

ABSENCE OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AS A FACILITATOR FACTOR OF ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR: AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF COGNITIVE, AFFECTIVE, AND SOCIAL MECHANISMS

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Abstract

This article proposes an integrative theoretical model explaining the absence and inhibition of cognitive dissonance in antisocial behaviour, conceptualizing this phenomenon not as an isolated anomaly but as the outcome of interacting cognitive, affective, moral-developmental, responsibility-related, and social-contextual mechanisms. While cognitive dissonance theory posits that inconsistency between attitudes and behaviour generates psychological discomfort and motivates conflict reduction (Festinger, 1957; Cooper, 2019), empirical evidence suggests that individuals with psychopathic traits or low levels of moral development often fail to exhibit typical dissonance responses (Murray, Wood, & Lilienfeld, 2012; Palmer & Hollin, 2000).

The proposed model integrates five core levels: (1) self-serving cognitive distortions (Gibbs, 1993), (2) moral disengagement mechanisms (Bandura, 1991), (3) sociomoral immaturity consistent with Kohlberg's (1984) developmental framework, (4) biases in social information processing (Crick & Dodge, 1994), and (5) diminished perception of personal responsibility, as emphasized in the “New Look” model of dissonance (Cooper, 2019). These mechanisms operate synergistically, preventing the activation of internal conflict through responsibility neutralization, empathic attenuation, hostile reinterpretation of social cues, and moral reframing.

The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in reconceptualizing the absence of cognitive dissonance as an active maintenance mechanism underlying persistent antisocial conduct. Practical implications highlight the need for cognitively and morally restructuring interventions that move beyond purely punitive or didactic approaches.

Keywords: cognitive dissonance, antisocial behavior, moral self-regulation, cognitive distortions, psychopathy, social information processing, perceived responsibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

Antisocial behavior and criminal offending represent phenomena with substantial social and economic impact. Globally, high recidivism rates – often ranging between 40% and 60% within the first years following release (UNODC; various European recidivism reports – suggest the persistence of psychological mechanisms that sustain deviant conduct over time. Research indicates that disadvantaged environments characterized by normative inconsistency, violence, or deficient parenting practices contribute to the development of hostile cognitive

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schemas and moral distortions (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989; Patterson, 1992). According to social information processing (SIP) theory (Crick & Dodge, 1994), aggressive individuals are more likely to interpret ambiguous social cues as hostile and to select aggressive behavioral responses. Within this framework, a central question emerges: why do certain individuals fail to experience cognitive dissonance when engaging in antisocial acts? Addressing this issue is essential for understanding the maintenance of criminal behavior in the absence of internal moral conflict and for designing more effective interventions.

From this perspective, the absence of cognitive dissonance may reflect a psychologically reorganized system structured around egocentric schemas and sociomoral immaturity, in which deviant behavior is perceived as functional and justifiable. If cognitive dissonance typically operates as a mechanism of moral self-regulation, its inhibition signals a structural vulnerability in processes of self-control and responsibility attribution. Examining this phenomenon provides a relevant explanatory framework for persistent recidivism and supports the development of interventions aimed not merely at external compliance with norms, but at reactivating internal mechanisms of moral regulation.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The present paper adopts a theoretical and integrative methodological approach. Rather than reporting original empirical data, it synthesizes and critically integrates established theoretical frameworks and empirical findings from cognitive, moral, social, and forensic psychology in order to construct a coherent explanatory model.

The model was developed through a structured conceptual analysis of the literature on cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Cooper, 2019), moral development (Kohlberg, 1958, 1981, 1984), cognitive distortions and moral disengagement (Gibbs, 1993; Bandura, 1991), psychopathy and affective deficits (Hare, 1991, 1999), and social information processing (Crick & Dodge, 1994). These frameworks were selected based on their empirical validation, theoretical relevance to antisocial behavior, and their conceptual compatibility with mechanisms of dissonance activation or inhibition.

The integrative process involved identifying convergent mechanisms across these domains – specifically cognitive distortions, affective deficits, biased social information processing, moral immaturity, and diminished perceived responsibility – and examining how their interaction may systematically inhibit the activation of cognitive dissonance. The resulting model represents a functional synthesis rather than a meta-analytic aggregation, aiming to clarify the structural conditions under which dissonance fails to emerge in antisocial conduct.

To enhance the transparency and methodological rigor of the integrative approach, the literature included in the present model was selected through a structured, criterion-based process. Sources were identified using major academic databases (*e.g.*, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, Scopus), focusing on peer-reviewed articles, theoretical works, and seminal contributions relevant to cognitive

dissonance, antisocial behavior, and moral functioning. Priority was given to highly cited and empirically supported frameworks, as well as to studies demonstrating conceptual relevance to mechanisms of dissonance activation or inhibition.

The selection of sources was guided by three primary criteria: (1) theoretical relevance to the core constructs of the model (*e.g.*, cognitive distortions, affective deficits, social information processing, moral reasoning, perceived responsibility); (2) empirical support or validation within forensic, developmental, or social psychological contexts; and (3) conceptual compatibility with an integrative, multi-level explanatory framework. When possible, recent empirical contributions were incorporated to complement classical theories and ensure the contemporary relevance of the model.

The model was constructed through a sequential integrative process. Key mechanisms from different theoretical frameworks were identified, grouped, and synthesized into broader functional categories (*e.g.*, cognitive distortions, affective deficits, SIP biases). These were then organized into a dynamic system reflecting their role in inhibiting cognitive dissonance, based on their functional relationships (*e.g.*, cognitive appraisal → affective response → responsibility attribution → social reinforcement).

Rather than aggregating findings quantitatively, the present approach emphasizes functional integration, aiming to capture how distinct mechanisms interact within a coherent psychological architecture.

Table 1

Criteria and Integration Logic for Model Construction

Criterion / Step	Description
<i>Theoretical relevance</i>	Inclusion of frameworks directly addressing cognitive dissonance, antisocial behavior, moral reasoning, and social cognition
<i>Empirical support</i>	Preference for peer-reviewed studies and validated theoretical models
<i>Conceptual compatibility</i>	Selection of constructs that can be integrated into a multi-level explanatory system
<i>Mechanism extraction</i>	Identification of key processes (<i>e.g.</i> , distortions, affective deficits, SIP biases, responsibility)
<i>Conceptual grouping</i>	Integration of overlapping constructs into broader functional categories
<i>Model structuring</i>	Organization of mechanisms into a dynamic sequence explaining dissonance inhibition
<i>Integrative synthesis</i>	Development of a coherent, multi-level model rather than statistical aggregation

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND COGNITIVE MECHANISMS INVOLVED

According to Idowu and Esere (2000), cognition refers to mental awareness, whereas dissonance signifies a lack of harmony. Dissonance describes a state in which attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors are in conflict. Franzoi (2000) defines cognitive dissonance as a feeling of discomfort caused by performing an action that

is inconsistent with one's own attitudes. More specifically, it represents a psychological tension or discomfort arising from holding two or more inconsistent cognitions simultaneously.

According to cognitive dissonance theory, individuals strive for consistency between their attitudes and behaviors. When they perceive incompatibility between two or more attitudes, or between attitudes and behaviors, they experience cognitive dissonance – that is, they feel frustrated and uncomfortable, sometimes intensely so, with the situation (Burnes & James, 1995). Idowu and Esere (2000) further argue that dissonance occurs when an individual performs a task or action that contradicts what would normally be considered their usual or positive duty. For example, a school counselor expected to promote positive values among students might be required by school leadership to participate in examination fraud. In such circumstances, the realization of acting against one's professional and moral obligations generates psychological discomfort.

Cognitive dissonance has been explained through several dimensions, including forced compliance, psychological tension, perceived falseness, reward magnitude, and motivation to reduce tension (Oduh, 2016). Forced compliance occurs when an individual adopts behaviors contrary to personal beliefs due to external pressures, such as institutional demands or fear of sanctions. This may subsequently lead to attitude adjustment in order to align beliefs with behavior (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Carlsmith, Collins, & Helmreich, 1966). The resulting psychological tension consists of the discomfort experienced when the individual becomes aware that they have acted against their own values (Oduh, 2016).

Another relevant dimension is "falseness", whereby individuals reduce dissonance by denying or minimizing the authenticity or intentionality of their own behavior (Aronson, 1992; Oduh, 2016). Reward magnitude also influences the intensity of dissonance: the greater the external justification, the lower the experienced dissonance, as the behavior is perceived as sufficiently motivated by external factors (Franzoi, 2000). Conversely, weak external rewards amplify tension and increase the likelihood of attitudinal change.

The motivation to reduce psychological tension leads individuals to employ cognitive reconstruction strategies, such as changing attitudes, adding justifying cognitions, diminishing the importance of the conflict, or rationalizing the absence of viable alternatives (Franzoi, 2000; Oduh, 2016). Through these mechanisms, internal consistency is restored without necessarily altering the initial behavior.

Antisocial behavior refers to a set of actions that violate the rights of others and established social norms, including aggression, vandalism, theft, and other delinquent acts (Frick, 1998, cited in Fortin, 2003; Farrington, 2005). In childhood and adolescence, antisocial behavior is associated with impulsivity, conduct disorders, and academic difficulties. Considered an early stage of delinquency, it may lead to socio-emotional problems and criminal behavior in adulthood (Moffitt, 1993). Early onset is correlated with greater persistence and chronicity of such conduct (Patterson, 1990).

There are two broad dimensions of conduct disorders: internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Internalizing behaviors are inwardly directed and involve behavioral deficits such as isolation, social withdrawal, and depression. In contrast, externalizing behaviors involve disruption of others, verbal and physical aggression, and acts of violence.

Early childhood, particularly the first five years, is critical for the development of antisocial behavior, with both family and individual factors serving as key predictors of later delinquency (Moffitt, 1993; Patterson *et al.*, 1992; Loeber, 1982; Patterson, 1992). Adverse family environments, maladaptive parenting, and individual temperament interact with broader social influences, while preadolescence marks a period of heightened vulnerability in which attachment to parents and peers becomes central to socio-emotional development (Sprinthall, 1995).

Building on these developmental and environmental accounts, recent neuroscientific evidence provides further insight into the biological underpinnings of antisocial behavior. Functional imaging studies indicate that individuals with antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) and psychopathic traits exhibit significant structural and functional abnormalities, particularly within prefrontal and limbic systems (Reyes *et al.*, 2024). These include cortical thinning in regions associated with impulse control, empathy, and social regulation, as well as reduced gray matter volume in the prefrontal cortex, which has been linked to impaired decision-making and diminished capacity to anticipate consequences (Ly *et al.*, 2012; Raine *et al.*, 2000). Such structural deficits suggest a neurobiological basis for the persistent impulsivity and lack of moral restraint observed in antisocial individuals.

In addition to structural differences, alterations in functional connectivity appear to play a critical role. Evidence indicates reduced connectivity between frontal and parietal regions, as well as disrupted integration within frontoparietal and fronto-subcortical networks, leading to decreased efficiency in information processing and impaired behavioral regulation (Jiang *et al.*, 2017; Reyes *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, dysfunction within the limbic–prefrontal circuitry, particularly involving the amygdala, anterior cingulate cortex, and orbitofrontal cortex, has been associated with deficits in fear conditioning, emotional processing, and learning from negative consequences (Birbaumer *et al.*, 2005; Koenigs, 2012). These findings help explain the reduced sensitivity to punishment and diminished emotional responsiveness characteristic of antisocial and psychopathic profiles.

At a functional level, these neurobiological disruptions translate into observable behavioral and cognitive patterns. Individuals with ASPD show impaired integration of emotional and cognitive processes, resulting in poor adherence to social norms, diminished empathy, and increased impulsivity (Reyes *et al.*, 2024). The lack of orbitofrontal cortex activation during the translation of learned associations into behavior further reflects a failure to use past experiences to guide future actions. Together, these findings support the view that antisocial behavior is not solely a product of environmental risk factors or moral immaturity, but is also rooted in neurocognitive dysfunctions that affect emotional regulation, decision-making, and social adaptation.

According to the “New Look” perspective, cognitive dissonance is frequently triggered by feelings of guilt or remorse associated with causing negative consequences to others, raising the question of whether individuals with low levels of guilt – such as those with psychopathic traits – experience the same internal tension. Psychopathy is characterized by lack of remorse, affective callousness, impulsivity, and difficulties in internalizing moral norms (Hare, 1993; Patrick, 2006), and is overrepresented in correctional populations (Hare, 1996). Unlike antisocial personality disorder, psychopathy includes essential interpersonal and cognitive dimensions (Hare, 1999). Research further indicates reduced physiological reactivity to aversive stimuli and lower levels of anxiety among individuals with psychopathic traits (Hare, 1978; Fowles, 1980). These findings suggest that such individuals may experience diminished psychological discomfort in dissonant situations and, consequently, a lower likelihood of attitudinal change – an aspect highly relevant for understanding the absence of cognitive dissonance in antisocial behavior.

Cognitive distortions refer to biased or erroneous interpretations that justify or facilitate antisocial conduct by protecting the individual’s self-image. Gibbs differentiated between primary distortions, which are self-centered and derived from an egocentric bias, and secondary distortions, which include rationalization mechanisms such as blaming others, minimizing wrongdoing, and assuming hostile intent (Barriga & Gibbs, 1996; Barriga *et al.*, 2001). Primary distortions are associated with moral immaturity, whereas secondary distortions serve to reduce psychological tension arising from conflict between behavior and moral standards.

The principal typology includes four categories: (1) self-centeredness, (2) blaming others, (3) minimizing/mislabeling, and (4) assuming the worst intentions. These function as techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957) and mechanisms of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1991), enabling individuals to reduce cognitive dissonance and deactivate moral self-sanctions. Through repeated cognitive reconstruction, behaviors initially perceived as unacceptable may gradually become normalized. Recent systematic evidence further consolidates the central role of cognitive distortions in criminal behavior (Syasyila *et al.*, 2024).

Research on social cognition and morality suggests that the way children process social information and interpret situations involving harm significantly influences aggressive or prosocial behavior (Gini, 2006; Menesini & Camodeca, 2008). Arsenio and Lemerise (2004) proposed an integrative model combining social information processing (SIP) with moral reasoning, arguing that distortions in moral knowledge and evaluation can shape aggressive responses. Empirical findings indicate that reactive aggression is associated with hostile intent attributions, whereas proactive aggression involves distorted moral reasoning and an instrumental orientation, characterized by disregard for the victim’s suffering (Arsenio *et al.*, 2009).

Research further shows that aggressors may possess adequate perspective-taking abilities but exhibit low moral motivation, using social-cognitive skills in

non-moral ways. In contrast, bully-victims display deficits in both social cognition and moral functioning (Gasser & Keller, 2009). These findings underscore the complex interaction between social cognition, moral motivation, and antisocial behavior.

Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1969, 1984) provides a relevant framework for understanding antisocial behavior, suggesting that offending is more frequently associated with immature levels of moral reasoning characterized by egocentricity, punishment avoidance, and self-interest (Gibbs, 1993; Palmer, 2003). Research consistently indicates that juvenile offenders tend to demonstrate preconventional levels of moral maturity compared to non-offenders (Nelson *et al.*, 1990; Palmer & Hollin, 2000).

Extending this perspective, contemporary integrative approaches emphasize that moral reasoning is not solely a product of cognitive development but emerges from the dynamic interplay of cognitive, emotional, and neurobiological systems. Neuroscientific research indicates that moral judgment relies on a distributed network of neural regions, including the prefrontal cortex, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (involved in emotional valuation and empathy), the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (supporting abstract and impersonal reasoning), the orbitofrontal cortex (implicated in evaluating the emotional and social consequences of actions), and the amygdala (associated with affective processing) (Bawa & Sharma, 2025).

Empirical studies on moral dilemmas further demonstrate a functional differentiation between emotionally salient, harm-related decisions and more abstract, utilitarian judgments, reflecting a dual-process interaction between affective and cognitive systems, in which emotionally driven evaluations engage ventromedial regions, whereas more deliberative reasoning recruits dorsolateral mechanisms (Greene *et al.*, 2001; Greene, 2007). Within this framework, higher levels of moral reasoning are not purely rational but depend on the integration of emotional and cognitive processes. Moreover, moral judgment appears to be context-dependent and neurocognitively plastic, shaped by both biological predispositions and environmental influences, with implications for interventions targeting emotional regulation and cognitive control (Bawa & Sharma, 2025).

From a broader neurocognitive perspective, these findings may also be interpreted within contemporary predictive processing frameworks, according to which behavior is guided by internally generated expectations and salience attribution mechanisms (Friston, 2010). In antisocial individuals, maladaptive predictive models may bias the interpretation of social and moral information, reducing the likelihood that norm violations are processed as behaviorally or emotionally significant prediction errors. Such alterations may also involve dysfunctions in salience and conflict-monitoring systems associated with behavioral self-regulation (Menon, 2011; Botvinick *et al.*, 2001).

Recent neurocognitive perspectives suggest that cognitive conflict and behavioral self-regulation rely on neural systems associated with error monitoring

and conflict detection, particularly within the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) (Botvinick *et al.*, 2001; Van Veen *et al.*, 2009). Dysfunctions in these mechanisms may reduce sensitivity to inconsistencies between moral standards and antisocial behavior, thereby weakening the activation of cognitive dissonance. Contemporary predictive processing frameworks further propose that maladaptive internal models and altered salience attribution may bias the interpretation of social and moral information, reducing the likelihood that norm violations are processed as behaviorally significant signals (Friston, 2010; Menon, 2011).

Within the Theory of Planned Behavior, Ajzen (1991) proposed that behavioral intention is determined by three primary factors: attitudes toward the behavior, perceived social (subjective) norms, and perceived behavioral control. These components are influenced by background factors such as demographic variables, personal values, prior experiences, and group identity (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). In the context of antisocial behavior, this theory conceptualizes the intention to commit a deviant act as a reasoned decision shaped by risk-benefit evaluation, social pressure, and perceived control over outcomes (Patrick, 2021).

Tajfel's (1979) Social Identity Theory suggests that an individual's social identity – derived from membership in meaningful groups – influences attitudes and behavior. Hogg and Smith (2007) argue that, depending on the situation, individuals “activate” one of their social identities, leading them to adopt the norms and values associated with the relevant group. Thus, if a valued group (*e.g.*, peers) tolerates or even encourages antisocial behavior, individuals are more likely to adopt such conduct, particularly to maintain belonging and status within that group (Patrick, 2021). In this sense, “SIP theory proposes that individual differences in behavioral responses to social situations are caused by individual differences in mental processing” (Nas, Orobio de Castro, & Koops, 2005, p. 12).

According to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), discomfort generated by incongruence between moral identity and deviant behavior motivates attitudinal change or the use of justificatory strategies (Patrick, 2021). Sykes and Matza (1957) demonstrated that individuals may engage in antisocial acts without abandoning their moral values by employing techniques of neutralization, such as denying responsibility, minimizing consequences, or condemning authorities. These strategies function as cognitive regulation mechanisms, reducing dissonance and protecting self-image.

Dissonance is more likely to arise when behavior is perceived as voluntary and inconsistent with personal values, with individual responsibility serving as a central factor (Festinger, 1957; Patrick, 2021). However, dissonance reduction through rationalization may paradoxically contribute to the normalization of antisocial conduct and increase the likelihood of its repetition, even in the absence of obvious external rewards.

Integrating these theoretical frameworks allows antisocial behavior to be understood not merely as the result of a “deviant personality trait”, but as the

product of complex interactions among intentions, social norms, group identity, and cognitive adaptation strategies.

4. THE PROPOSED MODEL

4.1. CENTRAL HYPOTHESIS OF THE MODEL

The proposed theoretical model argues that the absence of cognitive dissonance in antisocial behavior is not the result of an isolated dysfunction, but rather the outcome of an integrated interaction among cognitive, affective, and social mechanisms. At the cognitive level, justificatory distortions – such as denial of harm, devaluation of the victim, and minimization of responsibility (Gibbs, 1993; Bandura, 1991) – combined with confirmation bias and hostile attribution bias (Nickerson, 1998; Dodge, 1993), distort moral evaluation and prevent the emergence of internal conflict.

At the affective level, low levels of empathy and guilt, commonly associated with psychopathic traits (Hare, 1991), reduce the negative emotional reactions necessary for activating cognitive dissonance. In addition, diminished perception of personal responsibility inhibits the mechanism described in the “New Look” theory of dissonance (Cooper, 2019).

At the social level, distorted social information processing and the internalization of deviant norms (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Sykes & Matza, 1957) further reinforce and legitimize antisocial conduct, transforming the absence of cognitive dissonance into a stable and functional behavioral pattern.

4.2. MODEL FLOW (INTERNAL LOGIC)

The proposed model conceptualizes the absence of cognitive dissonance in antisocial behavior as the outcome of a dynamic interaction among cognitive, affective, and social mechanisms that operate in a coordinated and mutually reinforcing manner. Rather than reflecting a simple failure of moral awareness, the lack of internal conflict emerges from a structured psychological system in which distortions, emotional deficits, and contextual influences collectively inhibit the activation of dissonance from the earliest stages of moral evaluation.

Within this framework, antisocial behavior is maintained through a sequential process in which each component contributes to preventing the emergence of psychological tension. The model therefore shifts the explanatory focus from isolated factors to their functional organization, emphasizing how these mechanisms interact over time to stabilize a dissonance-free pattern of behavior. The following section outlines this process in a stepwise manner, highlighting the internal logic through which cognitive dissonance is systematically blocked.

1. Cognitive Distortions and Biases → Alter Moral Evaluation and Justify Action

The first active mechanism in the model's sequence consists of cognitive distortions and automatic biases, which directly influence how individuals evaluate their own behavior and the broader social situation. Cognitive distortions – such as denial of harm, devaluation of the victim, minimization of consequences, or blaming others – provide a coherent justificatory framework that eliminates moral conflict at the earliest stage of action (Gibbs, 1993; Bandura, 1991).

Cognitive biases – particularly confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) and hostile attribution bias (Dodge, 1993) – reinforce the distorted framework created by these mechanisms. Confirmation bias leads individuals to attend selectively to information that supports preexisting beliefs while disregarding contradictory evidence. This process sustains antisocial beliefs and prevents the activation of cognitive dissonance, even in the presence of clear evidence of harm.

Furthermore, hostile attribution bias – a common error in social information processing – causes individuals to perceive provocation or threat where none objectively exists. As a result, aggression is interpreted as legitimate or defensive, thereby strengthening self-justification. These mechanisms generate an internal “alternative reality” in which antisocial behavior is not merely acceptable, but necessary or justified.

2. Affective Deficits → Reduce or Eliminate Negative Emotional Reactivity

The second stage of the explanatory sequence concerns the affective domain, where the absence of negative emotional reactions plays a crucial role in preventing cognitive dissonance. Individuals with psychopathic traits or low levels of empathy and guilt are less likely to experience affective tension when engaging in antisocial acts (Hare, 1991).

Under normal circumstances, empathy functions as an affective feedback system that regulates social behavior. Its absence reduces sensitivity to others' suffering, meaning that individuals do not naturally experience guilt or shame. Without this affective discomfort, there is no internal need to re-evaluate or justify the action – thus, no activation of cognitive dissonance.

Moreover, affective flattening, superficial affect, and lack of remorse – features frequently observed in antisocial personalities – lead to inhibition of the emotional reactions that typically accompany conflict between actions and values. Cognitive dissonance presupposes a negatively experienced psychological tension; in the absence of an active affective substrate, this tension lacks the emotional foundation necessary to emerge.

Recent empirical findings further nuance this perspective. Garofalo, Neumann, and Velotti (2018) demonstrated that difficulties in emotion regulation are positively associated with psychopathic traits in violent offenders, particularly

with affective and lifestyle facets, even after controlling for general psychological distress. These results suggest that psychopathy is not merely characterized by emotional absence, but by dysfunctional regulation of emotional processes. Such dysregulation may impair the activation of guilt, empathy, or moral anxiety in situations of norm violation, thereby contributing to the inhibition of dissonance rather than its conscious suppression.

Recent empirical findings further nuance this affective dimension. Kyranides and Neofytou (2021) demonstrated that primary and secondary psychopathic traits are associated with distinct attachment profiles and cognitive emotion regulation strategies. Primary traits were linked to avoidant attachment and externalization mechanisms such as blaming others, whereas secondary traits were associated with anxious attachment and maladaptive amplification strategies such as catastrophizing. These findings indicate that affective dysfunction is not homogeneous across antisocial profiles. Rather, different emotional configurations may contribute to the systemic inhibition of cognitive dissonance through either emotional detachment (primary variants) or dysregulated emotional reactivity (secondary variants).

3. Low Moral Reasoning and Distorted Social Information Processing (SIP) → Distort Situational Interpretation and Behavioral Goals

Continuing the explanatory sequence, moral reasoning and social information processing serve as intermediate mechanisms linking cognition and affect. According to Kohlberg's (1976) model of moral development, individuals operating at preconventional levels tend to make decisions based on self-interest, punishment avoidance, or gain maximization, without internalizing abstract ethical norms.

The SIP model (Crick & Dodge, 1994) further explains how individuals exhibiting antisocial behavior may process social cues inaccurately. They may struggle to accurately recognize others' intentions, select prosocial goals, or choose adaptive behavioral responses. When these processes are dysfunctional, neutral situations may be interpreted as provocative, and aggression may be perceived as an appropriate or legitimate reaction.

Distorted moral reasoning, combined with erroneous processing of the social context, leads to a subjective redefinition of the moral situation. Rather than perceiving themselves as aggressors, individuals may view themselves as victims or enforcers of justice. This narrative reformulation of one's own conduct removes the need for self-criticism and, consequently, eliminates the basis for cognitive dissonance.

4. Low Perceived Responsibility → Closes the Gate to Dissonance Activation (Cooper)

One of the most important theoretical components integrated into the model is perceived responsibility, as conceptualized in Cooper's (2007) "New Look" theory of cognitive dissonance. According to this perspective, dissonance arises

only when individuals perceive that they acted freely and that they are personally responsible for the negative consequences of their actions.

In the absence of perceived responsibility – whether because individuals view themselves as constrained, minimize the consequences, or externalize blame – dissonance is not activated. This explains why many individuals involved in antisocial acts do not experience internal conflict, even when their actions clearly violate moral norms.

Perceived responsibility may be diminished through appeals to external factors (“I was forced,” “everyone does it,” “I had no choice”), but also through internal automatic processes, such as reframing intention (“I didn’t mean to hurt anyone”) or reinterpreting consequences (“it wasn’t a big deal”). In all cases, individuals dissociate themselves from their actions, thereby eliminating the psychological conditions necessary for cognitive tension to emerge.

This stage functions as a “final filter” prior to the potential activation of dissonance. If responsibility is removed or reinterpreted, dissonance lacks the psychological foundation required to manifest, and antisocial behavior proceeds without moral re-evaluation.

5. Deviant Social Context → Normalizes the Entire Process → Sustains the Absence of Dissonance and Facilitates Recurrence of Antisocial Behavior

The final component of the model’s sequence is the social context, which plays a decisive role in sustaining and perpetuating the entire psychological system that inhibits cognitive dissonance. Deviant social norms, internalized within environments such as criminal peer groups or correctional institutions, validate antisocial conduct and discourage expressions of guilt or moral reflection (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

Deviant socialization reinforces cognitive distortions by replicating and socially validating the same patterns of justification. In the absence of prosocial behavioral models, individuals lack motivation to question or reassess their value system. Consequently, the absence of dissonance is not only maintained but becomes part of an adaptive psychological equilibrium within that context.

Furthermore, social environments in which aggression is rewarded and empathy is perceived as weakness contribute to the consolidation of affective deficits. In this way, affective and social components operate in tandem, reinforcing deviant patterns of thinking and action.

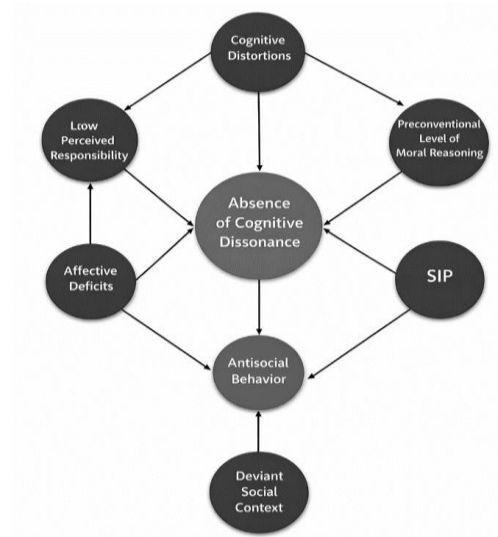


Figure 1. Theoretical Model of the Absence of Cognitive Dissonance Facilitating Antisocial Behavior.

Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic interaction among cognitive, affective, and social mechanisms that inhibit the activation of cognitive dissonance in antisocial behavior. Rather than operating independently, these components form an integrated system in which distorted social information processing, affective deficits, diminished perceived responsibility, and social reinforcement jointly contribute to the stabilization of deviant conduct. This systemic interaction explains how antisocial behavior can persist in the absence of internal moral conflict.

Table 2 summarizes the specific function of each psychological and social component involved in the explanatory model of antisocial behavior without cognitive dissonance. These components, analyzed in detail in previous sections, operate together to prevent internal conflict and to facilitate the maintenance of coherent and repetitive deviant conduct. Each element contributes at a distinct level – cognitive, affective, or social – to the inhibition of dissonance.

Table 2

The Role of Each Component in the Model

Component	Function within the Model
<i>Cognitive distortions</i>	Rationalize and justify actions
<i>Affective deficits</i>	Eliminate negative emotional responses
<i>Cognitive biases</i>	Block access to contradictory information
<i>Low moral reasoning</i>	Reduce internal evaluative standards
<i>SIP (Social Information Processing)</i>	Misattribute intentions, ignore consequences
<i>Low perceived responsibility</i>	Prevent the activation of dissonance
<i>Deviant social context</i>	Normalize and sustain the system

4.3. FORMALIZATION OF “DISSONANCE BLOCKAGE” AS A MULTILEVEL INHIBITORY MECHANISM

The concept of *dissonance blockage* refers to a psychological process through which cognitive dissonance is inhibited before moral tension reaches the level necessary for behavioral self-regulation. Unlike classical dissonance models, which assume that internal conflict emerges and is later reduced (Festinger, 1957; Cooper, 2019), the present concept proposes that the psychological conditions necessary for conflict activation may themselves become disrupted.

Conceptually, the mechanism may be defined as a multilevel process of cognitive, affective, and socio-contextual inhibition of the psychological tension resulting from incongruence between moral norms and antisocial behavior.

4.3.1. Conditions Necessary for the Emergence of “Dissonance Blockage”

The proposed model suggests that dissonance inhibition emerges when multiple functional conditions necessary for moral conflict activation are simultaneously disrupted.

1. *Deactivation of Internal Moral Evaluation*: at this level, antisocial behavior is no longer cognitively registered as morally self-inconsistent, allowing norm violation to occur without threatening self-coherence (Bandura, 1991; Gibbs, 1993).
2. *Reduction of Negative Affective Reactivity*: the absence or attenuation of guilt, shame, and empathic distress weakens the emotional substrate normally required for the emergence of cognitive dissonance (Hare, 1991; Murray *et al.*, 2012).
3. *Fragmentation of Personal Responsibility*: when responsibility attribution becomes externally displaced or psychologically diffused, individuals no longer experience themselves as direct moral agents of the harmful outcome, preventing dissonance activation (Cooper, 2007, 2019).
4. *Social Validation of Deviant Cognitions*: repeated social reinforcement of antisocial interpretations stabilizes dissonance inhibition by transforming deviant cognitions into socially normative and identity-consistent patterns (Sykes & Matza, 1957; Tajfel, 1979).

4.3.2. Levels of “Dissonance Blockage”

The model proposes distinct functional levels of dissonance inhibition, differentiated according to the degree of psychological stability and automatization.

Level I – Situational Inhibition

At this level, dissonance blockage emerges primarily in specific contexts and depends largely on external justification or group pressure.

Characteristics include:

- fluctuating moral conflict;
- post-hoc rationalizations;

- residual emotional discomfort;
- partially preserved responsibility attribution.

Individuals may occasionally experience guilt or regret, although these reactions are rapidly neutralized.

Level II – Structured Inhibition

At this level, neutralization mechanisms become stable and predictable.

Characteristics include:

- automated cognitive distortions;
- persistent reinterpretation of others' intentions;
- reduced empathy;
- chronic externalization of responsibility.

Dissonance emerges infrequently and is rapidly deactivated through cognitive restructuring.

Level III – Structurally Integrated Inhibition

This level corresponds to severe and persistent forms of antisocial functioning.

Characteristics include:

- near-complete absence of moral conflict;
- superficial affect;
- lack of remorse;
- integration of deviant cognitions into personal identity;
- chronic social validation of antisocial conduct.

Within this configuration, dissonance may fail to emerge even in the presence of severe harm inflicted on others.

Types of Dissonance Blockage:

1. **Cognitive dissonance blockage** – moral conflict is inhibited through cognitive distortions, rationalizations, and reinterpretations that justify antisocial behavior.
2. **Affective dissonance blockage** – diminished empathy, guilt, or emotional responsiveness prevents norm violations from generating psychological discomfort.
3. **Social dissonance blockage** – deviant group norms and social reinforcement normalize antisocial behavior and reduce perceived moral conflict.
4. **Identity-based dissonance blockage** – antisocial cognitions become integrated into personal identity, making moral conflict incompatible with self-coherence.

Observable Indicators of “Dissonance Blockage”:

- *Cognitive Indicators*: spontaneous justification of antisocial behavior; minimization of consequences; hostile reinterpretation of ambiguous situations; cognitive rigidity; pronounced confirmation bias; externalization of responsibility.

- *Affective Indicators*: absence of expressed guilt; reduced emotional response to others' suffering; superficial affect; emotional recognition deficits; diminished empathy.
- *Behavioral Indicators*: persistent recidivism; repetition of conduct despite sanctions; absence of attitudinal change following moral confrontation; resistance to interventions based exclusively on punishment; repetitive use of neutralization strategies.
- *Social Indicators*: affiliation with deviant peer groups; social reinforcement of aggression; conformity to antisocial norms; devaluation of prosocial standards.

5. DISCUSSIONS

5.1. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Although several existing frameworks address mechanisms related to antisocial behavior – including neutralization theory, moral disengagement, and pro-criminal cognition models – the present model differs by focusing specifically on the psychological conditions under which cognitive dissonance fails to emerge. Rather than treating cognitive distortions, affective deficits, or social justifications as isolated explanatory factors, the proposed framework conceptualizes them as dynamically interacting components of a unified system that inhibits internal conflict prior to its activation. In this sense, the model does not merely integrate existing theories, but reorganizes them around the conditional activation of dissonance, thereby offering a process-oriented explanation for the persistence of remorse-free antisocial behavior.

Table 3

Comparison Between Existing Frameworks and the Proposed Model

Model/ Theory	Primary Focus	Main Mechanism	Limitations	Contribution of the Proposed Model
<i>Neutralization Theory (Sykes & Matza, 1957)</i>	Justification of deviant behavior	Rationalization and denial of responsibility	Focuses mainly on post-hoc justifications	Explains how justifications interact with affective and cognitive mechanisms to inhibit dissonance before it emerges
<i>Moral Disengagement (Bandura, 1991)</i>	Cognitive restructuring of immoral acts	Moral justification and diffusion of responsibility	Limited emphasis on emotional and neurocognitive processes	Integrates moral disengagement with affective deficits, SIP distortions, and responsibility perception
<i>Pro-criminal Cognition Models</i>	Criminal thinking patterns	Self-serving beliefs and attitudes	Often treat cognitions as isolated predictors	Conceptualizes cognitions within a dynamic self-reinforcing system linked to dissonance inhibition

Table 3 (continued)

<i>Social Information Processing (Crick & Dodge, 1994)</i>	Interpretation of social cues	Hostile attribution and biased processing	Does not directly address moral conflict or dissonance	Connects SIP distortions to moral self-regulation and dissonance activation
<i>Proposed Integrative Model</i>	Absence of cognitive dissonance in antisocial behavior	Interaction of cognitive, affective, social, and responsibility-related mechanisms	Requires empirical validation	Explains antisocial persistence through systematic inhibition of internal conflict

Importantly, the model also clarifies a potential “dissonance paradox.” While interventions aimed at confronting distorted cognitions may increase cognitive tension, in the absence of empathic engagement and internalized responsibility, such tension may lead to defensive rationalizations rather than behavioral change (Banse *et al.*, 2013). This suggests that dissonance cannot function as a corrective mechanism unless its underlying psychological conditions are reactivated.

The proposed model adds to the literature the following:

- The proposed framework shifts the explanatory focus of classical dissonance theory from post-hoc tension reduction toward the conditions under which cognitive dissonance may fail to activate altogether in antisocial functioning.
- Rather than conceptualizing the absence of remorse as a passive emotional deficit, the model interprets it as the outcome of an active inhibitory system involving cognitive, affective, and social mechanisms that collectively suppress moral self-regulation.
- The model further contributes by integrating cognitive dissonance theory with social information processing, moral disengagement, psychopathy research, and pro-criminal cognition within a unified process-oriented framework.
- In contrast to approaches that treat responsibility as a secondary variable, the present framework conceptualizes perceived responsibility as a critical condition for dissonance activation, suggesting that extensive externalization of responsibility may prevent moral conflict from emerging.
- The proposed model also introduces a functional distinction between moral knowledge and moral self-regulation, suggesting that individuals may cognitively recognize moral norms without generating the affective tension necessary for behavioral inhibition.
- Finally, the framework conceptualizes antisocial behavior as the product of dynamically interacting mechanisms rather than isolated traits or static risk factors, thereby supporting a more process-oriented understanding of persistent offending behavior.

Formalizing the concept of *dissonance blockage* allows the absence of remorse to be reconceptualized as an active process of inhibition of moral self-regulation rather than as a passive emotional deficit.

This framework offers several conceptual advantages:

- it differentiates dissonance reduction from the impossibility of dissonance activation;
- it explains the persistence of antisocial behavior in the absence of internal moral conflict;
- it integrates cognitive, affective, and social processes into a unified functional mechanism;
- it provides the basis for future clinical and criminological operationalization.

The proposed framework may also be extended through contemporary neurocognitive perspectives emphasizing predictive processing, salience attribution, and conflict monitoring. From this perspective, dissonance blockage may reflect not only cognitive and affective distortions, but also impaired neurocognitive mechanisms involved in detecting and emotionally signaling violations of internalized norms.

The model shifts the explanatory focus from isolated antisocial traits or cognitions toward the functional organization of the processes that prevent moral self-regulation from emerging. Rather than viewing the absence of remorse as a passive deficit, the model conceptualizes it as an active and structurally reinforced psychological state. This perspective provides a more process-oriented understanding of persistent antisocial behavior and offers a conceptual bridge between cognitive dissonance theory, forensic psychology, and contemporary social-cognitive approaches.

In addition, the model introduces a functional distinction between the presence of moral knowledge and the capacity for moral self-regulation. Existing theories generally assume that individuals retain access to moral standards even when these are neutralized or cognitively reframed. The present framework proposes that antisocial individuals may cognitively recognize social norms while remaining psychologically unable to translate this recognition into self-corrective emotional tension. This distinction helps explain why some offenders demonstrate awareness of wrongdoing without experiencing guilt, remorse, or meaningful behavioral inhibition, thereby extending current cognitive and forensic models of antisocial behavior.

5.2. APPLICATIVE IMPLICATIONS

At a practical level, the proposed model can be directly linked to established intervention programs in forensic and correctional settings. Cognitive-behavioral approaches such as Reasoning and Rehabilitation (R&R) (Ross & Fabiano, 1985) and Aggression Replacement Training (ART) (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998) already target key mechanisms identified in the model, particularly cognitive

distortions, social information processing deficits, and poor self-regulation. Similarly, Moral Reconnection Therapy (MRT) focuses explicitly on enhancing moral reasoning and responsibility, aiming to shift individuals from egocentric to more socially oriented stages of moral development (Little & Robinson, 1988). The present model provides a unifying framework that explains why such interventions are effective only when they simultaneously address cognitive, affective, and responsibility-related components, rather than focusing on a single domain.

More specifically, the concept of “reactivation of moral affect” can be operationalized through interventions targeting empathy and emotional awareness, such as victim impact exercises, perspective-taking training, and emotion regulation techniques. These approaches aim to restore the affective feedback necessary for moral self-regulation, which is often diminished in individuals with antisocial traits (Hare, 1991; Garofalo *et al.*, 2018). At the same time, the notion of “dissonance blockage” may inform the development of screening tools that assess the extent to which individuals minimize responsibility, reinterpret harm, or exhibit reduced emotional responsiveness. Such assessments could be integrated into risk evaluation protocols to better predict resistance to change and recidivism risk.

It is also important to distinguish between different levels of application. At the clinical level, the model supports individualized therapeutic planning, emphasizing the need to tailor interventions to specific deficits (*e.g.*, affective vs cognitive). At the criminological level, it can enhance offender assessment by providing a structured framework for evaluating remorse, responsibility, and cognitive distortions beyond observable behavior. At the broader social level, the model highlights the role of deviant group norms and suggests the importance of prevention strategies targeting peer environments, early socialization, and moral development.

However, several practical limitations and ethical considerations should be acknowledged. First, the identification of “dissonance blockage” may risk being interpreted as a stable or deterministic trait, potentially leading to stigmatization or reduced rehabilitation expectations. Second, interventions aimed at increasing cognitive dissonance must be applied cautiously, as excessive or poorly supported confrontation may trigger defensive rationalization rather than constructive change (Banse *et al.*, 2013). Finally, the model’s integrative nature, while theoretically valuable, may complicate its direct operationalization, requiring multidisciplinary collaboration and adaptation to specific institutional contexts.

It enables psychologists to determine whether the absence of remorse stems from affective deficits, cognitive rationalizations, implicit biases, or distorted perceptions of responsibility. Such analysis can guide therapeutic planning and enhance recidivism risk assessment. Furthermore, it may support the development of screening tools aimed at identifying “dissonance blockage” – that is, the mechanisms that prevent the activation of moral conflict in response to deviant behavior.

In addition, this framework may also have important implications for forensic assessment and intervention. Traditional approaches frequently focus on the

presence of antisocial cognitions or personality traits, whereas the present model suggests that particular attention should also be directed toward the individual's capacity for dissonance activation and moral self-regulation. Persistent antisocial behavior may therefore reflect not only distorted beliefs, but a broader impairment in the psychological mechanisms that normally generate internal conflict following norm violation.

The model further suggests that interventions focused exclusively on cognitive confrontation may produce limited effects when affective engagement and responsibility attribution remain impaired. In such cases, increasing cognitive tension without simultaneously restoring empathic processing and personal responsibility may reinforce defensive rationalization rather than behavioral change. Consequently, effective intervention may require integrated approaches targeting cognitive, affective, and social mechanisms simultaneously.

5.3. RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

1. Empirical validation of the integrative “dissonance blockage” model.

A central research direction involves empirically testing the relationships among cognitive distortions, level of moral development, psychopathic traits, and the absence of cognitive dissonance. Future studies could employ experimental designs (e.g., classic dissonance induction paradigms) combined with psychophysiological or neurocognitive measures to assess affective and motivational activation in forensic populations.

2. Longitudinal studies on the development of dissonance-avoidance mechanisms.

Another relevant direction concerns investigating how cognitive distortions and moral immaturity consolidate over time, particularly among adolescents from disadvantaged environments. Longitudinal research could clarify whether absence of dissonance predicts recidivism and whether early interventions targeting social information processing and moral responsibility can prevent the stabilization of antisocial conduct.

3. Experimental testing of dissonance activation in forensic populations.

An important direction for future research involves the experimental testing of dissonance activation using controlled paradigms adapted from the classical counter-attitudinal advocacy framework (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). Building on this approach, the proposed model can be empirically examined through factorial experimental designs manipulating key situational variables known to influence dissonance, such as perceived freedom of choice and external justification (e.g., reward). For instance, a 2×2 design combining levels of perceived freedom (high *versus* low) and external reward (present *versus* absent) would allow the systematic investigation of conditions under which cognitive dissonance is activated or inhibited in forensic populations.

Within such designs, participants engage in a counter-attitudinal task (e.g., persuading another individual that an initially neutral or aversive activity is

enjoyable), followed by the assessment of dissonance through multidimensional measures capturing emotional discomfort, doubt, and perceived manipulation (Sweeney & Soutar, 2000). This methodology allows for the simultaneous examination of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to induced inconsistency, as well as their relationship to antisocial tendencies measured through validated instruments (e.g., STAB). Crucially, the paradigm can be adapted to correctional settings, preserving ecological validity while maintaining experimental control.

Based on the proposed experimental framework, the following hypotheses can be formulated:

- **H1:** Participants exposed to experimental conditions that minimize cognitive dissonance (e.g., presence of external reward combined with low perceived freedom) will report lower levels of psychological tension, including emotional discomfort, doubt, and perceived manipulation.
- **H2:** *Lower* levels of cognitive dissonance will be associated with higher perceived pleasantness of the experimental task, reflecting post-hoc rationalization processes.
- **H3:** *Reduced* cognitive dissonance will be positively associated with higher levels of antisocial behavior, as measured through validated instruments (e.g., aggression, rule-breaking, and social aggression dimensions).
- **H4:** Cognitive *dissonance* will mediate the relationship between experimental manipulation (reward and perceived freedom) and antisocial behavior, indicating its central role in moral self-regulation.
- **H5:** The effectiveness of participants in persuading the confederate will function as a mediator or moderator between experimental conditions and experienced dissonance.
- **H6:** Contextual variables, such as offense type (violent vs. non-violent) and detention regime, *will* moderate the relationship between dissonance and antisocial behavior, with stronger effects expected in more severe offender profiles.

5.4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper proposed an integrative theoretical model explaining the absence of cognitive dissonance in antisocial behavior as the result of interactions among self-serving cognitive distortions, sociomoral immaturity, affective deficits, and biases in social information processing. From this perspective, lack of internal conflict is not a simple anomaly but a functional mechanism that enables the maintenance of deviant conduct without moral self-regulation. The model highlights the central role of norm internalization, perceived responsibility, and empathy in the activation of cognitive dissonance. Theoretical and practical implications point to the need for interventions focused on cognitive-moral

restructuring, capable of reactivating internal corrective mechanisms and reducing the persistence of antisocial behavior.

Future research may benefit from integrating the present model with contemporary neurocognitive approaches examining predictive processing, salience network functioning, and conflict-monitoring systems involved in moral self-regulation.

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