Psychological Inquiry, 23: 346–349, 2012

ISSN: 1047-840X print / 1532-7965 online
DOI: 10.1080/1047840X.2012.706507

Psychology Press
Taylor & Francis Group

Meaning, Violation of Meaning, and Meaninglessness in Meaning Maintenance

Bertram Gawronski
Department of Psychology, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada

About half a century ago, a bunch of psychologists came up with the provocative idea that all human thought is inherently constrained by the principle of consistency. The most well-known product of this insight is Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. Yet, the idea that consistency plays a fundamental role in thinking and reasoning was also a central part of several other theories at that time, many of which have disappeared from psychology textbooks over the years (for a review, see Abelson et al., 1968). Although these theories differed in various regards, all of them shared the assumption that cognitive inconsistency elicits an aversive state of arousal that people try to avoid.

Today, the concept of cognitive consistency is mostly known for its contribution to research on attitude change. Counter to the notion of reinforcement that dominated psychology in the middle of the 20th century, dissonance theory predicted that people who engaged in counterattitudinal behavior should show a more favorable evaluation of the relevant attitude object when they received a low rather than a high incentive for engaging in the behavior. Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) well-known confirmation of this prediction quickly became one of the most prominent findings in psychology. At the same time, however, the accumulating body of research on dissonance-related attitude change directed researchers' attention away from the original idea that cognitive consistency represents a fundamental principle of human thought (Abelson, 1983; Berkowitz & Devine, 1989; McGuire, 1968). Over the following decades, the focus became even narrower when dissonance-related attitude change was reinterpreted as the result of self-related processes rather than reflecting the operation of basic consistency principles (see Gawronski & Strack, 2012; Greenwald & Ronis, 1978).

Despite the increasingly narrow focus in research on cognitive consistency over the past decades, recent theorizing has rediscovered the original idea of cognitive consistency as a basic principle of human thought (for reviews, see Gawronski & Strack, 2012; Proulx, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones, 2012). Travis Proulx and Michael Inzlicht's (this issue) discussion of meaning maintenance is an excellent example in this regard. Drawing on a small set of basic psychological principles, their meaning maintenance model (MMM) offers a conceptual integration of a wide range of content-specific phenomena that many researchers consider as unique. Yet, as the authors convincingly argue, it seems rather implausible that the human mind is characterized by different principles of information processing depending on the particular content of the processed information. In line with this view, I concur that the MMM offers a valuable framework that provides deeper insights into the shared underpinnings of a wide range of psychological phenomena.

Nevertheless, I believe that the authors have overlooked a few important distinctions in their identification of basic psychological principles. Consistent with the authors' emphasis of content independence, these distinctions are not content specific. Instead, they pertain to some unacknowledged aspects of the basic components of meaning maintenance. As I argue next, a closer analysis of these components may help to increase both the integrative and the predictive value of the MMM.

What Is Meaning?

Although Proulx and Inzlicht do not offer a nominal definition of *meaning*, their elaborate discussion provides a solid basis for their conceptual integration. Yet, I believe that some aspects of their discussion deserve closer scrutiny to avoid conceptual conflations in the analysis of meaning violation and meaninglessness. According to Proulx and Inzlicht, the basic components of meaning are propositions and their interrelations. Conceptually, propositions are statements about states of affairs in the world that can be true or false. Philosophers have argued that the meaning of a proposition is defined by the conditions that make it true or false (e.g., Quine, 1960). For example, a person can be said to understand the meaning of the proposition *Travis is a social psychologist* when this person knows the conditions that make this statement true or false. However, propositions themselves do not provide meaning in the sense that Proulx and Inzlicht seem to have in mind. Merely knowing the meaning of a proposition does not imply any knowledge about *what* is the case and *why* something is the case. To turn a proposition

into an expectancy in the sense of Proulx and Inzlicht's analysis, a person not only needs to understand the meaning of the proposition but also believe in the truth or falsity of that proposition. In the previous example, a person not only needs to understand the meaning of the proposition *Travis is a social psychologist* but also has to believe that the proposition is either true of false (see Gawronski, in press). For the sake of conceptual clarity, I therefore use the term *proposition* for unqualified statements and the term *propositional belief* for propositions that are qualified by subjective truth or falsity.

In line with Proulx and Inzlicht's analysis, propositional beliefs may refer to a person's representation of what is the case and why something is the case. However, they may also involve evaluative beliefs that something is good or bad (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Jones & Gerard, 1967). Although the examples discussed by Proulx and Inzlicht primarily refer to nonevaluative, descriptive beliefs, acknowledging the role of evaluative beliefs would increase the applicability of the MMM to a wide range of other phenomena. For example, Gawronski, Peters, Brochu, and Strack (2008) have shown that different forms of racial prejudice (i.e., implicit prejudice, old-fashioned prejudice, modern prejudice, aversive prejudice) can be understood in terms of their underlying consistency-processes (for a review, see Gawronski, Brochu, Sritharan, & Strack, 2012), and this integration may be further subsumed under the general framework of the MMM. However, such an integration requires a consideration of evaluative beliefs, which are not part of the current formulation of the MMM. Hence, the integrative value of the model could be further enhanced by including evaluative beliefs over and above nonevaluative, descriptive beliefs about what is the case and why something is the case.

Another important aspect of meaning in Proulx and Inzlicht's analysis is the interrelation between propositional beliefs. Many content domains involve multiple propositional beliefs, which may be described as a system of beliefs. For example, prejudice-related belief systems may include evaluative beliefs about racial groups, nonevaluative beliefs about racial discrimination, and evaluative beliefs about discriminatory behavior (Gawronski et al., 2012; Gawronski et al., 2008). According to the MMM, and in line with early consistency theories, a central constraint for any system of beliefs is that it is internally consistent. Although Proulx and Inzlicht do not elaborate on what makes propositional beliefs consistent or inconsistent with each other, a useful answer to this question can be found in Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. According to Festinger, two cognitive elements are inconsistent if one element follows from the opposite of the other. More formally, this definition can be restated as "*x* and *y* are dissonant if not-*x* follows from *y*" (p. 13), with *x* and *y* subsuming "any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one's behavior" (p. 3). As Fritz Strack and I have argued, Festinger's cognitive elements can be understood as propositional beliefs in the sense just outlined (Gawronski & Strack, 2004). These propositional beliefs may be general if they refer to categories of objects (e.g., *Canadians are introverted*) or specific if they refer to individual objects (e.g., *Michael is extraverted*). Thus, counter to Festinger's (1957) concern with the relation between two cognitive elements, inconsistency is most often the result of more than two propositional beliefs (e.g., *Canadians are introverted*; *Michael is extraverted*; *Michael is Canadian*), which may be described as a system of beliefs.

The psychological significance of (in)consistency is rooted in its epistemic and pragmatic function. Although consistency is insufficient to establish accuracy, inconsistency is an unambiguous cue for errors in one's system of beliefs (Quine & Ullian, 1978). From this perspective, consistency is important, because erroneous beliefs can undermine context-appropriate behavior by suggesting inadequate courses of action (Gawronski, in press). Moreover, inconsistency itself can sometimes disrupt context-appropriate behavior, because inconsistent beliefs may suggest mutually exclusive courses of action (Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Harmon-Jones, 2009). In both cases, the state of arousal that is elicited by inconsistent beliefs can be interpreted as a physiological signal that the current system of propositional beliefs has to be revised for context-appropriate action.

From the perspective of the MMM, inconsistency resolution can be achieved through either accommodation or assimilation. Whereas accommodation involves the updating of prior beliefs to bring them in line with new experiences, assimilation refers to the reinterpretation of new experiences in a manner that makes them consistent with prior beliefs. However, an important aspect of the MMM is that inconsistency often leads to compensatory activities that simply aim at reducing the aversive feeling that arises from the inconsistency (see also Harmon-Jones et al., 2009; Van Harreveld, Van der Pligt, & De Liver, 2009). These activities include affirmation, abstraction, and assembly. Affirmation refers to the enhanced commitment to alternative belief systems, abstraction refers to the acquisition of novel belief systems, and assembly refers to the active creation of novel belief systems. In all of these cases, the inconsistency that has caused the aversive state of arousal remains unresolved. What is targeted is the aversive state of arousal, not its underlying inconsistency. This distinction between different compensatory strategies allows the MMM to integrate a wide range of content-specific phenomena. However, without a clear specification of *when* each of the five strategies will be used, the model could be criticized

for explaining everything, yet predicting nothing. As I argue in the following section, the aforementioned conceptualization of propositional beliefs helps to increase the predictive value of the model by clarifying an important difference between the concepts of *meaning violation* and *meaninglessness*.

Meaning Violation and Meaninglessness

According to Proulx and Inzlicht, meaning violation occurs when people make an experience that is inconsistent with their understanding of the world. In other words, meaning violation involves the acquisition of a new propositional belief that is inconsistent with one's existing system of beliefs. Proulx and Inzlicht further argue that meaning violation causes a feeling of meaninglessness that motivates compensatory efforts to restore meaning. In other words, meaning violation causes meaninglessness. I believe that this conceptualization is misleading, in that it ignores an important difference between meaning violation and meaninglessness. Whereas meaning violation involves the *presence* of a belief system that conflicts with a new experience, meaninglessness involves the *absence* of a belief system that helps to understand a new experience. To be sure, both meaning violation and meaninglessness can be argued to involve a person's inability to construct a mental model of a particular state of affairs. As outlined by Johnson-Laird (2012), exhaustive checks for consistency involve a major capacity problem, which can be resolved through the construction of mental models. If it is possible to construct a mental model in which all relevant propositional beliefs are true, people tend to judge these beliefs as consistent. If not, they will be judged as inconsistent (Johnson-Laird, Girotto, & Legrenzi, 2004). Similarly, meaninglessness may be understood as a case in which the absence of applicable beliefs undermines the construction of a mental model for a new experience. Yet, as just argued, the two cases are distinct in that the former involves the presence of a system of beliefs that is inconsistent with a new experience, whereas the latter involves the absence of a system of beliefs that is applicable to a new experience. Thus, instead of treating meaning violation as the cause of meaninglessness, it seems more appropriate to interpret the two constructs as conceptually distinct causes of a general state of meaning uncertainty that is reflected in the inability to construct a mental model for a particular state of affairs.

This distinction has important implications for the five compensatory strategies proposed by Proulx and Inzlicht. From a pragmatic perspective, violation of meaning requires different activities than absence of meaning. Whereas violation of meaning requires *restoration* of meaning, absence of meaning requires *creation* of meaning. Hence, strategies that aim at restoring inconsistency (i.e., accommodation, assimilation) are applicable only to cases in which meaning has been violated, but they are not applicable to cases in which meaning is absent. Yet, strategies that aim at creating meaning (i.e., affirmation, abstraction, assembly) seem applicable regardless of whether meaning has been violated or meaning is absent in the first place. In both cases, creating meaning may reduce the aversive state of arousal that arises from the failure to construct a mental model for a particular state of affairs. From this perspective, a conceptual distinction between meaning violation and meaninglessness provides deeper insights into the conditions under which different compensatory strategies are used, which seems essential for the derivation of novel predictions. Of course, a conceptualization that treats meaning violation and meaninglessness as distinct instances of the inability to construct a mental model for a given state of affairs would require a different term for the aversive state resulting from this inability (e.g., meaning uncertainty). However, the benefits of such a reconceptualization seem to outweigh its costs, given the additional insights it can provide.

Conclusion

I have always been a big fan of theories that identify basic psychological principles that are applicable to a wide range of psychological phenomena independent of their content. In my view, the MMM makes an important contribution in this regard. Yet, I believe that the integrative value of the model could be enhanced by including evaluative beliefs about what is good or bad in addition to nonevaluative beliefs about what is the case and why something is the case. Moreover, the predictive value of the model could be increased by distinguishing between meaning violation and meaninglessness as conceptually distinct instances of failures to create a mental model for a given state of affairs. Although both cases involve uncertainty about meaning, they are characterized by different affordances (i.e., restoration vs. creation), and thus in terms of the strategies that are suitable to cope with the resulting uncertainty.

Note

Address correspondence to Bertram Gawronski, Department of Psychology, The University of Western Ontario, Social Science Centre, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5C2. E-mail: bgawrons@uwo.ca

References

Abelson, R. P. (1983). Whatever became of consistency theory? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *9*, 37–54.

Abelson, R. P., Aronson, E., McGuire, W. J., Newcombe, T. M., Rosenberg, M. J., & Tannenbaum, P. H. (Eds.). (1968). *Theories of cognitive consistency: A sourcebook*. Chicago, IL: Rand-McNally.

Berkowitz, L., & Devine, P. G. (1989). Research traditions, analysis, and synthesis in social psychological theories: The case of dissonance theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *15*, 493–507.

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Evanston, IL: Row Peterson.

Festinger, L., & Carlsmith, J. M. (1959). Cognitive consequences of forced compliance. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *58*, 203–210.

Gawronski, B. (in press). Back to the future of dissonance theory: Cognitive consistency as a core motive. *Social Cognition*.

Gawronski, B., & Bodenhausen, G. V. (2006). Associative and propositional processes in evaluation: An integrative review of implicit and explicit attitude change. *Psychological Bulletin*, *132*, 692–731.

Gawronski, B., Brochu, P. M., Sritharan, R., & Strack, F. (2012). Cognitive consistency in prejudice-related belief systems: Integrating old-fashioned, modern, aversive and implicit forms of prejudice. In B. Gawronski, & F. Strack (Eds.), *Cognitive consistency: A fundamental principle in social cognition* (pp. 369–389). New York, NY: Guilford.

Gawronski, B., Peters, K. R., Brochu, P. M., & Strack, F. (2008). Understanding the relations between different forms of racial prejudice: A cognitive consistency perspective. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *34*, 648–665.

Gawronski, B., & Strack, F. (2004). On the propositional nature of cognitive consistency: Dissonance changes explicit, but not implicit attitudes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *40*, 535–542.

Gawronski, B., & Strack, F. (2012). Cognitive consistency as a basic principle of social information processing. In B. Gawronski & F. Strack (Eds.), *Cognitive consistency: A fundamental principle in social cognition* (pp. 1–16). New York, NY: Guilford.

Greenwald, A. G., & Ronis, D. L. (1978). Twenty years of cognitive dissonance: Case study of the evolution of a theory. *Psychological Review*, *85*, 53–57.

Harmon-Jones, E., Amodio, D. M., & Harmon-Jones, C. (2009). Action-based model of dissonance. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *41*, 119–166.

Johnson-Laird, P. N. (2012). Mental models and consistency. In B. Gawronski & F. Strack (Eds.), *Cognitive consistency: A fundamental principle in social cognition* (pp. 225–244). New York, NY: Guilford.

Johnson-Laird, P. N., Girotto, V., & Legrenzi, P. (2004). Reasoning from inconsistency to consistency. *Psychological Review*, *111*, 640–661.

Jones, E. E., & Gerard, H. B. (1967). *Foundations of social psychology*. New York, NY: Wiley.

McGuire, W. J. (1968). Theory of the structure of human thought. In R. P. Abelson, E. Aronson, W. J. McGuire, T. M. Newcomb, M. J. Rosenberg, & P. H. Tannenbaum (Eds.), *Theories of cognitive consistency: A sourcebook* (pp. 140–162). Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.

Proulx, T., Inzlicht, M., & Harmon-Jones, E. (2012). Understanding all inconsistency-compensation as a palliative response to violated expectations. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *16*, 285–291.

Quine, W. V. O. (1960). *Word and object*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Quine, W. V. O., & Ullian, J. S. (1978). *The web of belief* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Van Harreveld, F., Van der Pligt, J., & De Liver, Y. (2009). The agony of ambivalence and ways to resolve it: Introducing the MAID model. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *13*, 45–61.