

Self-justification: The subtle path to corruption  
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**Abstract:** Conscious, explicit corruption—selling your vote or your research to the highest bidder—is an obvious problem. Here I will be talking about the less obvious, more widespread kind: unconscious self-justification, which allows a person to feel incorruptible, above that dirty business of tainted findings or conflicts of interest.

Aldous Huxley once said, in essence, how come everybody can see a hypocrite in action except the hypocrite? The question of this panel is: How come everybody can see the influence of conflict of interest or corruption on a person except that person? I won't be talking about a company's lying about the safety of its hip replacements or new drug; rather, about a more insidious, universal mechanism that applies not only to thinking about corrupt institutions but for all of us in our everyday lives—including how we deal with our partners, colleagues and friends as we try to communicate the perils of selling sickness.

In 1957, the great social psychologist Leon Festinger developed the theory of cognitive dissonance, which occurs when two ideas, or a belief and behavior, logically conflict: I smoke, I know smoking is dangerous. To reduce this dissonance, I must either quit smoking or *justify* smoking. In the decades since Festinger's work, more than 3,000 studies have been done on dissonance, around the world, in cognitive and social psychology. The need to reduce dissonance is powerful and we do it unconsciously, smoothly; it's a cognitive thermostat that keeps our beliefs consonant and our beliefs consonant with our behavior. For example, in 2003 the large majority of Americans believed George Bush's justification for the invasion of Iraq: Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. What happened in ensuing years, when people learned that that no such weapons existed? Many Republicans reduced dissonance by ... continuing to believe there *were* WMD and we'd find them someday. Many Democrats reduced dissonance by ... forgetting they had supported the war ("I knew all along Bush was lying to us").

Of the mental biases that underlie CD, two are central: the confirmation bias—the fact that we notice and remember information that confirms what we believe, and minimize, forget, or dismiss information that is dissonant. We can see this bias at work when it helps us reduce *post-decision dissonance*: before we make a decision or commit to a course of action, we are open-minded (should I buy this car or that car?). The minute we make a decision, we tend to see all the information that confirms the rightness of what we did (my car is so safe!) and ignore, forget, or minimize any information that is discrepant—dissonant (my safe car gets 3 mpg). We try to stick with the choice we made.

The second is bias is the belief that we are better-than-average. Most people believe they are kinder, smarter, wiser than average; above-average in integrity and intelligence. (The majority of students at two fundamentalist Christian colleges said they were humbler than average.) My colleague Elliot Aronson advanced dissonance theory by demonstrating that it is most powerful, and we are most motivated to reduce it, not when we are buying cars but when the information collides with an essential aspect of our self-concept: when we are confronted

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<sup>1</sup> This talk is drawn from Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes were made (but not by me): Why we justify foolish beliefs, bad decisions, and hurtful acts* (Harcourt, 2007).

with evidence that we just did something foolish, believed an unsupported idea, harmed someone, committed an unethical act, have been taking a pill for 6 years that is unnecessary and possibly harmful. To the puzzlement of observers, but not to students of dissonance, people are more likely to justify their actions and beliefs rather than change them—even when changing them would make their lives easier or safer, improve their skills.

We see this everywhere when evidence is dissonant with self-concept: “You are telling me, a competent and compassionate physician, that something I did was a mistake and I harmed my patient? My patient was dreadfully ill already.” “You are telling me, a kind and loving person, that this family rift is partly my fault? They started it.” “You are telling me, a skeptical scientist, that I’ve been conned?” One of the greatest problems we face, therefore, is not from people who sell out, lie, or cover up their mistakes, and know exactly what they are doing—doing it for money, fame, or perks, or to avoid losing their jobs or marriages; it’s from people who internally *justify* their actions by blinding themselves to their own culpability.

Post-decision dissonance reduction is useful when we just bought a car; it lets us sleep at night and avoid buyer’s remorse. The danger is what happens when postdecision dissonance sets a person on a course of action. Elliot and I like to use the pyramid metaphor, based on an actual study done of students. Imagine that two students are at the top of a pyramid, this close in their attitudes toward cheating: They think it is not a good thing to do, but there are worse crimes in the world. Now they are both taking an important exam, when they draw a blank on a crucial question. Failure looms, at which point each one gets an easy opportunity to cheat, by reading another student’s answers. After a moment of indecision, one yields and the other resists. Their decisions are a hair’s breadth apart; it could easily have gone the other way for each of them. One gives up integrity for a good grade, the other gives up a good grade to preserve integrity.

As soon as they make a decision—cheat or don’t cheat—they will justify the action they took, in order to reduce dissonance—to keep their behavior consonant with their attitudes. They can’t change the behavior, so they shift their attitude. The one who cheated will justify that action by deciding that cheating is not such a big deal: “Hey, everyone cheats. It’s no big deal. And I needed to do this for my future career.” But the one who resisted the temptation will justify that action by deciding that cheating is far more immoral than he originally thought: “Cheating is disgraceful. Not a victimless crime at all. People who cheat should be expelled.” Notice the cheater could say, “guess I behaved badly by cheating that time.” But the far more common resolution is to say: “Hey, I am an ethical person; this isn’t really cheating.”

By the time they finish justifying their choices, they have slid to the bottom and now stand at opposite corners of its base, far apart from one another. The one who didn’t cheat considers the other to be totally immoral, and the one who cheated thinks the other is hopelessly puritanical, an idiot for not doing what “everyone” does. *And they will believe that they always felt that way.* Now, instead of cheating on an exam, substitute: stay in a troubled relationship (or leave), blow the whistle on unethical practices (or keep quiet), accept money from big pharma for your research (or not). The person makes a decision, and then justifies it to maintain consonance. *And then—this is the key—stops noticing or looking for disconfirming evidence, and ignores or minimizes evidence of being wrong.* This starts a process of action, justification, further action that increases their commitment to that first tentative decision.

Thus, because of the natural impulse to justify a small step off the pyramid, it becomes harder and harder to go back up: doing so means admitting that first step was wrong. It becomes easier, indeed almost inevitable, to justify bigger ones, to throw good money after bad. With each ensuing investment of time, money, effort, and self-esteem a person invests in those steps, the harder it is to say, “I was wrong.” Thus, a researcher at the top of the pyramid is offered money from Big Pharma for research. “What a relief—a big grant to do this important study.” The person is unlikely to be thinking: “but what happens if my results do not confirm what my funder expects? I risk losing that grant.” How do you maintain integrity and the grant when you get the wrong numbers? You say, “well, let me just noodle these numbers a bit. There may be some risk, but look how minimal it is, and besides, these patients are already sick . . .”

This process illustrates how scientists and physicians become corrupted, how they blind themselves to evidence of how money from industry might affect their research, or how accepting a trinket from a drug rep might affect the drugs they prescribe. The reasoning is: “I know, looking inward, that *I* am not biased or corrupt; therefore this grant money, let alone this trinket or free lunch, can’t influence *me*.” Their behavior changes, while their view of themselves as professionals of integrity remains intact. How do you corrupt an honest person? You get him or her to take a small step off the pyramid, and self-justification will do the rest.

By the way: The pyramid works in positive directions, too. Get people to commit to a small step toward activism to counteract corruption, and pretty soon you have a conference—in fact, you have a social movement!

There are three big lessons in this research for all of us: First, dissonance afflicts not only those who are financially vested in a belief, but anyone who is professionally or ideologically vested in a belief—that means all of us. That means we should apply our own standards of criticism to evidence we *like*, to research we consider to be on our side. Bias in research can occur because of ideological and professional interests, not only because of financial conflicts of interest.

Second, in working for change, we should focus not only on the self-justifying people at the bottom of the pyramid—that’s big, that requires institutional intervention—but also the forces that encourage or impede people from taking that first step off the top—and get them to take a step in our direction. Hence the importance of “no free lunch” along with “no ghostwritten papers.”

And a third lesson: As we work on an individual level, trying to persuade our friends and colleagues, we need to appreciate the power of post-decision dissonance. A friend of mine, a world-class scientist, asked me for my opinion about her taking two medications for her diagnosis of osteopenia. I told her, and sent supporting material. Perhaps now, as students of dissonance, you can predict her reaction. Did she say, “What a relief to learn that I don’t need this medication, that osteopenia is a pseudo-diagnosis”? She said, “I feel safer taking these drugs and, besides, my doctor insists.” An understanding of the power of dissonance and self-justification, therefore, helps us understand not only the most egregious forms of institutional and political corruption, but also the everyday, sometimes self-defeating things we all do in the sisyphian effort to keep our beliefs in harmony with our actions.