THE POWER OF PROVERBS: DISSONANCE REDUCTION THROUGH COMMON SAYINGS

Daniel R. Stalder
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

ABSTRACT

After reading a detailed account of a serious mistake in which a similar-age other went against personal values or a prior commitment, undergraduates rated their feelings of dissonance (regret, hypocrisy, and stupidity) had they been in the actor's place. Relative to a control condition, reading relevant proverbs such as "everybody makes mistakes" or "live and learn" significantly reduced feelings of dissonance in men but not women. For men but not women, perceived applicability of the proverbs also predicted trivialization of the mistake.

INTRODUCTION

Cognitive dissonance is a psychological discomfort created by an inconsistency among one's thoughts or behaviors (Festinger, 1957). For example, a mistake or misjudgment may be dissonant with one's values or self-views (e.g., Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997). Among possible modes of dissonance reduction, social comparison has received recent attention. If other people engaged in the same misjudgment or dissonance-inducing behavior, then dissonance reduces and one seems to feel better (e.g., Matz & Wood, 2005; McKimmie et al., 2003; Stalder & Devine, 2002). Despite the growing evidence for this effect, methodological challenges might limit such evidence. In particular, participants who behave contrary to their own attitudes and who learn of others who engaged in the same behavior still tend to infer behavior-consistent (vs. contrary) attitudes in those others (McKimmie et al., 2003; Stalder & Baron, 2001). Others who behave consistently with their own attitudes should not feel dissonance and thus do not act as relevant comparison others, nullifying the dissonance-reducing effect of a social-comparison manipulation (Stroebe & Diehl, 1981; White, 1980).

Nonetheless, the dissonance-reducing potential of social comparison might exceed other modes of dissonance reduction, because a dissonance-reducing aspect of social consensus seems ingrained in society and language. A child who is caught misbehaving at school and asked to explain at home might argue that "everybody else" was doing it. Research has shown that an

"everybody does it" perception seems to downplay the seriousness of cheating in school and on taxes (Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992; Welch et al., 2005). The literature on the false consensus effect shows how one commonly overestimates the number of others who are guilty of one's own misbehavior (Myers, 2005). Some public figures and celebrities similarly use the "everybody does it" defense when asked about a questionable behavior or personal failure (e.g., see Myers, 2005). Many of such reports even explicitly cite the defense by name (e.g., the "everybody-does-it defense"; Corn, 2005). In some cases, the defense uses others to redefine the act as acceptable or as not a failure. In other cases, the defense highlights how "nobody is perfect," a well-known proverb that might provide immediate consensus-based relief after committing a serious and undeniable mistake. Other proverbs, such as "live and learn," imply a common belief that everyone makes mistakes or that mistakes are a necessary part of life.

Addressing Methodological Issues

The present study tried to demonstrate experimentally the dissonance-reducing effect of such proverbs. Such a social-comparison manipulation precludes the methodological problem of participants inferring relevant cognitions that are consistent with comparison others' behaviors. In stating or alluding to mistakes, the proverbs convey that other people have engaged in personally unwanted (or naive) behavior or behavior that is inconsistent with personal values.

In addition to this methodological issue, McKimmie et al. (2003) noted that some participants who feel dissonance or hypocrisy and are asked to rate their feelings of hypocrisy might simply "reinterpret the discrepancy…by claiming to be nonhypocritical and thereby reducing the [dissonance] effect" (p. 218). Stalder and Devine (2002) also reported some evidence for this outcome (among participants who regarded the target issue as highly important). Thus, it might be difficult to accurately measure personal feelings of hypocrisy in response to a dissonance manipulation. Stalder (2006) thus tried a role-play procedure in which participants "pretended" to be the original participants in a standard dissonance paradigm. In this way, directly-felt dissonance could not bias the reporting of dissonance-related feelings, and Stalder showed stronger feelings of dissonance than Stalder and Devine in comparable conditions. The present study used a similar role-play procedure.

Trivialization

It makes intuitive sense that if "everybody" does something that most people otherwise perceive as negative and thus serious, then the behavior must not be as "big a deal" as initially thought (see also Davis et al., 1992; Welch et al., 2005). Similarly, if "everybody makes mistakes," then most people probably perceive their occasional mistakes as less serious. Such perceptions constitute a mode of dissonance reduction called trivialization, in which one downplays the importance or seriousness of a dissonant element to feel better (Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). I investigated whether trivialization might be the dissonance-reducing mechanism underlying a proverb effect. As further possible support, Jemmott, Ditto, and Croyle (1986) showed that greater perceived prevalence of a negative condition (disease) increased trivialization of that condition.

Present Predictions and Questions

In sum, I predicted that reading relevant social-comparison proverbs after reading about a serious personal mistake would reduce feelings of dissonance relative to a control condition. I also investigated whether trivialization might be the mechanism underlying such an effect.

I also considered gender, because the role-play instructions might tap empathy which women exhibit more strongly (at least in self-report measures; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983). In addition, Stalder and Baron (1998) showed that a standard dissonance inducer led women and not men to want to socially compare with similar others who went through the same dissonance procedure. This result might reflect that women are more likely to seek social support in response to stress (e.g., Shumaker & Hill, 1991). Thus, although the present procedure provided supportive proverbs and not actual social support, women might show the dissonance-reducing effect of proverbs to a greater degree than men.

On the other hand, some report evidence that men might be more sensitive or responsive to normative information than women in a risky-behavior context. Prentice and Miller (1993) showed that although men and women each perceived their peers as being more comfortable with alcohol use than themselves, only men conformed to this misperceived norm. Prentice and Miller cited others in suggesting the general possibility that in response to ego threat, men are more likely than women to internalize a perceived norm (and thus be more influenced by normative information). In the present research, this possibility suggests that men might show the dissonance-reducing effect of proverbs to a greater degree than women. Committing a mistake constitutes the ego threat, and finding comfort from the social-comparison proverbs might reflect internalization of a perceived norm. Thus, it is unclear how gender might moderate a proverb effect. This study begins to investigate.

METHOD

One hundred twenty-nine undergraduates (58 men, 71 women; age $M = 20.4$, $SD = 3.8$) participated for extra credit in a "perspective taking" exercise in social science courses at a Midwestern university. Participants expected to read about others' "failures to live up to their own ideals." I instructed participants to try to imagine how they would feel in the actor's place.

Mistake Type

Participants first rated how important it was (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very*) not to commit three different mistakes (taken from hypocrisy-induction or related dissonance research; Leenders & Brugman, 2005; Stone et al., 1997): (a) engaging in unsafe sex, (b) wasting water during a drought, and (c) going along with others in a serious crime. These items acted as a check that participants viewed the mistake issues as high and relatively equal in importance. High perceived importance and committing to such a view might also maximize the chance to induce feelings of dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

Participants then read a story of one of three randomly assigned experiences (mistake type; see Appendix A), corresponding to the three mistakes, in which a teenage or college-age individual went against explicit personal values or a prior commitment. The three stories varied between

about 180 and 280 words. I used the pronoun "you" to encourage the participant to imagine him- or herself in the role. Closely preceding the mistake, the actor also convinced parents to "trust" that the actor would do the right thing. Then the actor did the opposite: (a) had sex without protection, prompting thoughts about the partner's sexual history; (b) wasted hundreds of gallons of water during a drought; or (c) joined friends for a drive in a stolen car. In each case, the story ended with the actor having to face the parents regarding the mistake.

Proverb Type

After each story, participants read or did not read a short list of proverbs or "sayings." In total, I randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions (proverb type): (a) a control condition with two irrelevant proverbs ("an apple a day keeps the doctor away" and "money is the root of all evil"); (b) a relevant-proverb condition with the two irrelevant proverbs plus two relevant proverbs *directly* regarding social comparison and mistakes ("nobody's perfect" and "everybody makes mistakes"); (c) a second relevant-proverb condition with the two irrelevant proverbs plus two relevant proverbs *indirectly* regarding social comparison and mistakes ("live and learn" and "experience is the best teacher"); and (d) another control condition with no proverbs. In each of the three conditions with proverbs, participants rated the proverbs for how applicable they were to the story (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very applicable*). Participants read that some proverbs "may strongly apply and some may not apply at all, depending on the particular experience you read about," to minimize experimental demand (e.g., to rate proverbs as applicable). Participants also read that the applicability questions "pertain to your perception of the experience," consistent with the perspective-taking cover story. (Undergraduates prerated the irrelevant proverbs as not applicable.)

Primary Measures

The main dependent measure asked participants to report their feelings of dissonance had they committed the mistake. I averaged three items assessing "how regretful," "hypocritical," and "stupid" the participant would feel (alpha = .78). The trivialization dependent measure averaged two items assessing how serious the participant viewed the consequences of the mistake and viewed the actor's role in such consequences (interitem $r = .26$, $p < .01$). All items used a 9-point response format (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very*; lower trivialization scores represent greater trivialization; see Appendix B).

Realism Check

Participants lastly rated the story they read for how "realistic" it sounded and "in other words, how likely…it is that this event could really have happened" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very*). This item acted as a check on the stories' realism. This item also acted as a possible check that participants could take the actor's perspective (a story that participants perceived as unrealistic would be more difficult to imagine happening to oneself).

MANIPULATION-CHECK OUTCOMES AND DESIGN DECISIONS

Participants' importance ratings for avoiding each type of mistake ($Ms > 7.0$) and ratings of how realistic each experience sounded ($Ms >= 7.0$) significantly exceeded the scale midpoint (5.0) ($ps < .001$). I also compared the three types of mistakes on each of these two ratings and found some significant differences. Thus, although I did not have a prediction regarding the different mistake types, I retained this variable of mistake type in the primary analyses of variance (ANOVAs).

To check whether the current participants perceived the irrelevant and relevant proverbs as intended on the applicability measure, I conducted several analyses. I averaged the two irrelevant-proverb applicability ratings (for the "apple" and "money" proverbs) in each of the three proverb conditions, and I averaged the two relevant-proverb ratings in each of the two relevant-proverb conditions. Using the irrelevant (apple-money) composite score, I compared the three proverb conditions in a one-way ANOVA. There was no main effect ($Ms < 1.8$), $F(2, 93) = 1.17$, $p > .30$. In each condition, the perceived applicability of the irrelevant proverbs was significantly below the scale midpoint (3.0) ($ps < .001$). Comparing the irrelevant score from the control condition with the relevant-proverb score in the two relevant-proverb conditions, a one-way ANOVA yielded a strong main effect (irrelevant-control $M = 1.7$, direct-relevant $M = 4.6$, indirect-relevant $M = 4.0$), $F(2, 93) = 148.44$, $p < .001$. In each of the relevant-proverb conditions, the perceived applicability of the relevant proverbs significantly exceeded the scale midpoint ($ps < .001$).

As a third predictor variable (in addition to mistake type and proverb type), I also considered gender as already stated. Thus, I began the investigation using a 4 x 3 x 2 (Proverb Type x Mistake Type x Gender) factorial design. However, due to some relatively small and unequal cell sizes (partly due to unequal gender group sizes), I investigated whether the two control conditions (with no or irrelevant proverbs) could be combined into one. For each type of mistake, I conducted t tests to compare these two conditions on the two dependent measures (dissonance and trivialization) and found no significant differences ($ps >= .15$). Similarly, I found no significant differences between the two relevant-proverb conditions (direct and indirect; $ps > .25$). Thus, I combined the two control conditions into one and the two relevant-proverb conditions into one for an ultimate design of 2 x 3 x 2 (Proverb Type [control vs. relevant] x Mistake Type x Gender).

RESULTS

A 2 x 3 x 2 (Proverb Type x Mistake Type x Gender) ANOVA using the dissonance measure yielded all three main effects. In the effect of mistake type, $F(2, 117) = 6.51$, $p < .01$, going along with others in a crime led to stronger feelings of dissonance ($M = 7.8$, $SD = 1.0$) than wasting water or unsafe sex ($Ms = 6.9$ and 6.8, $SDs = 1.4$ and 1.6, respectively), $ps < .01$, using LSD post-hoc comparisons. In the effect of gender, $F(1, 117) = 14.45$, $p < .001$, women felt greater dissonance ($M = 7.6$, $SD = 1.2$) than men ($M = 6.7$, $SD = 1.5$). In the effect of proverb type, $F(1, 117) = 6.01$, $p < .02$, reading relevant proverbs decreased feelings of dissonance ($M = 6.9$, $SD = 1.6$) compared to the control condition ($M = 7.4$, $SD = 1.2$). However, there was also a significant Proverb Type x Gender interaction, $F(1, 117) = 6.36$, $p < .02$. The dissonance-reducing effect of relevant proverbs occurred only in men, $F(1, 117) = 11.71$, $p < .01$, and not women ($F < 1$) (see Table 1). No other effects were significant.

Table 1. Mean Feelings of Dissonance (and Standard Deviations, Sample Sizes) as a Function of Gender and Proverb Type

	Control	Relevant proverbs
Men	7.3 (1.1, 30)	6.1 (1.7, 28)
Women	7.6 (1.2, 36)	7.6 (1.3, 35)

Conducting a 2 x 3 x 2 ANOVA using the trivialization measure yielded a main effect of gender, $F(1, 117) = 5.31$, $p < .05$. Women perceived greater seriousness ($M = 7.7$, $SD = 1.5$) than men ($M = 7.3$, $SD = 1.4$). There was also a main effect of mistake type, $F(2, 117) = 18.64$, $p < .001$. Perceived seriousness regarding unsafe sex ($M = 8.3$, $SD = 1.0$) exceeded that for going along with others ($M = 7.6$, $SD = 1.0$) which exceeded that for wasting water ($M = 6.6$, $SD = 1.8$), $ps < .02$, using LSD post-hoc comparisons. No other effects were significant, although the Proverb Type x Gender interaction approached significance ($p = .101$) with means in the same directions as those in Table 1.

To further investigate a role for trivialization, I added the trivialization measure as a covariate in the 2 x 3 x 2 (Proverb Type x Mistake Type x Gender) ANOVA using the dissonance measure. All significant effects remained except for the Proverb Type x Gender interaction, which became marginally significant ($p = .054$). Also, relevant-proverb applicability significantly predicted trivialization for men, $r(26) = -.39$, $p < .05$, but not women, $r(33) = -.04$ (recall that lower trivialization scores represent greater trivialization).

DISCUSSION

Reading and rating mistake-relevant proverbs reduced signs of dissonance across three mistake types used in prior dissonance research, but only among men. As suggested by Prentice and Miller (1993), men might be more influenced by normative information in response to ego threat (such as that in dissonance). If the mistake types represent "delinquency," then the present findings might also connect to Warr's (2002) view that the higher rates of delinquency among boys versus girls are partly caused by peer influence. Warr suggested that both boys and girls are exposed and sensitive to normative pressures toward delinquency but that girls' stronger "moral disapproval" of common offenses acts as a stronger "barrier to peer influence" (p. 117). Perhaps in the present study, women's stronger ratings of seriousness regarding the mistakes reflected such moral disapproval, which reduced the impact of a proverb-induced impression that everybody behaves immorally at times. In that case, the present gender difference might only apply to dissonance-inducing behavior with this element of delinquency or morality. After such behavior, counseling or social support that draws on such proverbs might thus work best for men.

Data also indicated that one dissonance-reducing mechanism might be trivialization. The relevant interaction became marginally significant after covarying trivialization. Also, the perceived applicability for relevant proverbs significantly predicted trivialization among men. However, this latter result is correlational and has other possible interpretations. Future research might also consider different measures of trivialization that more closely model Simon et al.'s (1995).

Although participants did not perform the dissonant behavior themselves, the manipulation checks indicated a high level of role-play engagement (in ratings of importance and realism for each mistake scenario). Thus, the present research begins to document the dissonance-reducing effect of common sayings and calls for further study. The present findings suggest that such sayings might have developed as an ego-protective coping mechanism.

REFERENCES

Corn, D. (2005). Armstrong Williams: I am not alone. *The Nation.* Retrieved June 28, 2009, from http://www.thenation.com/blogs/capitalgames/2114

Davis, S. F., Grover, C. A., Becker, A. H., & McGregor, L. N. (1992). Academic dishonesty: Prevalence, determinants, techniques, and punishments. *Teaching of Psychology, 19,* 16-20.

Eisenberg, N., & Lennon, R. (1983). Sex differences in empathy and related capacities. *Psychological Bulletin, 94,* 100-131.

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Jemmott, J. B., III, Ditto, P. H., & Croyle, R. T. (1986). Judging health status: Effects of perceived prevalence and personal relevance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50,* 899-905.

Leenders, I., & Brugman, D. (2005). Moral/non-moral domain shift in young adolescents in relation to delinquent behaviour. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology, 23,* 65-79.

Matz, D. C., & Wood, W. (2005). Cognitive dissonance in groups: The consequences of disagreement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 88,* 22-37.

McKimmie, B. M., Terry, D. J., Hogg, M. A., Manstead, A. S. R., Spears, R., & Doosje, B. (2003). I'm a hypocrite, but so is everyone else: Group support and the reduction of cognitive dissonance. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice, 7,* 214-224.

Myers, D. G. (2005). *Social psychology* (8th ed.)*.* Boston: McGraw Hill.

Prentice, D. A., & Miller, D. T. (1993). Pluralistic ignorance and alcohol use on campus: Some consequences of misperceiving the social norm. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 64,* 243-256.

Shumaker, S. A., & Hill, D. R. (1991). Gender differences in social support and physical health. *Health Psychology, 10,* 102-111.

Simon, L., Greenberg, J., & Brehm, J. (1995). Trivialization: The forgotten mode of dissonance reduction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68,* 247-260.

Stalder, D. R. (2006, May). *Why does social comparison reduce dissonance? Evidence for social validation.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago.

Stalder, D. R., & Baron, R. S. (1998, April). *Can dissonance create a desire to socially compare?* Poster session presented at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago.

Stalder, D. R., & Baron, R. S. (2001, May). *Social comparison, attitude importance, and dissonance reduction.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago.

Stalder, D. R., & Devine, P. G. (2002, August). *Why does social comparison reduce dissonance?* Poster session presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Chicago.

Stone, J., Wiegand, A. W., Cooper, J., & Aronson, E. (1997). When exemplification fails: Hypocrisy and the motive for self-integrity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72,* 54-65.

Stroebe, W., & Diehl, M. (1981). Conformity and counterattitudinal behavior: The effect of social support on attitude change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 41,* 876-889.

Warr, M. (2002). *Companions in crime: The social aspects of criminal conduct.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Welch, M. R., Xu, Y., Bjarnason, T., Petee, T., O'Donnell, P., & Magro, P. (2005)."But everybody does it…": The effects of perceptions, moral pressures, and informal sanctions on tax cheating. *Sociological Spectrum, 25,* 21-52.

White, G. L. (1980). Consensus and justification effects on attitude following counterattitudinal behavior. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 43,* 321-327.

APPENDIX A: MISTAKE STORIES

Each of the following stories ended with an incomplete sentence. I left the end blank for two main reasons: (a) to allow and encourage participants to imagine how the conversation with parents might proceed, and thus to minimize experimental demand in characterizing how the actor was feeling; and (b) to preclude providing any inadvertent dissonance reduction for participants prior to my dissonance measure.

Drought

You grew up in the western part of the U.S., where serious drought conditions were not uncommon. As a child, you were lectured on how important it was to conserve water. So you got in the habit of taking shorter showers and turning off the faucet while brushing your teeth.

Although not all families in the neighborhood took it that seriously, you and your family did. Your mom later told you that as a child, you were particularly concerned about water conservation, after hearing about the effects of droughts on children in other parts of the world. During one summer after 10th grade, you were helping your dad around the house and offered to water the plants in the back of the house. Your dad agreed but said to be careful to use no more water than necessary. "I know, I know," you said, slightly annoyed that he felt the need to say it. "It's not like I haven't done it before," you said. But your dad trusted you enough to run an errand in town while you were watering. As you finished, you walked back toward the house to turn off the water, but you were distracted by a cell phone call. You thought you had turned off the water when you hadn't, and you went back into the house while the water ran unattended. Over an hour later, your dad returned to find a small pool in the backyard, which had actually starting running into the neighbor's yard, given that dessert soil doesn't drain very well. Your dad seemed disappointed as he told you what had happened, that literally hundreds of gallons of water were wasted, to which you replied…

Friends' Crime

You grew up with one very close friend in the neighborhood, but most summer nights you and your friend hung out with several kids. In high school, you and this group spent a lot of your free time together. But starting around junior year, some of these kids started getting into trouble, like the time when three of them spray painted something obscene on the sidewalk in front of the school. You and your closest friend thought it was a stupid thing to do, and you were glad you were not part of it, after one of these kids got caught by the school principal. Your parents found out about the incident and knew that you hung out with one of the "guilty parties," so they awkwardly tried to talk to you about it, saying things like, "we don't want to tell you who your friends should be, but…" You told your parents, "Don't worry – I'm not going to do anything stupid," and your parents trusted you. But one night just a week later, you and your friends were walking home from a movie when one of your friends announced a recently learned skill to "hotwire" a car. "Let's try it," someone said. You didn't believe they would do it, but one of them actually broke a car window to try. You expected them all to run after the unsuccessful attempt to hotwire the car, but then the car started. Everybody jumped into the car, even your closest friend. You could not think of what to say and jumped into the car with everyone else. That night, your parents asked what you and your friends did that evening, to which you replied…

Unsafe Sex

You were 15 years old when you had what you recall as your first date. You and your date went to the movies. Although some of your friends had "dates" when they were even younger, your parents were concerned that you were way too young. They stumbled around when talking to you about this concern, bringing up things like "safe sex." You had sex education classes about STDs, AIDS, and pregnancy…, which you reminded your parents about. "Don't worry," you said, embarrassed. "I'm not stupid." As you got a little older, 16, 17, and had more serious romantic relationships, your parents still bravely touched on the "safe sex" issue at times, to which you had gotten in the habit of saying, "I'm not stupid," which seemed to satisfy your parents. "We trust you," they would say. But during the very next night with your "significant other" of 2 months, things happened very fast and you did not practice what you preached.

Afterwards, you thought a little about the risks and your partner's sexual history, and the next time your parents raised the issue, you said…

APPENDIX B: PRIMARY DEPENDENT MEASURES

Preceding the items below, participants read the following: "Think about how you would feel if this experience happened to you. The following questions pertain to your perception of this experience."

Dissonance Items

1. After this experience, how regretful would you feel?
2. How hypocritical would you feel?
3. How "stupid" would you feel?

Trivialization Items

1. How serious might the consequences of this event be?
2. How responsible would you feel for any of these consequences?

APPENDIX C: CORRELATION MATRIX FOR PRIMARY ANOVAS

	Proverb type	Mistake type	Gender	Dissonance	Trivialization
Proverb type	1.00				
Mistake type	.00	1.00			
Gender	-.01	.06	1.00		
Dissonance	-.17*	-.03	-.30***	1.00	
Trivialization	-.02	0.47***	-.15	.41***	1.00
M				7.2	7.5
SD				1.4	1.5

Note. $N = 129$. For proverb type: control = 1, relevant proverbs = 2; for mistake type: drought = 1, friends' crime = 2, unsafe sex = 3; for gender: female = 1, male = 2. Proverb type, mistake type, and gender refer to independent or predictor variables. Dissonance and trivialization refer to dependent variables (range of 1 to 9); lower trivialization scores represent greater trivialization.
*$p < .05$. ***$p <= .001$.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Daniel R. Stalder is an assistant professor of Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. His recent research involves the need for closure trait and applications of dissonance theory. Email: stalderd@uww.edu