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Cognitive Dissonance and Moral Rationalisation in Ukrainian Youth: A Mixed-Methods Experimental Study

Festinger's ground-breaking Cognitive Dissonance theory has shaped our understanding of decision-making, moral reasoning and social psychology. However, despite the years of study, we are still lacking a clear understanding of how people regulate the moral dilemmas in real-life scenarios that matter for social behaviour, national identity and civic responsibility. This research aims to provide deeper insight into how personal involvement, outcome severity and different scenarios influence cognitive dissonance and moral rationalisation on example of a realistic socio-cultural context in Ukraine. The topic is timely due to the unique psychological environment, shaped by war, identity shifts, and moral pressure. We contribute by providing a new methodological framework that integrates cognitive dissonance measurement, moral judgement tasks, behavioural choice and qualitative rationalisation coding, which extends the existing paradigms in moral psychology and cognitive dissonance research.

We will employ a 2×2 mixed factorial design, manipulating *Personal Involvement* (Agent vs. Observer) and *Outcome Severity* (High vs. Low) across three morally relevant in the Ukrainian context vignettes: Language Choice, Participation in Combat and Petty Corruption. Although moral dilemmas can cause a risk of potential discomfort, this is mitigated by withdrawal options, anonymity and content warnings. Each participant completes three randomised and counterbalanced scenarios. Participants first read a vignette and complete a Cognitive Dissonance pre-scale. Following this, they respond to three open-ended prompts designed to elicit moral reasoning: a Free-choice Paradigm, a Counter-Attitudinal Argument, and a Hypocrisy Paradigm. After that, participants complete a Cognitive Dissonance post-scale, manipulation check and moral judgment anchor. The research combines qualitative and quantitative methods, allowing for a broader and more reliable analysis of the cognitive dissonance phenomenon.