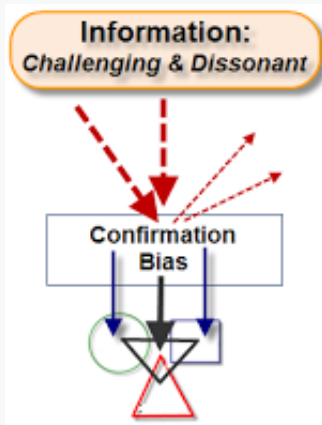


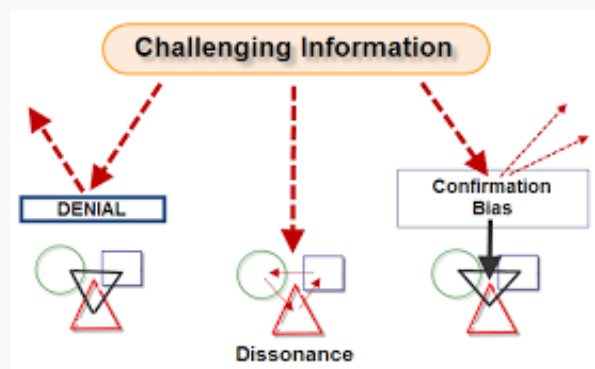
FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 2009

Understanding Cognitive Dissonance Part V: Confirmation Bias



Confirmation bias describes the human tendency to interpret new information in such a way as to (subconsciously) confirm what one already believes, a type of selective thinking. When confirmation bias manifests, information that contradicts one's preconceived ideas and assumptions fails to catch the attention of the individual, or it is ignored or downplayed. Errors in logic, faulty statistical analysis/interpretation and errors in memory result from this type of bias of thought. New information that confirms one's favored hypothesis is considered good data, and any information that disproves one's hypothesis is considered

and defined as faulty data.



~~In this **diagram** and **for the purposes of this discussion** of the overall phenomenon of cognitive dissonance, I have depicted confirmation bias only as a filter that does allow some information in through the barrier. Please note however that confirmation bias can just as easily result in a complete and total rejection of all new information (denial), not only a partial filtering of information exclusively. I have singled out "denial" separately, but confirmation bias also plays a role in both denial as well as filtering out and accepting only selected information.~~

The very remarkable skill of the human mind is its desire to find meaning in things, noting patterns in events and seeing only what we wish to see. Sometimes I think that much of the Christian life involves just reviewing all that we've been working so hard to ignore, as God works in us to purge, correct and redeem. Our true skill as human beings (particularly when

following our flesh) is not really our ability to realize truth as much as it is to evade it. A few years ago, I reviewed a scientific article that presented research about a particular issue, and it was so biased and flawed that I could barely believe that anyone had bothered to submit it for publication. The author selected only the data that supported what he had hoped to find. As Blaise Pascal once wrote, *"The heart has its reasons that reason knows not."*

This reminds me of a quote from an evolutionist that I will paraphrase (their name escapes me at the moment):

We believe in evolution, not because of scientific fact or evidence, but because the only alternative is creation, and that is unthinkable.

Leo Tolstoy also made this comment, one of several similar statements found within his writings:

I know that most men, including those at ease with problems of the greatest complexity, can seldom accept the simplest and most obvious truth if it be such as would oblige them to admit the falsity of conclusions which they have proudly taught to others, and which they have woven, thread by thread, into the fabrics of their life.

For the Christian, we should definitely practice some bias, but our bias manifests not as confirmation bias as it is described here but as bias after we have looked squarely at all of the truth and evidence that we find without ignoring any of it. Our bias should manifest in how we put all of the evidence we find into perspective, not through denying that which seems to challenge us. Christians should engage the world truthfully without intimidation then apply the Word of God to what we encounter, bringing out thoughts captive to Christ. I'm reminded of the Serenity Prayer that says *"Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it."*

In summary, I have to agree with Dr. Albert Mohler as he expressed the Christian's responsibility in *"Confirmation Bias in a Fallen World"*:

The reality of confirmation bias and its threat to intellectual integrity is one reason that Christian thinkers must read widely and think carefully. We must not limit ourselves to reading material from those who agree with us, fellow Christians who share a common worldview and perspective. Instead, we have to "read the opposition" as well -- and read opposing viewpoints with fairness and care.

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