

“Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me)” Analysis And Reflection

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Introduction

The book “Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)” is written by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson. It explores cognitive dissonance and biases while explaining self-justification adopted by individuals to rationalize their behaviour. The book allows the reader to reflect on personal conduct in everyday situations and to question our false rationalizations. It forces the reader to self-analyze the course of action taken when confronted by the evidence proving us wrong. It rightly states that in such situations, rather than accepting our mistakes or changing our point of view, we tenaciously justify our actions. The authors regard “self-justification as more powerful and more dangerous than the explicit lie” because it allows us to not only convince others but also convince ourselves that our course of action is the best possible thing that could be done (Tavris & Aronson, 2020, p. 5). Thus, through rationalization, we fail to see the error of our ways and maintain our image as “honest people and not criminals or thieves” (p. 7).

Major Questions

While relating to the concepts presented in the book, many questions arise in one’s mind. Primarily, the reader is forced to think about the reason behind dodging responsibility for one’s actions. Also, why are public figures unable to take responsibility for a wrong decision? Why do couples endlessly quarrel to be proven right? Why do we see others as hypocrites while failing to see it in ourselves? The bigger question is whether we all are liars or we really believe our justifications to be the truth. The cognitive dissonance that occurs as a result of such situations and the rationalization that we adopt provide us with an insight into the process.

Cognitive Dissonance and Confirmation Bias

The driving force behind justifying “our actions and decisions – especially the wrong ones – is the unpleasant feeling” named cognitive dissonance (p. 15). Holding two psychologically inconsistent ideas, opinions, and beliefs leads to “mental discomfort”, which may range from minor feelings of guilt to deep anguish (p. 16). To ease this discomfort, people seek various means that may reduce it. Humans have an inbuilt “need for consonance”, and when presented with information that is inharmonious, we consider it foolish or biased. Through confirmation bias, we find ways to “criticize, distort, or dismiss it” to uphold and even fortify our belief system and achieve psychological harmony.

Moreover, humans tend to have certainty about being right, especially when they cannot undo the situation. The greater the money, time, and effort utilized or the inconvenience caused by a decision, the higher the dissonance and the need to rationalize.

In our daily lives, we come across many examples of cognitive dissonance and rationalization. An example of this can be making a big purchase, say, a house. Once the house is bought, and the buyer uncovers some information that may cause conflicting thoughts, the only solution to silence the inner turmoil would be by rationalizing the purchase. The need to self-justify is greater in this scenario as the decision cannot be easily undone because too much time and money was invested in it. Such an individual would not only justify his actions but would also prompt others to do the same. Such is our need to prove it right. Humans defend not only their conscious choices but also those “we do for unconscious reasons when we haven’t a clue about why we hold some belief or cling to some customs but are too proud to admit it” (p. 30). The human desire for psychological harmony is so great that “even the ones who know the theory inside out” are not “immune to the need to reduce dissonance” (p. 31).

Naïve Realism

The human brain is wired to certain “self-serving habits” which make us perceive our actions to be realistic, correct, and balanced. It is due to this naïve realism “that we perceive objects and events clearly,” and if someone disagrees with our version of events, then they most certainly are unable to see things with clarity. The concept of naïve realism is based on two assumptions. First, all open-minded and fair individuals should agree to reasonable opinions. Second, any beliefs that I have are certainly reasonable; otherwise, I wouldn’t have them. This leads us to believe that if only the other person would listen to us, we would convince them that we are right. If they continue to disagree, we presume them to be biased (p. 54).

The Role of Memory

Cognitive dissonance can also be reduced by modifying or rearranging our memories until they fit the narrative that serves us the best. At the basic level, the human mind tends to selectively “forget discrepant, disconfirming information about beliefs we hold dear” (p. 90). These “dissonance-reducing distortions of memory” not only enable us to understand the world around us but also help us to find our place in it (p. 91). Parent blaming is an example of the biases of memory. Instead of owning up to our mistakes, we self-justify by blaming them for the mistakes that were made by them. Our memory may distort or disremember our role in the narrative, shaping it to reduce psychological anguish by living the “victim narrative” (p. 118).

“The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread”

Introduction

The book “The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread” is written by Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall. The main theme of the book centres around beliefs, especially false beliefs. The authors assert that “holding false beliefs can hurt us” and focusing on human intelligence and psychology to understand beliefs is nothing more than a misdiagnosis that leads to ineffective remedies (O’Connor & Weatherall, 2019, p. 7). Contrary to attributing beliefs to human psychology, O’Connor and Weatherall contend that false beliefs that arise from misinformation are related to social phenomena. The social mechanism of learning from others not only shapes our true beliefs but also makes us susceptible to falsehood. The book forces the reader to analyze the society we live in and realize that the world today is divided by beliefs stemming from fake news and alternative facts.

Major Questions

The authors set to answer questions such as: “How do we form beliefs – especially false ones? How do they persist? Why do they spread? Why are false beliefs so intransigent even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary? And, perhaps most important, what can we do to change them?” (p. 6). The authors posit that our beliefs about the world around us matter considerably as they shape not only our individual decisions but also societal decisions, such as policy matters. Therefore, these beliefs do not occur in a void, rather they have real consequences.

Humans form beliefs by processing the information gathered through experience. Often, these opinions are not consistent with the available evidence, and this failure to process information is regarded as a false belief. Humans probably fail to process information accurately due to “cognitive biases or blind spots, quirks of human psychology that prevent us from drawing reliable inferences from our experience” (p. 7). Since false beliefs result from incorrect inference – and drawing reliable inference is a measure of intelligence, does this imply that stupid people hold false beliefs? If so, is society merely a group of stupid and intelligent people? Since we form beliefs “based on what other people tell us” and because we trust the people we learn from – how can any of us be sure if the beliefs we hold are true or not? Also, what merits the opposing group to question our beliefs since they have also formed them through a similar process?

Spread of Misinformation

The world today is characterized by a boom of information – or rather, misinformation. Putting a spin on facts, marketing, and outright lies has become a trend that has increased incessantly over the past

century. Moreover, technology has further amplified the situation as “misinformation takes the form of propaganda” to serve a particular interest and to endorse a specific idea (p. 9). The use of mass media to propagate personal interest has long been a strategy of governments. This not only aids them in controlling the masses and bending them to their will but also influences the political careers of their opponents. Although political propaganda has certain implications, however, industrial propaganda is considered to be even more dangerous. Imparting “deliberately partial, misleading, and inaccurate information” has long been a practice of advertisers, leading to the formation of false beliefs among the masses (p. 10).

Truth and Misinformation – Forming Beliefs

The authors, O’Connor and Weatherall, elaborate on the notion of truth and falsity through numerous examples. While the book does not describe misinformation, it does discuss the idea of true and false beliefs. The endnote clarifies that true beliefs are “beliefs that generally successfully guide action”, whereas false beliefs “generally fail to reliably guide action” (p. 188). Exploring the concept of belief formation, whether true or false, the authors explain the examples of a scientific community that shares evidence of their work with one another. It is often extremely likely that all scientists within the community would accept the evidence and form a similar belief, regardless of whether it is true or false. For that particular group, the belief holds to be the truth. This example shows that even the most reasonable and rational truth-seekers may form false beliefs influenced by the group they are associated with. Of course, there may be others who may challenge their belief and present new findings.

When forming beliefs, like scientists, all individuals within a society are also influenced by subconscious and conscious motivations. The strongest among these is the need to conform with peers. This “conformity bias” stems from our dislike “to stick out from the pack” even if our “rational judgment” tells us otherwise (p. 84). The role of propagandists among the group is explained from the point of view of policy formation, however, it can be analyzed as a function of our day-to-day life as well. The propagandist within any group functions by manipulating evidence and “biases the total evidence on which we make judgments by amplifying and promoting results that support their agenda”. They may also “play on our emotions, as advertising often does”, and this has nothing to do with evidence (p. 125).

The spread of false beliefs does not always require a propagandist to manipulate evidence. False beliefs can also be propagated by withholding information or selective sharing of information. Although the concept of spreading fake news is not new, today, due to mass media, it is spreading like never before. The question arises: do people believe these outrageous stories? What motivates them to post, share and like these on social media? While some may do so as they may “find them funny or unbelievable, or share them ironically”, there are still those who believe fake news to be true (p. 154). Probably, much can be avoided by imposing sanctions on the spread of misinformation.

Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age

Introduction

The book “Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age” is written by Sherry Turkle. In this book, the author explores the current trends of communication, especially the shift from face-to-face conversations to text messages, tweets, emails, etc., i.e., the mediums of online communication. Although this new form of communication is now widespread, and people prefer online interaction as opposed to meeting in person, they are gradually becoming aware of its consequences. The author addresses two audiences through her book. First, it is for the group of people who see “flight from conversation” as an evolution rather than a problem. Second, it is for those who feel defeated and “mourn the inevitable flight from the conversation and see themselves as bystanders” (Turkle, 2016, p. 14). For both her audiences, the author postulates a solution and suggests that we must allow conversation back into our lives; this way, we would return to one another and also ourselves. Moreover, the ones who are aware of the pleasures of conversation must not step back, rather they must step up and pass on this gift to those around them.

Reclaiming Conversation

With the advent of technology, civilization has changed dramatically. Turkle does not regard technology as unilaterally beneficial as it has stunted our need for conversation. Interaction via technology not only puts pressure on us to maintain a certain profile but also leads to social anxiety and depression. Moreover, it has compromised our ability to empathize with others due to a “difficulty of reading human emotions” (p. 25). In contrast, face-to-face communication develops self-esteem and improves our ability to deal with others. The author does not put forth an anti-technology argument, neither does she persuade her reader to give up the use of phones, rather she suggests a much different use. With a pro-conversation stance, she contends that we must alter our practices. Dividing attention between the people around us and our phones and surfing the internet when we must be enjoying moments of self-reflection affects not only our relationship with others but also with ourselves. Therefore, it is time to utilize technology as per its use and revive the pleasures of face-to-face conversation.

The solitude and Family Conversations

In today’s world, real solitude is absent, and today’s generation is unaware of this meditative state that instils focused awareness. We are constantly bombarded with text messages, tweets, and snaps, and our Facebook and Instagram newsfeeds are unceasingly being updated. Even with our mobile phones on silent, our attention remains diverted. Although our social networks have widened, we are

more alone than ever. Probably the reason today's generation struggles with identity formation is that they are deprived of true solitude. Our core identities are formed during the time of solitude, and without it, "we can't construct a stable sense of self" (p. 61). Even the most innovative ideas may occur to us during such periods of introspection. However, today, instead of seeking solitude by turning inward, we turn to our screens.

Parents must realize the importance of nurturing solitude in developing minds. They must get off their phones and connect with their child, as communication is vital to development. Close parent-child communication also develops empathy, while distant parenting results in less empathetic individuals. Family conversations are extremely important as they "teach children about themselves and how to get along with other people, they show children how listening works, and learn to see other people as different from themselves and worthy of understanding" (pp. 105-106). Through family conversations, children learn to share their feelings, develop empathy, learn the importance of secrecy, and talk it out rather than acting on emotions. It builds and nourishes family relationships, which are "hard to sustain if you are on your phone" (p. 107).

Way Forward

Our society is moving from conversations through technology to conversations with technology. It is high time that we realize the impact of these gadgets on our mental well-being and social relationships and nurture our interpersonal ties, giving value to each bond rather than picking as we please from the vast choices.

Analysis and Conclusion

The three books analyzed in this paper provide the readers with important insights into today's social interactions and information propagation. It explores the human psychology that seeks to comfort any mental anguish that results from conflicting ideas. The authors have presented views that might lead to cognitive dissonance among the readers as it forces us to reflect on our beliefs and practices. Since we are part of the same society, self-reflection leads to a realization that we have indeed abandoned the pleasures of conversation. We all are indeed part of a social structure where, with every beep of the phone, we mindlessly communicate; with every click, we post, share, or like information without proving its merit. And most importantly, when confronted with our practices, as done through these books, we self-justify. Recognition of the problem is the first step to its remedy; therefore, being mindful of what we propagate and valuing relations can be a few steps towards the improvement of the society we live in.

References

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