



Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Bonus Episode: Good Accidents with Elliot

Aronson

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Elliot Aronson:

It was one of the great accidents in my life, and I've had a lot of really good accidents, I think.

Andy Luttrell:

Hello again, or maybe hi for the first time. I don't know. A couple weeks ago I did a deep dive on the theory of cognitive dissonance. It was the grand conclusion of the first season of this podcast, but I'm releasing some bonus episodes that are the full interviews with some of the experts in cognitive dissonance. Last week, I posted my interview with Joel Cooper, and this week I'm excited to share my conversation with Elliot Aronson. Aronson got his PhD in 1959 from Stanford University, working with Leon Festinger on some of the first experiments testing dissonance theory.

From there, he went on to academic positions at Harvard, the University of Minnesota, the University of Texas, and finally at UC Santa Cruz. In 1972, he authored a celebrated social psychology textbook titled *The Social Animal*, now in its twelfth edition. In 2001, he coauthored the book *Age of Propaganda*, a book introducing the general public to persuasion research. And in 2007, with Carol Tavris, he published *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)*, which introduced the world to the ins and outs of cognitive dissonance and other cognitive biases. The two of them also had an article in *The Atlantic* last month about the role of cognitive dissonance in people's choices during the COVID-19 pandemic. I'd also recommend his autobiography, *Not By Chance Alone*.

Anyway, as a junior social psychologist myself, it was obviously a real thrill to get to talk to him about his life and his work, and I think you're really gonna enjoy this conversation with the incomparable Elliot Aronson.

So, I thought one place that we could start is that actually one of my favorite psychology origin stories is the story you tell in your book about how you stumbled into the world of psychology while you were at Brandeis. Would you mind telling that story?

Elliot Aronson:

Oh yeah. I was very naïve, and I had to declare a major. Well, the background is that I was born in 1932 in the middle of the great economic depression, and my father was uneducated. He had something like a sixth or seventh grade education, and was an immigrant, and he was unemployed.

He was an unskilled or semi-skilled laborer, and when the Great Depression hit, we didn't have enough food to eat or enough money to buy... to keep the house warm in the wintertime. We were really poor. And then my father died while I was in high school and my notion was one of the reasons you go to college is to get a good job afterwards, and I figured, "Well, what am I gonna major in?" And I decided to major in economics because it seemed like a practical thing to do, but I wasn't liking it very much.

And then one day I was having a cup of coffee with a young woman that I was trying to impress and she had to go to class, and so I figured I'd go with her to her class, and she said it was a lecture class in introductory psychology, and I figured maybe we can sit in the back of the room and hold hands or something like that. Those were innocent times. And I got her to class and it was a course in introductory psychology, being taught by a professor who was brand new to the university, had just gotten there that year or maybe the year before, named Abraham Maslow, and I didn't know that name or anything about him.

He started talking and what he was talking about was the psychology of prejudice. Now, when I was a kid growing up in a blue collar town, I had to go to Hebrew school, because my parents were fairly Orthodox Jews, and every Jewish kid went to Hebrew school, and we lived in a neighborhood that was... I think we were the only Jewish family in that neighborhood. It was very anti-Semitic. And coming home from Hebrew school, especially in the winter when it was like 6:00 in the evening and dark, I was frequently waylaid by gangs of teenage hoodlums who would push me around, yell anti-Semitic epithets, and sometimes they'd even rough me up. And after one of these encounters, they roughed me up a little and so I was sitting on the curb nursing a bloody nose and a split lip and trying to clean myself up a little before I came home, because I didn't want my mother to see the blood and get scared.

And I was sitting on the curb and pondering why these kids hated me so much when they didn't know me, and why they hated Jews so much, and wondering if they were born hating Jews, or if somebody had taught them to hate Jews. I was maybe nine years old and I didn't know much, but I was really confused by that. Why did they... And I figured if they got to know me better and saw what a sweet, and innocent, and harmless little kid I was, would they like me more? And then I wondered, gee, and if they liked me more, maybe they would hate other Jews less. Maybe that would show them that, you know, we're not so bad. And those were things I remember vividly. It's one of my vivid childhood memories.

So, there I am sitting in Maslow's class and he's talking about the psychology of prejudice, and he raises the very questions that I had raised 10 years earlier while sitting on that curb down in Revere, Massachusetts. And I got really excited and I was holding hands with the young woman that I was at that moment courting, and I immediately let go of her hand and started to take notes, and I lost the girl, but I gained something much more valuable, I think, because the very next day I switched my major from economics to psychology, and gradually I was... I was a kind of a shy kid when I was in college, but Maslow made it easy for me to get to know him, and I got to know him quite well in the last two years of my college career, and it was one of the great accidents in my life, and I've had a lot of really good accidents, I think.

Andy Luttrell:

To set the stage for the dissonance stuff, what was psychology like at that time? When you were entering Stanford, just to put into relief how dissonance theory really shook things up, what were sort of the prevailing views at the time and why was dissonance so revolutionary?

Elliot Aronson:

There were two major threads in psychology at the time. One was still the psychoanalytic. Freud was still very important in the mid 1950s, and the other major thread, of course, was radical behaviorism. B. F. Skinner was a very powerful force and it entered into social psychology. Well, both entered into social psychology, but more so general reward reinforcement theory, which said we do things in order to get reinforced, and Skinner, as you know, is primarily a learning theorist, but he was non-theoretical in the sense that he was just a very practical guy. How do you get rats and humans to do things and to remember things? And you do it by schedules of reinforcement.

So, learning takes place that way, and then by extension, we learned to love the things that we're rewarded for. We love our mothers because they give us food, and tenderness, and love, and even Harry Harlow's work on rhesus monkeys, which was aimed at challenging reinforcement theory, but what he showed in his most famous experiment was that infant monkeys prefer creature comfort to actual food reward, even if they're hungry. And that was an interesting finding, of course, but it still can fit under the rubric of reinforcement theory. Whatever is reinforcing by definition is the thing you want to do, whether it's food or creature comfort, and that will make the learning more effective, and also by secondary reinforcement, make you really love the provider of that.

Well, that was the dominance thing, and what cognitive dissonance theory showed is that human beings think, and because we think, we try to figure things out. And the way I would look at it, the way I came to look at it is that we also have a self concept that is extremely important. An extremely important part of our nature as humans. And so, for me, when I started working with Festinger, that's what really excited me. I took a seminar he was teaching, which is... He was brand new at Stanford. He and I arrived at the same time, 1956. He as a really... an enfant terrible. He was a really very bright guy, 39 years old, full professor, one of the highest paid faculty members on campus at age 39, and I as a first-year graduate student, and Festinger also had a reputation for being a genius, and he also had a reputation for being an extremely harsh, critical, impatient, angry young man, which he was.

He also had the capacity to be warm and encouraging, but in order to get to the warmth, you had to go through an awful lot. There was a very high barrier there, because he did not suffer fools gladly, and his seminar, there he was this high paid guy, and he was teaching a seminar. The first course he taught at Stanford, which came in the winter quarter of my first year as a student, and hardly anybody wanted to take his course, because his reputation had preceded him. And only about five of us in the class, and he was everything he was cracked up to be.

He was a genius and he was very, very tough. But nobody would dare to come into that class the least bit unprepared, because he could be very, very harsh. But all in the service of getting us up to speed, and... Well, I don't think that was his motivation. His motivation was to teach the material and to get us thinking about it. It was tough, but boy was it good. And he was just

developing the theory of cognitive dissonance at that time, and what came out of that course were two experiments. One that Jud Mills and I designed on the severity of initiation, which was an idea that I had and I ran it by Mills once when we were walking back from the classroom, from Leon's class, and Mills got excited about that idea and we designed the experiment and brought it to Leon, brought the design to Leon, and he was very excited about it and said, "Go do it." And he couldn't find anything wrong with it. He liked it as we had set it up.

The other one, which was I think the single most important experiment ever done in social psychology, was the one... It was by Festinger and Carlsmith. Merrill Carlsmith was an undergraduate at the time, a senior, and that's the experiment where if you're offered \$1 or \$20, you do a terribly boring task for 45 minutes, like packing spools, or turning a screw, sort of like what people might do on the assembly line. You do this terribly, and then after it's over, you rate the task, and everybody rated it terribly boring, and then you're told in a very effective way that there's somebody waiting out in the next room to be the next subject, and you were in the control condition. In the experimental condition, that person, that future participant is about to be told that the task is really interesting. We just want to see whether if they're told it's interesting, they will find it more interesting. But you have to be told in a casual way, so you're just coming out of the experiment. I'd like you to tell that guy that it's a really interesting experiment and explain why you found it interesting and everything, and I'll pay you a dollar for doing that. In one condition they were paid a dollar, the other condition, they were told they would be paid \$20, which they were.

And Carlsmith actually handed them the money and they did it. And then afterwards, somebody interviewed them, somebody from outside, from the psychology department, but having nothing to do with the experiment, about what happened in the experiment, was the experimenter polite and stuff like that, and then what was the task you did and how did you like it. And the results were that the people who were paid \$1 convinced themselves that the task was very interesting, whereas the people who were paid \$20 really could see it for what it was. A terribly boring task.

Now, that flew right in the face of reinforcement theory, because by the notion of general, of secondary reinforcement, the prediction would be, and I actually talked to Fred Skinner about this a few years later when I was teaching at Harvard, and he couldn't really explain it. He really couldn't explain it. He tried. We had lunch together just once and he thought, "Well, I'll come up with an answer in terms of reinforcement theory and I'll give you a call." And he never did give me a call.

But it was an amazing experiment. Now, the experiment I did with Jud Mills showed that if you go to-

Andy Luttrell:

Can I actually pause you here? I want to ask you about the initiation study in a bit, but can I ask you a couple questions about the Carlsmith study?

Elliot Aronson:

Sure.

Andy Luttrell:

So, that, like you said, I think that was definitely such an important moment in dissonance, because it just... The evidence was clear and confrontational to what people were thinking at the time. And what I'm curious is did you all have a sense of how important that was about to be at the moment when you were running it and seeing the results? Or did that only become apparent later?

Elliot Aronson: No, no. We knew it at the time. We knew it at the time. I actually worked with Merrill Carlsmith to bring him up to speed as an experimenter, because he was a pretty stiff guy when he was an undergraduate. He got a lot better. He became my graduate student at Harvard and we stayed together, but as an undergraduate, I knew him and liked him at Stanford when I was a first-year graduate student there, and so I worked with him, I trained him to be an effective experimenter, and we knew it at the time. We thought... I wasn't sure that experiment would work, but I understood the theory and when those results were coming out, it was very exciting. We knew what we had there. Yeah.

More so the Festinger-Carlsmith experiment than any of the others that we did, but that one was really provocative, and that's why I think it was important, because it really got social psychologists thinking about thinking. Thinking about how important that brain we carry between our ears is, because people do distort their perceptions in a way that... Well, the way Festinger put it, that reduces the cognitive dissonance that comes from the thought, "Why did I lie to that person? Why did I tell him that lie? Well, actually it wasn't such a lie. The task wasn't so bad. Actually, turning that screw was sort of fun and I got some exercise for my wrist or whatever." But you can blind yourself to... You can't turn a sow's ear into a silk purse, but you can turn it into some kind of purse. And that's what people do.

And a lot of the debriefing we did after these experiments really showed us how deeply the subjects were involved in the process of dissonance reduction to the point where they would argue with us when we gave them the explanation to the experiment after it was over. You know, in my experiment, for example, where we showed that people who go through a severe initiation, a lot of unpleasant effort in order to get into a group, like the group better than people who get in going through little or no effort to get in. When I explained our theory to them afterwards, most of the people in the severe initiation condition would say, "Well, that's a very interesting theory. So, you're saying that people who go through a lot of effort to get into the group," they asked us, "Why did I do all this work to get into such a boring group? Well, actually, you know, it wasn't so boring. There was a lot of stuff in there that was interesting."

"You know something," the guys would say to me. "It's an interesting theory and I'm sure it's right for some people, but that's not what happened to me. I really like the group. I liked it from the outset." And since there was hardly any overlap between the severe condition and the other condition and the subjects were randomly assigned a condition, of course, the fact that they really believed that the theory didn't apply to them, but that they really liked it, was extremely exciting. Because it showed to us. They showed us that dissonance reduction operates below the level of consciousness.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah, so we can talk about that initiation study in a little more detail. So, I recently went through the original paper again, and one of my favorite quirks of that paper is that it has one reference, which is to the 1957 dissonance book, which is not something you can get away with anymore.

Elliot Aronson:

I know. I know. You can't get away with it anymore, and boy, someday I'll tell you about my PhD dissertation defense. I'll save that story for later.

Andy Luttrell:

Okay. Well, so for the initiation, I'm just curious. Can you recall where the initial idea for that came from? I forget. You said it was your idea that you told to Mills, right?

Elliot Aronson:

Yeah. I had been reading for another course some stuff by John Whiting, the anthropologist, and he was talking about how different Indigenous groups usually... Some have initiations into adulthood, some don't, with a child becoming an adult, and some of the initiations are extremely severe, and so I was reading that for a course I was taking in anthropology, and it dawned on me because I was also taking Festinger's course in which he was talking about dissonance theory, and I was thinking, "Well, I wonder if the people like the tribes in Africa that go through severe initiations, if they end up being more patriotic and really liking being a member of their tribe much more than people who go through a mild initiation. That would be interesting." Because they would really have to believe that their tribe was more exciting because they went through all that.

And I began to think about the military, and being in the Marines, and going through basic training, and thinking, and I was thinking, "Boy, you could compare people who are drafted into the Army with people who volunteer for the Army, and therefore they're volunteering for this, to go through this terrible basic training. They might end up really liking the Army better than people who were drafted." And then I thought, "No, but that wouldn't work, because they probably liked it more before they entered the basic training." And then I thought about fraternity initiations, and then I thought, "No, that wouldn't work because if a fraternity required a severe initiation, then people who didn't care about being in that fraternity wouldn't have joined that one if it had a reputation for severe initiations. If they just wanted to be in a fraternity, they would go into any fraternity that required a mild one." And so, it would be predetermined. It would have nothing to do with the initiation. It would have to do with the reputation of the fraternity.

So, then I thought, "Well, you have to do an experiment." So, we have to randomly assign subjects to different conditions, and that's when I started to talk to Jud with it, because I had thought about this the night before, and then we went into Leon's class and he was talking about similar kinds of things. Similar ideas. And then it began to clarify in my mind, and within a few days, Jud and I had the design of an experiment.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah, so could you describe what that experiment looked like and what the results were?

Elliot Aronson:

Briefly it was we wanted people to volunteer to be in a discussion group that was to meet for several times, and what could that discussion group be that would make people want to volunteer to be in it? And so, we thought, “Well, if they were talking about sex,” this was the 1950s, “all students are interested in sex.” And then we thought, “Okay, so that would be the discussion group.” And then what kind of initiation to have? Well, it has to have something, some barrier to it, some difficult thing, and then we thought, “Well, what if they had to show that they could talk about this by reciting a list of really provocative words and passages from novels like *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* that describe sexual things?” And then we realized that the only way to do it... We started with, the first experiment was with college women, and they had to... We asked them to go through either a mild initiation, where they read dictionary words, like sexual intercourse or something like that, or words that could be embarrassing to them, and read the passage from *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in order to get into the group.

And then we had a third condition where there was no initiation at all, and then they put on headphones and were told, “Your group, the group that you’re about to join is already in session, and these people have been meeting for a couple of times already.” And they put on the headphones. We turned off the microphone, because we don’t want you to participate. But it was really a tape recording of a group discussion that was extremely dull and boring. And this was a group that they had just committed themselves to join for the next few sessions.

So, the people who went through the severe initiation, we hypothesized would be asking themselves, “How come I went through hell and high water to get into this boring group?” And they would begin to see some of the boring things as a lot less boring than the people in the mild or no initiation condition, which is the way it came out.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah. I sort of sometimes think about that as similar to when you spend a lot of money on something, and then you kind of have to like it, or you have to hang onto that possession for a little bit longer, even if when it arrives it’s not quite as perfect as you initially thought it was.

Elliot Aronson:

I think that’s... Any effort or any commitment, whether it’s money, whether it’s embarrassment, whether it’s hard work, you will like the thing better if you work hard for it. You will find things about it. You will blind yourself to some of the really negative aspects of it. I think that’s why people stay in marriages often longer than a rational person would, a marriage that isn’t going anywhere, a marriage that is abusive, or not fulfilling, or anything like that, because there is an investment in that. People usually don’t get divorced when they first start realizing that this marriage is never gonna work. You ask people who have divorced after five or six years of marriage, and their main answer will be, “I stayed in it longer than I should have.” And they don’t quite know why. They try to find the good things in it, and they try to ignore the negative things in it, and the more energy and effort they put into it to begin with, the more likely they are to do that.

Andy Luttrell:

And in common terms, just to even make this even more clear, especially I like the way that you put it in the book with Carol about it's your justifying these things. You're looking for justifications or rationalizations for something that you've already done.

Elliot Aronson:

Yeah. And the way I put it now is I think cognitive dissonance is most powerful when it threatens your self concept. Most people think of themselves as smarter than average, more ethical than the average person, more competent, and kinder than the average person. So, if you can get them, if they do something that makes them feel stupid, or unkind, or unethical, or incompetent, then they will have to try to justify that thing that they've done by convincing themselves that it was worth it. That if they hurt another person, for example, and there's a lot of research on this one, if you do damage to another person, you try to convince yourself that that person deserved it, that he would have done the same to me if he had the chance. And that helps you maintain your image as a nice person in spite of the fact that you did that person harm.

If you do something really stupid and you think of yourself as a smart person, you have to convince yourself that it was a reasonable thing to do, that you couldn't have done it any other way, and most people would have done it that way. And that's a very, very powerful notion.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah, so I'm wondering in how the self concept is related to dissonance. I'm curious, are you saying that this is an alternative account of what dissonance is? Or that this is like a compounding factor to dissonance as Leon originally put it?

Elliot Aronson:

As Leon originally put it, any two cognitions that don't fit together can be dissonant with each other. So, if one looks at the initiation experiment, one can say the cognition, "I went through hell and high water in order to get into this group," is dissonant with the cognition, "This is a lousy, stupid, uninteresting group." You know? Okay. That's the way Leon would put it and that's the way I put it when I designed that experiment.

Four, five years later when I was thinking about what is dissonant and what isn't dissonant, and by the way, that's... In Leon's book, *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, which came out in 1957, he has an example of an event that he says isn't dissonance. He wanted to show where does it end. And he said, "Look, suppose you go driving in a dark night and it's raining, and you're on a lonely country road, and you get a flat tire, and then you go, and you look in your trunk and you don't have a spare tire." So, he said, "Do you experience dissonance?" And he says, "No, you don't," in the book. "You don't experience dissonance because you might be scared, you might be angry, you might be frustrated, but there's no dissonance there."

And I remember when I was a graduate student, I said, "What do you mean, there's no dissonance? What kind of an idiot would go driving late at night without a spare tire?" And he said, "Yeah, but what's dissonant with what?" And I couldn't answer that question. There was a little bit of... The reason that Leon came up with that example is the theory was not really clear about what is dissonant and what isn't dissonant. And you could design, you could come up with a hypothesis,

like the initiation experiment, or the Festinger Carlsmith experiment, and yeah, that's clearly dissonant, but finding out what isn't dissonant, you really have to set the parameters of a theory. And that's what Festinger was trying to get at, and I remember in 1959 when I was like the... I was his majordomo in training the younger people, the younger students to be able to do the research and stuff like that.

I remember joking with them once when someone would come to my with a hypothesis and say, "Well, Elliot, do you think that's dissonant?" And I would say, "You know, I'm really not sure. If you really want to know what's dissonant with what, ask Leon." And Leon got so angry at me for doing that, because I did it as a joke, you know? But in reality, Leon and I would argue about these things all the time, and I couldn't put my finger on it. But a couple years later, after I got out of Stanford and I was teaching at Harvard, I was thinking, "Okay," I sat down and I actually came to the conclusion that really at the center of dissonance theory, what really makes two cognitions dissonant is if one of the cognitions involves the self.

So, I could recast, for example, the initiation experiment as I am a very smart person and I've done a very stupid thing. I went to hell and high water in order to get into a group that turned out to be boring and worthless. Okay? So, those are the two cognitions. One of them is my self concept. If my self concept was that I was a dumb guy who always did stupid things, there would be no dissonance, you see? So, but for most things, the two ways of looking at it are highly correlated, so it doesn't really matter a lot, but in some situations... So, then I went back, and I remember seeing Leon at an APA convention and saying, "Okay, I got it all figured out. And with your example of the guy having a flat tire on a lonely country road late at night, and I would say what kind of an idiot would go out? And that's exactly the point. That my self concept, that I'm a smart and careful person, is dissonant with the cognition that I went out driving on a lonely country road without a jack in my car. Without a spare tire in my car. Or with a spare tire that had gone flat in my car. These are things that smart people don't do and that's what's dissonant."

And Leon said, "You're right. But, but," but we argued about whether I should be stating it that way, because he thought that limited the scope of the theory. And he was right that it did limit the scope of the theory, but sometimes you have to limit the scope in order to make it more accurate. And there's usually a tension between how broad the theory is and how tight it is. And so, my idea was not to say... There wasn't a new theory. It was saying at the center of the theory, dissonance is most painful when it comes into contact with an aspect of our self concept. And here's the thing. Sarah Silverman talks beautifully about what happened when she found out that her dear friend, who she really loves, Louis C.K., was guilty of doing something really terrible. And she could not reconcile those two things. Well, there's dissonance there, of course. How could my dear and wonderful friend who I love have done such an awful thing? That's dissonance.

My point is it would be much more dissonant if she had done it. If it were her self concept. So that yes, we do experience dissonance when our self concept is not involved, but it's strongest and most powerful when our self concept is involved. And gradually Festinger came to realize that that was true.

Andy Luttrell:

For you, thinking about that part of dissonance or that claim about dissonance, what stands out as some of the strongest evidence that really the self concept is what magnifies this inconsistency?

Elliot Aronson:

Well, the things that... Some of the things that we did, that Carlsmith and I did, and that John Darley and I did when he was my student, showed that you can convert the self concept into an expectancy about what you're able to do, and we could build up expectancy, we did experiments on performance expectancy on a task that people didn't know much about. We called it social sensitivity. And to some people, we gave them experiences that made them realize that they were not very good at this, at social sensitivity. They were socially relatively insensitive, and we gave them several situations in which they did poorly in what we called social sensitivity, and then we gave them a situation in which they did very well, and they were surprised by that good feeling and didn't accept it. They tried to reject success because they had already established the fact that they weren't good at it.

Now, that was a very daring experiment, but it's since been replicated several times in a lot of different ways, and it shows that if we can take a small aspect of the self concept, like how well you do on a particular task, get you to know that you're not very good at it, and then when you do have a very good performance, that gets rejected. And of course, we set up all four possible conditions, and we did show that the self concept plays a role. Not everybody has a high self concept. Most people in the world walk around with a self concept that's at least better than average, so that when we do an experiment, any kind of behavior that we would consider negative, or stupid, or unethical, or unkind, would be dissonant with the self concept of 95% of the people in the world.

It really is a Lake Wobegon world, you know, where almost everybody thinks they're above average on almost everything.

Andy Luttrell:

Would you say that dissonance is like fundamental, or some fundamental principle of social psychology? The context for this question is dissonance has survived a long and generative life in social psychology, and the question is how much of that is because it really taps into something that is really fundamental to what it means to be a human person in a social world? Whereas the alternative when I talked to Joel Cooper, he seemed to suggest that some of what the staying power has been that it's been a confrontational theory, that people have enjoyed arguing about it for that long, and maybe there's nothing uniquely special to the theory. It's just captured the attention of psychologists.

Elliot Aronson:

I don't know. I have a lot of respect for Joel Cooper, but I think he may be wrong on this one. I think it's a basic aspect of human behavior. Not just of social behavior. There's a lot of situations in which cognitive dissonance works not on a purely cognitive level, but on a cognitive/emotional motivational level, that has very little to do with social psychology. And I think that it's a fundamental aspect of human behavior that has been long ignored, and because it's been long ignored, it's produced a lot of excitement and it's survived an awful lot of negativity, so that when

we first came out, when Leon first came out with the theory and we were doing experiments, there was a lot of skepticism and people were trying to find reasons why the initiation experiment worked, or reasons why the Festinger Carlsmith experiment worked, that were in terms of reinforcement theory.

And none of these alternative explanations held up. And then in the 1980s, when a lot of attention in social psychology turned to pure cognition, then people were trying to come up with alternatives to cognitive dissonance theory by saying, “Well, you don’t really need motivation. It’s a purely cognitive thing.” Daryl Bem’s notion, for example. And Daryl Bem’s notice is perfectly reasonable for a great many experiments that were done under the rubric of cognitive dissonance, because Daryl Bem’s explanation can account for it. But then there are a lot of experiments, Joel Cooper having done some of them, the Zanna Cooper experiment, which I really liked, shows that you really do need motivation.

So, I think the theory is basic to human nature. That notion has been ignored for a great many years, but now in the past 50 years or so, 60 years, since Festinger did the theory... Oh my God. 64 years. It’s produced a great many experiments. Over a few thousand, I think. It’s still a reasonable explanation for an awful lot of behavior in society that would seem puzzling on the surface.

Andy Luttrell:

My last question for you is sort of moving away from dissonance specifically, but you’ve lamented the fact that high impact experiments, what you call high impact experiments have largely vanished in social psychology or declined over the years. And so, I’m curious, what do you find so important about that methodology of high impact experiments, and what is psychology missing now that those methods are out of fashion?

Elliot Aronson:

Well, high impact experiments... What it is is something important is happening to the person. I mean, we all know that the laboratory is an artificial environment. And how can anything that happens in the laboratory be taken seriously? That’s what we were facing in the 1950s, but when you take an experiment, and let me say, let me take the highest impact experiment I can think of off the top of my head, Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiment. You take that experiment and you say, “Yeah, it’s an artificial experiment.”

Look, how many times in your life have you been called on to give a series of gradually increasing electric shocks to somebody in the next room, and you hear them screaming, and you’re giving them 450 volts. How many times are you apt to do that? It’s unrealistic. Well, it’s only unrealistic in the sense that that particular thing never happens to a person. But it’s extremely realistic in the sense that anyone who served as a subject in that experiment has to take it seriously and has to behave as if it were happening to him in the real world, because that is his real world, even though it’s in the confines of the laboratory.

He’s sweating real sweat. He’s very upset at the time that it’s happening. That’s what I call experimental realism. That happens in a high impact experiment. If you’re doing something simple, some paper and pencil thing, or asking someone how they think they might behave in a

given situation, the person has the ability, and people are very smart at this, to sit back and instead of reacting the way one would react in the real world, they're thinking, "Let's see. How would a normal person react in this situation?" And they do it so that there has to be something happening that provokes the individual to perform the kind of behavior he would perform if it happened to him in the middle of Fifth Avenue, for example.

Why move away from that? Well, there are reasons for moving away from that, that I fully understand, and am sympathetic with. Human subjects committees, IRBs would... A lot of the experiments that people would like to do can't be done anymore because of the snowflake phenomenon, that IRBs consider human beings to be extremely sensitive and hypersensitive and could fall apart if they were in an experiment like the Milgram experiment. Or certainly anything like it.

I did some research recently... not recently, but in the 1990s, to get people to conserve energy and to get people to wear condoms when they're having sex and things like that. Now, the condom experiment, which I was doing because we were in the middle... In the 1980s, we're in the middle of the AIDS epidemic, and so it was aimed at saving lives, or at least preventing some sort of venereal disease, to get college students to use condoms, and the IRB wouldn't let me do the experiment, even though very little was happening to subjects in the experiment, and it took me two months of argumentation to get them to relent when the subjects who were in the experiment were very happy to have been in the experiment.

So, I think that the IRBs have been... We've given them too much power. But there are other factors involved. You know, it sometimes takes three or four months to do a high impact experiment. It takes an awful long time. And when people were doing experiments in cognitive psychology it became very easy to do an experiment. People can do an experiment now on computers and you can do 30 subjects at once. And it becomes a lot easier. You can get more publications that way and that... People who count publications, and they do, the deans do that, I can understand why some of the younger psychologists want to get a lot of publications out.

But it doesn't take away from the fact that the high impact experiment is more realistic, it gives us answers to questions that we couldn't have gotten any other way, and I really hate to see the interest in that diminished.

Andy Luttrell:

I also think there's something to those experiments helping illustrate the concepts we're doing. So, for example, you mentioned the water conservation study, the hypocrisy, and what's amazing that study is that you were able to measure how long people spent in the community shower, right?

Elliot Aronson:

Right.

Andy Luttrell:

And I love, I teach that all the time, because it so clearly shows that the behaviors that we're doing every day are being shaped by those same processes in a way that I think about a time intentions measure doesn't illustrate as easily.

Elliot Aronson:

Yeah. Well, all you need is a waterproof stopwatch.

Andy Luttrell:

Well, I don't want to take any more of your time. Elliot, thank you so much for taking the time to talk about this stuff. This was really a treat for me to hear some of those early anecdotes about where dissonance came from and your involvement in it.

Elliot Aronson:

It was a pleasure, Andy. I enjoyed talking to you.

Andy Luttrell:

All right, that's it for this bonus episode. I'm gonna take a couple weeks off, but I'll be back again soon with new episodes of Opinion Science. To make sure you don't miss that triumphant return, be sure to follow the podcast on Facebook or Twitter. It's @OpinionSciPod. And subscribe to the podcast using Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, whatever you use. You can get the links at OpinionSciencePodcast.com. Hey, and while you're there, take a second to leave a nice review of the show. After 20 episodes, it already feels like forever, but the show is still very young and has a lot of growing to do. Rating and reviewing the show, sharing it with your friends and family, all of that goes a long way, so thank you for your help in spreading the word. Until next time, take care and be kind. I'll see you again soon. Bye-bye.