



# A MAN WITH CONVICTION IS A HARD MAN TO CHANGE

LEON FESTINGER (1919–1989)

## IN CONTEXT

### BRANCH

**Cognitive psychology**

### APPROACH

**Learning theory**

### BEFORE

**1933** Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin leaves the Berlin School of Experimental Psychology and emigrates to the US.

### AFTER

**1963** Stanley Milgram publishes his experiments on willingness to obey authority figures, even when orders conflict with one's conscience.

**1971** Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison study shows how people adapt to the roles they are assigned.

**1972** US social psychologist Daryl Bem proposes the alternative self-perception theory of attitude change.

**1980s** Elliot Aronson defends Festinger's theory, conducting experiments into initiation rites.

If we hold **strong beliefs** that are undermined by **evidence to the contrary...**



...we find ourselves in an uncomfortable state of **"cognitive dissonance."**



If we **accept the contradiction**, this causes **further inconsistency** between our past and present beliefs.



So instead we may find ways to **make the new evidence consistent** with our beliefs.



**A man with conviction is a hard man to change.**

**See also:** Kurt Lewin 218–23 ■ Solomon Asch 224–27 ■ Elliot Aronson 244–45 ■ Stanley Milgram 246–53 ■ Philip Zimbardo 254–55 ■ Stanley Schachter 338

**B**y the end of World War II, social psychology had become an important field of research, spearheaded in the US by Kurt Lewin, the founder of the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1945.

On the staff at the center was one of Lewin's former students, Leon Festinger. Originally attracted by Lewin's work in Gestalt psychology, he later took an interest in social psychology. In the course of his research, Festinger observed that people continually seek to bring order to their world, and a key part of that order is consistency. To achieve this, they develop routines and habits, such as establishing regular mealtimes and choosing favorite seats on their daily commute to work. When these routines are disrupted, people feel very uneasy. The same is true, he found, of habitual thought patterns or beliefs. If a very strong opinion is met with contradictory evidence, it creates an uncomfortable internal inconsistency; Festinger called this

"cognitive dissonance." He reasoned that the only way to overcome this discomfort is to somehow make the belief and the evidence consistent.

### Unshakeable conviction

After reading a report in a local newspaper in 1954, Festinger saw an opportunity to study the reaction to just such a cognitive dissonance. A cult claimed to have received messages from aliens warning of a flood that would end the world on December 21; only true believers would be rescued by flying saucers. Festinger and some of his colleagues at the University of Minnesota gained access to the group, interviewing them before the designated apocalyptic date and again afterward, when the events had failed to transpire.

The now-famous Oak Park study of this group, written up by Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter in *When Prophecy Fails*, describes the reaction of the cult members. Where common sense might lead us to expect that the failure of

their prediction and consequent cognitive dissonance would cause cult members to abandon their beliefs, the opposite occurred. As the day of reckoning drew near, another "message" came through, declaring that, due to the group's dedication, the world was to be spared. Cult members became even more fervent believers. Festinger had anticipated this; to accept the contradictory evidence would set up an even greater dissonance between past belief and present denial, he argued. This effect was compounded if a great deal (reputation, jobs, and money) had been invested in the original belief.

Festinger concluded that cognitive dissonance, or at least the avoidance of it, makes a man of strong conviction unlikely to change his opinion in the face of contradiction; he is immune to evidence and rational argument. As Festinger explains: "Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point." ■

### Leon Festinger



Leon Festinger was born in Brooklyn, New York, to a Russian immigrant family. He graduated from City College of New York in 1939, then studied at the University of Iowa under Kurt Lewin, finishing his PhD in Child Psychology in 1942. After spending the later years of World War II in military training, he rejoined Lewin in 1945 at the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

It was during his appointment as professor at the University of Minnesota that Festinger made his famous Oak Park study of a

cult predicting the end of the world. He moved to Stanford University in 1955, continuing his work in social psychology, but in the 1960s he turned to research into perception. He later focused on history and archaeology at the New School for Social Research in New York. He died of liver cancer, aged 69.

### Key works

1956 *When Prophecy Fails*  
1962 *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*  
1983 *The Human Legacy*