

# Are They Telling the Truth? Cognitive Dissonance in In-Depth Interview of a Multiple-Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

In this qualitative multiple-case study which explores the second language writing anxiety experience of five (5) local postgraduate students in dissertation writing, the participants appear to have experienced episodes of cognitive dissonance or psychological discomfort resulting from conflicting thoughts and feelings, during the in-depth interview sessions. As they sometimes changed their existing beliefs, added new beliefs, and/or reduced the importance of particular beliefs, their integrity as participants seemed questionable at first. But upon closer examination of the accumulated data, these acts often serve as self-justifications. For instance, despite believing that they have the capacity to achieve their writing goals, they were unsuccessful at accomplishing a specific goal. In this case, they may reinterpret the failure as a success by telling themselves and the researcher that the goal was not in their best interests. This act of defending the ill effects of their thoughts and actions is one of their ways to reduce the mental conflict the dissonance created and thus, allow them to escape the possibility that they have wasted efforts and resources. In this view, Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (1957) highlights the interplay of cognition, motivation, and emotion. As such triangulating the in-depth interview data using personal documents analysis, audio journals to document their state writing anxiety and writing experience, and supporting instruments, such as Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory to describe their levels of trait writing anxiety, it can be concluded that cognitive dissonance seems to be connected to the participants' emotions, specifically writing anxiety. It appears to be triggered when they recall emotionally charged experiences of writing anxiety or emerge as they experience intense anxiety and other emotions that require them to appraise themselves, their writing situations, and writing performance during the interviews. As a clarification, this study had received the necessary research ethics clearance from the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC). Nevertheless, under those circumstances, data triangulation was able to provide either corroborating or contradicting pieces of evidence for their claims. Therefore, the possibility of the participants to experience cognitive dissonance during an in-depth interview makes it imperative to conduct multiple interview sessions, to analyse the data concurrently with data collection, and to triangulate the data in qualitative studies, to ensure that the individual's perspective, reality, and experience have been extensively explored, accurately documented, and thus, understood, before attempting interpretation and abstraction. The participants may unconsciously alter their beliefs and the details of their experiences, in an attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance, and this becomes noticeable as early as the second interview session (5 weeks into the 24-weeks research duration), as data became available to be compared and contrasted within and across the cases. Thus, the problem with cognitive dissonance becomes apparent during the analysis process as it interferes with the researcher's attempt to identify emergent categories and possible patterns. For this reason, novice qualitative researchers, in particular, should be wary of any indications of this psychological phenomenon that could influence their overall findings and research implications.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research; multiple-case study; in-depth interview; cognitive dissonance; data triangulation.