

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND HOW HUMANS TREAT ANIMALS

In this lesson, students examine their personal beliefs and behavior, identifying areas in which they experience cognitive dissonance and analyzing their opposing attitudes and actions. They then evaluate examples of discordant beliefs and behavior in society as a whole, using their understanding of facts and opinions to challenge the assumption that animals are ours to use.

Objectives

- **Affective:** Students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of the psychological experience of cognitive dissonance and to reflect on and evaluate their own beliefs and behavior.
- **Cognitive:** Students will be able to initiate and participate effectively in a variety of collaborative discussions with diverse partners, building on others' ideas, expressing their own ideas clearly and persuasively, and citing evidence to substantiate their claims. Students will also be able to draw inferences from an informational text and express their opinions in writing using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Background

Cognitive dissonance—which is defined as “the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioral decisions and attitude change”—is something most people have experienced at one point or another. It's that feeling you get when you do something like buy a case of plastic water bottles with lots of packaging while simultaneously being fully aware of the damage that plastic wreaks on the environment.

While this state can be uncomfortable, it can be used very effectively in the classroom to help

students make informed choices. Studies show that the experience of cognitive dissonance can be used to foster prosocial behavior and promote positive change.

Materials

- [“Grace”: PETA’s Banned Thanksgiving Ad” video*](#)
- [“Statements About Beliefs” and “Statements About Behavior” worksheets](#) (included in the kit)
- [“Why Are We Outraged About Eating Dog, but Not Bacon?” article](#) (included in the kit)
- [“Differentiating Animals From the Ways They Are Used” sheet](#) (included in the kit)
- [“The Hidden Lives of Animals” reading passages *](#)

Key Vocabulary

cognitive dissonance: the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioral decisions and attitude change

Motivation

- Begin the lesson by showing students the video [“Grace”: PETA’s Banned Thanksgiving Ad.”*](#) in which a young girl says a disturbingly truthful prayer before her family’s holiday feast.
- Tell students that the ad was submitted to air during the iconic Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade but was ultimately rejected by NBC, even though it contains no graphic images.
- Ask them how they think the family in the video feels as the little girl describes the abuse that turkeys raised for food endure. (Answers could include ashamed, conflicted, disgusted, etc.).
- Ask them to consider PETA’s goal in creating



[“Grace”: PETA’s Banned Thanksgiving Ad” video](#) (available online)



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the ad (to persuade viewers to go vegan ahead of the holiday season, during which millions of turkeys are slaughtered so that humans can eat them).

- Have students share their responses as a class before explaining that the psychological phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance was purposely used in this ad.

The girl states facts about the treatment that the turkey endured. Viewers of the ad can see on the family members' faces that they're not comfortable with this kind of treatment, yet they're still prepared to eat the turkey. What allows the family members to enjoy their feast without thinking of and feeling for the individual they're eating is *cognitive dissonance*—a disconnect between their beliefs and their behavior. In this ad, students can see what cognitive dissonance looks like. Next, they'll get a chance to experience it.



["Statements About Beliefs" and "Statements About Behavior" worksheets](#) (included in the kit)

["Why Are We Outraged About Eating Dog, but Not Bacon?" article](#) (included in the kit)

Part 1

Before Reading

The following activity was inspired by an in-class exercise used in the study "Bringing Cognitive Dissonance to the Classroom" by David M. Carkenord and Joseph Bullington. It's designed to induce cognitive dissonance in students by pointing out inconsistencies between their beliefs and their behavior.

- Start by giving your students a copy of the ["Statements About Beliefs" worksheet](#) (included in the kit). If you are teaching virtually, have students complete the digital version of this worksheet. Ask them to choose either A or B as the answer to each of the questions, based on what they believe to be factual, given their awareness of the topic. Ask students to turn their sheet facedown (or minimize their digital worksheet) after they've completed it.
- Then have students complete the second worksheet, ["Statements About Behavior"](#) (included in the kit). Ask them once again to choose either A or B for each answer, and stress that they should be truthful in answering each question, regardless of how they answered the questions about their beliefs—even if they notice inconsistencies. Explain that inconsistencies between attitudes and actions are very normal.
- Have students identify questions that show dissonance between a belief and their behavior. Repeat that inconsistencies are normal, and explain that identifying and processing the dissonance can help them make informed choices in the future.
- Have students write down their initial reactions to this exercise on a separate sheet of paper. This can be as simple as writing a few words that describe how they feel.
- Explore students' reactions as a class, and let them know that when people experience the feeling of cognitive dissonance, they often feel uncomfortable or defensive. Our brains are simply trying to reconcile the difference between our knowledge or beliefs and how we choose to act.

Discuss the following common reactions to feelings of cognitive dissonance:

- Attempting to rationalize the behavior (e.g., "But everybody eats meat, so it's fine.")
- Ignoring the truth or being in denial (e.g., "I don't want to think about that.")
- Reducing the importance of their belief (e.g., "Animals aren't as intelligent as humans, so their lives don't matter as much.")

The above coping mechanisms are defensive reactions. The most effective way to reduce cognitive dissonance is to change either a belief or a related action so that the two are consistent. After the discussion, have students write a paragraph about a behavior they could change in their own life in order to reduce cognitive dissonance brought to light by this activity.



During Reading

The concept known as "the meat paradox" describes the cognitive dissonance experienced by people who care about the well-being of animals and also choose to eat them. They believe that animals deserve protection and care, but their actions contribute to the abuse and death of animals. Have students conduct a close reading of the article ["Why Are We Outraged About Eating Dog, but Not Bacon?"](#) by Jared Piazza, lecturer in moral psychology at Lancaster University in the U.K. (included in the kit). Have them respond to and discuss their answers to the questions with a classmate or in small groups:

1. According to the author, why is it that humans feel outraged and heartbroken by the thought of dogs being slaughtered and served as food but don't experience the same reaction to the thought of pigs being slaughtered and served as food? Do you agree or disagree with his claim?

Answer: The author asserts that "emotional prejudice" is the reason why humans react differently to dogs and pigs being eaten as food. Piazza writes, "We just don't care enough about pigs for their needless suffering to pull at our heartstrings." Additional responses will vary based on student experience, but encourage students to use their knowledge of cognitive dissonance to inform their answer.

2. Is the popular argument that we should care more about dogs because of their "superior social intelligence" a strong one? Why or why not? Use evidence from the article to support your answer.

Possible answer: It is not logical or accurate to argue that dogs deserve better treatment because they're more intelligent than pigs. The author points out that because humans typically keep dogs as companions, they're simply more familiar with them and therefore more likely to identify with them emotionally. Dogs and pigs share many cognitive abilities, and pigs sometimes even outperform dogs on certain tasks.

3. How did the participants in the author's lab's study respond when presented with images of baby animals? How did they react when presented with images of adult animals? Do you think individuals who are thought to be "cute" deserve more respect and consideration than those who are not? Explain your answer.

Answer: The study showed that participants thought it would be more wrong to harm the baby animals than the adult animals because baby animals are cute. Additional responses will vary based on student experience, but encourage students to consider the moral implications of treating attractive humans with more respect and consideration than unattractive ones.

4. Explain the myside bias and the problems it presents.

Answer: The myside bias occurs when someone favors evidence that supports their own opinions. This is problematic because facts should not be up for debate but rather accepted as true. We should instead adjust our opinions to be in alignment with facts, not vice versa.

5. In Steve Loughnan's study, how did participants' feelings about the alien and the tapir differ from their feelings about the pig? Why?

Answer: Participants felt that it was wrong to eat the alien and the tapir but acceptable to eat the pig because it's considered normal to eat pigs, even though their intelligence level is the same as that of the alien and the tapir.

Reconvene as a class, and have students share their thoughts on the article. Then discuss the following question:

If people treated cats and dogs the way animals used for food are treated (i.e., kept in cages so small that they can't even turn around, etc.), they could be arrested on felony cruelty-to-animals charges. In your opinion, what's the reason for this massive, societywide cognitive dissonance? Why are some animals considered beloved companions while others are tortured, killed, and often eaten by people who claim to love and care about animals?

After Reading

As Piazza points out, experts theorize that certain factors contribute to the greater amount of compassion that people have for some animals than others. After the discussion, share these factors with your students:

- How “cute” or “babyish” an animal looks (having characteristics such as large eyes and a round head)
- How intelligent species are perceived to be (although this doesn’t necessarily correspond to their actual intelligence level)
- How many physical characteristics an animal shares with humans
- How many admirable anthropomorphized (or human-like) qualities an animal is thought to possess (e.g., cleverness, bravery, or capacity for affection)

After reviewing these qualities, ask students to write a paragraph giving their opinion on the following questions, citing evidence to support their case: **Is it fair to judge animals by these qualities? Why or why not?**

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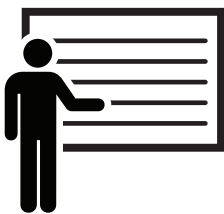
Have students respond to the two questions that follow using their opinions and conducting independent research online. This can be done either in class or as homework:

1. What laws concerning animals show inconsistencies?

Example answer: *The way animals are treated in a slaughterhouse would warrant felony cruelty-to-animals charges if someone did the same things in another setting or to an animal of a different species, such as a dog.*

2. Think about the many ways humans use animals in our society (e.g., in experiments, as food, for clothing, in entertainment). What are some things that many self-described “animal lovers” do that create cognitive dissonance?

Example answer: *Some self-described “animal lovers” are horrified at the thought of using the skin of a cat or dog for leather but may buy shoes made of cows’ skin without a second thought, even though cows suffer just as much when they’re killed for leather.*



[“Differentiating Animals From the Ways They Are Used” sheet](#) (included in the kit)

[“The Hidden Lives of Animals” reading passages](#) (available online)

Part 3

Begin this activity by writing the following words on the board, reading them out loud to students via a web conferencing tool such as Zoom or sharing them in your online forum of choice such as Google Classroom:

cat	duck	mouse	rat
chicken	fish	octopus	turkey
cow	frog	pig	
dog	goose	rabbit	

- Provide students with the [“Differentiating Animals From the Ways They Are Used” sheet](#) (included in the kit). As you read the name of each animal, have students write the animal under the category

that seems appropriate for the way our society treats them (as science experiments, food, clothing/fabric, companion animals, pests, or wild animals). If students need help defining the category titles, explain further. Let them know that there are no wrong answers and that they may list an animal in multiple categories. For example, mice are companion animals and also commonly used in experiments and considered by some to be pests.

- Once students have categorized each of the animals, break them into pairs or groups of three (depending on how many are in your class) and have each group read one of the [“Hidden Lives of Animals” reading passages](#).*
- When they’re finished, have group members participate in a collaborative discussion about the things they learned and what new perspectives they have on the animals they read about.
- Then have all the groups prepare and give a short presentation to the rest of the class on the animal(s) in their reading passage. Ask them to address at least five different facts about the animal(s) in their presentation as well as at least one significant quality that they share with animals like cats and dogs. For example, many fish like physical contact with other fish and often gently rub against one another—in the same way a cat weaves in and out of a human’s legs.
- Discuss how the class initially categorized each animal, and ask students if that categorization makes sense after looking deeper. Have students address the role that cognitive dissonance plays in society’s continued exploitation and general treatment of these animals.

Real-World Connection

Ask students, “What other times in your life have you experienced cognitive dissonance? How did you respond (for example, attempt to rationalize the behavior, ignore the truth or be in denial, or reduce the importance of the belief)? Did you adjust your belief or your behavior? Going forward, how will your knowledge of cognitive dissonance inform your actions?” Have students explain their answers fully and discuss their responses as a class.

Ask students, “Why do you think many people become uncomfortable when presented with images or video footage of animals suffering (for example, homeless cats and dogs, pigs in slaughterhouses) or altogether refuse to look at them?” Have students explain their answers fully and discuss their responses as a class.



Wrap-Up Activity

Share with students the quotation below from Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer, and ask them to discuss what it means to them and how it relates to cognitive dissonance.



“No one must shut his eyes and regard as non-existent the suffering of which he spared himself the sight.”

—Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer

Assessment

Evaluate students’ written responses, and monitor group discussions for evidence of clear and persuasive expression of ideas as well as building on the ideas of others.

Common Misperception/Reality

Common Misperception 	Reality 
It's "natural" for humans to use animals. Some animals are meant to be cared for and deserve our respect and consideration, whereas others are meant to be used in experiments, for food, for labor, or otherwise exploited.	Humans have categorized animals based on arbitrary characteristics. For example, someone might be moved to tears by a news story about an abused dog yet feel no remorse over eating a bucket of chicken wings that caused multiple birds to suffer and die. This is not because dogs suffer more or feel more pain than chickens but because humans ascribe a higher importance to dogs than they do to chickens.



Extension

If you'd like to have your students continue their research into the meat paradox, reasons why people treat certain animals differently, and reactions to cognitive dissonance, have them read the following articles or watch the documentary [The Emotional World of Farm Animals](#):*†

- [The Independent: "Why Some Animals Are More Equal Than Others ..."](#)*†
- [The Conversation: "The Meat Paradox: How We Can Love Some Animals and Eat Others"](#)*†

Common Core Standards Addressed

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1**
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1**
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1**
Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1**
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1**
Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1**
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

*Indicates components necessary to implement the lesson are available online only
Please visit TeachKind.org/SocialJustice to access these materials.

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CHALLENGING TeachKind ASSUMPTIONS

¹Please note that starting at 11:53 in the documentary *The Emotional World of Farm Animals*, Ned Buyukmihci, D.V.M., cofounder of Animal Place, explains that his colleagues suggested “killing” Jessie, a cow who was taken to the sanctuary with a severely broken leg. While Jessie recovered from her injury, euthanasia is nevertheless a painless, quick, and dignified way to spare animals intense suffering and a prolonged death. When performed properly and by a trained professional, euthanasia is often the most compassionate option.