Journal of Psychology & Psychotherapy
ISSN: 2161-0487

DOI: 10.4172/2161-0487.1000207

Short Commentary Open Access

What we can learn about Psychology from the Maid Narratives: A Case of Cognitive Dissonance

Katherine Stuart van Wormer*

University of Northern Iowa cedar falls, Iowa, United States

Abstract

This brief paper explores Festinger's classic theory of cognitive dissonance as a psychological phenomenon that can be applied to situations of social oppression. This framework is discussed in terms of older white women from the U.S. South who grew up with black women who worked as maids in their home under conditions of racial segregation.

Keywords: Cognitive dissonance; Oppression; Domestic servants; Segregation

How do people who have grown up in a society characterized by injustice and oppression justify to themselves (and others) their role in that oppression? If they were members of the oppressed group, how do they now explain their non-resistance? And if they were members of the dominant group, how do they explain their complicity in the injustice as their families benefited by the exploitation of others?

Today, in the southern United States, a lot of explaining is going on related to the flying of the Confederate flag. A symbol that some took as a representation of one thing (pride in one's heritage) is now viewed as a symbol of something else entirely (race hatred). Southern politicians now speaking in favor of pulling the flag down are called upon to explain why they were so slow to do so. Former defenders are the flag find themselves in a psychological bind. A dissonance is created between the way people want to see themselves and the way others see them as well as between their past beliefs and their present values. The dilemma facing probably all people of an older generation living in more progressive times is how to reconcile one's earlier compliance with a system built on injustice with one's self image as a good person.

Cognitive dissonance is defined by psychologists Tavris and Aronson [1] as "a state of tension that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent". The individual's self-concept is involved in this whole process. Because people generally want to believe they are good, moral beings and that they treat each other well, as Tavris and Aronson suggest [1], an important element of their self-concept is threatened when they are confronted with facts that would seem to indicate the opposite. The concept was originally introduced by Leon Festinger [2] and his associates in *When Prophecy Fails* which was a study of how a group of fanatical believers that the world would come to an end on a certain day would react when that day came and their prophecy was proven false.

The concept of cognitive dissonance is widely considered to be one of the most influential and extensively cited social psychological theories of all time. We could talk about the Holocaust and how many Germans later said, "We just didn't know." We could consider how Americans explained the World War II firebombing of civilians in their homes in Dresden, Germany or atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan--"We did this to end the war sooner." Or how segregationists justified the "southern way of life" in the face of segregation and lynchings-- "Our family always treated the colored people well."

Since this latter example relates to me personally as a southern white person who grew up in the 1950s, it is the mind set of whites, especially those who had black maids, that has always intrigued me. I grew up in New Orleans during an era when there were strict laws of racial segregation on the books. Whites and blacks did not use the same bathrooms, dine in the same restaurants, sleep in the same hotels, or drink from the same water fountains. "White only" and "Colored" signs were up all over. I was disturbed then as a child as I am now about the pieces of information that did not fit together. The very race of people we could not mix with in public were working for us, often in our homes, cooking our food, and caring for the children. The discrepancy between what I was told and what I saw and observed was enormous. My grandfather was a strong believer in "separate but equal" and he was always kind to black people and provided hospitality to black clergy. Seeing black people sitting in the back of the streetcar and discovering they had no access to a public swimming pool or to the rides at the beach, I felt a sense of distress about the whole thing. Then I learned that in the North black and white children went to the same schools, and there were none of the segregation or Jim Crow laws there. But also northern women did their own housework and rarely had maids. It was obvious that my grandfather who strongly believed in "our southern way of life" was a good person. So were my great aunts. Later when I was in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the conflict between my actions and the values of some of my favorite relatives came to a head.

The notion of cognitive dissonance is built on the notion that because most people want to see themselves as good and their reference groups as honorable, they are forced to explain away any flaws in character or culture that reveal a discrepancy between one's image of how things are and the stark realities. To alleviate the tension people might feel due to the discrepancy or dissonance, they typically will draw on one or more defenses. Regarding these defenses, let us consider a situation facing people who grow up as members of the dominant group in a society that engages in blatantly cruel and unjust behavior. The citizens can deny

***Corresponding author:** Katherine Stuart van Wormer, University of Northern Iowa, 610 Tremont St., Cedar Falls, Iowa 50613, United States, Tel: 3192664447; E-mail: katherine.vanwormer@uni.edu

Received July 02, 2015; **Accepted** September 25, 2015; **Published** October 03, 2015

Citation: van Wormer KS (2015) What we can learn about Psychology from the Maid Narratives: A Case of Cognitive Dissonance. J Psychol Psychother 5: 207. doi: 10.4172/2161-0487.1000207

Copyright: © 2015 van Wormer KS. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

the injustice to outside groups, claiming that any discrimination was necessary for the society as a whole or that the minority group at issue deserved its fate. Victim blaming may come into play here. Similarly, they can deny their involvement and that of their family in any of the injustice. They can point to other people whose behavior was far worse. (Members of the White Citizens Council, for example, distinguished themselves from supporters of the KuKluxKlan.) They can say, as many Germans did about the Holocaust, that they did not know about the concentration camps or of the persecution of the Jews [3]. Alternatively, they can apologize for the painful past and for their own involvement in the oppression. Finally, they can disown their past and even, in rare cases, their families.

Bearing these possible defenses in mind and inspired by curiosity about how these older whites would justify their past discrimination against black people, I conducted interviews with 23 older white women from the Deep South, mainly New Orleans and Mississippi, who were known to me (13) or recruited from a social work listserv (10). These interviewees were actually an afterthought to better inform our book, *The Maid Narratives: Black Domestics and White Families in the Jim Crow South*. Co-authored with two African American academics who conducted the interviews of the former servants who now lived in Iowa, the book was centered on these women of the Great Migration and their compelling stories of their life and work under conditions of legal and social oppression. The addition of the interviews and written narratives of the white women served to bolster the black women's narratives. The contrast is that resilience of the black women contrasts with the guilt feelings of the white women, of most of them, anyway.

So the question I want to consider now, which was not the focus of the original study, is how did these now older white people who been reared under the norms of white supremacy reflect upon the world they knew then from the more enlightened perspective of today. Consider the contradictions inherent in a society that voiced democratic ideals shared with the larger society while enforcing a feudalistic form of race relations under Jim Crow laws and customs. Even back then there would have been an inherent dissonance between Judeo-Christian teachings and the doctrine of white supremacy. Any child could see the contradictions and would be apt to question their elders about the whys and wherefores of certain customs. Adult visitors from the North also would regularly comment on the strangeness of the racial etiquette that they observed [4-6]. Southern whites then had a lot of explaining to do to both their own children who had not yet been socialized into the system, and to the occasional visitors from out of town who seemed "not to get it".

To learn more about the intricacies of early 20th century southern etiquette, read John Dollard's [5] classic, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* and Hortense Powdermaker's [7] *After Freedom: A Cultural Study of the Deep South,* C Vann Woodward [8] *The Strange Career of Jim Crow,* and from more recent times, Rogers' [9] *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change.* From the African American perspective, one can find the same themes in the works of Anne Moody [10] (*Coming of Age in Mississippi*) and Maya Angelou (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) [4].

A major concern that I had in my interviews was discovering how older southern whites would reconcile themselves to their roles in a past, the image of which is now tainted by almost universal recognition of the evils of a system built on white supremacy. These evils have been exposed in news media, film, social science, and autobiography progressively and relentlessly since around the 1950s through the present day. My focus was on the years of race relations from the 1920s through the 1960s in the Deep South, the era that remains in living memory.

Findings

The first thing I discovered was the striking reluctance of many older white southern women who were contacted to talk about their relationships with the black women they grew up with. I should point out that my notices in likely places (for example, of the alumni from two private schools I attended) produced very few results. Of those who did respond, including several relatives and close friends, all had grown up with black women cooking and cleaning for them as well as caring for small children.

The following categories emerged from our analysis of the interviewers' words: denial—refusal to admit to having had a servant growing up against reports by others that they did, or denial of the hardship faced by these women; defensiveness—justification of their treatment of their servants as helpful to them; guilt—expression of remorse and anger of their parents' prejudice at the time; providing personal care—stories of the kind treatment accorded to the maids including generous gift giving; blaming the victim—pointing to the ingratitude of the women for the kind treatment they received and to their ignorance and other shortcomings; defiance of the Deep South's social norms—stories of not following the Jim Crow rituals such as allowing the maid to enter through the front door and use the household's bathroom; and becoming an ally through political advocacy and open defiance of the segregation laws. The following defenses did not emerge in the interviews—apologizing to the individuals later in life, offering some kind of compensation, or forgetting one's history and that of one's social environment.

Conclusion

The full interviews are provided in *The Maid Narratives* published by LSU Press. The short summary here has implications for how people learn to live with themselves even when they have participated in societal oppression. Many who have bullied others at school or discriminated in some way against cultural or sexual minorities who now as adults recognize the wrongdoing are in a position that could be characterized as cognitive dissonance. The ghosts of the past can be haunting, and the individual will seek some way to reduce the tension. Cognitive dissonance which elicits tension in the individual who is confronted with ghosts from the past is a phenomenon in many parts of the world (for example, the whites in South Africa and the Protestants in Northern Ireland) where the legacy of the past lives on in a more progressive present era. It is then when individuals from the older generation are likely to be questioned about the past injustices inflicted upon a few and asked what they did about it. Did they stand up against the injustices that were going on or did they conform to norms of the time? Since most people likely conformed to the social norms and laws of their day, the situation is one that is ripe for what Festinger et al. [2] labeled cognitive dissonance. Although these researchers were not talking about whole societies or about social injustice, they were concerned with situations in which a person is presented with contradictory facts that are of an emotionally charged nature. The same phenomenon can be expanded to also be applied to individuals who engaged in one way or another in social and historical oppression. The relevance of this theoretical framework is one that we can draw on in our understanding of human nature in regards to defense mechanisms.

References

1. Tavris C, Aronson E (2007) Mistakes were made (but not by me). A Harvest Book, Orlando FL.
2. Festinger L, Riecken H, Schachter S (1956) When prophecy fails: A social and psychological study of a modern group that predicted the destruction of the world. Harper-Torchbooks, New York.
3. Breslow J, Chheng L (2015) In mapping the Holocaust, a horrifying lesson in Nazi "paths of persecution". Public Broadcasting Company: Frontline. Retrieved from www.pbs.org.
4. Angelou M (1969) I know why the caged bird sings. Random House, New York.
5. Dollard J (1937) Caste and class in a southern town. Doubleday, Garden City, NY.
6. van Wormer K, Jackson DW III, Sudduth C (2012) The maid narratives: Black domestics and white families in the Jim Crow South. LSU Press, Baton Rouge, LA.
7. Powdermaker H (1939) After freedom: A cultural study in the Deep South. Viking Press, New York.
8. Woodward CV (1957) The strange career of Jim Crow. Oxford University Press, New York.
9. Rogers KL (2006) Life and death in the delta: African American narratives of violence, resilience, and social change. Palgrave/Macmillan, New York.
10. Moody A (1968) Coming of age in Mississippi. Random House, New York.