive event. Somebody is sitting there saying, "Oh, thank you so much, because you know, I was gonna be one of these recyclers that always recycled, but you know, now I see what you do, and I don't have to." That's an aversive consequence. And I'm… There it is. It's in front of my face. But gee, was I really the one responsible for throwing that can in the trash rather than the recycle bin? Well, there was no recycle bin, so it's not my fault. I'm not responsible.

You know, so I think it can work in either direction, but the default is normally working backwards to absolve yourself of responsibility.

Andy Luttrell:
So, did the New Look solve the question of dissonance? Are we all good now?

Joel Cooper:
Well, to me it did, but of course quite a number of things happened after that. One was that Jack Brehm and his colleagues, Eddie Harmon-Jones and Jeff Greenberg, they published a study that showed that indeed, if you do say something that's counterattitudinal and throw it away, there are conditions in which you still experience dissonance. So, that study was used by a lot of people to say, "Yeah, you know, Cooper and Fazio have said this, and there's a lot of research to support this, but there's the Brehm study," and then I think we lost some momentum on that, to say that the New Look was really the better way to conceptualize dissonance.

That was one real occurrence. It was empirical, and that study was published and was used a lot. You know, I think the other thing is that as people started to take dissonance in a new direction, and I think that new direction is a more applied direction, a direction saying, "How can we use this for some good?" The nuances of exactly what conditions create dissonance became less important. So, I think people were perfectly willing to use either definition of dissonance as a way of bringing the ball forward and applying dissonance to other things and other events.

Most of the time, see, I'm not trying to throw the baby out with the bathwater with the New Look, because most of the time, inconsistency leads to dissonance. When you act in an inconsistent way, you have set about the circumstances that make you feel responsible for having brought about an aversive event. But that's a lot of words, so sometimes it's just easier to say, because it's true much of the time, that inconsistency leads to dissonance. So, I think the nuances became less and less important. I believe, and I'm looking… I just wrote a review paper for a European journal, so I was looking at all the decades, half-century of research, and I do believe… Now I'm sounding like Festinger, but I do believe that the New Look still encompasses more of the research, both pro and con, than any other version of dissonance.

So, I still use it, and I think it's most accurate, but I think the field is not as concerned anymore about how we conceptualize it as how we use it.

Andy Luttrell:
So, you've continued to study dissonance throughout your career, and so I'm curious, what is it about dissonance that keeps you coming back?

Joel Cooper:
Well, I think it keeps making interesting predictions that we might ordinarily not have made. Not too long ago, working with Mike Hogg, I began to question whether you can catch dissonance vicariously. Somebody else has dissonance, might you have dissonance if you feel close to that other person? And Mike being an intergroup person said, "Well, yeah. We feel very close to each other when we're integral parts of social groups, so maybe you can experience cognitive dissonance on behalf of someone else." If you carry this out, it's possible that if we observe, we being a whole bunch of people now, observe a group member acting in an inconsistent way, or being responsible for producing an aversive event, we, the entire group, might experience

dissonance and change our attitude about an important issue just by dint of being in the same social group.

So, that's really interesting and exciting. To me, I should say, that's a sufficient reason to be really motivated to go look at it, because it really seems theoretically interesting. Not obvious, but interesting if it turned out to be true.

You can also see down the line where that can have multiplier effects on the use of dissonance to create attitude change that we actually want to create. That is not just the.. I'm not just looking at the theoretical process, but we want to actually use dissonance theory to change attitudes for the social good. Dissonance is… The way we usually look at it in the laboratory is a labor intensive labor of love. Right? You take each person, do something that's counterattitudinal, and you set the circumstances right, change their attitude, move onto to the next person. If we want to change attitudes about some larger issue, that can be next to impossible. But if people can catch dissonance, that is if they can feel dissonance vicariously on behalf of group members, now in the applied world this can have enormously important ramifications.

So, that inspired me to want to pursue the idea of vicarious dissonance. So, in a style that I've become accustomed to, when Mike and I, and Mike Norton and Benoit Monin did the first studies on vicarious dissonance and we found out that indeed, people, vicarious dissonance does exist. Now we wanted to pursue it to its theoretical extreme. Once again, does it behave like regular dissonance? Does it need aversive consequences? Does it need a responsibility? So, that inspired another set of years worth of study to try to get that right.

Andy Luttrell:
So, you alluded there, and also earlier in our conversation, about using dissonance as a tool, like a practical tool to change opinions and behavior.

Joel Cooper:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
Is there a specific example that jumps out to you of like you say, in the lab, it can be tricky to get everything so right so that people are feeling that dissonance. So, if you scale it up, in what way might dissonance be useful as an influence tool?

Joel Cooper:
Well, recently we did a study that, and to just jump ahead a little bit to dissonance in the sense of hypocrisy, and I'll just give you an example of how in a very recent study we used hypocrisy to hopefully do something good, and I should say this comes in two steps. One, something we did, and then something we are trying to do right now that will show the ramping up of how you can use this in an applied way.

So, what we wanted to do was use dissonance to get elderly people to exercise more. That was the goal. I can't remember what made that the original goal, but that was the goal. So, we thought, "Okay, and a dissonance paradigm that's tailor made for this kind of situation is the hypocrisy

paradigm." Most people believe that exercise is good, and important, and they believe they should do it, just that not everybody does it, and we know from all the data from in the health community that indeed, people do not exercise nearly as much as they should, and the elderly are more responsible for that, succumb more to being a couch potato than any other age group. Still, they believe in exercise. They just don't do it.

So, we thought we could use the hypocrisy paradigm to confront people with their dissonance, confront people with the dissonance in the form of hypocrisy, and see if that had the predicted effect on their behavior. So, we got people into again the right circumstances. We manipulated variables like freedom of choice and got people to write an essay that extolls the virtues of something they absolutely believed in, namely exercise. That people should exercise, especially the elderly should exercise, very important to exercise. You should exercise at every opportunity you can get. Then in the high hypocrisy conditions, we asked people to remember some of the times that they might have had the opportunity to exercise, but didn't. And of course, they were able to do that easily, and so they had a high degree of cognitive dissonance as they thought about their own lack of exercise, despite the fact that they had just extolled the virtues of exercising every time you can.

Then we had people decide how much exercise they were going to do in the next week. We had a measure of the exercise they had done in the previous week. We asked them to estimate the specific number of hours that they were going to exercise the following week. But what we found was that the high dissonance, high hypocrisy participants planned specifically to engage in more exercise behavior than low hypocrisy participants. So, we were not able to follow that up to see that they actually did do the exercise, but hopefully they did. At least they planned to engage in a lot more exercise than people in low dissonance conditions.

So, that was what I mean by taking the dissonance and turning into something that's of social value, and personal value, and health value. But there's a next step, and the next step is using the vicarious dissonance paradigm to have one instance, one exemplar of hypocrisy, get caught by lots of people in a group. So, you can imagine that if you were to go to a home, you go to a community, rather an old-age community, a senior citizens' community, and get a group member in that community to extoll the virtues of exercise and tell everybody how often they should exercise, and then use the hypocrisy paradigm to admit to occasions in which they didn't quite exercise.

If lots of people in the senior facility, in the group, are witness to that, then we think they should feel dissonance vicariously and may all resolve the dissonance by exercising more. So, putting together the individual dissonance, in this case the hypocrisy paradigm, but in the individual dissonance with the idea of vicarious dissonance, we're guessing that we can create a fairly large scale dissonance reduction that will be helpful to people's health. So, I continue to be enamored by dissonance. I continue to be enamored by how interesting it is conceptually and theoretically. But I think like much of the field, I am invested in seeing to the practical, pro-social benefits of the idea.

Andy Luttrell:
I think too, dissonance, maybe you would disagree, but is one of the most thoroughly studied theories in the field. Like we've had a long time and there's been a lot of work on this one

paradigm. And so, are there open questions? Are there still? Is there still more work to be done on the theoretical side?

Joel Cooper:
Well, you know, yeah. I mean, I think there are theoretical questions in a number of places. One, for example, is where does the dissonance come from? That is, we start with the assumption, if you're Festinger, that inconsistency causes arousal. If I said where does the inconsistency, I didn't mean that. Where does the arousal come from? Where does the drive come from? I don't think we've solved that, so we can posit it, we can say, "Inconsistency causes this." But why should it do that? Are we hardwired? It seemed like in the makeup of human social behavior; we have a limited number of ways in which our brain can be hardwired. Why did they ever pick consistency as something the human just had to get rid of?

It's not convincing to me. I think we don't know enough about the development of dissonance, so that's one piece that I think really could use some investigation. Where does it come from? How does it develop? Is dissonance a learned drive, which I think it is, or did Festinger just hit it right? We're just hardwired to abhor inconsistency or hardwired to abhor bringing about an aversive consequence. I doubt it, but I think we do not know the answer to that.

And then in my new incarnation as a vicarious dissonance theorist, I'm comfortable with the research that shows that people really do feel dissonance vicariously. They are aroused. They feel uncomfortable. They change their attitude when people in their group behave in an inconsistent manner, and I'm convinced we don't know why that's true. So, we need… In some of our articles, we indicate that it's true. We say people just experience this dissonance and therefore they will want to change their attitude, but what does it accomplish for them? Why does changing my attitude in the direction of the behavior of a fellow group member, why should that make me feel better?

So, I think that there are these… Some very basic underlying ideas and variables that we really haven't studied yet. We've just assumed them and then we've moved on, and they've served us well. Dissonance does seem to be arousing. We do seem to change our attitudes or our behaviors at the service of this arousal. Take away the arousal, people don't seem motivated to change their attitudes and behaviors. But why should that be? I really don't think we know that yet.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah, it does seem like there's been lots of debate and testing on the causes and the consequences, but there's still that black box right at the heart of the whole thing.

Joel Cooper:
There's still the black box. That's exactly right. So, I think in the beginning, we were okay with the black box. There was something… There was almost something mysteriously intriguing about that black box, but you didn't have to go in there to find it. It was, if you will, very Freudian. And I do believe that, because you had in the literature of the '50s the hardnosed Skinnerians. There is no black box. We know what causes people to behave. We know, so that was the importance of reward, and reinforcement, and we didn't go into the black box. And then there was Freud who said, "Look, there's a black box and we're probably never ever gonna see it, but we can make

predictions." And Festinger was of that nature, right? There's a black box in there, and I'm tell you if it works like this, it'll come out in the end with these predictions. And lo and behold, those predictions hold truth. Given some parameters and so on.

And now, I think it would be really, really good to open up that black box and at least see not only what's in there, but how it gets there.

Andy Luttrell:
As just a question to wrap up, this is a totally left field pivot, but I thought I heard that there is some story behind this, which is that when you measure attitudes, often they're on scales that are not your typical five, seven-point scale. Sometimes they're 21, 25, 27-point scales. I don't remember the number. Is that a consistent thing? Is that a choice that you made to measure attitudes in that way?

Joel Cooper:
I started with a 31-point scale and I did that because I think I found that in a Brehm and Cohen, in the Brehm and Cohen book. And I didn't want to rediscover a wheel, you know? I didn't want to be engaging in research and find that I've used a scale that doesn't actually show the nuances of dissonance, it's too small to show changes, or it's too big, so there's too much variance. So, I found a scale that I think Jack Brehm and Bob Cohen had used, and it was successful, and they described it as a… I think a six-point scale, a five-point scale, I don't know, but it had 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3, so I just said, "Okay, that's my scale. 31 points." When you count them all out, it's 31 points. And then students would say, "Why are we using this scale?" And I would say, "Because I'm superstitious and the 31-point scale has worked for me, and so I want to use it."

But I do not always use it. I use… I've stopped trying to justify it. My use of the 31-point scale was A, because it worked, and then because it was superstition.

Andy Luttrell:
Well, Joel, thank you so much for taking the time to talk about dissonance. This has been super cool.

Joel Cooper:
I really appreciated the conversation and good luck with the podcast.

Andy Luttrell:
All right, that'll do it for this bonus episode. Check out the show notes for more about Joel Cooper and his work and to make sure that you get the updates about new episodes of this podcast, be sure to follow the podcast on Facebook and Twitter @OpinionSciPod. Past episodes, transcripts and more are available at OpinionSciencePodcast.com, as well as information about subscribing. Okay, come back next week to here from Elliot Aronson. It's a good one. See you then.