Using Cognitive Dissonance Theory in Reducing Racism and Prejudice

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Abstract
In this paper, Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance is suggested for utilization in order to reduce and/or diminish racism in society. Leon Festinger’s theory posits that humans strive to be consistent, mostly internally (thus the term cognitive); when a cognitive dissonance is experienced, an individual feels a psychological discomfort and therefore attempts to reduce the tension created by that particular experience. In this paper, I suggest specific ways of combatting racism in daily life, particularly in communities that are mostly homogenous and/or have high levels of (potential or active) racism. It is important to note that, I use the term racism as a blanket term that includes race, ethnicity, culture, and religion. This is important because of the highly discussed issue of discrimination against people of minority religions (i.e., anti-Muslim, anti-Jewish attitudes) and also because of the fact that most individuals are not aware that blaming the other’s culture is also racism. I also would like to emphasize that color-blind racism is also included in the definition of racism as an integral part of the paper (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) argument suggests that we do not live in a post-racial community, although this view is widely acknowledged in the society due to misinformation. The hegemonic power structure, which benefits from this hidden or covert racism including ignorance or inaccurate beliefs, is also mentioned in the study. In order to achieve the cognitive dissonance in people’s minds, I suggest using startling facts that will contradict with the people’s own values, beliefs, and attitudes. An example could be using religious texts that oppose or forbid discriminatory ideas or actions. A similar example can be also given from the other’s religious text or belief; causing the individual who has (color-blind) racist attitudes, or prejudices towards the other and their religion. Specific examples for different situations are provided in the study. Breaking stereotypes and prejudices by using this theory, even when it does not necessarily count as racism, is also crucial as it could lead to more open minds thus enabling the individual(s) to be more inclusive and sensitive towards the other.