Dissonance and Self-perception: An Integrative View of Each Theory's Proper Domain of Application

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The literature concerning the controversy between dissonance and self-perception theories is reviewed. It is proposed that the two theories be regarded not as "competing" formulations but as complementary ones and, furthermore, that each theory is applicable only to its own specialized domain. Self-perception theory, it is suggested, accurately characterizes attitude change phenomena in the context of attitude-congruent behavior and dissonance theory attitude change in the context of attitude-discrepant behavior. Attitude-congruent is defined as any position within an individual's latitude of acceptance; attitude-discrepant as any position in the latitude of rejection. An experimental test of these notions produced confirming evidence. Subjects who were given an opportunity to misattribute any potential dissonance arousal to an external stimulus did not change their attitudes relative to low choice subjects, if they were committed to endorsing a position in their latitude of rejection. If the commitment concerned a position in the latitude of acceptance, however, these subjects did exhibit attitude change relative to low choice subjects.

If an individual freely chooses to perform a behavior which is discrepant from his attitude, he tends later to realign his attitude toward that behavior. For example, a subject who complies with an experimenter's request to

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write an attitude-discrepant essay against the legalization of marijuana is typically found to favor such legalization to a lesser degree than previously. This now classic attitude change effect is readily explained by both Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance (1957) and Bem’s self-perception theory (1972). Dissonance theory, in general, concerns the relationship between various cognitions. The theory posits the existence of a drive-like motivation to maintain consistency among relevant cognitions. Self-perception theory, on the other hand, concerns the passive inference of attitudinal dispositions from behavior. According to Bem (1972), “Individuals come to ‘know’ their own attitudes, emotions, and other internal states partially by inferring them from observations of their own overt behavior and/or the circumstances in which this behavior occurs” (p. 2). Social psychologists vary in which theory they endorse.

Although the underlying processes posited by each theory differ, the predictions drawn from each are very similar. According to both, individuals closely examine the behavior in question and the external environment. Both theories stress the importance of various situational cues, e.g., freedom of choice and level of monetary inducement, as possible external justifications (or, in the “language” of self-perception theory, external causal attributions) for the performance of attitude-discrepant behavior. In addition, both theories possess rare predictive and explanatory power in the sense that they can account for a great deal of attitude change data.

Given the similarity of dissonance and self-perception theories and the historical dominance of attitude research in social psychology, it is understandable that a controversy as to the relative superiority of one theory over the other emerged soon after Bem’s (1965, 1967) proposal of self-perception theory as an alternative to cognitive dissonance theory. Social psychologists have largely conceptualized the two as “competing” theories and have expended much effort to disconfirm their nonpreferred theory. The details of the controversy need not be reviewed here. It will suffice to remark that the issue is far from settled. Neither theory has been convincingly demonstrated to be relatively superior (cf. Greenwald, 1975), despite a plethora of so-called “crucial experiments” (e.g., Snyder & Ebbesen, 1972; Ross & Shulman, 1973; Green, 1974; Schaffer, 1975; Swann & Pittman, 1975).

It shall be the aim of this paper to provide an integrated framework for the operation of both dissonance and self-perception processes. We hope to refocus the manner in which the two theories are viewed and to suggest an integration. More specifically, we propose that they not be regarded as “competing” theories. Our basic tenet is that dissonance and self-perception are actually complementary and that, within its proper domain of application, each theory is correct. Together the two theories provide a more complete conceptual framework for explaining the manner in which,
and the conditions under which, the examination of one's behavior will lead to attitude change.

**DISSONANCE THEORY AND ATTITUDE-DISCREPANT BEHAVIOR**

A major difference between cognitive dissonance theory and self-perception theory concerns the matter of aversive tension. A motivation to reduce cognitive discrepancies is a central part of dissonance theory but, "in the self-perception explanation, there is no aversive motivational pressure postulated" (Bem, 1972, p. 17). This difference provides the characteristic by which dissonance and self-perception processes must ultimately be distinguished.

The recent development by Zanna and Cooper (1974) of an attributional framework in which the possible occurrence of dissonance arousal can be investigated has led to research on the question of dissonance as an aversive arousal state. Given the extensive review of this research by Zanna and Cooper (1976), only two relevant studies will be summarized here. We will emphasize the relevance of these findings to our view that dissonance and self-perception theories are complementary.

Following Schachter and Singer's (1962) theory that an emotion is a combination of arousal and a cognitive label, Zanna and Cooper (1974) reasoned that the arousal which is postulated to occur when one freely chooses to write a counterattitudinal essay is also amenable to cognitive labeling. As long as an individual in an induced-compliance setting attributes this presumed arousal to his performance of a counterattitudinal behavior, he will experience dissonance and attempt to reduce it, possibly via attitude change (cf. Worchel & Arnold, 1974). However, if the situational cues provide a reasonable alternative to which he can "misattribute" this arousal, then no dissonance and no subsequent attitude change will occur.

Zanna and Cooper (1974) varied potential cognitive labels by giving subjects a placebo which ostensibly produced a side effect of relaxation or tension or no side effect. Subjects were then placed in an induced-compliance situation where they wrote a counterattitudinal essay under conditions of high or low choice. The no side effects condition demonstrated the typical effect in which high choice subjects changed their attitudes more than low choice subjects. The no side effects condition demonstrated the typical effect in which high choice subjects changed their attitudes more than low choice subjects. Of particular importance is the fact that this effect failed to occur in the conditions where subjects could attribute their arousal to the pill which supposedly made them feel tense. In the relaxation conditions, the attitude change effect was accentuated—presumably because the high choice subjects experienced arousal, despite believing that they had taken a relaxing drug.

From the data of Zanna and Cooper's experiment (1974), and other
studies using the "misattribution" approach (e.g., Zanna, Higgins, & Taves, 1976), it is possible to infer that aversive arousal does result when one performs a counterattitudinal behavior. Cooper, Zanna, & Taves (Note 1) went further by demonstrating that arousal is a necessary condition for attitude-discrepant behavior to lead to attitude change. In their study, counterattitudinal advocacy did not affect subjects' attitudes when they had taken a drug (phenolbarbitol) which inhibited their becoming aroused. However, when subjects had taken an arousing drug (amphetamine), they did change their attitudes. This result constitutes further evidence that arousal is associated with attitude change in counterattitudinal, induced compliance situations.

Taken together, these studies confirm the dissonance theory proposition that freely choosing to perform an attitude-discrepant behavior leads to a state of aversive arousal (cf. Kiesler & Pallak, 1976). The findings cast serious doubt on the self-perception view that people infer their attitudes from counterattitudinal behavior without experiencing aversive motivational pressure. Self-perception theory obviously remains a powerful and useful predictive tool in the domain of attitude-discrepant behaviors. It well predicts the occurrence of attitude change and, furthermore, suggests the attributional process involved in the identification of arousal as dissonance. However, the theory cannot be considered to accurately capture and depict the process by which a person who behaves counterattitudinally is led to make a change of cognition. The research described demonstrates that cognitive inconsistency is accompanied by aversive arousal.

**SELF-PERCEPTION THEORY AND ATTITUDE-CONGRUENT BEHAVIOR**

An additional major difference between dissonance and self-perception theories concerns the theories' implications for attitude-congruent behavior. Self-perception theory predicts that a new attitude will emerge if an individual performs a behavior which is more extreme than implied by his attitude. It is not necessary for the behavior to be attitude-discrepant. That is, self-perception theory leads to the expectation that attitude change will occur if the behavioral advocacy lies anywhere along the attitudinal continuum other than the person's preferred position.

Dissonance theory, on the other hand, predicts attitude change only if the behavior performed is discrepant with the attitude. The theory is not applicable to situations in which pro-attitudinal advocacy occurs. In fact, one might argue that the theory leads to a prediction of no attitude change in such situations on the basis that the two cognitions—attitude and the behavioral advocacy—form a consonant relationship.

There now exists much independent evidence supporting the basic self-perception notion concerning the inference of attitude from behavior
(e.g., Bandler, Madaras, & Bem, 1968; Salancik, 1974). Also, in what has become a research area of increasing interest, it has been reliably demonstrated that an individual's interest in an activity can actually be undermined if he is provided with oversufficient external justification for the performance of a behavior he would normally freely engage in (e.g., Deci, 1971; Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973; Benware & Deci, 1975; Ross, 1976). Such "overjustification effects" are easily interpretable from a self-perception analysis, but are outside the realm of dissonance theory.

Most relevant to our concerns is the fact that Kiesler, Nisbett, and Zanna (1969) demonstrated attitude change in the direction of more favorability to the position advocated. Subjects committed themselves to argue against air pollution (a behavior generally consistent with their attitudes) to passers-by in the street. In addition, some of the subjects were led to believe that the performance of this behavior had implications for belief, while other subjects were led to believe that there was no such link between beliefs and behavior. Belief-relevant subjects were found to be more favorable to the position they were to advocate than were belief-irrelevant subjects or control subjects who were not committed to the behavior.

In the Kiesler et al. study (1969; cf. also Zanna & Kiesler, 1971), it is important to note the extremity of the behavior relative to the attitude. Although subjects committed themselves to perform a behavior which was generally consistent with their attitudes, proselytizing against pollution to passers-by on a street corner is probably a more extreme behavior than was implied by the subjects' attitudes. That is, while the subjects did hold antipollution attitudes, their attitudes were unlikely to have been of such an extreme nature that they would typically, and without request, proselytize against pollution. Any action which appears as ordinary behavior in relation to an individual's attitude should not lead to attitude change. The act implies nothing new about attitude and will not result in a self-attribution of a new, more extreme attitude. Only if the overt action is more extreme than implied by an individual's attitude will a self-attribution result in a shift to a more extreme position (cf. Pallak & Kleinveselink, 1976).

LATITUDES OF ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION

Thus far, we have argued that dissonance theory is appropriately applied to attitude-discrepant behaviors and self-perception theory to attitude-congruent behaviors. In conjunction, we suggest, the two theories can account for attitude change effects which result from the full range of behaviors. However, each theory has its proper and specialized domain of application.

In order to define each theory's domain, we have used such terms as attitude-congruent vs. attitude-discrepant, proattitudinal vs. counter-
attitudinal, and consistent vs. inconsistent. In fact, such vague terms permeate the entire literature in this area. How are these terms to be defined? Operationally, at least, social psychologists have defined them by dichotomizing the attitudinal continuum. Any position on the same side of the midpoint as the subject's expressed attitude is typically considered congruent and any position on the opposite side is considered discrepant. Such an operational definition obscures some important distinctions. After all, is it not basically attitude-congruent for someone who is only slightly in favor of a given proposal to write an essay pointing out a few of the disadvantages of the proposal? Similarly, would it not be just as attitude-discrepant for this person to write an essay favoring an extreme version of the proposal as to write an essay arguing against the adoption of the proposal?

Festinger's (1957) original statement merely proposed that two cognitions are dissonant or discrepant with one another when one does not "follow from" the other. An endorsement of an extreme radical position does not follow from a slightly liberal attitude any more so than an endorsement of a conservative position does. That is, it may be just as counterattitudinal for a person who views himself as occupying a center-left position to favor a radical proposal as it is to favor a conservative one.

A more precise and psychologically meaningful definition than the typical midpoint dichotomy seems necessary. Such a definition may be garnered from the work of Sherif and his colleagues (Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965; Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Hovland, Harvey, & Sherif, 1957) who developed a useful and relevant technique of attitude measurement. In their research, the investigators had subjects indicate which one of a continuum of extreme pro- to extreme con-attitudinal statements they found most acceptable, which additional positions they found acceptable, and which they found objectionable. The range of acceptable positions, including the most acceptable position, was termed the latitude of acceptance; the range of objectionable positions, the latitude of rejection.

We propose that attitude-congruent behavior be defined as the endorsement of any position within an individual's latitude of acceptance. This procedure avoids the arbitrariness of a midpoint dichotomy and permits each individual to define for him or herself those positions deemed to be attitude-congruent. It is within the latitude of acceptance, we suggest, that self-perception theory applies. The endorsement of a position, other than the most acceptable position, within this latitude may lead to a self-attributional inference that one holds that newly-endorsed position as his attitude. Correspondingly, attitude-discrepant behavior is defined as the endorsement of any position within an individual's latitude of rejection—regardless of whether this region is on the same side of the
midpoint as the individual’s most acceptable position, on the opposite side, or on both sides. We propose that this latitude of rejection defines the domain to which dissonance theory is applicable. Writing an essay in support of a statement within one’s latitude of rejection may lead to dissonance arousal and subsequent attitude change.

The following experiment was designed and conducted to test the above theoretical notions. After completing a latitudes measure, and provided his latitudes met certain a priori criteria necessitated by the experimental procedure, each subject was committed to write an essay supporting either the most extreme position within his latitude of acceptance (Accept conditions) or the least extreme position within his latitude of rejection (Reject conditions). These two positions were always adjacent ones (see Fig. 1). In addition, subjects were committed under conditions of low choice or high choice. Within the Reject condition, high choice subjects should change their attitudes more than low choice subjects via a dissonance reduction process. Within the Accept conditions, high choice subjects should infer more extreme attitudes than low choice subjects via a self-perception process.

In order to examine the crucial question of arousal and to identify the attitude change process as dissonance or self-perception, one further variable, the presence of a stimulus to which dissonance could potentially be misattributed, was included. Because dissonance is not aroused in low choice settings, this misattribution stimulus was paired only with high choice Accept and Reject conditions. Within the Reject conditions, we have argued that dissonance theory is applicable. Thus, subjects in the high choice–misattribution condition should experience dissonance arousal, misattribute that arousal, and exhibit no attitude change (cf. Zanna & Cooper, 1974). The prediction for the Reject conditions, then, is that final attitudes in the high choice–no misattribution condition should be more extreme than both those in the low choice condition and those in the high choice–misattribution condition. Within the Accept conditions, we have

![Fig. 1. A hypothetical latitudes measure depicting the position that individual would have been assigned to support in either the Accept or Reject Conditions.](image-url)
argued that self-perception theory is applicable. Since no arousal is expected to occur, the opportunity to misattribute arousal should not obviate attitude change. Thus, the prediction in the Accept conditions is that the final attitudes of both the high choice—misattribution subjects and the high choice—no misattribution subjects should be more extreme than the attitudes of the low choice subjects.

**METHOD**

**Subjects**

Seventy-five male and female freshmen at Princeton University were recruited for a survey of people's political attitudes, for which they were promised $1.50. Of these subjects, 48 met the a priori criteria that had been established concerning the latitudes measure (see below) and were included in the experiment. Subjects were randomly assigned to condition with the restriction that there be an equal number ($n = 8$) in each condition. They were run in individual booths in groups of two to five.

**Procedure**

After all subjects for a given experimental period arrived, the experimenter began by explaining the alleged purpose of the experiment. He indicated that he and a professor in the department were beginning a research program in order to study voting behavior in the '76 presidential election and that the present study was concerned with political attitudes. After these introductory remarks, each subject was told to enter a 4 ft 4 in × 3 ft 4 in × 6 ft 4 in (133 cm × 103 cm × 195 cm) soundproof booth where the subject completed the latitudes measure.

*Latitudes.* The measure consisted of nine statements, each of which began with the phrase “The socio-political philosophy of this nation should be one of . . .” and concluded with one of the following nine terms: radicalism, extreme liberalism, moderate liberalism, slight liberalism, middle of the road, slight conservatism, moderate conservatism, extreme conservatism, reactionism. The subject was instructed to place a symbol by the one statement he found most acceptable, another symbol by any other statements he found acceptable, and yet another symbol by any he found objectionable. The instructions asked him to judge each and every statement.

In order to be included as a subject the individual's latitudes were required to meet certain criteria. Since the majority of Princeton students held liberal positions, we chose to have all subjects argue in the liberal direction so as to compare the endorsement of statements on the same side of the midpoint as the subject's preferred position. The following criteria were necessary: (1) The most acceptable position had to be no more conservative than middle of the road. (2) At least one statement more liberal than the most acceptable had to be checked as acceptable. (3) At least one statement more liberal than any acceptable positions had to be checked as objectionable. Employing these criteria insured that each subject would be capable of assignment to any experimental condition.

At this point, the experimenter explained that the purpose of the study, the first in a program of research which was to culminate in our investigation of voting behavior, was to ascertain

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1 In their more recent work, Sherif et al. (1965), also measured a latitude of noncommitment—the range of positions to which an individual is indifferent—which intervenes between latitudes of acceptance and rejection. In the present experiment the latitude of noncommitment was ignored, because it does not permit a clear prediction of which attitude change process will occur.
what distinctions people made between various political philosophies and what arguments they perceived to support those positions. The subjects were told that in past research of this sort concerning such issues as the legalization of marijuana and the military draft, we had discovered that one of the best ways to find out what the relevant arguments were was to have people write short, forceful essays supporting a given position. Subjects were told that the same procedure was to be employed in this study.

The experimenter continued by remarking that the essays would be content analyzed in order to discover what the relevant arguments in support of a position were. In order to associate the essay with a foreseeable and possibly undesired consequence (cf. Cooper & Worchel, 1970; Nel, Helmreich, & Aronson, 1969), one further use to which the essay would be put was detailed. A local high school teacher who had four or five classes of sophomores had supposedly heard about the study and asked that we help him in a class project. The teacher intended to have a few members of his class engage in a debate concerning political philosophies before an assembly of all his classes. The essays the subjects wrote were ostensibly to be sent to the debaters who would use those arguments in the debate. Thus, the subjects were led to believe that their arguments might possibly convince some high school sophomores to adopt that position.

Subjects were also told that "in order to avoid any systematic bias," they would be randomly assigned to a position to write about. The experimenter commented that such random assignment was one of the few methods of control a social scientist could employ in a study of this sort.

After randomly assigning each subject to experimental condition and preparing the necessary materials, the experimenter handed each subject a booklet, entitled "1975 Princeton University Political Survey." The first page of the booklet asked for the subject's name and class. The second page informed the subject of the position he was to support in his essay. Printed on this page was either the most extreme liberal position within the subject's latitude of acceptance (Accept conditions) or the least extreme liberal position within his latitude of rejection (Reject conditions). The instructions on this page told the subject to complete the questions on the following pages and to then "write a short, forceful and persuasive essay" supporting the position he had been assigned on the blank sheet at the end of the booklet.

**Choice manipulation.** The presence or absence of a "Subject Consent Form" as the next page constituted the choice manipulation. This form began with the following paragraph.

> I understand the nature of the study in which I am being asked to participate, I am aware that my essay will be used in a high school government class. I further understand that I will be paid $1.50 for simply appearing here today, regardless of whether or not I actually decide to participate in the entire study. In addition, I understand that I can leave at any time, if I so desire.

The form then asked the subject to check whether he chose to participate and to allow the release of his essay to the high school class or whether he chose not to participate, and to sign his name and fill in the date. The form concluded with two sentences thanking the subject, if he chose to participate, "for your voluntary agreement to write an essay supporting the position assigned to you" or, if he chose not to participate, "for taking the time to come here today." Also printed in large letters on the bottom of this page, as a reminder to the subject of what he was agreeing to write, was the position the subject had been assigned. All subjects, in fact, chose to participate. This form appeared in the high choice booklets, but was absent in the low choice booklets.

**Misattribution stimulus.** In the two high choice misattribution conditions, a one-page questionnaire entitled "Departmental Equipment Inquiry" followed the subject consent forms. The booth each subject was seated in was to serve as the stimulus to which dissonance arousal might be misattributed. The page began by explaining that the booths had been
recently purchased and installed by the psychology department and that this was, in fact, the first time the booths were being used. The department was supposedly interested in people's assessments of the new booths. The inquiry was supposedly "unrelated to the actual study" and "had been placed in a random position in each booklet in order to assess the effect of duration of time spent in the booth on evaluations of the booth."

The questionnaire began with an item labeled "general measure" which asked subjects to rate on a 31-point scale "To what degree do the booths make you feel tense or uncomfortable?" The endpoints of the scale were labeled "Not tense or uncomfortable at all" and "Very tense or uncomfortable." Three specific measures, each a 31-point scale with endpoints labeled "Not at all adequate" and "Perfectly adequate" followed. These items asked the subject to rate the lighting, air ventilation, and size of the booth. Thus, this questionnaire provided subjects in the booth conditions with an opportunity to "blame" any aversive arousal they might be feeling on the booths, rather than on their decision to write the essay.

**Dependent variable.** The next page of the booklet contained the dependent variable. In the low choice conditions, this page followed the notification of the position the subject was to support. In the high choice-no booth conditions, it followed the subject consent form. In the high choice-booth conditions, it appeared immediately after the booth questionnaire. The measure was a 31-point scale with endpoints labeled "Extremely Conservative" and "Extremely Liberal". The question asked, "To what degree do you perceive yourself to be politically conservative or liberal?"

The last page of the booklet was a blank sheet of paper on which the subject was to write the essay. Since the critical behavior was the commitment to write the essay (Wicklund, Cooper, & Linder, 1976), no subject was required to actually complete the essay. As soon as all the subjects in a group had completed the measures and had begun to write, the experimenter interrupted, informed the subjects that the experiment had ended, and carefully debriefed them.

**RESULTS**

Preliminary examination of the data indicated that, on the average, subjects held a slight to moderate liberal position as their most acceptable position. The initial position mean was 6.44 on a scale where reactionism was scored as 1 and radicalism as 9. Subjects assigned to the Accept conditions endorsed either a moderate or extreme liberal position. Those assigned to the Reject conditions endorsed either an extreme liberal or radical position.

Because the initial and final attitude scales differed markedly, it was not possible to compute a change score. Hence, the data were analyzed in a $2 \times 3$ analysis of covariance, with the subject's most acceptable position in the latitudes scale serving as the covariate. Two points should be noted. First, the relationship between initial and final attitude scores was virtually identical in each condition. Thus, the critical analysis of covariance requirement concerning homogeneity of within-group regression coefficients was met. Second, no significant differences on the covariate existed between the various conditions. Indeed, the analysis of covariance was performed, not in order to equalize initial differences, but in order to allow initial position to "explain" what in an analysis of variance would be considered error variance (Cohen & Cohen, 1975). The proportion of variance on the dependent measure accounted for by the covariate was, in fact, highly significant ($F(1,41) = 75.93, p < .001$).

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TABLE 1

ADJUSTED MEANS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latitude</th>
<th>Low Choice</th>
<th>High Choice-No Booth</th>
<th>High Choice-Booth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accept</td>
<td>20.33ab</td>
<td>22.70c</td>
<td>22.29~</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject</td>
<td>18.77a</td>
<td>21.14bc</td>
<td>18.89a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The higher the mean, the more liberal subjects perceived themselves to be. Cell means not sharing a common subscript differ beyond the 5% significance level (except the low choice-Accept vs. high choice-booth-Accept comparison which is at \( p = .06 \)).

Presented in Table 1. Attitudes were more extreme in the Accept than in the Reject conditions (Accept \( M = 21.77 \), Reject \( M = 19.60 \); \( F(1,41) = 13.22, p < .001 \)). This main effect indicates that Accept subjects were more willing to agree with the position they committed themselves to endorsing than were Reject subjects. In addition, the analysis revealed a main effect for the conditions under which subjects committed themselves to writing the essay (\( F(2,41) = 5.61, p < .01 \)). Overall, high choice–no booth subjects (\( M = 21.92 \)) tended to express more extreme attitudes than high choice–booth subjects (\( M = 20.59 \)) who, in turn, expressed more extreme attitudes than low choice subjects (\( M = 19.55 \)). The interaction effect was not statistically significant (\( F(2,41) = 1.10 \)).

The overall analysis of covariance does not, however, allow an exact test of the hypothesis. The critical test is provided by the a priori t-ratio comparisons of the adjusted means (Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973) within the Accept and Reject conditions. As predicted, within the Accept conditions, the mean in the high choice–no booth condition is significantly greater than that in the low choice condition (\( t(41) = 2.35, p < .05 \)). Also, in accordance with expectation, attitude scores in the high choice–booth condition tended to be more extreme than those in the low choice condition (\( t(41) = 1.94, p = .06 \)). The statistical marginality of this latter effect is understandable given the fact that there was in the high choice–booth condition one highly aberrant subject whose adjusted final score fell 3.5 standard deviations below the mean of the remaining seven scores in this condition. Were this subject’s data deleted from the analysis, the high choice–booth condition (\( M = 22.60 \)) would differ significantly from the low choice condition (\( t(40) = 2.16, p < .05 \)), indicating that the opportunity to misattribute arousal did not attenuate attitude change. These data are consistent with the proposition that a self-perception process must have served as the attitude change mechanism.

Within the Reject conditions, the mean in the high choice–no booth condition was significantly greater than both the mean in the low choice

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3 All significance levels reported in this paper are based on two-tailed comparisons.
condition \( t(41) = 2.35, p < .05 \) and the mean in the high choice–booth condition \( t(41) = 2.23, p < .05 \). Thus, in the case of objectionable positions, the opportunity to attribute one’s arousal to the booth obviated attitude change—a finding that is indicative of a dissonance process.

Also informative is the fact that a weighted contrast revealed the mean in the high choice–booth–Reject condition to be significantly different from the average of the means of the other three high choice conditions \( t(41) = 3.12, p < .01 \). Thus, as expected, final attitudes were less extreme in the one condition where subjects were both experiencing dissonance and given an opportunity to misattribute that arousal.

Within the two high choice–booth conditions, subjects’ assessments of the booth were also examined. The prediction, of course, is that the Reject subjects, since they are the ones who are misattributing dissonance arousal, should evaluate the booths more negatively than the Accept subjects. Because the data were highly skewed, they were analyzed by a nonparametric arcsine transformation of the proportion of subjects in each condition who fell below the overall median (Langer & Abelson, 1972). The only dimension on which the booths were judged differently by Accept and Reject subjects was that concerning the adequacy of the air ventilation. Apparently, air ventilation was the most salient dimension on which the booths could plausibly be considered inadequate. Six of the eight Reject subjects, compared to two of the eight Accept subjects, rated the air ventilation below the overall median \( z = 2.09, p < .04 \). Thus, it was those subjects whom we suggested were experiencing dissonance arousal who found the booths relatively inadequate. This judgment served to “explain” the cause of their discomfort and to obviate what would otherwise have been motivational pressure to change their attitudes.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of the experiment provide support for the conceptual framework that was developed earlier in this paper. Subjects who endorsed an acceptable position more extreme than their most acceptable position shifted their attitudes towards that endorsement when they had decision freedom. This effect occurred even when subjects were provided with an arousal misattribution cue. Since the cue did not attenuate attitude change, it is reasonable to assume that dissonance arousal did not occur. Instead, the attitude change occurred via a self-perception process. In addition, subjects who freely chose to endorse a position within their latitude of rejection subsequently expressed more extreme attitudes. In the context of objectionable positions, the misattribution cue was employed and served to attenuate attitude change, indicating that dissonance arousal occurred. By “blaming” the booths for their discomfort, subjects were able to avoid the need to adjust their attitudes to justify their behavior (cf. Zanna & Cooper, 1974, 1976).
Can either self-perception or dissonance theory explain the data in both the Accept and the Reject conditions? We doubt that either theory is capable of that. Self-perception theory has difficulty with the attenuation of attitude change which was found to occur in the Reject conditions. Dissonance theory, on the other hand, finds the lack of attenuation of attitude change in the Accept conditions difficult to explain. However, dissonance theory might maintain that endorsing any position along the continuum, other than the most acceptable one, does not "follow from" one's attitude. The more extreme this endorsement, relative to one's most acceptable position, the greater the arousal which is experienced. Such an explanation would be forced to assume that the likelihood of misattribution to some external stimulus changes as a function of level of arousal. At lower levels of arousal, as in the Accept conditions, an individual is more likely to attribute that arousal to his own behavior rather than to some external stimulus. Thus, no misattribution nor the subsequent attenuation of attitude change occurred in the Accept conditions. At higher levels of arousal, as in the Reject conditions, misattribution to some external cue is more likely than attribution to the agreement to write the essay. Thus, attitude change was attenuated in the Reject conditions.

Such an explanation cannot be rejected completely by the data since we are concerned in the Accept conditions with the lack of a difference between the high choice—no booth and the high choice—booth conditions. However, there seems to be no compelling reason to assume that the likelihood of misattribution to some external stimulus changes as a function of level of arousal. Also, this explanation, since it asserts that there is more arousal in the Reject condition than in the Accept condition, leads to the prediction of greater attitude change in the high choice—Reject condition than in the high choice—Accept condition. The fact that the data tend in the opposite direction casts serious doubt upon this explanation.

Thus, the findings provide evidence for the notion that both dissonance and self-perception processes occur. However, each theory can be appropriately applied only to its own specialized domain. Self-perception theory convincingly explains attitudinal shifts within an individual's latitude of acceptance. Correspondingly, dissonance theory provides an accurate account for attitude change effects within the latitude of rejection.

Unfortunately, in order to maintain random assignment, our procedure could not differentiate the amount of discrepancy between the most acceptable position and the endorsed position from the latitudes of acceptance and rejection. In order to argue within their randomly assigned latitude, subjects in the Reject conditions tended to endorse a position about one step more extreme than those in the Accept conditions. We are not, however, suggesting that a certain, specifiable amount of discrepancy is necessary to arouse dissonance processes. Large or small discrepancies could arouse dissonance, if the endorsed position were to fall within the latitude of rejection. It is our position that these individually defined
latitudes delineate whether dissonance or self-perception processes will occur. In fact, when one examines only those subjects in the high choice-booth conditions who endorsed a position two units from their most acceptable positions, one finds that the final adjusted attitude scores of the two subjects in the Accept condition are higher than any of the scores of the seven subjects from the Reject condition. Equalizing for discrepancy, then, there still seems to be a difference between the conditions—more change in the Accept-booth condition than in the Reject-booth condition. Although necessarily based upon a small number of cases, this internal analysis suggests that even if discrepancy were equalized, one would find latitudinal position to serve as an indicator of the attitudinal process occurring.

What periods during the history of an attitude favor the likelihood of self-perception or dissonance processes operating? Latitudes of acceptance and rejection provide the key through which some meaningful implications can be drawn. A wide latitude of acceptance will increase the likelihood of a self-perception process occurring, while a wide latitude of rejection will make a dissonance process more likely. We might speculate that the period during which attitudes are formed is characterized by a broad latitude of acceptance. After all, when an individual has little information about, or experience with an attitude object, he is likely to endorse a number of positions as acceptable ones. On the other hand, firmly established attitudes regarding attitude objects toward which an individual has had much relevant experience are likely to be characterized by the acceptability of relatively few positions and, hence, by a wide latitude of rejection. In short, while self-perception seems applicable to the early stages of attitude development, dissonance theory may be most relevant to later stages when an individual is more certain of his feelings toward an attitude object.

It should be noted that our experimental procedure involved what we considered to be the simplest method of operationalizing acceptable vs. objectionable behaviors. Subjects were committed to endorsing attitudinal positions within or beyond their latitudes of acceptance. The behavior itself, and the consequences of that behavior, were held constant. That is, all subjects were to write an essay which they were led to believe might convince some high school students to adopt the position advocated.

However, it is reasonable to assume that the same pattern of data would accrue if the position endorsed were held constant and the extremity of the behavior and/or consequences varied. One can imagine a behavioral latitudes measure on which individuals could indicate which behaviors they found acceptable and which objectionable. Performance of a behavior more extreme than implied by one's attitude yet within the behavioral latitude of acceptance may lead to the self-perception of a new attitude. Performance of a behavior within the behavioral latitude of rejection may lead to dissonance-induced attitude change. For example, for an individual
who favors the legalization of marijuana, signing a petition to that effect may be within the latitude of acceptance, and, therefore, evoke a self-perception process. On the other hand, marching on the state capital may fall within the latitude of rejection, and, therefore, produce dissonance. These different processes may occur even though the position endorsed is identical for the two behaviors. Further research is necessary to examine the extent of the similarity between a methodology employing behavioral latitudes and the methodology used in this study.

Hopefully, our conceptualization and the data that accompany it will serve to call a truce between dissonance and self-perception theorists. Within its proper domain of application, each theory is superior to the other, but, in general, no such relative superiority exists. Alone neither theory can explain all the data. Together, they provide social psychology with provocative and convincing explanations of the effects of overt behavior on attitudes.

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**REFERENCE NOTE**