

*Trauma's Legacy
Psychology 607, Winter 2004,
University of Oregon*

*January 12, 2004:
The Politics of Denial*

Part 1: Discussion Questions and Responses

What's Missing from this Picture?

1. "...we do present evidence that (childhood experiences) exert a significant effect on his or her politics" (p. 8) Really? Or do they show an association?

An association is about as much as we can hope for, because an intervention would involve putting people at risk.

A longitudinal study would show a stronger relation, perhaps, but the multitude of intervening circumstances would limit that, too.

Another option would be using therapy as an intervention: the study could show what factors the treatment effects. This might be especially revealing if the treatment didn't address political views.

Pennebaker has demonstrated the effects of writing about feelings as opposed to ideas and strategies for dealing with a trauma (example: unemployment). The subjects who hadn't written about their feelings were less likely to get new jobs, and some evidence indicated subjects who didn't get hired because of showing hostility in their job interviews.

2. Let's bring in your expertise? What evidence is there about choice-making and emotions, in the literature in advertising, psychology, and elsewhere?

Lots. For example there is an aphorism in social psychology that "attitudes are a poor predictor of behavior"—attitudes being cognitions.

The Theory of the Rational Man was disputed through a study that showed that people buy more at the supermarket when they are hungry. (Economists and advertisers, however, don't study scientific research literature that we know of.

For the realms of propaganda and advertising, it has been shown that an increase in irrationality leads to an increase in support for a belief/regime or buying, respectively.

[Side note: there are multiple levels of denial: conscious and unconscious. There is manipulation of denial, and often that happens without our awareness. Sometimes what

looks like denial is an actual unawareness of a phenomenon or fact, which can happen through cognitive inability to comprehend information. On the other hand, we wonder about the extent to which denial can be a planned objective for media or a regime.]

To what extent does denial seem to differ between the United States and other countries we have experience in?

U.S. denial may be greater because we have more to defend, in terms of our position as the ‘greatest country in the world’ or people’s support for the ‘American Dream.’

Smaller countries have less at stake and may have less denial. However, when it comes to an issue that is threatening to a people’s safety and well-being, denial will erupt even there, as in people denying the threat of war.

Level of income disparity in a country may increase the amount of denial: could this be related to a perceived lower level of denial in Canada?

3. The authors point to a dichotomization in our thinking: the “split between good and evil” (p. 8). To what extent is this true (as research-based knowledge) for adults? And do we know about the extent to which it has changed? In other words, do we know if critical thinking skills developed in adolescence during neocortical refinement have decreased relative to different historical periods?

Could it be that it seems our critical thinking skills have decreased only because the world we are living in is so much more complex?

There may be an inverse relation between the level of religious dominance and that of critical thinking. This probably influenced critical thinking over the last many hundreds of years. It is possible that for the last 20 years (or maybe since the sixties?) critical thinking practices have strengthened.

Action movies and video games tend to dichotomize good and evil. Sometimes the news looks like a video game.

An example of the polarization in U.S. is the political criticism of “fuzzy” Al Gore – we demand one kind of image in a leader. Social oppression leads to increased polarization (dichotomization).

4. What do you know about the shift in public access to government documents since 9/11?

They’ve been made inaccessible, across the board.

Hear No Evil, See No Evil

1. Milburn and Conrad have a list of aphorisms associated with the process of denial in chapter 2. Can we come up with some new aphorisms that psychologists and teachers could use with kids and embed in our lexicon that support acknowledging and processing negative affect (as opposed to denial of affect)?

We agreed this would be helpful and will keep it in mind. One possibility is, “The data is in! (Your feelings matter! ...We want to know how it was for you... Talking about it helps....)”

“No, really, I’m fine”

1. “...patients high in denial, though they appear to function better, may ...jeopardize their long term recovery.” Again, do we have a statement about physical health that could be analogized to our political process?

When it first happens, denial is adaptive. It enables people to cope with as much as they can at one time. Absorbing reality at a moderate pace may be adaptive, but denying it isn’t.

A Canadian minister noted US denial that it had done anything to provoke 9/11. (If we get back to the question, we could note that the question of US doing anything wrong was very absent from public discourse.)

When a feeling is stigmatized, denial increases.

6. Do levels of within-person protection from intergenerational transmission of trauma correspond inversely with levels of caregiver attachment classification?

Yes! The data is in.

The Politics of Denial

1. What do you think about Milburn and Conrad’s use of the data about the cost and lack of effect of the death penalty in their argument about the relation of attitudes on the death penalty with personal history of punishment?

Legislators do read this data....maybe sometimes they deny it when other pressures intervene.

The data is in on media violence being associated with violent behavior in people exposed to it. Same with the negative repercussions of spanking.

The timing of getting the facts to the people is important.

2. What has research shown about any compensatory effects of efforts parents make after harsh punishment or emotional aggression of their children? Might

there be an interaction between the level of trauma x cognitive stage of the child x attachment level x child disposition with these efforts? [What do psychological researchers believe about the tenet that if there is a higher order interaction, it reduces or even nullifies the simple effects?]

The plasticity of the brain makes reparations very effective: such a logic is reductionist (reducing the human to his neurons).

And, the sooner the reparations occur, the more effective they are. Nevertheless, reparations are effective even when they come about many years after the fact

Positive interactions create positive changes in emotion and development.

4. I was taught that the ethics of revising a hypothesis after data collection and analysis (adding the gender construct in reanalysis of Milburn, Conrad et al. 1995) is questionable. What do you think? It's surprising that they didn't include the gender construct originally. Poor research design?

At least they were honest!

Anna will contact the authors to see if the second analysis was written up.

Another note:

5. On page 65, the authors state that "girls are more empathic."

This has been contradicted (before and) since publication in '97, especially through Hodges study that found that males were just as empathic when they were offered money for empathic responses! In other words, empathy seems to be a motivated response.

Part 2: Questions circulated prior to discussion

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2. Let's bring in your expertise? What evidence is there about choice-making and emotions, in the literature in advertising, psychology, and elsewhere?

3. The authors point to a dichotomization in our thinking: the "split between good and evil" (p. 8). To what extent is this true (as research-based knowledge) for adults? And do we know about the extent to which it has changed? In other words, do we know if critical thinking skills developed in adolescence during neocortical refinement have decreased relative to different historical periods?

4. Has minimization been consistent in U.S. history? In text books/public education? In the news media? Do you believe that minimization is perhaps slightly less dangerous than outright exclusion of information from the public eye?

5. What do you know about the shift in public access to government documents since 9/11?

Hear No Evil, See No Evil

1. Have psychologists who focus on cognitive processes (neuropsychologists?!) explained the process of denial as one linked to individuals' failure or refusal to "ground" memories or information into memory through the process of verbalization?

2. Milburn and Conrad have a list of aphorisms associated with the process of denial in chapter 2. Can we come up with some new aphorisms that psychologists and teachers could use with kids and embed in our lexicon that support acknowledging and processing negative affect (as opposed to denial of affect)?

3. "The physical punishment of children, we believe, remains acceptable because parents deny the very nature of what they are doing, their motives for doing it, and the consequences of this behavior for their children's emotional well-being and behavior." (p. 22) Does this remind us of our military ethos? If we were to advance that those in charge of the military are educated and informed about developmental and psychological theory, could we attribute motivation to their decisions? Reactions and discussion.

4. How could we tell if our own interpretation of trends and events were biased by our own hostile attribution?

"No, really, I'm fine"

1. "...patients high in denial, though they appear to function better, may ...jeopardize their long term recovery." Again, do we have a statement about physical health that could be analogized to our political process?

2. Does the repeated experience of watching mainstream broadcast news create a psychological dependence on the relief from stress that the denial inherent in it provides?

3. Could dispositional optimism sometimes be easily confused with denial, since it's hard to measure the extent to which persons are confronting their problems? In other words, people could verbalize such a rationalization, and then fail to engage in resolution of their conflicts/problems. Is this something psychologists and educators should keep in mind?

4. Does the term *psychic numbing* seem like one that might be more effective to use in discussing the global political denial with non-professionals? This postulate doesn't

argue that the terms are equivalent: and it might be interesting to talk about the relationship between the two terms.

5. 'Modif(ication of the) perception of threat' sounds like a great therapeutic objective. Is that difficult...or not? What about for the perception of threat by U.S. citizens?
6. Do levels of within-person protection from intergenerational transmission of trauma correspond inversely with levels of caregiver attachment classification?

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5. Did the Milburn, Conrad et al. research address the hypotheses on p. 67? What questions do you have about the first and second studies they did? Problems? Support? Questions?
6. What do you think about these two statements that Milburn and Conrad make: "anger resulting from childhood punishment is associated with holding more punitive political attitudes" (p. 70) and "...our political attitudes...have their source in childhood." (p. 71) ??