Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Communication Accommodation

Theory Application Paper

Context: “Fattening in” in order to “Fitting in”

“Fitting in” is a perennial problem for almost all people, including Asian immigrants, and their children. The anxiety about food is definitely part of it; for example, when your classmates think your mother’s home cooking looks weird, you may pretend that you dislike it, too. The study published in the June issue of *Psychology Science* shows that it is not simply the abundance of high-calorie American food that has been blamed for immigrants packing on pounds, approaching U.S. levels of obesity within fifteen years of their move, but instead, it is also due to the desire to prove American-ness for members of Asian immigrant groups by choosing typical American dishes.

Researchers held two experiments to examine the hypothesis that the pressure felt by Asian immigrant groups to prove they belong in America causes them to consume more prototypically American, and consequently less healthy, food.

The first experiment tested the identity threat and espoused preferences for American food of Asian Americans. Scientists recruited sixty-four college students, including twenty-four Asian Americans and twenty-four European Americans, and they were separated into either an experimental group or a control group. Scientists asked all of the participants to write down their favorite food. In order to make Asian American participants feel self-conscious about their status as Americans, scientists asked the

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participants in the experimental group “Do you speak English?” a questions that provokes what psychologists call “stereotype threat,” whereas people in the control group had not been asked this question. The results show that Asian Americans who had been asked if they speak English were three times as likely to write down American foods, like hamburgers or pizza, as those who had not been. European American students wrote down the same kinds of food either way.

Did Asian Americans actually alter their food choices to seem more American? If the statement gets an affirmative answer, it would demonstrate that Asian Americans go as far as altering their diet and potentially compromising their health in response to identity-based threat. To test this, in the second experiment, researchers recruited fifty-five U.S. born Asian Americans in separate groups without the knowledge of this racial restriction. Researchers told them to order whatever they liked from local Asian and American restaurants, yet dropped a bomb on people in the experimental group: “Actually, you have to be an American to be in this study.” The results show that the subjects who had their American identities threatened ordered and ate dishes which were more classically American-style, such as hamburgers, grilled cheese sandwiches, BLTs, and pizza, than those who had not. When researchers tallied up the calories each group ate, Asian Americans who had been threatened had eaten a whopping 182 calories, 12 grams of fat, and 7 grams of saturated fat more than those who had not been threatened.

These two experiments lend credence to the notion that anxiety about fitting in leads immigrants and their children to consume more calories and hence develop the

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2 Stereotype threat is a potential contributing factor to long-standing racial and gender gaps in academic performance, while, it may occur whenever an individual's performance might confirm a negative stereotype.
health problem of obesity. Ironically, the researchers point out that the European American students, who embodied the prototypical American identity the others were mimicking, did not eat as much American food as Asian Americans who felt threatened. Through the study, researchers hope that there will be “a readjustment of what people think ‘American’ food really is”.

**Cognitive Dissonance Theory & Communication Accommodation Theory:**

Dissonance is the existence of nonfitting relations among cognitions. Cognition means any knowledge, opinion, or belief about one’s behavior. Cognitive dissonance is a feeling of discomfort resulting from inconsistent attitudes, thoughts and behaviors, and can be seen as an antecedent condition, which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957, p. 2-4). Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT), developed by Leon Festinger in 1957, proposes that people dislike this inconsistency between their action and their attitudes, and thus they have a motivational drive to reduce dissonance. They do this by changing their attitude, beliefs and actions to be consistent with their attitude. Dissonance can also be reduced by justifying, blaming, and denying (Festinger, 1957, p.18-24).

CDT focuses on the effects of inconsistency among cognitions, and how beliefs and behavior change attitudes. There are four assumptions basic for the theory, including:

1. Human beings desire consistency in their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.
2. Dissonance is created by psychological inconsistencies.
3. Dissonance is an aversive state that drives people to actions with measurable effects.
4. Dissonance stimulates efforts to achieve consonance and efforts toward dissonance reduction (Turner, & West, 2010).
As the theory developed over years, certain concepts were refined. The first one is magnitude of dissonance, which refers to the quantitative amount of dissonance a person experiences. Magnitude of dissonance determines actions people will adapt and cognitions they may advocate to reduce the inconsistency. Three factors, inclusive of importance, dissonance ratio and rationale, will influence the magnitude of dissonance one may feel (Zimbardo, Ebbesen, & Maslach, 1977; West & Turner, 2010, p.117).

CDT predicts that people will avoid information that increases dissonance, and four methods are suggested to accomplish this. First one is selective exposure, or seeking information that is consonant with current beliefs and actions. Second, selective attention, refers to paying attention to information that is consonant with current beliefs and actions. Third, selective interpretation involves interpreting ambiguous information so that it becomes consistent with current beliefs and actions. The last one, selective retention refers to remembering information that is consonant with current beliefs and behaviors (Festinger, 1957, p.95).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles in 1973 by expanding on social psychology’s Social Identity Theory, CAT explores the underlying motivations and consequences that occur when two interlocutors shift their communication styles (West & Turner, 2010, p.467).

Social Identity Theory, developed by Henry Tajfel and John Turner, they believe that social identity is primarily on the basis of an individual’s affiliations between in-groups, in which a person feels he or she belongs, and out-groups, where one feels he or she does not belong. People strive to maintain positive social identity, which therefore leads people to differentiate themselves from others through either in-group or out-group
comparisons (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). CAT is based on many of the same principles and concepts as social identity theory. Giles went further by arguing that not only do individuals accommodate, referring to the modification or regulation of one’s behavior in response to others with attributes that one perceive as different, but people also accommodate to others that they assume are form out-groups.

There are four assumption of communication accommodation theory, including:

1. Speech and behavioral congruencies and differences exist between all individuals in all conversations.

2. How we perceive the speech and behavior acts of the conversation, will determine how we evaluate the conversation.

3. Information about social status and group belongings exists in language and behavior.

4. Norms guide the accommodation process and there are varying degrees of appropriateness (Turner, & West, 2010).

CAT claims that in conversations people have options, and these choices are labeled convergence, divergence, and overaccommodation. Convergence, Giles, Nikolas Coupland, and Justine Coupland (1991) define it as a strategy whereby communicators choose to adapt to each other’s behaviors. People do convergence by relying on their perceptions of other person’s speech or behaviors. However, convergence is not always positive, for it may be based on stereotypes, which may affects the extent to which an individual will converge. Divergence, termed by Giles (1980), refers to the situation that communicators purposefully accentuate the verbal and nonverbal differences between themselves and other interlocutors. Depending on the situation, divergence is not always leads to negative effects, and may be used to maintain social identity.
Overaccommodation attributes to a communicator who in a well-intentioned attempt to connect with others, while be perceived as patronizing or demeaning (Jane Zuengler, 1991). Overaccommodation usually results in listeners perceiving that they are less than equal within communication discourse. Overaccommodation usually results in listeners perceiving that they are less equal within communication discourse.

**How CDT & CAT applied to the context?**

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) holds that cognitive discrepancy creates psychological discomfort, which motivates individuals to attempt to reduce or eliminate the discrepancy between cognition (Festinger, 1957). Phillip Anderson (1999) suggests that dissonance results when individuals behave in ways that are inconsistent with their expectations or beliefs about themselves. He argues that individuals possess a specific need for self-consistency. Dissonance usually involves threats to self-conceptions of rationality, competence, and morality (Harmon-Jones, 2000). In the context of altering food preferences to classical American-style food acted by Asian Americans when they feel their self-identity threatened, the change of behavior can be explained as the threat to their self-identity that causes the reduction of this dissonance.

Theorists indicate that both personal and social identities are important to self-definition, and thus the intragroup processes can arouse cognitive dissonance when group identity is different from self-identity (Glasford, Dovidio & Pratto, 2009). Facing the threat of self-identity via the statements stated by the researchers, “Do you speak English?” and “Actually, only Americans are being able to join the study,” the dynamic of cognitive dissonance arose in these Asian American participants.

In the first experiment, querying their English competence, the question is
discrepant to the participants’ self-definition as an American, since English is the mother tongue to native-born Americans. Feeling their self-identity as Americans in jeopardy, along with the inconsistency of their identity cognition, Asian American participants shifted their behavior of food choice from Oriental-styled dishes to American-style dishes to reduce this dissonant feeling. In the second experiment, by giving an extra emphasis on personal “nationality,” participants perceived a threat to their self-definition that aroused cognitive inconsistency. With the feeling of group-based (the group as Americans) dissonance, participants therefore reduced the dissonance by modifying the behavior to act more like Americans via consuming more American dishes.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) provides a theoretical framework for understanding interpersonal relationships in the intercultural communication context. According to theorists of CAT, the theory explains how people modify their communication style based on what they perceive to be the cognitive, emotional, and conversational needs of their conversation partners and situational cues such as stereotypical views of their partners’ group (Giles Coupland& Coupland, 1991). Individuals acquire self-identity via incorporating various elements of an ethnically diverse environment. According to Young Yun Kim’s study, in this process the identity becomes inclusive with a greater capacity to make deliberate choices of actions in specific situations rather than being simply dictated by the prevailing norms of the ethnic category ascribed to the individual (Kim, 2006).

In the first experiment of the discussed case, the questions asked by researchers, “Do you speak English?” subtly put the Asian American participants in a low-status in this discourse, in that these Asian Americans would inevitably perceive their self-identity
being threatened, and thus modify their behavior to ingratiate the higher-status (here referring to researchers in a narrow scale, the identity of prototypical Americans in a broader scope) by altering their favorite food choices into more typical American dishes. This is how communication accommodation occurred.

The affective dimension of intragroup attitudes is conceptualized as one’s inner feelings toward outgroup members as a whole, thus modifying the communication style. According to Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), the affective indices of prejudice tend to yield stronger contact effects than such cognitive indices as stereotypes, albeit the contact effects are significantly stronger for majority group members than for members of minority status groups (Imamura, Zhang, & Harwood, 2011). In the second experiment, researchers threw the bomb to participants by telling them “Actually, you have to be an American to be in this study” so that participants felt their identity as Americans being jeopardized along with the feeling that they are being labeled as “Asian American,” and consequently, the situation stimulated them to act more like Americans via consuming more calories of typical American food. Their behavior modification attempted to accommodate themselves in the group of Americans.

Conclusion:

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) indicates that people dislike the discrepancy between their behaviors and attitudes. Hence, the feeling of discomfort drives them to reduce the dissonance by changing their attitudes, beliefs, and actions to be consonant. Expanded from Social Identity Theory, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) proposes the latent motivations and outcomes that occur when two communicators alter their communication styles, finding that during the communication encounters,
individuals will try to accommodate one’s style of speaking to others.

Identity is the crucial issue that both theories touch upon. In CDT, self-identity is important, in that in order to reduce this discomfort from the dissonance caused by incompatible beliefs and actions, that individuals change their actions. CAT tackles social identity, in that the theory suggests that interlocutors will modify their communication styles to accommodate one another, and the modification is based on an affiliation one with the group or the desire to differentiate from the group, which is an important element of social identity.

In the later study of CDT, theorists provide further evidence of the phenomenon of intragroup dissonance and illustrate how group identification influences not only the effectiveness, but also the choice of intragroup dissonance reduction strategies that individuals will likely adapt (Glasford, Dovidio & Pratto, 2009). In this case, how the group identification changes is at stake. As the researchers suggest in this study of Asian Americans consuming more American junk food to fit in this group, which resulting in the damaging of their health, the definition of American food should be broaden. By broadening the intragroup identity, here the definition of “American food,” Asian Americans eating sushi or kimchi will raise no suspicion that they are foreigners, which will stimulate their cognitive dissonance, and thus they consume more unhealthy food.

CAT explains how people modify their communication based on what they perceive to be the cognitive, emotional, and conversational needs of their conversation partners and situational cues such as stereotypical views of their partners’ group (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). In this context, Asian American participants shifted their food preferences to accommodate the majority group, which they identify as typical Americans,
after receiving cues of “not fitting prototypical American outlooks.” Since this was stated by higher-status speakers, participants in a lower-status made this alteration. However, as mentioned previously, when the characteristics of American identity are broadened, there is no need for Asian Americans to change their food preferences to ingratiate themselves to the majority group. To a greater extent, the situation of overaccommodation, such as asking for language help without knowing the person, or stereotyping that Asians all like to have rice, made by Caucasian Americans may improve.

Admittedly, although both theories can provide possible suggestions to the problem discussed in the case, they fall short in some situations. It is true that CDT and CAT offer a clear picture for people to notice the phenomenon and the relating issues. However, the key problem still falls on the social cognition or definition of what should be called “American Food,” or expanding from it, what should “Americans” look like. Without changing the perception of the problem, immigrants and their younger generations will still modifying their actions to fit into American society.

References:


