Quarterly Newsletter

THE CENTRE FOR LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING IN RISK

Understanding Cognitve Dissonance - Feature Article

I hear many people in risk and safety use the concept of 'cognitive dissonance' interchangeably with the notion of contradiction, ambiguity, paradox or ambivalence, nothing could be more misleading. This is also reinforced by the wikipedia explanation, that cognitive dissonance is some kind of cognitive discomfort (**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance**). However, this is not a helpful explanation of the concept, neither does it reflect the work of Festinger, the originator of the concept.

The theory of 'cognitive dissonance' was first put forward by: Festinger, Riecken and Schachter

(1955) in *When Prophecy Fails*. Within the context of what Festinger (et.al.) explained, there is much more to cognitive dissonance than cognitive discomfort. You can obtain Festinger's book here: **https://archive.org/details/pdfy-eDNpDzTy_dR1b0iB**

The opening line and idea of the book is as follows:

'A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point … … We have all experienced the futility of trying to change a strong conviction, especially if the convinced person has some investment in his belief. We are familiar with the variety of ingenious defenses with which people protect their convictions, managing to keep them unscathed through the most devastating attacks. But man's resourcefulness goes beyond simply protecting a belief. Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to this belief, that he has taken irrevocable actions because of it; finally, suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong: what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before. Indeed, he may even show a new fervor about convincing and converting other people to his view. How and why does such a response to contradictory evidence come about? This is the question on which this book focuses.'

The context for Festinger's study is critical to an understanding of cognitive dissonance. Festinger and colleagues entered into a fundamentalist cult, and researched the phenomena as insiders. The context is essentially religious in nature and this is critical in understranding the force and power of the concept. In particular, Festinger cites 'messianic and millennial' movements as the best examples of context for cognitive dissonance (p.4). Interestingly, both messianic and millennial movements are religiously situated and involve cultic belief/faith. I have also given examples of cults in my book *Real Risk, Human Discerning and Risk* (pp.10-22) for example, The Order of The Star of The East Cult in Sydney in the 1920s. I also discussed the Branch Davidian Cult and the characteristics of Fundamentalism in *For the Love of Zero* (pp. 63-83).

Without a solid understanding of theology and cults, it is not likely that one would really understand the social-psychological nuances in Festinger's concept of cognitive dissonance. The study of the force and power of cults as a window into the nature of culture is critical for an understanding of the nature and force of cognitive dissonance itself. Indeed, for a proper understanding of conversion, and the distress of conversion, one needs to understand the (religious) power of faith/belief.

Living with contradiction, ambiguity, ambivalence and paradox is not an ontological (sense and philosophy of being) stress or struggle. In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Thomas Kuhn popularised the expression 'paradigm shift'. A paradigm shift is tantamount to a major religious conversion, denouncing past faith and belief and acknowledging a total and new transformation in the opposite direction. Kuhn tells us that a paradigm shift has very little to do with logic and evidence. Such a cataclysmic breakthrough has much more in common with Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith' than some slow rational shift from one idea to another.

Often when people in risk and safety speak of 'cognitive dissonance' they just mean some cognitive tension in living, with contradiction, paradox, ambiguity, inconsistency and/or some state of ambivalence. We all live with such tensions for example, all learning involves risk/movement /change, but rarely does this take on the distress of cognitive dissonance. It is only when a belief in risk aversion takes on a religious fervor, as in zero harm, that change could be associated with distress. This is because the ideology of zero harm requires a binary philosophy and any challenge to zero harm is invested in ontological identity. (Even many who argue they have moved 'beyond' zero still anchor identity to zero). So, the rejection of zero harm also requires a rejection of binary thinking and the religious investment one has made in zero harm as an act of faith. Cognitive dissonance brings into play the demand for an 'identity transplant' and 'paradigm shift', this is what Festinger discovered in his studies of cults.

There are a range of critical factors in coming to grips with an understanding of cognitive

dissonance. These factors necessary to experiencing cognitive dissonance are:

1. Religious cultic-like adherence
2. Ontological investment
3. Binary philosophy/ideology
4. Deep conviction anchored in action
5. Related 'sunk cost'
6. Length of commitment
7. Power of attachment and belonging
8. Threat of loss in social support
9. Powerful emotions of fear, distrust and oppositionalism

Festinger's discussion and historical analysis in the book When Prophecy Fails is instructive. All of his examples regarding cognitive dissonance are religious and cultic. Having experienced personally the power of 'Millerite' theology I can attest to Festinger's discoveries.

What then are the implications for understanding the nature of change and conversion?

The idea that belief/faith in an ideology that is 'anchored' in religious/cultic commitment can be shifted by rational argument is naïve. This is because most people in cults are not aware that they are in a cult, it's a 'catch 22'. Such an awareness only becomes available to the faith-adherent in cognitive dissonance. It is only then that the believer wrestles with the distress of conversion and associated grief of loss and a new 'leap of faith' into a paradigm shift.

Some of this discussion is captured in my video presentation of a model of a 'cognitive dissonance cycle' **https://vimeo.com/202589604**. The model of the cycle is represented at the header of this article.

Of course, this discussion also brings into focus nature of Conversion. By what method is it best to 'help' people into cognitive dissonance? What are the ethical concerns associated with such 'helping'? What methodology underpins the challenge to help people experience release and freedom from dogma and fear? How can such helping resist superiority and arrogance? What of dialogue? How is dialogue maintained with a contra-ideology in order to find the point of connection and doubt?

Much more about this will be available in my new book to be released later in 2017, *Tackling Risk, A Field Guide to Risk and Learning*. However, there is a range of discussion on cognitive dissonance in *Risk Makes Sense* and *Real Risk*.

Why does this matter? What can we do about it?

The pathway to learning requires doubt, unlearning, dialectic, questioning, seeking and uncertainty. Unless these are present in conversation and dialogue it is doubtful that either person in such dialogue will move. Movement and dialectic (inbetweeness) are essential to learning.

Tannen (*Conversational Style*; *Framing in Discourse* and; *The Argument Culture*) shows how not to be frustrated by the idea that evidence and logic shapes belief-faith. It is not likely that you would venture thus far in this feature article if you did not already have some thirst to question and learn. The binary mindset resists any such dialectic and seeks the constructed certainty of monologue. Unfortunately, risk and safety are the industries of 'telling' and monologue not listening and learning.

So, if you are sense-able with your time and, battling someone in a binary state of faith-belief. The way forward is only through doubt, questioning and cognitve dissonance. Without such it is pretty certain that one is wasting time. And, be careful of questioners that only seek to ask rhetorical questions or only question for entrapment and confirmation of belief. Often such are **'firelighters' or sociopathic**.

So, the key to learning is an environment of enquiry. Such an environment needs to create a climate of safety as well as comfort with discovery, exploration and shared vulnerability, so that cognitve dissonance is less painful and so a new identity (with support and belonging) can be visualised. This is the way forward to a new ethic of freedom for those trapped in binary discourse. Our task in the social psychology of risk is to help create such environments.

The Return of Eugenics in Safety

This is the title of an article written recently by Fraser Nelson that is a timely reminder of the **Social Psychology of Eugenics**. Many don't really know this word **'eugenics'** but do know about the atrocities of the Nazis. The word 'eugenics' was popularised by Francis Galton in 1883 and signifies the argument that justifies the manipulatuon and rationalisation of certian 'types' from a population. **The argument is usually based on a notion of 'good'.**

Eugenic ideas were embraced in the 1880s by scientists, politicians, feminists, and many others, including Alexander Graham Bell, Woodrow Wilson, Victoria Woodhull, and Thomas Edison. In 1907, Indiana became the first state with a forced sterilization law, allowing doctors to castrate or sterilize people in institutions against their will. The Supreme Court's 1927 Buck v. Bell decision upheld such laws. In the 1920s in the USA the idea of 'fitter families' became the mantra for those who wanted to sociallly and clinically control people deemed 'unsuitable'. You can download a book from the 1920s about population sterilization **here. You can download galton's works here.**

The idea of Hitler was to get rid of the 'problem people' and reproduce only pure people of the Aryan race. However, in recent times there have been similar but more subtle efforts to rid society and organisations of so called 'problem people'. In the 1940s the Nazis sterilized over half a million people in order to create 'a better society'. Surely you want a better society? You can read more about the history eugencis **here. A history of eugenics in Australia here. A video on eugenics is here.**

In the strange world of risk aversion, people who take risks are deemed 'a problem'. There are even safety consulting organisations in Australia that propose a psychological test that supposedly selects risk takers in a business. It doesn't matter that there is no scientific evidence for such a psychological indicator, there is just a promise to reduce incidents and make the workplace safer. What could be wrong with such a 'positive' message. We surely don't want people to be harmed, zero harm is what is wanted, by whatever means, right?
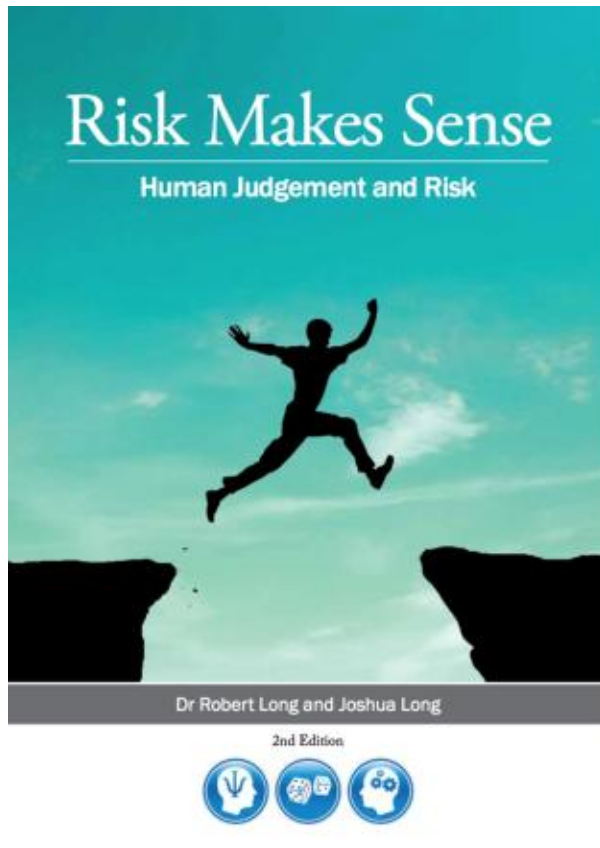
The problem is that just because one has a good idea of 'ends', never justifies unethical 'means'. There are always by-products and trade-offs in all decision making regardless of desired ends. We may want everyone at work to be safe but manipulating a population of people by some bogus test to get such an outcome can only be evil. Besides, the idea that the elimination of risk takers from a population is a good thing is crazy. Even if such a thing was possible this would mean the eradication of all innovation, agility and creative thinking. There is no learning without risk.

If your business or organisation is confronted by an organisation that advertises this bogus test, it must be rejected. It is anti-safety, anti-human and anti-learning.

I have written about eugenics in other places:**https://www.safetyrisk.net/safety-eugenics-and-the-engineering-of-risk-aversion/**

https://www.safetyrisk.net/to-err-is-human-to-forgive-divine/

Bulk Book Offer - Risk Makes Sense

As a special oppostunity for subscribers to this newsletter, the following offer is available.

A bulk order of 6 copies of *Risk Makes Sense, Human Judgement and Risk* is available for $50 (including postage) by direct order to **admin@humandymensions.com.**

Risk Makes Sense is structured in such a way that each chapter can be used as a study guide, with questions at the end of each chapter. This is ideal for a reading group or training group wanting to learn more about risk. **This is a saving of $90.**

This offer may also be helpful for those wishing to help others learn about the Social Psychology of Risk using the book as a give away.

Because postage is so expensive to outside Australia, this offer is only for subscribers in Australia.

Going With Your Gut

One of the messages of **One Brain Three Minds** is the importance in understanding that we have **One Brain but Three modes of decision making**. One mode, **implicit-tacit decision making,** is often expressed as 'gut decision making'. (To read more on implicit thinking and decisions the best to read is Michael Polanyi *The Tacit Dimension*). You can read about examples of implicit-tacit decision making **here.**

Collective tacit decision making is also possible. This is where whole populations and groups make gut decisions, what Jung called **the Collective Unconscious**. This is when whole groups of people make decisions based on long held cultural beliefs
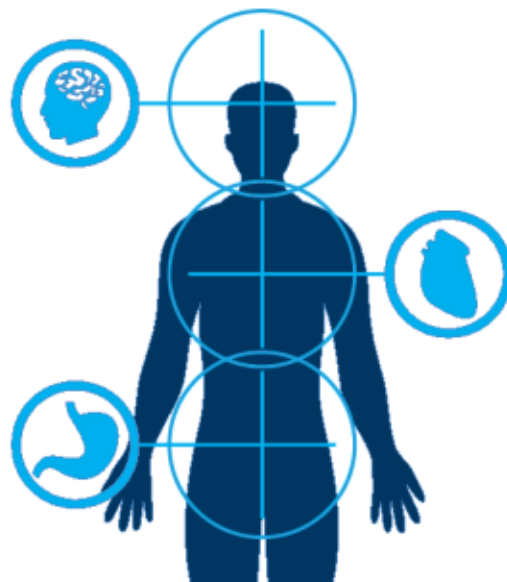
and, undertake decisions without really thinking. We see such thinking with many faith-belief positions such as with the **anti-vaxxer debate.**

Hutson (*Scientific Americal Mind* March/April 2017) demonstrates a problem with relying only on gut decision making. Whilst it is good that we have the advantages of **heuristics** for rapid and effecient decision making, it is also good to be able to think through things rationally if one has the time. Hutson demonstrates how we often read the emotions of others and groups wrongly when we just rely on tacit knowledge. So the message is to use one brain AND all three minds if we can when it comes to critical decision making. In our busy lives and under hectic pressure to 'get the job done' it is no wonder that we often get things so wrong and misjudge risk.

Missing Legs Illusion Goes Viral

This picture above recently went 'viral' (**http://nymag.com/selectall/2016/12/girl-missing-legs-on-couch-optical-illusion-goes-viral.html**). Can you see the problem? The explanation for the illusion is in the article.

Approaching CLLR Workshops

The offer of workshops continues with some cancelations and relocations. To keep on top

of workshops on offer please visit the CLLR calendar (**http://cllr.com.au/events/**)

The next workshop starts tomorrow 19-21 April and is the long awaited Semiotics Masterclass. Special discounts and places are available with 28 participants currently registered. The Semiotics Masterclass is quite different from the introduction to Semiotics but both contribute to the accreditation of the Diploma. The Semiotics Masterclass tackles the work of Roy Fitzgerald the facilitation of Metaplan thinking. A special rate for the Semiotics Masterclass is in place for those with previous studies in the Social Psychology of Risk. Roy Fitzgerald is the second author in the latest book due out later this year: Book 6 in the series on risk - *Tackling Risk, A Field Guide to Risk and Learning.*

The next workshops are both scheduled for Canberra:

The iThink Masterclass on 7,8,9 June 2017 and,

The SEEK Workshop on 5,6,7 July 2017.

A New Zealand Roadshow is now planned for 24-28 July 2017.

To find out more about these workshops or to attend this week please write to: **admin@cllr.com.au**

New Facebook Group

Only for those with four or more units of study in the Social Psychology of Risk.

A new facebook discussion, research and learning group has been created for those interested in the Centre for Leadership and Learning in Risk. The purpose of the group is to help with high level research, further study and learning in the Social Psychology of Risk. This is a closed group.

If you are eligible and want to join please make a request to **admin@cllr.com.au**

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Book Competition

What would a CLLR Newsletter be like without a chance to win a book. See above the solution for the last competition. Happy reading to the successful competitors.

Here is the new competition: This time you can win a copy of *Risky Conversations* by naming who is attributed to the notion of a 'leap of faith'. Who is known for that saying? Write the full name of who you think it is and email to **admin@cllr.com.au** for your copy. The first 10 correct entries will be posted a copy and include you postal address in your submission. Generally all prizes are gone within 60 minutes of posting the Newsletter.

Of course, the reason why all the books in the series on risk are situated across a chasm is exactly because Dr Long defines risk as: 'The uncertainty associated with human action and the trust and faith required to suspend uncertainty to take that action.' Hence the semiotic theme in every book of risk as a 'leap of faith'.

The Footprints of Consciousness

This is the title of a neat feature article by Christof Koch in the latest copy of Scientific American Mind (pp. 53ff). In this article Koch traces the history of reasoning including, the idea that the human heart was once considered the seat of reason (Aristotle).

I recently had a debate with an engineer who argued against the perception that we can tell someone is 'acting without thinking'. I argued that I could tell a person was in a trace-like state because of cues in behaviour. the engineer in his debate virtually denied the existence of an unconscious.

Koch informs us that the world was heart-centred for 12 centuries until the publication of Cerebri anatome in 1664 by Thomas Willis. From then on Western society has been neuro-centric. Indeed, the recent elevation of neuroscience as the new cure for all human ills is a trend worthy of its own analysis.

Similarly, the faith-belief in 'machine learning' is also a trend that is concerning as is the anthropomorphic attribution of learning to a machine as if machines can be persons. Amazing how a self generating algorithm is now equated with 'learning'.

The reality is, noone knows where consciousness resides nor unconsciousness. Koch's article

demonstrates that there is still much more to learn in understanding consciousness.

Need an Effective Risk and Safety Diagnostic?

MiProfile is the only diagnostic globally that evaluates social psychological conditions and culture in the workplace. With a global data base in excess of 60,000 participants the MiProfile can benchmark any industry and provide a snapshot of underlying sub-cultures in risk in any organsiation and industry.

The unique methodology, demo executive summary and more information can be obtained here:

http://www.humandymensions.com/services-and-programs/miprofile/

A video presentation and overview can be viewed here: https://vimeo.com/24764673

The MiProfile survey tool captures implicit knowledge and, with Dr Long's extensive analysis provides extraordinary insights into the social psychology of risk and 'collective unconscious' in your business. Contact Rob for more information or ask for referees from many of the organisations who have undertaken the survey recently rob@humandymensions.com

Contacts

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Websites

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