

Cognitive Dissonance at www.fairwiki.org

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

I have not revisited cognitive dissonance – one of my favorite topics – for quite a while so this is as good an excuse to do so as any. I take it as a compliment that the Mormon apologists think that this issue is one they need to address, in their usual unwitting-self parody way, and that they have put me front and centre. I copied the material below from their site on June 16, 2005. I won't bother to attempt to edit it there since that would quickly devolve into a time wasting war with the people who control the site. Instead, I will post my comments in other places where they can stand as testimony to the tactics, shallow thinking and probable cognitive dissonance of Mormon apologists in general.

I will place the www.fairwiki.org text in quotes, and my comments in square brackets, indented.

“Critics of the Church are fond of portraying all members as either naive, ill-informed dupes or cynical exploiters.”

[rdm – I hope that they do not include me in that camp. This is a classic straw man argument. The Mormon apologists speak for the critics and do so in terms that are easy to show as silly. In contrast, see my essays at: <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf>; <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf>; and <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.does%20mormonism%20cause%20irrational%20belief.pdf>;

where I go out of my way to show how the smartest among us, the most objective among us, are subject to the distorting forces of denial. Cognitive dissonance is only part of the equation. This applies to Mormons, post-Mormons and all other believers and non-believers of every stripe. However, it applies differently to each of us and this predictable in part on the basis of how we have been conditioned, as I will set out below.]

“Unfortunately for the critics, most fair-minded people realize that—just as in any religion—there are many intelligent, well-informed people who become or remain members of the Church.”

[rdm – I agree with this, except most of the critics I know are in the fair minded camp. More straw man treatment of the critics. This makes sense once we recall who this stuff is written for – faithful Mormons who are starting to question. See <http://www.exmormon.org/mormon/mormon441.htm> and <http://www.exmormon.org/Why%20We%20Believe%20-%20The%20Edmonton%20Series.htm> (Day 4) for a summary of how apologists work. Much of this is the result of their own denial and cognitive dissonance.

That is, once their shallowness is pointed out to them, they work hard to fix it. As a result, there is no doubt that this article will be fixed or perhaps even scrapped once the more knowledgeable among the apologetic crowd look at it. And, it is precisely this kind of process that led me and others who were apologists of one kind or another, out of Mormonism. The fellow who developed the Mormon apologetic site at www.whyprophets.com, for example, thought his way out of Mormonism more or less in lock step with me as we exchanged emails and questioned a variety of things.]

“To get around this, critics appeal to the psychological concept of 'cognitive dissonance' to try to 'explain away' the witness of intelligent, articulate members.”

[rdm – As noted above, cognitive dissonance is part of the picture, but far from all of it. See the essay on Denial noted above.]

Source(s) of the Criticism

- Bob McCue, “Notes for Van Hale’s Radio Show”; e-mail posting (5 September 2004), copy in author's possession.
- Bob McCue, “Van Hale’s ‘Mormon Miscellaneous’ Radio Talk Show,” Version 3, 20 Sept 2004.

[rdm – See the other essays above as well. “How Denial Works” is the most complete of these. The Van Hale essay can be found at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.van%20hale%20show.pdf>]

“What is cognitive dissonance?”

Cognitive dissonance theory was first described in the mid 1950s by Leon Festinger. Cognitive dissonance explains behavior by pointing out that all people have various beliefs, thoughts, or ideas, called "cognitions." From time to time, these cognitions will come into conflict—for example, someone might believe that their child is honest and law-abiding. However, they might learn one day that their child has been charged with shoplifting. There are now two cognitions in tension:

- cognition #1: "my child is honest"
- cognition #2: "my child has been arrested for shoplifting"

These cognitions create conflict, or "dissonance" because they create internal conflict—it is not readily apparent how both cognitions can be 'true'. This realization is a psychologically unpleasant experience, and according to the theory, people seek to minimize or resolve dissonance. This can be done in a number of ways:

the former cognition can be rejected

"I guess my child isn't as honest as I thought he was."

the new cognition can be rejected

"My child wouldn't take something without paying. There must be a mistake." or "It's a lie! He was framed!"

a new cognition can eventually be formed which reconciles the two conflicting cognitions "My child put something in his shopping cart, and forgot to pay for it on leaving the store. Thus, he was not trying to be dishonest, but it is understandable why he was arrested. It was a misunderstanding."

The important point is that all people experience cognitive dissonance whenever they encounter something that does not match what they have thought or believed previously. People may choose appropriate means of reconciling their dissonance (e.g. accepting new truths, adopting new perspectives, rejecting or modifying previous beliefs) or less appropriate ones (e.g. denying new truths, clinging to false ideas). “

[rdm – I agree with this for the most part. For more background see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> starting at page 52.]

“The presence of cognitive dissonance alone says nothing about the quality or truth of someone's beliefs. For example, in the third case, the child might really have forgotten to pay for the article, or the parent might have seized on a rather threadbare excuse (not bothering to ask, "How did you forget the radio was hidden under your jacket?") and accepted it uncritically, because rejecting the first cognition—my child is honest—is too painful. The presence, or resolution, of dissonance proves nothing about the facts.”

[rdm – Agreed. Cognitive dissonance is a function of conflicting cognitions. The accuracy or truth of the cognitions has nothing necessarily to do with it. However, cognitive dissonance is often the product of beliefs that are false colliding with more accurate apprehensions of reality. Religious history is full of this. And Festinger's seminal research into cognitive dissonance related to religious beliefs.]

“How do the critics misuse it?

Michael Shermer, an agnostic and writer for Skeptic magazine, specifically dismissed the idea that "cognitive dissonance" could generally explain religious believers:

‘It would be a long stretch to classify [millions of white, middle class American Christians] as oppressed, disenfranchised, or marginalized...[millions of apocalyptically-inclined] Americans are anything but in a state of learned helplessness or cognitive dissonance. Indeed, some recent polls and studies indicate that religious people, on average, may be both physically and psychologically happier and healthier than non-believers.[1]’”

[rdm – This is another straw man argument. I am very familiar with Shermer's work. I have three of his books on my shelf at home (“Why People Believe Weird Things”, “How We Believe” and “The Science of Good and Evil”), all well marked and thumbed, and I attended a conference he put on last year at about this

time at Cal Tech where I had the chance to chat with him. In the quote above he is talking about the entire breadth of religious believers above, including liberal Protestants and many others.

On the other hand, in his book “Why People Believe Weird Things” Shermer quotes with approval psychologist Raymond Nickerson (1998) who published a comprehensive review of the literature on the confirmation bias, as follows:

“If one were to attempt to identify a single problematic aspect of human reasoning that deserves attention above all others, the confirmation bias would have to be among the candidates for consideration. It appears to be sufficiently strong and pervasive that one is led to wonder whether the bias, by itself, might account for a significant fraction of the disputes, altercations and misunderstandings that occur among individuals, groups, and nations.” (quoted in "Why People Believe Weird Things", p. 299)

The confirmation bias is one of many forces that causes many beliefs to be so securely held that no conflicting cognitions can take root. See “How Denial Works” for a list of other forces that perform a similar function. Depending on how the term “cognitive dissonance” is used, this kind of thing may or may not be included in it.

Cognitive dissonance can only exist once a conflict between cognitions has been subconsciously, at least, acknowledged. For example, “Joseph Smith is a prophet” and “Joseph Smith lied about his sexual activities and had sex with young girls and others means wives” are conflicting cognitions for most people, but will only produce cognitive dissonance after the latter cognition has been acknowledged to some degree.

In classic apologetic fashion, fairwiki is taking the concept of cognitive dissonance out of context and misapplying statements made about it in an attempt to persuade the ignorant or those who need to believe that cognitive dissonance is irrelevant to their religious faith.

The best part of this is that fairwiki is using Michael Shermer to defend precisely the kind of religious beliefs that Shermer specializes in debunking. He just uses different concepts to do the job, such as the confirmation bias. I am going to send this to him. I am sure he will get a kick out of.

This is what happens when people know a little about something (cognitive dissonance and Shermer's writing) and think that they know a lot.]

“Critics like to pretend that talking about 'cognitive dissonance' is very scientific, and objective. However, they usually ignore one of the most important principles of a scientific explanation: falsifiability.

The criterion of falsifiability...says that statements or systems of statements, in order to be ranked as scientific, must be capable of conflicting with possible, or conceivable, observations.[2]

The hallmark of pseudoscience is its inability to be falsified. That is why neither religion or any other philosophical system can ever be called science, or tested by science.”

[rdm – I agree with the above three paragraphs, except that some concepts that are closely related to a religion or philosophical system can be falsified because they are scientific hypotheses. For example, the statement “Israelites emigrated to the Americas circa 600 BCE” is a statement that can be falsified, subject to the collection of adequate data. It is important to remember that falsification with regard to anything in the empirical (physical) world is not a matter of 100% certainty. So, while most people feel comfortable saying that “the Earth is not flat” and “the Earth is far more than 6,000 years old”, neither the hypotheses “the Earth is flat” nor “the Earth is 6,000 years old” has been falsified with certainty. We must be content with probable falsification to one degree or another.]

“God made it all out of nothing in seven days, and faked the evidence,” says the young earth creationist. “Any Mormon who doesn’t interpret the evidence as I do must be suffering cognitive dissonance,” says the anti-Mormon.”

[rdm – So, anti-Mormons (presumably, anyone critical of Mormon belief) are here compared to young earth creationists. This is rich. Young earth creationists are famous for denying scientific evidence that contradicts their belief that the Earth is about 6,000 years old. What scientific evidence about Mormonism do anti-Mormons deny? None to my knowledge. What scientific evidence do Mormon’s deny? The list is extensive. Start with DNA evidence (see http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/magazine/) related to the Book of Mormon origins, and go from there remembering in each case that we are not looking for certain proof that Mormon belief is false, but rather evidence that makes it seem highly probable that Mormon belief is false. Mormon scientists, for example, have stated that the evidence is against them on the DNA point, but that since proof is not certain enough yet they are justified on continuing in their Mormon beliefs. This is similar to the way in which evidence mounted in favor of Galileo’s position and against the Catholic Church’s. It took many generations for some Catholics to accept what many scientists believed much earlier, and what we have virtually all accepted now – Galileo was right and the Catholic Church was wrong.]

“How could a faithful Mormon's behavior or attitude toward the evidence prove that he or she is not subject to the critics' "cognitive dissonance"?”

[rdm - Lets suggest a falsifiable experiment. How about the one I outlined starting at page 18 of [http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.does%20mormonism%20cause%20irrational%](http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.does%20mormonism%20cause%20irrational%20)

[20belief.pdf](#). That involves the concept of “belief maps” and is consistent with the studies used in the academic cog dis research related to how people seek out information that is consonant rather than dissonant with their own views, so as to avoid cognitive dissonance (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance).

For example, most Mormons are comfortable accepting that much of the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, is metaphoric. The time it took the earth to be created, for example, is not taken literally by most well-educated Mormons. Nor is the worldwide flood. However, the Book of Mormon is believed by Mormons to be literally true. So, we would predict that Mormons will believe the Bible to be literally true to the extent that it is consistent with the Book of Mormon and that Mormons would tend to be more ignorant of information that conflicted with their beliefs than other similarly well educated people.

I have not tested this hypothesis (other than in casual conversation with some of my Mormon friends and relatives, where it passed with flying colors), but it is testable using standard social science tools. For example, I am confident that we would find that most Mormons believe that the Tower of Babel was a real historic event, whereas the creation of the Earth did not literally occur in seven days. Why? Because the Tower of Babel is referenced in the Book of Mormon and literal creation is not.

And, I would be willing to bet that a given group of university graduate Mormons are more ignorant of the linguistic theory that shows how silly the Tower of Babel story is than would be a similarly educated, and otherwise similar, group of non-Mormons.

Another way to use “belief maps” as noted in my essay above to construct a falsifiable hypothesis for testing cognitive dissonance would be to generalize the experiment I just suggested. For example, we might predict that religious beliefs tend to create both non-acceptance of scientific principles and ignorance of information related to them to the extent that religious belief conflicts with science, and then take several groups of religious believers who are university graduates and indicate that they are generally in agreement with the scientific point of view, and map their religious beliefs against their areas of ignorance or non-acceptance of science, and then compare that to the belief map of a group of agnostics. How do you think the Mormon population would do relative to the science related to sexual orientation (probably biological), or human origins (Africa), or the evolution of the human species (from mice)?

There are all kinds of ways to scientifically test cognitive dissonance and other denial related concepts on Mormon populations.]

“There is nothing which the critic could not shoe-horn into his theory—cognitive dissonance is thus little but a handy club to beat anyone who does not share his

interpretation. “Of course you see it differently,” the critic can kindly, but oh-so-condescendingly assure his Mormon friend. “You’re still in the grip of cognitive dissonance.” “

[rdm – See my comments above. This is ignorance writ large.]

“The anti-Mormon (ab)use of the theory is especially vulnerable to the charge of being unfalsifiable, but a lack of falsifiability has long been the chief criticism of cognitive dissonance theory generally:

One continuous criticism of Dr. Festinger's theory is that it may not be falsifiable. That is, there is no solid empirical data that proves without a doubt that people will react in a specific manner in a given situation or when dealing with dissonance.[3]”

[rdm – This is simply the criticism that is made of the social sciences in general. They are much less precise than the hard sciences, and hence one should take care when applying theories from the social sciences in any real life application. However, there have been countless cog dis experiments performed under falsifiable conditions. Cog dis and attachment theory are two of the best established psychological theories to date. This science is as solid as social science gets, while still being subject to the caveat that it cannot be applied with certainty to any real life application.]

“Dissonance is easier to point to when a group of people is exposed to the same situation and choices under controlled conditions. Trying to tease out why a given individual holds to or rejects religious or philosophical positions is a much taller order. There are no controls on the critics' rampant speculation.”

[rdm – I have addressed this concern above.]

“Is turnabout fair play?

This is not to say that cognitive dissonance cannot play a role in religious belief. It might play a role in some Mormons' refusal to accept an uncomfortable truth. It could also play a role in the critics' experiences, in which their expectations and beliefs did not meet their perceptions of reality. Each critic is the only one able to make that assessment.”

[rdm – I have been upfront about this all along. I have numerous times at www.exmormon.org and elsewhere chided people who seem to have forgotten that the same biases that affect Mormons affect post-Mormons. And we would be testable in the same as the Mormons are.]

“But, lacking access to others’ reasoning and spiritual experiences, a critic cannot objectively judge the influence (if any) of cognitive dissonance in others’ decisions.”

[rdm – Much of the point of science is to assess what is objectively accessible from the outside, using the perspective that can only be gained through the

comparison of many experiences. Science acknowledges that it cannot directly deal with the subjective nature of the experience, its qualia. However, what does it mean to a Mormon when she finds that countless people all of the world in different belief systems have precisely the kind of “testimony” experience she has? And that their brain states, measured during this experience, are doing exactly what her’s do (see <http://www.exmormon.org/Why%20We%20Believe%20-%20The%20Edmonton%20Series.htm> - Day Three). This is a testable hypothesis and all of the evidence so far indicates that there will be nothing to distinguish the Mormon spiritual experience from that of countless others. This would explain the tenacity of Mormon as well as many other beliefs, and would cause some Mormons to wonder what kind of god would give so many different people with different conflicting beliefs precisely the same experience. Other cognitive dissonance suffering Mormons will cling to the possibility that somewhere, somehow, their belief is different and superior and god will in his due time explain all this.]

“He can worry about the dissonant beams in his own eye; others’ notes are out of the reach of his self-justifying inquiry.”

[rdm – Or maybe he is humble enough to recognize that there are beams and notes in all eyes. An understanding of science leads to this conclusion. It also allows us to measure these to an extent. How many Mormons would likely believe that hard core Moonies are not subject to heavy cognitive dissonance? Would we trust a group of well trained psychologists to measure the Moonie cognitive dissonance relative to reality and compare it to that of, say, some Reform Jews? Why not Mormons v. Moonies v. Reform Jews? There is another interesting, falsifiable, hypothesis. Moonies – worst; Mormons – second worst; Reform Jews – best (of this group).]

“Many critics seem unwilling to recognize that men and women of good will and sound intelligence might honestly disagree on the interpretation of evidence, even if considered with all the objectivity they can muster. This is, for example, why some people will buy stock at a price at which other people are eager to sell. (But perhaps the entire economy is merely an exercise in cognitive dissonance?)”

[rdm – In fact, denial, the confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance have been shown to play a large role in market crashes and manias.]

“LDS critics often have a naïve, super-simplified view of the historian’s work whereby anyone who disbelieves a religious account is somehow automatically more free from bias than a believer. Such a stance ignores the fact that unbelievers may feel at least as great a stake in disproving uncomfortable and uncompromising religious claims as believers might in supporting them.”

[rdm – I have already acknowledged that we are all subject to the same forces. However, one can predict blind spots using tools like the confirmation bias, which allow a belief map to be drawn and areas of ignorance and possible cognitive dissonance to be predicted. And this can be done using falsifiable hypotheses as I have indicated above.]

“It is therefore no surprise that critics label interpretations with which they do not agree as examples of “cognitive dissonance” in action, while the critics' positions are portrayed as merely the product of dispassionate analysis.

One critic fond of this 'theory' tells us:

The most important part of this analysis, by far, is to recognize that the forces we are about to discuss [cognitive dissonance] operate mostly at the subconscious level. To the extent we drag them into the conscious realm, they largely stop operating.[4]

“Subconscious” forces which are used to explain behavior, especially by the outside observer, are a classic unfalsifiable hypothesis. How can we know that a “cause” which has been supposedly dragged from subconscious to awareness is the genuine article?”

[rdm – The subconscious forces are part of the cognitive dissonance theory. People show signs of cognitive dissonance in measurable, falsifiable ways, and are unaware of their source. This is by definition the result of the unconscious part of our minds.]

“Why isn't our “discovered” reason simply a rationalization, which is driven in turn by an even deeper “subconscious force” and so on down forever? Since a person is—by definition—unaware of unconscious processes, how can the critic know with any confidence that the "forces we are about to discuss" look anything like the unconscious ones?

[rdm – See above.]

“How can you say that A and B are the same thing if no one can get a certain look at A?”

[rdm – More silliness. These people need to do some reading.]

“If this is difficult in oneself, how much harder is it in another person, to whose mind and experience the outsider has no direct access? Despite these major hurdles, the critics seems to presume that they can reliably determine what others' unconscious processes are and “drag them into the conscious realm.” Freud would have been envious.”

[rdm – I have not suggested anything beyond what the scientists who work in this field have done many times over.]

“The critic then makes the equally strange assertion that these effects “largely stop operating” if we are but aware of them. Even if the critic, by the greatest fortune, has indeed identified a proper “subconscious force”—something of which he can never be sure—this belief is extraordinarily optimistic. Anyone who has spent any time in counselling or mental health work knows that awareness of a problem rarely provides a direct line to altered thinking or behavior. If it did, therapy would be just a dump of information to the patient. “

[rdm – Here is what I meant. Cog dis is part of the complex of forces related to denial. Cog dis starts when we become aware – often at the subconscious level – of conflicting cognitions such as those related to Joseph Smith’s lying about sexual activities and his prophetic status. This conflict produces the kind of pain cog dis theory described, and that pain produces various rationalizing behaviours. Once we become aware enough to assess the best evidence relative to both cognitions in light of how denial works (including the role of cognitive dissonance) we tend to be able to resolve the dissonance by rejecting false belief. Think of the abused spouse example that is so often used to illustrate cognitive dissonance. One cognition is that her husband loves her and is committed to her and her children; the other is that he occasionally beats her. All her friends tell her to leave him. She tells them that they don’t understand him; that he is really a good man. Often learning about how denial and cognitive dissonance work, and being introduced to objective evidence about how abused spouses in her situation tend to act; how their friends tend to act; how the abusers tend to act; and acknowledging that her life fits this pattern, etc. helps her to overcome her denial. Thus, her experience of cognitive dissonance declines (or even ends) on that issue.]

“The critic goes on:

The message that booms through the above evidence to me is that the denial inducing nature of cognitive dissonance makes it difficult to self-diagnose.[5]

Unfortunately for the critic, if we assume that this is true, then critics are equally vulnerable to the same treatment. The Mormon could just as easily respond that an anti-Mormon's perspective is all due to cognitive dissonance. He just doesn't know it, because such a condition is "difficult to self-diagnose."

[rdm – I have already agreed. So, why don’t we line up a bunch of Mormons and post-Mormons and run a controlled experiment conducted by non-Mormon psychologists to measure the cognitive dissonance relative to science and Mormon belief in the two populations. I bet I can find some psychologists who would love to do that.

This is the kind of experiment Mormons would be unlikely to participate in, because in general they don’t want to know. This contrasts with the statements of earlier Mormon leaders who said things like “The truth cuts its own way” (J.

Smith) and "If we have the truth, it cannot be harmed by investigation. If we have not the truth, it ought to be harmed." (J. Reuben Clark). Most people are like that to an extent. However, those of us who have experienced the pain of having our most important beliefs debunked tend to be more willing to expose our new beliefs to scrutiny, and are far less likely to be come as committed to our new beliefs as we were to our former, and so are more inclined to this kind of testing. And I note that this is in and of itself a testable hypothesis.

I now go out of my way to seek the advice of third parties in an effort to identify my blind spots. I would welcome the change to be the subject of a professional psychological study that would help me to identify the sources of cognitive dissonance in my own life, since I acknowledge that I am unlikely to be able to that on my own, in spite of my best efforts.]

“This illustrates that whatever else might be said about the flaws in this theory—the lynch-pin (“most important part...by far”) of which is an unfalsifiable and unverifiable claim about subconscious motives—it is not rational and not scientific. “

[rdm – I address this above. It is flatly wrong. This person knows somewhere between little and nothing about the social sciences.]

“But, appeals to "cognitive dissonance" allow the critic to fit the evidence to his biases, and “diagnose” flaws in others. No matter how much his Mormon target might insist that the critic does not understand the Mormon's point of view or evaluation of the evidence, this just serves as stronger evidence to the critic of how deluded the Mormon is. Cognitive dissonance in the critics' hands is nothing but self-fulfilling prophecy, or a variation of the observer-expectancy effect. It is full of fallacies, a substitute for rational discussion of the evidence and the witness of the Spirit. “

[rdm – He repeats himself over and over. I have addressed this above. If cognitive dissonance and denial theory cannot be applied to Mormonism it can't be applied anywhere. And as I indicated above, it is one of the more thoroughly tested of psychological theories.]

“Conclusion

"Cognitive dissonance theory," when applied in the critics' idiosyncratic way to explain away the witness and convictions of others, is hardly scientific. The critics' efforts fail on many grounds:

- it cannot be falsified
- the critic can explain and dismiss any attitude, any belief, or any conviction
- the critic relies on claims about hidden, unverifiable, “subconscious” motivations as explanations
- the critic arrogantly assumes that the interpreter knows more about the person and his/her experiences than the person him/herself, even if the subject disagrees with the analysis

And, any argument which the critic uses against a member can be used in just as strong a form against the critic in turn.“

[rdm – I have already addressed each of these points.]

Endnotes

1. [back] Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science* (New York: WH Freeman and Company, 1999), 211–212.
2. [back] Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1963), 33.
3. [back] M. Bruce Abbot, “Cognitive Dissonance Theory,” class notes for ADV382J, University of Texas at Austin, September 2003 (accessed 31 October 2005). *
4. [back] Bob McCue, “Notes for Van Hale’s Radio Show”; e-mail posting (5 September 2004), copy in author's possession.
5. [back] Bob McCue, “Notes for Van Hale’s Radio Show”; e-mail posting (5 September 2004), copy in author's possession.

[rdm - My essays lay out the theory relative to cog dis and denial, and maps it against a host of my own and other Mormon experience that I believe is explained by that theory as well as much other religious experience that has been subject to scientific observation or testing in this regard. In this so-called critique of my position there was not a single substantive comment relative to my approach. The entire argument of this critique rests on the assertion that it is impossible to apply cognitive dissonance theory to Mormon experience. This is flatly wrong. Much cognitive dissonance research has been done relative to religious belief, and there is nothing special about Mormonism in this regard.

From what I saw today looking around www.fairwiki.org, this is as good an illustration of cognitive dissonance as anyone is likely to find.

best,

bob]

The following are a few posts from the bulletin board at www.exmormon.org that address this issue. Punky’s Dilemma has PhD in psychology. I have corresponded privately with her across a broad range of issues.

Counterpoint is a lawyer with a degree in philosophy as well.

Winter teaches computer science at a US university.

Subject: Response
Date: Jun 16 21:31
Author: Counterpoint
Mail Address:

This is an excellent response, Bob. May I briefly add the following comment:

[APOLOGIST] “But, lacking access to others’ reasoning and spiritual experiences, a critic cannot objectively judge the influence (if any) of cognitive dissonance in others’ decisions.”

[BOB][rdm – Much of the point of science is to assess what is objectively accessible from the outside, using the perspective that can only be gained through the comparison of many experiences. Science acknowledges that it cannot directly deal with the subjective nature of the experience, its qualia. However, what does it mean to a Mormon when she finds that countless people all of the world in different belief systems have precisely the kind of “testimony” experience she has? And that their brain states, measured during this experience, are doing exactly what her’s do (see <http://www.exmormon.org/Why%20We%20Believe%20-%20The%20Edmonton%20Series.htm> - Day Three). This is a testable hypothesis and all of the evidence so far indicates that there will be nothing to distinguish the Mormon spiritual experience from that of countless others. This would explain the tenacity of Mormon as well as many other beliefs, and would cause some Mormons to wonder what kind of god would give so many different people with different conflicting beliefs precisely the same experience. Other cognitive dissonance suffering Mormons will cling to the possibility that somewhere, somehow, their belief is different and superior and god will in his due time explain all this.]

Your point is well taken, generally. Certainly, there are physiological similarities underlying the subjective spiritual experiences across religious dogmas. However, this approach is weak in my view, because the subjective nature of the experience transcends its physiological character, i.e. the experience itself is not about brain states. Reductionist programs that attempt to explain away conscious experience, spiritual or otherwise, by identifying such experiences with physical brain states have generally been rejected. In short, in my opinion there is no way to legitimately discount the content of spiritual experiences, and their application to, and support of, belief systems, by an appeal to commonality of physical states.

Notwithstanding, for me what is important to cognitive dissonance theory as considered in a religious context is its application within a context of scientific evidence. [Not only hard science, but well established facts in the soft sciences as well, especially history.] In other words, Mormons and Exmormons are not in the same intellectual boat when considering how cognitive dissonance might apply to their belief systems. Your Mormon apologist friend must first argue that his or her Mormon belief system is rational, before discounting the possible role of cognitive dissonance in maintaining such beliefs. Such an argument must take into account the body of evidence available to him or her, even if some allowance is given for spiritual experience. For example, a Mormon would be hard-pressed to support rational belief in the Book of Mormon given the scientific and historical evidence of its falsity, spiritual experiences notwithstanding.

In short, you cannot get mileage out of spiritual experience, in order to discount the possibility of cognitive dissonance effects, when your belief system is fundamentally inconsistent or at odds with well established facts about the world. Although as you say ExMormons are also subject to cognitive dissonance effects, their belief systems are far more conducive to scientific facts, leaving them much less vulnerable to claims of cognitive dissonance as the basis for maintaining such beliefs. After all, cognitive dissonance is more interesting as an explanatory theory of irrational beliefs, than rational beliefs.

Best personal regards,
Counterpoint

Subject: Thanks CP ...
Date: Jun 16 23:24
Author: bob mccue
Mail Address: mccuer@telusplanet.net

You make a good point that I did not emphasize enough perhaps – that cognitive dissonance is often measured by way of deviation from accepted, provable beliefs that correlate with (seem to be caused by) religious beliefs. And there is no question that the Mormon position deviates far more from the scientific norm than the post-Mormon position.

I also tried to make the point that beliefs are justified based on probabilities, and I found it interesting that you draw the line in that regard so that the neurological and other scientific data relative to what might be loosely called “spiritual experience” is unpersuasive. While I agree with you that this data is far from conclusive, it is persuasive to some degree. All who have been tested show the very similar physiological symptoms, and report very similar subjective experiences once cultural differences are taken into account.

The best that can be said in favor of your position is that science has not disproved it, nor should it be expected to. It must also be acknowledged that all of the data science has produced is consistent with the theory that none of the spiritual experiences reported indicate a reality beyond that with which we are familiar. Scientists like Newberg who hope to eventually find evidence in favor of such a state admit that they do not have any yet. As you know, I have heard that from Newberg in person. The most people like him tend to say is that the door is still open to the possibility that they will eventually find this evidence.

Hence, if I needed to make a decision now that depended on whether such a higher or ultimate reality, or beings inhabiting such, existed, it is clear what I would decide.

I understand that your views differ on this topic.

Good to hear from you.

Best,
bob

Subject: To: Bob Mccue
Date: Jun 17 00:13
Author: Margie
Mail Address:

I am listening to a podcast you were on, "Belief and Reason" I am really enjoying it. I work on a computer all day so it is great that I can listen. Too bad your posts here cannot be on a podcast also. I don't have time to read all the posts on this board that I would like to, but I can listen all day long.
Thanks!

Subject: Whoever thinks Festinger's body of research suffers from unfalsifiability...(language)
Date: Jun 17 01:13
Author: Punky's Dilemma
Mail Address:

Obviously hasn't read it, or hasn't been well-trained in social science research methods.

sigh Don't they realize how easy it would be to do a quick and dirty research design to show how CD can be easily induced (and measured with both self-report measures and physiological ones--and the self-report measure has a damn lot of reliability and validity) in TBMs? It's a goddamn standard in psychology, a classic. For a good reason...

If you could actually recruit the participants, it would be one of the easiest data collections and stat analyses I've ever had to conduct. Have two groups, TBMs and never-mos, read a passage of some classic "anti" literature (like Palmer's stuff, or some such thing). Measure psychological discomfort (the operation definition of CD) before and after the read. TBMs should show statistically significant elevations in psychological discomfort, never-mos shouldn't, and there should be no difference in psychological discomfort prior to reading the passage. Then, offer all participants a classic manipulation to reduce CD (like telling them an imperceptible buzz in the lights may be making people feel slightly ill, etc.--there are several standard ways to address this has been addressed in research design). The manipulation should produce a statistically significant decline in psychological discomfort for the TBMs, and once again no change for the never-mos.

And TBMs and nevermos should have a statistically significant difference in psychological discomfort only after reading the passage, and not after the CD relieving manipulation.

One of the reasons that CD is such a well-known psychological phenomenon is b/c of the huge body of empirical support for it. *eyes rolling* But, since when has solid empirical demonstration of something "inconvenient" made a difference to an apologist...

Subject: Yes. Everybody experiences Cog Dis at one time or another...

Date: Jun 17 18:28

Author: Punky' Dilemma

Mail Address:

That's hardly the point. It's presence in mormons over historical and doctrinal issues isn't as much an indicator of the truthfulness (or lack thereof) of TSCC. That's an evidentiary matter. It's more of an indicator that for many TBMs, on a subconscious level at the very least, they are very aware of the problems with mormon doctrine, historical inaccuracies, etc. and are troubled by it.

I think that it would be easy to demonstrate that mormons experience higher elevations of the psychological distress consistent with CD, and experience them more frequently, especially since there are so many CD triggers in daily life for TBMs that are specific to the church and not experienced by people who are not immersed in rigid, dogmatic cultures. Prolonged exposure to such distress is mentally damaging, and it is especially concerning since there are only a few options that TBMs have to alleviate CD if they stay TBM. That's the mental gymnastics with which so many at the BB are familiar, and which many of us experienced as unpleasant and emotionally damaging. And, I also think it would be rather simple to demonstrate that methods that TBMs use to alleviate CD are likely to diminish in effectiveness over time. There are only so many times you can tell yourself, "They are speaking as men," "Milk before meat," etc. before it doesn't work anymore and you either resolve the CD by changing your beliefs, or you find a new CD coping strategy ("even if TSCC isn't true, it's a good way to raise a family, e.g.).

To clarify, CD (at least as Festinger defines it) would only be possible in a TBM if they have two contradictory internal beliefs (merely reading something with which you disagree can't produce CD). It's mere presence in a person indicates *internal* conflict. It's also an easy matter to operationally demonstrate that internal conflict.

As far as pointing out the limitations of Festinger's work as mere "theory," well, yep, it's a theory. A theory with a great body of empirical support, and a theory whose findings stand up to replication decades after it was first introduced. There is little, if anything, in mormon apologetics that comes anywhere near that benchmark. Festinger's work on CD is to mormon apologetics what FDA drug approval is to quack home remedies. One is

standardized and reliable, and the other....well, you get the picture.

Subject: I have to agree with Punky's explanation of CD and Mormons

Date: Jun 18 18:43

Author: winter

Mail Address:

CD is a sign of internal conflict - the person recognizes something is not right. If I had to listen to a reading from a paper on the usefulness of astrology, I doubt I would exhibit any physiologic symptoms with the possible exception of irritation at having my time wasted. I have no internal conflict whatsoever about astrology.

OTOH, I tried reading a dry-as-dust analysis of the Book of Abraham to some TBM relatives, and the behavioral symptoms of psychological discomfort arose with a speed and clarity rarely seen outside of a Roadrunner cartoon.

As we all too often see here, when a member of the Mo tribe announces (and sometimes just hints at) unbelief, often, not the last resort, but the FIRST resort of those close to the "apostate" is to go nuclear, and threaten the total destruction of the relationship/family. A wife will make that threat, and her parents will agree and offer support in her carrying out the threat, and often HIS parents will agree and offer her support in carrying out the threat.

What's up with that??! What's up is Cog Dis - their unshakeable testimony notwithstanding, they know the Mormon mythology is hard to swallow, and that the nuclear option is the only thing that has any chance of keeping the unbeliever in the fold. As we have also seen, they are often willing to carry through on the nuclear option and destroy the relationship.

Bob's refutation of the apologists' tactic of turning Cog Dis on its head and stating Bob shows through his writings that he is in a state of dissonance and denial is wonderful. Those folks seem to have had any sense of irony bred out of them!

I have a nutritionist in the family, and on occasion got dragged to lectures given by health food purveyors at places like Provo High Auditorium. They can be fairly entertaining, though they are more easily found on cable channels on weekends these days. I particularly remember on lecturer filling with righteous indignation at how if you go to the BYU Food Science and Nutrition Department, they would lie to you about real nutrition, because their livelihood depends on hiding the truth and keeping you nutritionally deficient, so that they can keep charging you for one bogus cure after another. He, OTOH, wants nothing more than to never see you again, because the truth he has given you (at \$10 a ticket to hear the lecture) will make you the person God intended when He created a nutritionally perfect world.

Of course, there was a table full of books and video tapes and supplements for sale in the foyer of the auditorium, none of which gets foisted on you by the academics if you go to a university nutrition department. But never mind that. Their livelihood depends on you not believing the lecturer, making them untrustworthy. The fact that his livelihood depends on you believing him never gets mentioned.

Health food quakes, Mormon apologists, and business scammers all seem to share one characteristic: they not only ignore empirical evidence, they are actively hostile to it. And all three groups find fertile ground in Utah.

winter