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Hate as a dissonant emotion

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Century City Convention Centre, Cape Town,
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NETHATE
network of excellence for training on hate



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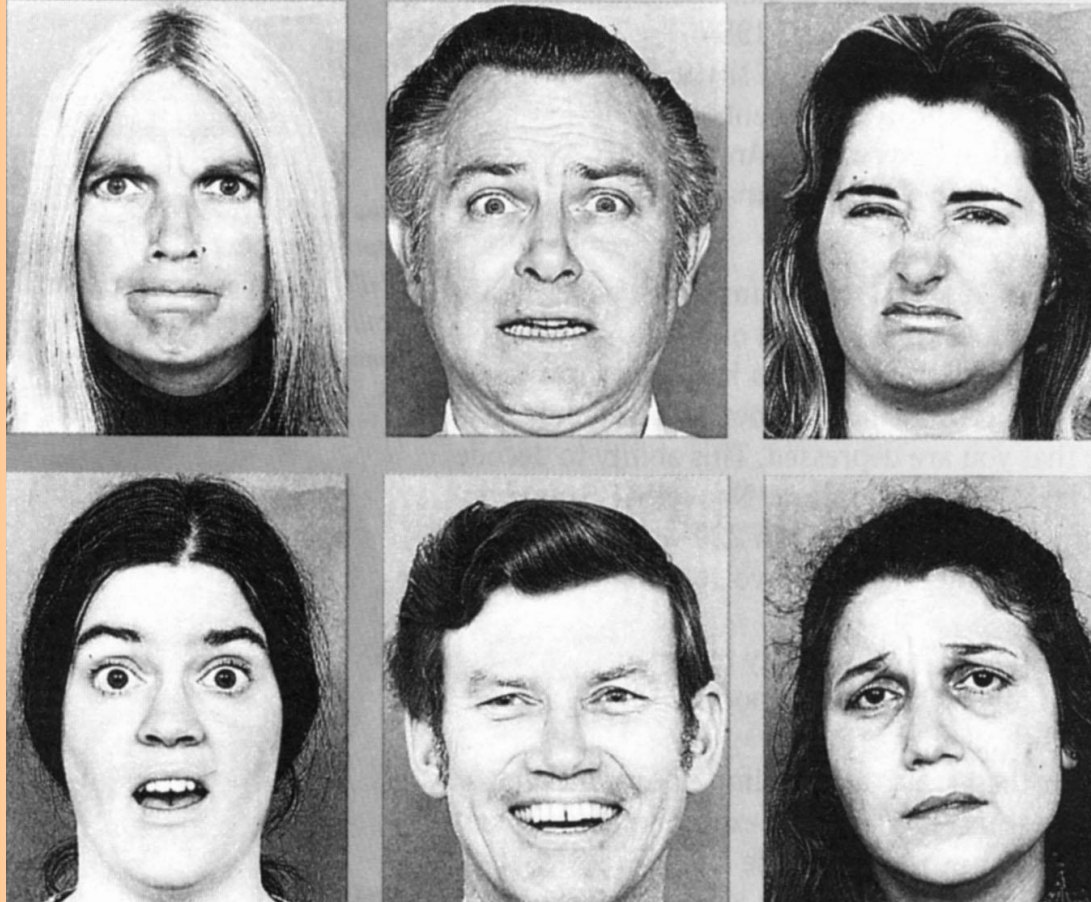
Hate as a dissonant emotion

An exploration focussing on the person who hates

- How should we understand the emotion of HATE?
- HATE through the lens of COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY
- Application to reconciliation dialogue

Is HATE a primary emotion?

Sadness
Fear
Disgust
Surprise
Anger
Joy



Ekman & Friesen (1975) found that these emotions had similar facial expressions all over the world

Is HATE a functional emotion?

- So, hate is perhaps not a primary emotion like Sadness, Fear, Disgust, Surprise, Anger, Joy (Ekman and Friesen, 1975).
- Nonetheless, hate may have an **evolutionary basis** related to the hierarchical organisation of social life:
 - Contempt for those lower on the ladder
 - Hate for those higher on the ladder (Fischer, 2024)
- Hate may also have an evolutionary basis to motivate us in preparing for violent action (turbo charged anger).
- In short, hate should probably be seen as a **functional emotion (perhaps evolved)** with an associated **action tendency** which includes destruction, wounding, killing, demeaning, degrading or bringing about other forms of suffering.

Is HATE also a complex emotion?

- complex emotions include, shame, embarrassment, guilt, regret, remorse, etc.
- Many complex emotions include conflicting cognitions and may include inconsistencies and inner conflict
- If hate is such an emotion, we could look at **cognitive dissonance theory** (Festinger, 1957) for an explanation of the mechanisms involved

A brief introduction to cognitive dissonance theory

- **What is cognitive dissonance?**

- An unpleasant state resulting from: (a) experiencing psychologically inconsistent or conflicting notions (Festinger, 1957); (b) engaging in behaviours inconsistent with goals (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002) or (c) event that violate self-related beliefs (Aronson, 1969)
- It is like an internal alarm system that warns us of impending cognitive or behavioural chaos (de Vries et al., 2023).

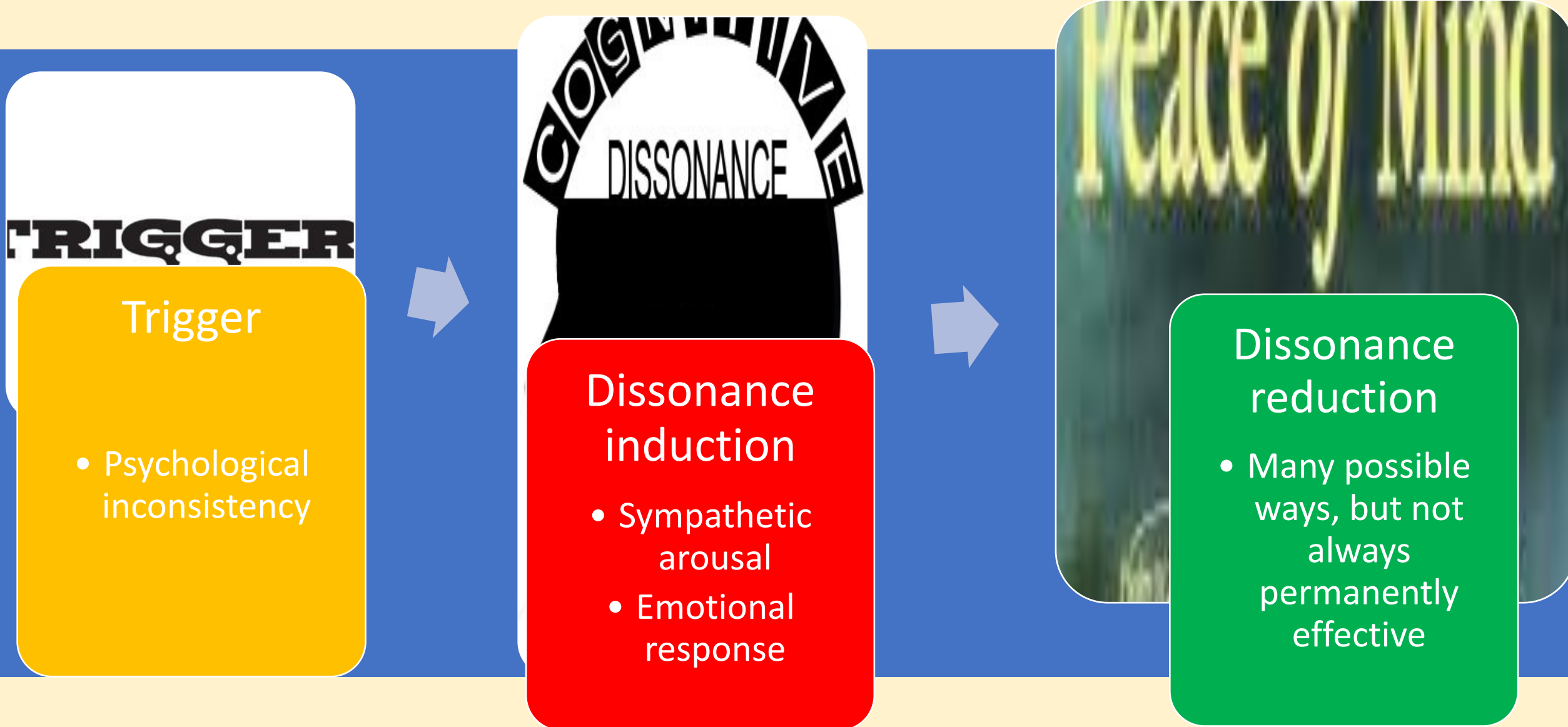
- **How does that affect us?**

- It generates discomfort, sometimes intense, sympathetic arousal, specific brain activations (de Vries et al., 2015);
- It also generates an urgent drive to reduce the discomfort.

- **How do we reduce dissonance discomfort?**

- take action; change attitude/belief; seek justification; denial; trivialisation; adding consonant thoughts; seek distraction or disengage (McGrath, 2017)

cognitive dissonance model



How does this apply to hate?

- **Possible Dissonance Triggers:**

- Being hurt <> expectation of being unharmed
- Unfairness <> expectation of fairness
- Feeling unsafe <> the right to feel safe
- Experiencing a crime against oneself <> revenge or justice is not forthcoming
- Feeling vulnerable <> I am strong
- Feeling wronged <> things need to be right

- **Additional dissonance may result from not wanting to be a hating person**

- I hate <> good people don't hate others
- I feel the urge to hurt someone <> that is not 'me'

Potential dissonance reduction when feeling hate

Dissonance reduction	Examples
action	<i>I am glad I took action.</i>
change attitude/belief	<i>I see it more clearly now. Things have been unfair for some time.</i>
justification	<i>It is not my fault they made me hate so much.</i>
denial	<i>What I feel is not hate; I don't hate anyone personally.</i>
trivialization	<i>In the greater scheme of things what I did is peanuts.</i>
add consonant thought	<i>I am not the only one who feels this way. Together we form a united front, and we are strong!</i>
seek distraction	<i>I am traveling a lot and going to conferences.</i>
disengage	<i>I try to make sure I stay away from situations in which I might feel hate.</i>

Where it started



Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation,
Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow, Ireland



<https://glencree.ie/>

Let's Involve the Victims Experience (L.I.V.E programme)

- Intercommunity dialogue for victims/survivors of 'the Troubles'
- Involving victims/survivors
- and later also ex-paramilitaries

Victims/Survivors in the L.I.V.E programme had every reason to hate

Their lives had been seriously disrupted by what had happened to them:

- they were grieving over personal loss
- Injured and/or traumatised
- living in a dangerous environment
- The main focus in life for many was coming to terms with the horror and injustice of what had happened to them
- Yet, many of them said they did not hate anyone How can we understand this?

Examples dissonance reduction efforts among victims/survivors

Dissonance reduction	Examples
action	<i>We got together to make peace or seek justice.</i>
change attitude/belief	<i>No violence is ever justified.</i>
justification	<i>If I choose the path of violence I am as bad as they are.</i>
denial	<i>My partner did not get shot during the Troubles; it was an accident. I don't hate anyone.</i>
trivialization	<i>In the greater scheme of things what happened to me is not so important.</i>
add consonant thought	<i>What I have endured has got me in contact with wonderful people and has given a new meaning to my life.</i>
seek distraction	<i>We have a laugh.</i>
disengage	<i>I moved away; I just try to get on with my life.</i>

Examples dissonance reduction efforts from ex-paramilitaries

Dissonance reduction	Examples
action	<i>We planted bombs, we shot people, we are the people with the balaclavas.</i>
change attitude/belief	<i>Because of our fighting, we have peace now.</i>
justification	<i>The people we attacked deserved it; we had no choice.</i>
denial	<i>We were just protesting and then we were attacked. We had to defend ourselves.</i>
trivialization	<i>In comparison with other violence, our actions were very minor.</i>
add consonant thought	<i>I am really a very peaceful person normally, and I am happy the conflict is over. We will never go back to the way it was.</i>
seek distraction	<i>I just went home afterwards and watched a sitcom on TV</i>
disengage	<i>I left Northern Ireland.</i>

The problems in bringing victims/survivors together with ex-paramilitaries were dissonance related:

- Both groups were very sensitive about their own dissonance reduction strategies: 'Because of our fighting, we have peace now' is incompatible with 'No violence is ever justified.'
- Victims/Survivors found it hard to convince their families that it was okay to become friendly with ex-paramilitaries; they could perhaps overcome their own hate, but not that of their families.

Conclusions

Cognitive dissonance theory provides a useful approach to better understand:

- the psychological inconsistencies that trigger hate
- the inner conflicts associated with hating
- different ways in which people manage/try to reduce their hate
- the struggle of living with unresolved hate
- the chasm between those who take violent action in response to their hate and those who are the victims of that violence



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Abstract

- **Hate as a Dissonant Emotion.** Prof. Jan De Vries, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland DEVRIEJ@tcd.ie
- In this paper, the mental discomfort that hate brings about in the person who hates will be examined with reference to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Dissonance theory deals with the discomfort generated by inconsistencies within our cognitive-emotional system. In the case of hate this can be betrayed trust, perceived injustice, and actual or feared damage to self or community.
- With the use of dissonance theory, the induction and reduction of hate will be examined, and the inner conflicts experienced will be elucidated. Dissonance theory will also be applied to the prolonged struggle people experience when no resolutions can be found. Unresolved hate is very common. While the arousal and aversive character of hate provide a functional drive for incisive actions, these are generally blocked by laws and policing, but also morality, principles, or religion inhibit expressions of hate. Thus, people who hate seek other ways of reducing their discomfort, such as trying to rise above it, avoidance, denial, finding justifications, and seeking validation by others. These are typical responses only explained integrally by applying the lens of dissonance theory.
- The author's experiences in facilitating dialogue with victims/survivors of 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland will serve as a practice-based touchstone.