

Search for Consistency

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Some people actively seek information while others avoid it or seem indifferent. According to a current psychological theory, the need for information is related to a person's search for consistency in his life with regard to his perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and actions. By understanding this search for consistency, Extension personnel will be better able to meet their clients' need for information. The author gives hypothetical examples to illustrate research findings regarding a person's active search for information, his need for certain facts, and his avoidance of some information.

WHY do some people actively seek information from Extension Service personnel, while others just as actively avoid it or seem passively indifferent to it? Are there clues for us in this behavior? Could we teach more effectively if we understood the reasons?

Until recently we have not had adequate psychological knowledge of the causes of such behavior. We were shocked when we learned that someone misinterpreted what we said, or that a farmer only skimmed the headline of a newspaper article we worked so hard to prepare, or that a loyal listener to our morning radio program switched to another station because we discussed a certain topic. Understanding the reasons for such behavior can assist Extension personnel in program development efforts.

In our traditional view of the communication or teaching process we think in terms of "Who says what through what channels (media) of communication, to whom (with what) . . . results."¹ This view tends to argue that the power and capacity for manipulating the learning effects is largely with the sender of the message. It assumes that the audience is more or less passive. If we critically examine our own experiences, we find this viewpoint inadequate. We

¹Harold D. Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," in Wilbur Schramm (ed.), *Mass Communications* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1960), p. 117.

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are not the all-powerful communicator. Our audience may seem passive but usually it is either seeking or avoiding our information.

THE SEARCH FOR CONSISTENCY

There are several relevant theories concerning what motivates people to seek information. Recently some new concepts have been developed which depict man as striving for a unified, meaningful structure of his perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes.² With this viewpoint as a major premise, a psychological theory has developed that can be of use to us in understanding the educational needs of people, their motivation to seek or avoid new information, and causes of apparently contradictory behavior. Called man's *search for consistency* in his life, this theory argues that a major motivation is the attempt of people to maintain consistency in all they do and feel.

According to this theory, each individual tries to maintain a state of balance among his perceptions, beliefs, and actions. For example, an habitual heavy eater may learn that overweight is considered bad for his health. His overeating is inconsistent with his knowledge that it may be harmful. In his search for consistency, this person may simply decide to eat less, so his actions are now consistent with his knowledge. Or, he may refuse to accept knowledge about the effects of overeating. Thus he may avidly read articles that are critical of research showing a positive relationship of heart failure to overweight, and avoid reading articles praising this research. He may search for information showing that danger from overeating is less than dangers such as car accidents.

Recently there has been much research in the social sciences regarding consistency, with resulting implications for educational efforts by Extension personnel. The largest systematic body of data referring to consistency has been collected in the demonstration and testing of Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance.³ Heider,⁴ Newcomb,⁵ and Osgood and Tannenbaum⁶ have also developed theoretical explanations of consistency. However, for simplicity of presentation this article will focus on Festinger's explanations. In

² Daniel Katz, in preface to special issue on "Attitude Change," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XXIV (Summer, 1960).

³ Robert B. Zajonc, "Balance, Congruity, and Dissonance," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XXIV (Summer, 1960), 290.

⁴ F. Heider, "Attitudes and Cognitive Organization," *Journal of Psychology*, XXI (1946), 107-112.

⁵ T. M. Newcomb, "An Approach to the Study of Communicative Acts," *Psychological Review*, LX (1953), 393-404.

⁶ C. E. Osgood and P. H. Tannenbaum, "The Principle of Congruity in the Prediction of Attitude Change," *Psychological Review*, LXII (1955), 42-55.

place of Festinger's terms "consonance" and "dissonance," we will use the more familiar words "consistency" and "inconsistency."

Festinger demonstrates that the existence of inconsistency makes a person emotionally uncomfortable and will motivate him to try to reduce this inconsistency and achieve psychological consistency.⁷ If this person tries to reduce inconsistency by changing an opinion he holds, then he will be very receptive to and may actively seek information attempting to influence him toward an opinion that agrees with his action. Likewise, he will resist and actively avoid information which results in more inconsistency.

The Active Search for Information

The search for consistency causes individuals to actively seek some types of information while avoiding other types. This concept has direct application to our daily educational activities. Communication or educational efforts are more fruitful when they help an individual solve problems and thus lessen tensions. A useful rule of thumb is that information is very effective when it reduces inconsistency and quite ineffective if it simply increases inconsistency, unless the latter comes about by accidental exposure.

A hypothetical example will illustrate the principle in action. A farmer reads an announcement of an Extension meeting on "Narrow Rows for Corn." Will he attend? When faced with a potential source of information such as this meeting, a person usually does not know the exact nature of the knowledge he might acquire. He reacts in terms of his expectations. If he thinks that the knowledge will increase his personal consistency, he will tend to seek the new information. If he expects that the knowledge acquired would increase inconsistency, thus provoking tensions, he will often avoid it.

Suppose this farmer has purchased narrow-row corn planting equipment. What need has he for additional information? He surely knows most of the facts consistent with his decision to purchase narrow-row equipment. He also recognizes the limitations of the standard-row equipment he rejected. Some other facts, however, will almost inevitably be inconsistent with his decision. These are the disadvantages of narrow-row equipment and the benefits of standard-row equipment. If this farmer knows any facts that would have led him to consider standard-row equipment, he will experience feelings of inconsistency as a result of choosing narrow-row equipment. He does not want this discomfort reinforced.

⁷ Leon Festinger, *The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 3.

The amount of inconsistency he experiences depends on the ratio of his inconsistent knowledge to consistent knowledge (regarding his commitment to narrow-row equipment), where each knowledge element is weighed according to its psychological importance to him. This ratio may be expressed as:

$$\frac{\text{Number and/or importance of inconsistent knowledge elements}}{\text{Number and/or importance of consistent knowledge elements}}$$

If, in this case, the only inconsistent element is the farmer's feeling that the neighbors will think him "off his rocker" if he goes to narrow rows—and he does not value his neighbors' opinions anyway—then he has few feelings of inconsistency. If the neighbors' opinions are important to him but the economic advantages of narrow-row equipment greatly outweigh this factor, there is again little inconsistency experienced. However, if he thinks that the merits of standard-row equipment are almost equal to those of narrow-row equipment, he will have a high magnitude of inconsistency. To reduce this inconsistency, he may try to eliminate or reduce the importance of inconsistent knowledge elements. He may depreciate merits of standard-row equipment and ignore any unfavorable aspects of narrow-row equipment. He may also try to increase the number and/or importance of knowledge elements which are consistent with his purchase of narrow-row equipment. He will tend to see the merits of equipment he bought and the unfavorable aspects of standard-row equipment.

Since news releases about narrow-row equipment have reported increased corn yields, the farmer expects that the scheduled Extension meeting will provide rewarding information. As a result of his search for consistency, he will try to attend the meeting.

Feelings of inconsistency will lead a person to seek out others who already agree with the knowledge element that he wants to establish or maintain. Early innovators of practices cannot reduce their feelings of inconsistency within the local community. Thus they may bypass the county agent and Extension specialist and go directly to the University scientist. They may even join groups outside the community in an effort to obtain social support.

Avoidance of Information

But suppose this farmer has purchased standard-row equipment, and has strong feelings of inconsistency. To reduce this inconsistency, he actively seeks information about the benefits of standard-row

equipment. If he suspects that the meeting will present facts favorable to narrow-row equipment, he may refuse to attend. Even if he does go, he may misinterpret the presentation so that he thinks that it supports his commitment to standard-row equipment.

Avoidance of new information that will add to feelings of inconsistency is a real pattern of behavior. A farmer who has just purchased standard-row equipment so strongly needs information for support of his actions that he may actually turn off a radio program (either mentally or physically) if it airs the merits of narrow-row equipment. He may do this even if he is a loyal listener because he cannot tolerate the emotional stress the program generates in him.

Passive Attitude toward Information

But what about the farmer with little or no inconsistency about the choice of corn-planting methods? He has no motivation to seek new and additional knowledge at the meeting, and little or no reason to avoid such knowledge. His motivation for attending the meeting would have to be for a different reason. He might go for social reasons—to associate with people he likes. He might attend the luncheon before the meeting in order to visit with other farmers, and stay for the meeting to prevent any social criticism. While there, he may accidentally experience feelings of inconsistency as he listens to the discussion; this may lead him to search for more information. To catch passive people who are believed to need the information, the Extension worker may have to provide clients with a motivational “excuse” to attend meetings and be exposed to information. He may do this through a social event which the people can enjoy as a part of a meeting or other Extension activity.

Commitment Influences

In this search for consistency, what happens to the educational needs of a person who makes a public commitment that conflicts with his private opinion? Consider a farmer who personally believes that minimum tillage is of little value but who has been persuaded by the Extension agent to publicly display a minimum tillage demonstration plot on his farm. Cohen reports that when persons are induced to express or display positions that oppose their private opinions, opinion change tends to be in the direction of the induced position.⁴ Their public behavior is inconsistent with their private

⁴Arthur R. Cohen, “Attitudinal Consequences of Induced Discrepancies between Opinions and Behavior,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XXIV (Summer, 1960).

beliefs. If they are given freedom and time for attitudes to change, the power of their public behavior overcomes the power of earlier private beliefs. We would thus expect our farmer to seek out all the information he could find on the relative merits of minimum tillage in order to reduce his inconsistency. He would also tend to avoid information not favorable to his public display of approving of minimum tillage.

Does the behavioral change come first, or does attitudinal change regarding the practice itself precede the action? As in the chicken or egg dilemma, it depends on our point of view and perhaps the subject being considered. Clark, in his study of attitude change, concludes that the "hypothesis that attitudinal and other subjective changes are necessary antecedents to behavioral changes is not supported by the empirical data examined in this survey. On the contrary, these data suggest that situationally determined behavioral changes generally precede any observable attitudinal changes."⁹

According to a consistency theory analysis, behaving in a manner contrary to one's attitudinal position creates inconsistency. This can be reduced by actively seeking information which seems to justify changing one's attitudes so that they are more consistent with one's behavior. We must be cautious in generalizing Clark's work to Extension education. However, we have seen the usefulness of public commitment through Extension demonstrations. And we have seen people seek information about the practices being demonstrated.

Misinterpretation of New Information

The search for consistency can cause misinterpretation and misperception of new information presented through accidental exposure. A classic example was recently given by a clothing specialist who conducted a weekly workshop for culturally disadvantaged women. The specialist explained the necessity for weight control if clothes were to fit well. The home demonstration agent handed out a booklet on correct diet and answered questions.

The following week an obese woman sat next to the specialist at lunch hour and raved about her new diet. She explained how fortunate it was she didn't have to give up any of the things she liked to eat. Her sack lunch consisted of potato chips, a soft drink, six chocolates, and a special can of diet food. At the workshop this lady had been accidentally exposed to new information telling her she

⁹ K. B. Clark (ed.), "Desegregation: An Appraisal of the Evidence," *Journal of Social Issues*, IX (No. 4, 1953), 72.

should lose weight in a safe manner that meant loss of her candy, potato chips, and soft drinks. This caused her great feelings of inconsistency. To resolve her dilemma she misinterpreted the information so she could buy diet food and continue her eating habits.

Different Tolerance Levels

People appear to have different tolerance levels to inconsistency. To some, any inconsistency is extremely painful, while others seem able to tolerate a large amount.¹⁰ A county agent recently commented that the diffusion process no longer works as it did 20 or 30 years ago. Now farmers adopt new practices in 3 to 5 years instead of 12 to 15 years. They actually seem to have an *expectancy set* for change in technological methods. This expectancy set is caused by the motivation brought about through the search for consistency. When mass media or Extension meetings present facts about new technology which can increase production and profits, feelings of inconsistency are both expected and accepted. To reduce this inconsistency, farmers actively seek more information to enable them to choose the promising new technology.

SUMMARY

What implications are there for Extension? The search for consistency by our clientele may not relate directly to all our educational responsibilities. However, this functional view of the informational needs of clients sharpens our focus on the dissemination of information to solve problems. It gives us a new respect for our audience's true psychological needs. There is a need for further study of this search for consistency as it applies to the Cooperative Extension Service and its educational goals. Some basic principles are briefly enumerated here with examples of practical application.

1. Feelings of inconsistency motivate individuals to either seek or avoid information. When a person wants to lower tensions caused by inconsistency, he actively seeks information which reduces inconsistency and he avoids information which might add to his inconsistency. *Application:* In Extension program development we must be aware that our clients may either actively search for or avoid our information. Planning must include feedback mechanisms to keep us in tune with the community. Thus we can plan to release information when our clients are actively seeking it, instead of just cranking out facts whenever they come from the University.

¹⁰Hastinger, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

2. The state of consistency produces little or no motivation to either seek or avoid information. *Application:* Clients who actively seek information have been Extension's best customers—and Extension has done a good job of meeting their needs. However, persons who actively avoided or passively sought no information have been neglected. Supposedly they were reached by the many communications that were freely dispensed. We tended to feel that if they didn't get the word, it wasn't our fault. It is doubtful if we can support such a position much longer. Extension is supposed to work with "all the people" in a continuing education effort.

How can Extension reach these "neutral non-seekers"? To eliminate this neutrality, the correct measure of inconsistency must be added to motivate these persons to seek information and thereby reduce their new-found inconsistency. The opportunity will often come through a noneducational social event. At gatherings such as a coffee break or potluck supper, the informal discussion can drift around to family and community problems about which Extension may have important facts. With his defenses down, and with accidental exposure to comments by his opinion leader, the non-seeker may begin to actively seek information. Information filters very slowly from one social stratum to another but it moves rapidly through a particular social stratum via opinion leaders. Extension workers must make sure that an "open door policy" is known to those who suddenly need information. If tension becomes great enough, the search for consistency will cause a non-seeker to become an active seeker in order to lessen these tensions. He may then loyally support Extension education.

3. If an individual makes a public commitment that opposes his private belief, he feels tension from the inconsistency and is motivated to seek information favoring the public commitment. *Application:* Extension should attempt to get people with the most resistance to new and worthwhile practices to commit themselves by consenting to a demonstration or activity of some sort. This public action may stimulate them to become active seekers of additional information.

The information presented here is an attempt to show the direct application of the consistency theory to Extension education. Because of its limited scope, this article should not be considered all-inclusive. Nor should the reader conclude that the search for consistency is the only motive for obtaining information. The author has attempted to stimulate questions in the mind of the reader regarding how well his Extension program meets the needs of individuals as he strives to "help people help themselves."