

The Effect of Anticipated Dissonance on Pre-Decision Behavior

Marcia Braden and Elaine Walster

There are times when a person will avoid making a decision even though he has a preference between the alternatives. Sometimes, for example, a person in a restaurant, after staring at the menu for some time, will breathe a clear sigh of relief if her companion offers to order for her. A high school graduate faced with a choice between two colleges may sometimes almost beg his parents to tell him which one to choose. Such reluctance to make a decision is not rare.

There are at least two possible explanations for this reluctance.

It is plausible to suppose that the conflict situation itself is somewhat unpleasant. If this is true, then one can interpret the avoidance of a decision as a means of avoiding, or escaping from, the conflict. The other possible explanation involves the anticipation of post-decision dissonance. Even though dissonance does not exist until after the decision is made, a person may react to the anticipation of such dissonance because through previous experience he has learned to be wary of it. One way to avoid any post-decision dissonance is to avoid making a decision.

Both of these explanations may be correct; that is, both processes may play a part in producing avoidance of decision making. There is, however, no clear evidence that either of these processes does, in fact, occur. This experiment represents an attempt to determine whether or not one can observe decision avoidance as a reaction solely to the anticipation of dissonance. We will not concern ourselves with the possible unpleasantness of conflict except to see to it that this factor does not play a differential role in the experiment.

The design of this experiment is quite simple. There are two experimental conditions. In both of them, subjects are faced with the identical decision. In one condition the situation is described so as to increase the anticipation of dissonance. In the other condition, with instructions held as constant as possible, the anticipation of dissonance is not encouraged. One should observe more frequent refusal to make a decision in the former condition. In order to ensure that the measurements would be sensitive enough, the experimental situation was arranged so that it was easy to refuse to make the decision.

Procedure

Forty-two high school girls were used as subjects in the experiment. The girls volunteered to participate in a "survey conducted by a company that produced popular phonograph records." They were told that they would be paid one dollar for participating in the survey.

Each girl was interviewed individually. When she arrived for the interview she was told that we were interested in finding out some things about teenagers' preferences. She was then shown

the names of 13 popular singers and asked to rank them from most liked to least liked. The purpose of this, apart from lending credibility to the ostensible purpose of the "survey," was to obtain some indication of the extent to which the girls liked one particular singer whose name was identified with the two records between which they would later be asked to choose.

The experimenter then engaged in an elaborate explanation of a "new promotion technique" that the company sponsoring the survey was about to use. The purpose of this explanation was simply to set the stage for the manipulation of anticipated dissonance. The experimenter explained that movies and plays were often reviewed and that quotations from the reviews, used in advertising, were successful in attracting new viewers. The record company had decided to use a similar promotional technique—they were going to print quotations from reviews on the labels of two records that were soon to be released. These quotations were to be recommendations from high school girls about the records.

The experimenter then drew the girl's attention to two stacks of records on the table. One of these stacks of records had green labels and the record was titled "The Stranger"; the other stack had white labels bearing the title "Forgetting You." The same singer was listed as the recording artist on both records. The subject was told that these were advance copies of the records. They had not yet been released, so the girl, of course, had not heard either of the songs. Before releasing them, the company was trying to find out which quotations from high school girls' recommendations would be most effective in selling each record. Last week, in order to get some quotations for possible use, these records had been played to girls in a different high school and those girls had written recommendations for the record they especially liked. Two lists of very enthusiastic recommendations, one list for each of the two records, now existed.

The experimenter continued, explaining that the next step was to discover which of these recommendations would be best to use for advertising on the labels of the records when they were released. The plan was to assemble a large number of small groups, four girls to a group, and to read to each group the recommendations for one of these records. Each group would then vote on which recommendation would most make them want to hear and

buy the record being described. The best way to obtain honest and helpful votes from such groups was to have someone their own age meet with each group, read the list of recommendations, and get the votes. This procedure, they were told, had turned out to be most successful. The experimenter then asked the girl if she would be willing to help out by reading the list of recommendations about *one* of the records to four different groups of girls during the next two weeks. After the girl agreed to do this (and they all did) actual appointment times were set up.

The experimenter then proceeded to create a situation in which subjects were asked to make a decision under circumstances in which they either did, or did not, anticipate that dissonance would ensue. To create a condition of "anticipated dissonance," the experimenter said:

As you can see from the stacks of records here on the table, we have lots of copies of the two records. We decided we might as well give one to each girl who helps us out by reading one of the lists of recommendations to four groups of other girls. Before you leave today, we'll flip a coin to determine which of the two records you'll be given as a gift.

Since you'll be reading recommendations about only one of these records to other girls, it seemed to us that you could probably do a better and fairer job during the next two weeks if you read the list of enthusiastic recommendations about the record which you do *not* get yourself. That means that if, on the coin toss, you get this record [*pointing to one*], it will be your job to read the things students really like about this record [*pointing to the other one*], and vice versa.

Oh, golly, wait a minute! Just yesterday we decided that if any of the students helping us had any special preference for one or the other of the records, she could *choose* which one she wanted. Naturally, if you choose a record, you will then read the things people liked best about the record you didn't choose. If you don't want to decide which one you like best, we can still flip a coin as we planned before. What would you like to do?

To create an experimental condition of "anticipated consonance," subjects were given the identical instructions in the identical order except that throughout they were told that they would read the recommendations about the record they *received* to the groups of other girls. When they were told that they could choose a record, they were told that if they did so, they would read the list of recommendations about the record they chose. Thus, the only difference between the two conditions was whether they ex-

pected to read a list of statements extolling the record they would possess, or one extolling the record they would not possess.

Next, either the girl chose a record, or a coin was flipped, as she desired. She was then asked to rate each of the two records on a nine-point scale on which 1 was labeled "Think I will like it extremely much," and 9 represented "Think I will dislike it very much."

The experiment was then explained to each girl, and she was paid one dollar for participating.

Results

Two experimental conditions were created in the experiment, one of anticipated dissonance and one of anticipated consonance. Actually, of course, these designations of the experimental conditions are correct only if the subject chooses which record she wants. Reading enthusiastic recommendations for an alternative that one has rejected may be expected to create dissonance. Reading such recommendations about a record one does not own because of the toss of a coin certainly does not create any dissonance. Consequently, if the subject reacts in anticipation of dissonance, one would expect a higher incidence of unwillingness to choose in the anticipated-dissonance condition. The experimental situation was designed, of course, to make it easy for the subject to avoid making the choice. First, there was little basis for making a choice. The singer was the same on both records, and they did not hear the records. Only the different titles could provide a basis for choosing. In addition, not choosing was described as a normal and usual procedure so as to make it easy for the girl to say she would rather flip a coin.

Given the ease of avoiding a choice, one may expect that any difference between the two conditions in reluctance to choose would be adequately reflected in the relative frequency of avoiding choice. These data are presented in Table 6.6. It is clear from the table that where consonance is anticipated, in spite of the meager basis for choosing, the great majority (81 per cent) make such a choice rather than leave the matter to chance. This, of course, is what one would expect and seems quite sensible. Even if only a slight preference exists, why not make a choice? When

TABLE 6.6

Number of Subjects Who Make or Avoid a Decision

	Anticipated Dissonance	Anticipated Consonance
Choose a Record	6	17
Flip a Coin	15	4

dissonance is anticipated, however, the data are reversed. In this condition 71 per cent want to flip a coin. The difference between the two conditions is highly significant statistically ($\chi^2 = 11.69$). In short, if dissonance is anticipated as a direct consequence of making a decision, there is a decided tendency to avoid the decision.

The data seem rather clear and it is difficult to think of other possible reasons for the difference between the two conditions. The subjects were assigned at random to the experimental conditions and, on the one pre-measure we obtained, are quite comparable. The average rank of the singer associated with the two records (out of 13 singers) was 4.2 and 4.5 for the anticipated-consonance and anticipated-dissonance conditions, respectively. In other words, the singer was rather well liked, and about equally so in both conditions.

One can also examine whether the difference in experimental procedure made any difference in how well the girls expected to like the records. If it did make a difference, this might be a clue to alternative interpretations. The average rating, on a nine-point scale, was 4.2 in the anticipated-consonance, and 4.1 in the anticipated-dissonance condition. The girls expect to like the records moderately. But again, there is no difference between the conditions.

It is possible, of course, that linking the anticipated dissonance to the choice brought the two alternatives closer together in attractiveness; that is, the girls may have been faced with a decision between "having the better record and doing something unpleasant" and "having the inferior record and doing something pleasant." This, if it made the alternatives nearly equal, could result in difficulty in choosing, which subjects expressed by refusing to choose. If this explanation were correct, however, one would

expect a fair number of the girls in the anticipated-dissonance condition to have chosen the inferior record, since, for some, the "unpleasant" action versus "pleasant" action difference would outweigh the difference in attractiveness of the records. This did not occur. It seems reasonable to conclude that the avoidance of decision was, indeed, a consequence of anticipated dissonance.

■

We have presented some evidence in this chapter that the pre-decision period can, and probably should, be viewed as involving more than a mere process of choosing between alternatives. It seems clear from the Walster and Festinger experiment that, strictly speaking, not all of the time consumed in the pre-decision period is spent in the process of deciding. That is, it is not all spent in the process of comparing and evaluating the available alternatives. Some time is spent in considering other more attractive alternatives, even though these may be unavailable. It seems equally clear from the Braden and Walster experiment that willingness or unwillingness to make a decision is affected not solely by the difficulty of the decision or by aspects of the conflict itself. The anticipation of post-decision dissonance produces a heightened reluctance to choose.

Both of the experiments reported in this chapter are preliminary in nature. They are, in a sense, demonstrations that these two effects do occur. The experiments do not contribute much to an understanding of the variables that would determine the magnitude of these effects, nor do they contribute much to an understanding of how factors outside the immediate decision situation interact with the conflict in which the person finds himself. Perhaps, however, these demonstrations will help open the way for such new understanding.