

Cognitive Dissonance and Fear – A Case Study in Marital Miscommunication

Bob McCue
January 31, 2004

We also know how cruel the truth often is, and we wonder whether delusion is not more consoling. Henri Poincaire

Introduction

One of the fascinating, frustrating aspects of leaving a fundamentalist religious group such as Mormonism, and then having to deal with loved ones who remain behind, is the impossibility that those who have left will be able to communicate their new understanding of “reality” to most of those who have not. Those on the outside say that those who remain are in denial and have been deceived. Those on the inside say that those who have left are confused, deluded etc. and often attribute that to sin – either of the flesh or of pride, intellectualism, greed (not wanting to pay tithing) and what have you.

Since the most common, and most difficult, situation in which this arises is between spouses, I will outline a few principles in summary form, provide a few graphic examples of extreme denial, and then walk through what might be called a typical spousal case study that works with those principles.

Principles

Cognitive dissonance is at the root of denial. Fear is at the root of cognitive dissonance. The extent of our fear is determined by our general tendencies in that regard, and our vulnerability to the issue in question.

Cognitive dissonance theory is concerned with the relationships among cognitions. A cognition is a piece of knowledge about an attitude, an emotion, a behaviour, a value, etc. People hold a multitude of cognitions simultaneously, and these cognitions form irrelevant, consonant or dissonant relationships with one another. (See <http://www.ithaca.edu/faculty/stephens/cdback.html>):

Two cognitions are consonant if one cognition follows from, or fits with, the other. People like consonance among their cognitions. We do not know whether this stems from the nature of the human organism or whether it is learned during the process of socialization, but people appear to prefer cognitions that fit together to those that do not. It is this simple observation that provides the theory's basis.

Two cognitions are said to be dissonant if one cognition conflicts with another. For example, I like my friend, and trust him. Various cognitions relate to this. If I then find out that he has lied to me, other cognitions form that are dissonant with

those I already hold. Cognitive dissonance is the term used to describe the resulting unpleasant mental state.

What happens to people when they discover dissonant cognitions? Cognitive dissonance is experienced as a state of unpleasant psychological tension. This tension state has drive-like properties that are similar to those of hunger and thirst. That is, when a person has been deprived of food for several hours, she experiences unpleasant tension and is driven to reduce it. Cognitive dissonance produces similarly driven behaviour to find consonance. However, finding the means to reduce this dissonance is not as simple as eating or drinking.

How can dissonance be reduced? If two cognitions are dissonant, we can change one to make it consistent with the other, change each cognition in the direction of the other, find more offsetting consonant cognitions, or we can re-evaluate the importance of either the dissonant or consonant cognitions. These strategies often result in what is sometimes called denial – the suppression or unrealistic appraisal of evidence in an effort to reduce dissonance. As William Safire in a New York Times op-ed piece (December 29, 2003), put it:

“A cognition is a bit of knowledge or belief. When it disagrees with another cognition in our head ... a nasty jangling occurs. To end this cognitive dissonance ... we change the weak cognition to conform to the stronger one.

Take Aesop's fox, who could not reach a lofty bunch of grapes no matter how high he jumped. One foxy cognition was that grapes were delicious; the other was that he couldn't get them. To resolve that cognitive dissonance, the fox persuaded himself that the grapes were sour - and trotted off, his mind at ease.”

Cog dis usually functions in no more complicated a manner than that.

The term “denial” is usually used to describe a particularly powerful form of cog dis. What causes cog dis to differ in power? First, dissonance increases as the degree of discrepancy among cognitions increases. That is, how serious was my friend's lie, and how often has he lied? Second, dissonance increases as the number of discrepant cognitions increases. That is, how strong is the evidence of the lying behaviour? How many different cognitions support the dissonant conclusion that I can no longer trust my friend and how compelling are they when compared to the cognitions that suggest I can still trust him? That is, if he only lied once and on a multitude of occasions I could be certain that he has been trustworthy, I would be less concerned. Third, dissonance is affected by the relative importance of the various consonant and dissonant cognitions in play. Perhaps in the case of this friend, lying is not that important because I do not depend on him in a significant fashion, or he is not a close friend. In such cases my dissonance would be lower than it would if the friend in question was also the mother of my children.

While Aesop neatly illustrated cog dis in the parable referenced above, he did not adequately reveal the primary force that lies beneath cog dis – fear. One of Buddhism’s central and enlightening notions is that most of mankind’s ills are caused by the manner in which fear or desire cause us to make unwise decisions. Buddha’s “middle way” was the path they lay between these two forces and was out of both their reaches. And since a good portion of desire is fear that we will not obtain that which we most desire, fear is the most primal and effective of emotions. The well known case of denial in marriages where infidelity is a problem illustrates this. The sober spouse is usually unable to see the evidence of cheating until well after most others can see it. This denial of reality is a function primarily of the spouse’s fear of losing the relationship if the information in question is processed and dealt with. The greater the cog dis, the greater the fear it will produce and the deeper will be the consequent denial.

The psychology related to personality profiles indicates to us that not all people are influenced by fear and desire in the same way. In one study that focussed on the question of why some people are more religiously inclined than others, it was determined that the personality trait called “openness” correlates strongly to religious tendencies. Openness is the inclination toward new experience; the opposite of dogmatic. The more “open” a person is, the less likely she is to be influenced by fear in any particular situation, and the less likely she is to be religious in the traditional sense of that word. And of course the opposite is also true. As a general rule, the psychological literature makes it clear that women are more oriented toward preserving important relationships, and have more important relationships, than are men. Hence, women in general are more fearful than are men of anything that threatens their important relationships than are men. Men, of course, have their vulnerable places as well. And while general tendencies can be observed between the genders, individual cases are all over the map.

So, the picture that comes into focus is that in any particular case, denial is a function of two things. First, how open to new experience the individual in question person is, and second, how significant is the fear that the denied information is perceived to create.

Examples of Extreme Denial

Consider the following as illustrations of how potent a force we have in our lives. These are provided to put in context the difficulties many married couples face as the attempt to deal with differences of religious point of view.

- The case of the alcoholic spouse referred to above, and the analogous case of the unfaithful spouse.

- The case of certain Jewish communities during the Holocaust. A chilling example of this is provided by Elie Wiesel in his classic

autobiographic “Night”. Wiesel tells the story of how he lived as a 14-year-old Jewish boy in a small Hungarian town called Sighet during World War II. As the Nazis gradually closed their net around this town, rumours began to circulate. However, the residents found reasons to believe that their comfortable little world would not collapse, and so few if any of them escaped while they had the chance. At some point, all of the foreign Jews in Sighet were expelled. One of them was Wiesel’s religious mentor, Moshe Beadle, a joyful, deeply spiritual man. Months passed, and life in Sighet continued mostly at its comfortable pace. Then Moshe returned. He told a chilling story. The buses in which the deportees left Sighet had crossed the border into Poland and been handed over to the Gestapo. The Jews were forced to get off and dig huge pits. Then they were all – men, women and children - machine gunned and pushed into what became their graves. Some babies were tossed into the air and used as human skeet to entertain the soldiers. Moshe was wounded and left for dead. It had taken him months to make his way back to warn his friends. Wiesel noted that for months Moshe went from one Jewish house to another, telling the story of Malka, the young girl who had taken three days to die, and of Tobias, the tailor, who had begged to be killed before his sons and of other horrors. And no one would believe him. Wiesel goes on to tell of how more and more news of the war, Hitler’s atrocities in general and his plans for the extermination of all Jews gradually infiltrated his town. They heard of what the Germans were doing to the Jews in other parts of Europe. Still lots of time to escape, but no one put what Moshe had said together with these reports and acted. Finally the Germans arrived. They began to remove Jewish liberties – still time to escape and no one acted. Then they created Jewish ghettos, and finally prepared them for mass deportation. All along the way, it would have been possible for many to escape. But at every juncture along this path, the good Jewish people of Sighet rationalized in different ways that things were not so bad; that their lives were not going to change too much; that their god would watch over them. This rationalization ended only as they watched their family members being led into the gas chambers and furnace of Auschwitz, or entered there themselves.

- The scientist who coined the term “cognitive dissonance”, Leon Festinger based his initial research on a Wisconsin-based flying saucer cult of the 1950s whose prophecy of universal destruction failed to come true. The cult prophesied a vast flood would soon kill everyone on Earth except for the members of the cult, who would be carried away by flying saucers. The flood, of course, did not materialize. But the faith of the cult members, while stressed, was not broken. In fact, they rationalized their failed prophesy and began to proselytize with renewed vigour.

- Other similar failed prophecy scenarios have received a great deal of attention. One, also referred to by Festinger, is related to as "The Great Disappointment" – an event in the early history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Between 1831 and 1844, William Miller, a Baptist preacher, launched what he called the "great second advent awakening", also known as the Millerite Movement. Based on his study of the prophecy of Daniel 8:14, Miller calculated that Jesus would return to earth sometime between 1843 and 1844. Others within the movement calculated a specific date of October 22, 1844. When Jesus did not appear, Miller's followers experienced what became to be called "the Great Disappointment". Most of the thousands of followers left the movement. A few, however, went back to their Bibles to find why they had been disappointed. They concluded that the prophecy predicted not that Jesus would return to earth in 1844, but that a special ministry in heaven would be formed on that date. From this started the modern-day Adventist Church.

- Of even more interest are the numerous, and failed, similar predictions made by the Jehovah's Witnesses. As noted by Penton, a Watchtower historian: No major Christian sectarian movement has been so insistent on prophesying the end of the present world in such definite ways or on such specific dates as have Jehovah's Witnesses, at least since the Millerites and Second Adventists of the nineteenth century who were the Witnesses' direct millenarian forbears. During the early years of their history, they consistently looked to specific dates-1874, 1878, 1881, 1910, 1914, 1918, 1920, 1925, and others - as having definite eschatological significance...When these prophecies failed, they had to be reinterpreted, spiritualized, or, in some cases, ultimately abandoned. This did not deter Russell [the JW leader] or his followers from setting new dates, however, or from simply proclaiming that the end of this world or system of things was no more than a few years or perhaps even months away. (M. James Penton, "Apocalypse Delayed" (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 34)

Friends of those who were Jehovah's Witnesses often noted the changes in their lives as 1975 approached. Janice Godlove relates this regarding her JW brother and sister-in-law:

As 1975 approached, the signs of tension increased. Strange bits and pieces of the family atmosphere came to our attention. There was an almost morbid fascination with flocks of birds gathering in the fall. We were given all of their canned goods since they wouldn't need them anymore. An access panel had been cut in the wall behind their washing machine and the boys (who were 5 and 3 at the time) were told to run to the kitchen and hide if they heard screams. Bill was so disappointed by the failure of 1975 that he

attempted suicide. But the tract we left by his hospital bed went unread and the family remained in the organization.

Today, each of the above failures are played down, and no reason is officially given for them. Many recent JW converts are not even aware of the relevant history. There are close parallels here to the popular Mormon ignorance of many important aspects of Mormon history. Watters concludes as follows respecting the resilience of the JW organization:

A pattern emerges when we examine the growth figures before and after each disconfirmation [failed prophecy]. Typically, there was a rapid growth in numbers at least two years before the prophetic date, followed by a falling away of some (viewed as a "cleansing" of the organization of the unfaithful), then another growth spurt as a new emphasis on evangelism was put forward. It may seem incomprehensible how the Witnesses could ignore the implications of each disconfirmation. Outsiders view the Witnesses as lacking common sense for not leaving the organization after numerous failures. They fail to understand the dynamics of mind control as used by cults. Even many ex-JWs fail to understand that the further disconfirmation of the importance of 1914 and "this generation" will not seriously affect the numbers of those swelling the ranks of the Watchtower. The results of mind control and unquestioning obedience will have the same effect today as it did in Russell's day. His view was, "Where else can we go?" Harrison writes regarding this attitude,

That, of course, is one of the keys to survival of the organization Russell founded on soft mysticism, glorious visions and worldly disaffection. The Witnesses had nowhere else to go. Their investment in their religion was total; to leave it would have meant spiritual and emotional bankruptcy. They were not equipped to function in a world without certainty. It was their life. To leave it would be a death..

Case Study

Finally we get to our case study. Assume that:

- We have a wife (W) who is unusually open to new experience and a husband (H) who is unusually closed.
- W and H are of equal intelligence.

- W is not as threatened by a loss of family and other relationships, including divorce as is H, but both of course are fearful of those things to an extent.
- W and H are devout Mormons. The family and community ties are 99% within the Mormon community.
- W decides that the foundations of their religious faith is false, and decides to leave the Church. While she fears the loss of relationships, and knows that taking this step may even cause divorce, she feels compelled to act in a fashion consistent with her understanding of reality and while working hard to keep friendships and family relationships intact, will “let the chips fall where they may”.
- H goes through all of the stages of grief as a result of W’s actions. And after doing that, reading much of what W has read and thinking about it carefully, does not agree with her. He believes that she has been deceived in some way, and worries that she has sinned in some undisclosed way or is trying to sabotage their relationship in order to justify divorce.
- W is so hurt by the breach of trust she believes that she has experiences at the hands of the LDS Church that she wants nothing to do with it; ridicules it regularly; and wants to cause H and their children to break off their association with it as well. This terrifies H.
- For W things are so clear that she cannot understand H’s inability to see the same things she can. She continues to push H in that regard, causing H to become more fearful and to push back.
- H and W reach the brink of divorce, and they both know it. W has decided that she is prepared to go through divorce if necessary. H, whether he will admit it to himself or not, is not so prepared. The reasons for which one spouse or the other may be less prepared to consider divorce than the other are too complicated to set out here. Some theorists describe this in terms of the spouses’ respecting “investment” in the marriage, or in terms of their alternative options in terms of other potential relationships, the earning of a livelihood etc. My observation is that this issue is not processed rationally, but rather at a primal, feared based level that is more determined by things like the general attitudes to fear and openness described above.
- Eventually H changes a few of his beliefs - just enough to enable his marriage to W to survive. The remainder of his beliefs remain intact, and this coupled with his continued relative faithfulness to the Church in his “difficult” circumstances earns him the continued trust and

respect of his Mormon family and friends. In fact, he becomes a bit of a local Mormon celebrity as a result of the manner in which he “keeps the faith” while dealing with W’s apostasy.

- W also mitigates her demands, and is prepared to remain within the marriage while H and some of their children remain connected to the Church. An elephant takes up residence in the corner of their lives.

Given the cog dis principles outlined above, I suggest the following with respect to this case study:

- For H relationships are paramount. Denial is a direct function of fear. H fears harming or losing friendships and family relationships to such an extent that any information that jeopardizes them is screened. This initially makes it impossible for H to see W’s point of view at all and brings them to the brink of divorce.
- H and W play a game of chicken re divorce. In the end, they either meet head on and get divorced, or one of them compromises, or they both compromise. Divorce is by far the most common case is divorce in the situation just described once it is out in the open. In my view that is sad. It is caused by a lack of understanding with respect to the options that are available and the nature of the forces at work. The probability of divorce is also the reason for which so many Mormons who suffer with cog dis will not disclose their concerns. My guess is that the majority of cases never reach the H and W stage for this reason.
- Based on my observations and limited empirical data I have seen on this issue, it seems that the next largest category cases is that of mutual compromise. That is what happened in this case, and its mechanics are discussed further below.
- That last, and rarest case, is that in which one party changes completely. I am aware of many cases where this has worked beautifully for a couple who together decide to create the own spiritual tradition. By this I mean they either choose a new and more open minded religious group with which to associate, or decide that secular humanism and a spirituality of a the kind espoused by people like Einstein is what they desire. I am also aware of a few cases in which after getting to the point described re. H and W above, the spouse in W’s position has re-suppressed all troubling information to the point where she could return to activity in the Church. I know a handful of people personally who have done that, and saw a fascinating thread when I began to participate her a short time ago that outlined another such case. These people tend to like conflicted lives; lives full of cog

dis, or as many intellectual and still faithful Mormons like to call it, "paradox".

- H's compromise to stave off divorce is not rational. It is motivated by the primal forces noted above. So, when much thought is given (and W gives this thought) to H's beliefs, it is clear that they do not make sense. That is, many of the things H says he believes in order to preserve his relationship with W are inconsistent with the things he believes in order to retain his status in the LDS community. Whenever this topic comes up for discussion, H feels a shot of fear induced adrenalin that is plain for W to see. Part of their compromise eventually becomes not talking about these things.

The antidote for cog dis is information that will help to overcome fear. Once the commoners learned to read and through that means came eventually to understand that kings did not have a divine right to rule, democracy took root. Once the humanity accepted that all humans are biologically equal in the important ways and hence that dark coloured skin did not connote a "less human" status, slavery began to disappear. We are now seeing a similar attitudinal sea change respecting homosexuality.

The kind of information that would be best suited to help a faithful Mormon overcome his fear will no doubt be individualistic in nature. And the place to start in understanding what that might be is likely with what that individual fears. However, there are also I suspect some broad patterns that could guide us in this regard. I have not had the time yet to analyse that. Some clues, however, can be found in the research summarized at http://2thinkforums.org/phorum3/read.php?f=1&i=2379&t=2379#reply_2379

Conclusion

It is my hope that a greater understanding of the principles on which cog dis, denial and fear operate in our lives will help us to heal ruptured relationships and find greater degrees of peace as well also enjoy the intellectual and moral freedom that comes with an understanding of the nature of our religious traditions.