

## Leon Festinger (1920 – 1989)

The prediction of which alternative will be chosen is a minor aspect of the psychological problem of decision making. The real problem concerns the process by which the organism evaluates the alternatives and *does* make a choice.

Leon Festinger

Leon Festinger died on February 11, 1989.

Leon Festinger, who developed the theory of cognitive dissonance, one of the most powerful theories of human decision making, died of liver cancer at his home in Manhattan.

Leon held the Else and Hans Staudinger Professor of Psychology chair at the New School for Social Research from 1968 until his death. He was the author of numerous books, including *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Row, Peterson, 1957).

My favorite publication is of course his edited volume, entitled *Conflict, Decision and Dissonance* (Tavistock Publications, 1964), published also by Stanford University Press when he served as Professor of Psychology at Stanford University (1955–1968). His other books include *When Prophecy Fails* (with Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter, University of Minnesota Press, 1956), *Deterrents and Reinforcement: The Psychology of Insufficient Reward* (co-authored with Douglas H. Lawrence) and the most recent *The Human Legacy* (Columbia University press, 1983).

Festinger's best papers are 'Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance,' with James M. Carlsmith, *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 58(2) (1959): 203–210, and 'Preparatory Action and Belief in the Probable Occurrence of Future Events,' with Ruby B. Varyan, *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 63(3) (1961): 603–606.

Leon Festinger was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Born in Manhattan, Dr. Festinger held a bachelor's degree from City College of New York (1939), and master's and doctoral degrees from Iowa State

University (in child behavior, 1940 and 1942 respectively). He remained in Iowa as a research associate until 1943 and for the next two years served as senior statistician on the Committee on Selection and Training of Aircraft Pilots at the University of Rochester (my own Alma mater). From 1945 to 1948 he taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and he was a program director of the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the University of Michigan until 1951. In 1959 the American Psychological Association awarded Festinger its Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award.

Surviving are his wife, Trudy, a daughter Catherine, and two sons, Richard and Kurt.

I'll miss Leon Festinger; I'll feel forever sorry for not having his great mind around for comfort, continuity and coherence. The very process of human decision making has been enriched and improved by the generous feedback from this great man's thought. All of my own theories of the 'displaced ideal' have been motivated and strengthened by his discoveries:

... we must accept the conclusion that a difference probably exists in the attractiveness of the available alternatives, depending upon whether the unavailable alternative was 'ideal' or 'mediocre.' In other words, we cannot maintain, unfortunately, that the same decision situation was present psychologically in all conditions.

Compare the above with the simplistic poverty of so-called 'axiom of independence of irrelevant alternatives,' and judge for yourself the wisdom and insight involved.

Festinger was one of the few decision theorists who understood the nature of the decision-making *process*. He wrote:

There is a clear and undeniable difference between the cognitive processes that occur during the period of making a decision and those that occur after the decision has been made.

The undivisible wholeness of the pre-decision/ decision/ post-decision triad is even today out of reach of most so-called 'decision analysts' who continue to maximize the artifacts of 'aggregate utilities' with no regard to the decision process itself. Why is it that even great thinkers like Leon Festinger do not reach the most active 'busybodies' of mathematical 'optimization?' We may never know.

The very 'act of decision', which most of 'decision analysts' pay so much attention to, was properly understood by Festinger:

The decision itself does nothing but involve the person in a commitment to a given course of action, and does not sharply alter the psychological processes that go on. After the decision there is still residual conflict, and the spreading-apart process continues, since conflict is unpleasant.

So, another of the 'greats' is gone. After Katona, Marschak, Machlup and Morgenstern, now also Leon Festinger leaves only a legacy of the great decision-making theories which remained unfinished,

incomplete – just glimpses of could have been, if . . . .

The theory of cognitive dissonance was beautifully and simply explained by Festinger in his 1962 article 'Cognitive Dissonance' in *Scientific American*:

All the information a person has concerning the attractive features of the rejected alternative (and the possible unattractive features of the chosen alternative is now inconsistent, or dissonant, with the knowledge that he has made the given choice.

Another way to summarize the result is to say that those who are highly rewarded for doing something that involves dissonance change their opinion less in the direction of agreeing with what they did than those who are given very little reward. This result may seem surprising, since we are used to thinking that reward is effective in creating change. It must be remembered, however, that the critical factor here is that the reward is being used to induce a behavior that is dissonant with private opinion.

Perfect, Leon Festinger.

Milan ZELENY