



Cognitive Dissonance in relation to White Fragility

This purpose of this document is to show the relationship between cognitive dissonance and white fragility. It is important as people are navigating through the equity work that they are aware of responses the staff they are working with could be experiencing or they themselves could struggle with. This serves as a precorrect.

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Cognitive dissonance

Refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors. This produces a feeling of discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance etc. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that we have an inner drive to hold all our attitudes and beliefs in harmony and avoid disharmony or dissonance (Festinger, 1957.)

Individuals can reduce cognitive dissonance by:

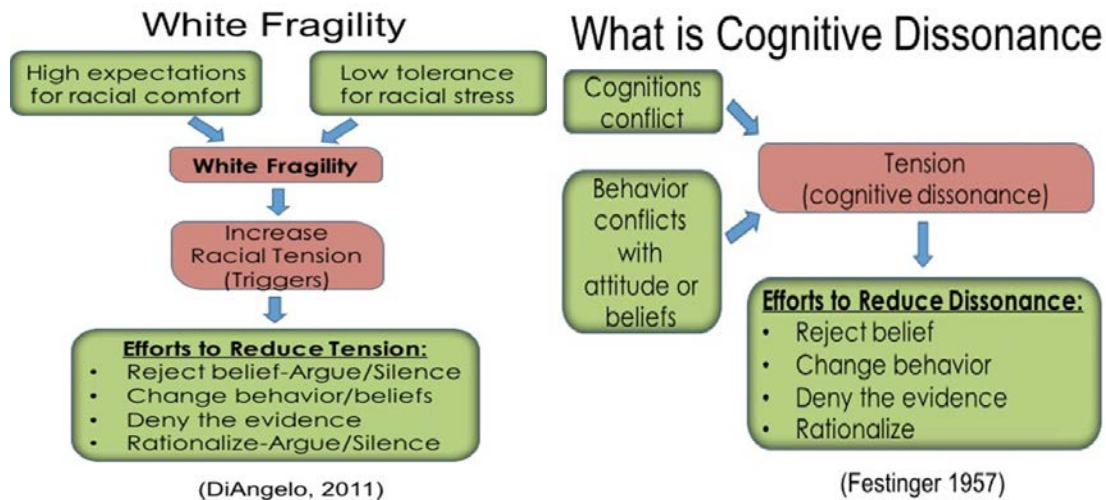
- Changing one or more of the attitudes, behavior, beliefs etc. to make the relationship between the two elements a consonant one. When one of the dissonant elements is a behavior, the individual can change or eliminate the behavior. However, this mode of dissonance reduction frequently presents problems for people, as it is often difficult for people to change well-learned behavioral responses (e.g. giving up smoking).
- **Acquiring new information** that outweighs the dissonant beliefs. For example, thinking smoking causes lung cancer will cause dissonance if a person smokes. However, new information such as "research has not proved definitely that smoking causes lung cancer" may reduce the dissonance.
- **Reducing the importance of the cognitions** (i.e. beliefs, attitudes). A person could convince themselves that it is better to "live for today" than to "save for tomorrow." In other words, he could tell himself that a short life filled with smoking and sensual pleasures is better than a long life devoid of such joys. In this way, he would be decreasing the importance of the dissonant cognition (smoking is bad for one's health).

White Fragility

Is the state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation

What triggers white fragility?

- Suggesting that a white person's viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference (challenge to objectivity)
- People of color talking directly about their racial perspectives (challenge to white racial codes)
- People of color choosing not to protect the racial feelings of white people re: race (challenge to white racial expectations and need/entitlement to racial comfort)
- Receiving feedback that one's behavior had a racist impact (challenge to white liberalism)



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