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Elliot Aronson

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Come Back to the Future

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A good theory does many things. It provides a parsimonious integration of seemingly disparate or conflicting data, it generates original hypotheses about established phenomena, it defines new phenomena to be investigated, it establishes a paradigm for the testing of hypotheses, and it reframes longstanding issues in the field. By these criteria, Festinger’s (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance is a very good theory indeed. It is safe to say, in fact, that no theory in social psychology comes close to dissonance theory in its impact on the field. In its prime, it provided a unified perspective on an impressive range of topics, generated many intriguing, counterintuitive hypotheses about psychological functioning, defined new components of psychological life, created rich paradigms within which over a thousand empirical investigations have been conducted, and taught an entire generation of psychologists how to rethink such pivotal issues as reinforcement, attitude consistency, and the interplay between thought and emotion.

A good theory typically does something else as well: It generates new lines of investigation and, ultimately, new theories, some of which, ironically, provide alternative accounts of the very phenomena and issues for which the original theory seemed so ideally suited. Hardly a just reward for a job well done, perhaps, but such is the evolutionary nature of science. By this criterion, dissonance theory can also be counted a stunning success. It is more than coincidental that in the three decades since the publication of Festinger’s book, social psychology for many researchers has become practically synonymous with social cognition. Directly or indirectly, dissonance theory has played a prominent role in fueling the proliferation of approaches emphasizing the relevance of cognitive dynamics to the understanding of emotion and action.

Some of these approaches have been complementary in intent, delving deeper into the issues and processes dissonance theory so splendidly brought to light. Other approaches, however, have been advanced as explicit contenders to the throne, providing alternative depictions of what really goes on in situations commonly ascribed to dissonance processes. Philosophically, Aronson seems more comfortable with the first approach to science than with the second. Thus, he concludes his article by advising that “whenever possible, we should try to build on one another’s work rather than continually strive to strike out in ‘original’ new directions.” There is a certain irony here, in that dissonance theory itself initially fired the imagination of so many people precisely because it provided an alternative to the prevailing wisdom of the time. One can only wonder what social psychology would look like today if someone like Festinger had not attempted to strike out in an “original” new direction, challenging some very entrenched assumptions about reinforcement and motivation.

But maybe Aronson has a point. Even in the “harder” sciences, after all, there are those who claim the cumulative nature of scientific understanding is illusory (e.g., Kuhn, 1970), that old theories are not disproved so much as replaced by newer ones that have interest value independent of strict scientific criteria (Davis, 1971). Aronson does not go quite this far in his portrayal of various contemporary “mini-theories,” but he clearly is not very impressed, describing them as having “limited scope” and “with a little work . . . contained under the general rubric of dissonance theory, as modified in 1962.” He goes on to question whether it advances science “when we have seven or eight little theories doing the work of one.”

Unfortunately, Aronson does not elaborate on (i.e., provide any evidence or reasoning for) this conclusion for most of these theories, and I suspect the psychologists associated with each of the theories might want to quibble, just a bit anyway. But let’s set aside for the moment the “my theory’s bigger than yours” bravado; Aronson’s larger point seems to be that, when everyone is out trying to rediscover the wheel, the wheel’s full potential will fail to be realized. Instead of working at cross-purposes, with all the wheat-to-chaff problems that entails, why not simply work together as a team, adding refinements here and there to perfect an existing form?

Aronson’s concern over the proliferation of mini-theories (as he sees them) reminds one of similar concerns voiced over a decade ago and deserves to be taken seriously. At face value, the concern seems warranted. Perhaps more than in any other science, there is a disturbing lack of theoretical consensus in social psychology, and it is easy to despair of progress ever being achieved when one encounters a seemingly endless parade of theories and research paradigms all attempting to claim ownership of the same topical turf. For all the frustration one might feel over the current patchwork of theories, however, it is instructive to consider what the field would be like if everyone fell in line behind a so-called classic theory. Efficiency would be achieved, I suppose, but at what cost?

This broad concern can be broached in various ways, two of which strike me as particularly pertinent to whether we should welcome back dissonance theory with open arms. The first issue involves the nature of evolutionary progress in science: in the abstract, this issue is open to endless debate. The second issue—far more concrete and potentially open to resolution—is whether dissonance theory is really up to the task of subsuming the theoretical developments of the last three decades, or whether its purported comeback will have all the impact of a 1950s “golden-oldies” revival.

The first point turns on one’s philosophy of science. In questioning the need to strike out in “original” new directions, Aronson seems to be arguing for a sort of gradualism in the evolution of scientific understanding. Aronson does not explicitly endorse an evolutionary metaphor in making this point, but it is interesting to consider his views on progress in social psychology in broad evolutionary terms. A case can certainly be made for gradualism in biological evolution and it is tempting to see parallels in the evolution of science. Thus, in much the same way that species slowly improve (i.e., become better adapted to their environment) through
the accumulation of incremental changes in genetic structure, theories over time become more precise (i.e., provide a better fit to data in the real world) through painstaking experimentation designed to iron out rough spots and extend the gradually evolving theory to new topics.

Modern evolutionary theory has begun to assign a more limited role to gradualism, however, arguing that major biological changes (e.g., the emergence of a new species) typically occur suddenly, geologically speaking, thereby "punctuating" long periods of relative equilibrium (Eldredge & Gould, 1972). The idea in brief is that some variant of an ancestral species becomes isolated and thus develops independently and under different selection forces than the ancestral form. If the new version of the species proves better suited to the environment than the ancestral species, the former will come to supplant the latter in a geologically short period of time. One must exercise caution and restraint, of course, in mapping principles in one discipline to the principles of another, particularly when the mapping is metaphorically in nature. Still, punctuated equilibrium provides an intriguing heuristic for thinking about evolution of all kinds. Indeed, cultural change, psychological development, and pattern formation in dynamical systems have all been discussed in just these terms in recent years.

With respect to progress in scientific understanding generally, and social psychology in particular, the punctuated equilibrium metaphor suggests that a vital role is played by independent research programs that strike out in new directions rather than trying to fill in the blanks in existing forms. To be sure, an overemphasis on originality can be very inefficient, producing a host of theories with a shelf life no longer than that of an edited book with contemporary in the title. It is also true that with everyone reinventing the wheel, important blank filling in existing theories goes undone. Such inefficiency, however, may be the price to pay if one holds out hope for attaining truly creative syntheses. Evolutionary change in biology does not represent a simple barbed arrow, but rather the intersection of independent forms; each the result of somewhat different selection pressures. In social psychology, too, separate theories developed within independent paradigms intersect in the public forum, sometimes cooperatively and sometimes competitively, and out of such intersections arise new and useful ways of thinking about the dynamics of thought and behavior.

I'm not sure if Aronson would disagree with any of this. On the one hand, he calls for research explicitly concerned with establishing the boundary conditions for different theories, and he sees this as the way to achieve creative synthesis. On the other hand, he rather summarily dismisses the potential for advancing science through the proliferation of new theories (e.g., those on his list) when there is already one integrative one (i.e., dissonance theory) available. Whatever his stance on this issue in the abstract (perhaps it is a creative synthesis of these two seemingly dissonant attitudes), though, he clearly feels that in this instance, at least, recent theories on cognition and action do not represent meaningful punctuation points in the evolution of social psychology.

Putting aside the philosophical issues, one can ask whether dissonance theory does in fact provide the broad brush strokes, with other theories at best filling in pieces of the canvas. Each of the theorists on Aronson's list of "mini-theories" would probably answer in the negative, of course, and I have no doubt that each could make a convincing case why his theory adds something new to our understanding of thought and behavior. For at least some of the theories and their relation to dissonance theory, I can't help but wonder whose theory is really bigger. Just who is subsuming whom, anyway? It might be instructive to outline the potential for just such a reversal with respect to one of the purported mini-theories. For fairly obvious (dissonance reducing? self-verifying? self-completing? self-affirming? self-questioning?) reasons, action identification theory comes to mind. Beyond responding to a challenge, this discussion will illustrate how dissonance theory has met the criterion of success noted at the outset—the generation of new perspectives that advance knowledge in ways unanticipated by the ancestor.

Action identification theory picks up on a central tenet of dissonance theory: People think about their behavior. In the dissonance formulation, it is the tension among different elements of such thought that drives attitudinal and behavioral change. Early on, Wegner and I also assumed that mental and behavioral dynamics flowed from the relations among various "act identities" and we were also concerned with how such relations moderate the effect of monetary incentives on motivation and enjoyment—very dissonance-like concerns. However, the more we thought about the key process—identifying one's action—the more we realized that it demanded theoretical attention in its own right. As Aronson and other dissonance theorists readily admit, the nature of people's thoughts were not well articulated in the theory. There was no model of information processing, no algorithm for suggesting which thoughts would become prepotent for a person in a given setting. Telling inquisitors to "ask Leo" hardly provided a satisfactory solution to the problem.

Our work on action identification thus quickly centered on specifying the key parameter or parameters underlying the wide range of potential act-identities available to a given person in a given setting. This work made clear that, although various dimensions of thought come and go as a function of context, one parameter was preserved: an underlying organization of whatever identities are available into a functional hierarchy. Morality, competence, and a general sense of self are certainly important components of thinking about one's behavior, but these context-based dimensions do not define people's thoughts at all times—a point which Aronson seems to acknowledge. In contrast, we discovered early on that regardless of content, the various act identities that people offer for their action can always be scaled hierarchically, from lower level identities conveying the specifics or how-to components of the action to higher level identities conveying a more general understanding of the action, indicating why the action was done or what its effects and implications were. In some contexts, the prepotent higher level identities might very well convey a concern with morality and/or competence; in others, though, wholly different semantic dimensions are represented in people's higher level identities, and these may be devoid of explicit self-defining significance altogether.

Research on the determinants of identification level has proven useful in determining what sorts of cognitions are likely to become prepotent in different situations, including perhaps those that are relevant to dissonance phenomena. We know, for example, that when a person engages in an action that is unfamiliar, personally difficult, or requires effort, he or she tends to think about the action in relatively low-level terms. At the same time, this lower level orientation sets the
stage for emergent understanding of the action in higher level terms, because people are said to prefer more comprehensive views of what they are doing or have done. Thus, in a variety of studies, we have shown that inducing people to think about the molecular features of their behavior renders them susceptible to new ways of conceptualizing what they are doing—even ways that are inconsistent with their previous higher level identities for the act.

At the least, then, principles of action identification would help to clarify what kinds of cognitions become predispelling for people in various dissonance paradigms. It might also be possible to reconceptualize dissonance phenomena as special cases of action identification processes. There are some advantages to doing so. For one thing, the notion of identification level and the process of emergence apply to behavior generally, regardless of its a priori valence. Whereas dissonance theory has its clearest application to behaviors that are presumably viewed negatively by subjects (e.g., boring tasks, counterattitudinal essays), action identification theory suggests that anything a person does can come to be viewed in a different, and differently valenced, way. Perhaps more important, action identification processes are not limited to instances of cognitive conflict, but rather apply to anything a person does and thus provide a basis for a general theory of human behavior. Although empirical work with respect to the theory is in its infancy as compared to the more than 30-year history of dissonance theory, research to date has shown how the natural tendency to understand what one is doing or has done applies to a wide range of topics, including prosocial versus antisocial behavior, self-concept stability, skill development, self-control of maladaptive behavior, performance impairment, self-presentation, intrinsic motivation, and personality.1

Of course, the extension of action identification to dissonance phenomena is sheer speculation at this point and may prove to be unfounded. The paradigms employed in dissonance research, after all, are carefully crafted microcosms of rather special social situations, representing a unique and finely balanced blend of a few key variables. Certain of the variables shown to be critical in these paradigms (e.g., choice, commitment, attribution of arousal) do not, as yet, have immediately obvious counterparts in action identification principles. These variables may well exert their impact, of course, by stabilizing certain act identities and/or destabilizing others in accordance with the emergence process, but the theoretical and empirical support concerning this possibility remains to be seen at this point. The investigation of this possibility, and a host of others, seems well worth the effort. Simply assessing what subjects think they are doing at different points in time in various dissonance paradigms, for instance, might provide insight into whether subjects are experiencing conflict between two evaluatively inconsistent high-level identities or, instead, are simply moving from one general conception of their behavior to another via the emergence process.2

I have emphasized action identification processes, but a host of other cognitive processes, including those depicted in Aronson’s other “minitheories,” are potentially relevant as well to understanding what goes on in situations commonly seen in dissonance terms. Automatic versus controlled processing (Bargh, 1989), cognitive business (Gilbert, 1991), and thought suppression (Wegner, 1989), for example, all capture important features of thought that seem to cut across a wide array of topics in social cognition and behavior, and thus warrant empirical consideration. Who knows?—such consideration may verify that the original version of dissonance theory tapped genuine, enduring insights into human psychology after all, or perhaps reveal that the refinements introduced by Aronson and others are right on the money. Or possibly, such research might generate an entirely new way of thinking about human thought and behavior, one that provides a dramatic punctuation in the evolution of social psychology in the same way that dissonance theory did over a generation ago.

Note

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References


2It’s interesting in this regard that overt behavior—actually doing the task—seems to be essential for the production of purported dissonance effects. In doing things, rather than thinking about them in the abstract, one must give at least some consideration to the mechanics of the behavior, and this suspension of high-level meaning in favor of a lower level orientation may provide the critical precondition for emergence in accordance with the cues to action meaning provided in the experimental context (e.g., “getting paid for drudgery” vs. “helping science”). An obvious way of testing this idea would be to employ tasks that vary in their personal difficulty or effort requirements—and hence in their relative identification level for subjects—and observe whether effects resembling dissonance are more forthcoming with the more difficult or effortful tasks. Alternatively, one could employ the same task (e.g., one of moderate personal difficulty) and manipulate subjects’ level of identification with respect to it through instructional sets or disruptions (cf. Vallacher & Wegner, 1987).