

## Cognitive Dissonance and Gay Activism

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I've seen it suggested that the people who hold on to certain scientific or political beliefs with quasi-religious tenacity do so because of some "strong emotional reasons". Indeed, the debate surrounding controversies such as the normality/immutability of homosexuality, anthropogenic climate change, and Arab-Israel conflict frequently spills over from a rational, dispassionate analysis of the facts into acrimonious ad hominem attacks, and even outright physical violence. The passions certainly run high, but so are the stakes. A great deal of money and power is involved -- research grants, salaries, book contracts, television interviews.

A climatologist who dares to suggest that human activity has little to do with global climate will find himself ostracized and grant-less just as swiftly as a geneticist who dares suggest a correlation between race and IQ. The actual scientific findings (however subtle and ambiguous) are quite beside the point.

I'm not saying these people are necessarily cynical hypocrites. There's the powerful effect of cognitive dissonance. Our brains have evolved to suppress or re-interpret inconvenient facts, thus smokers tend to minimize the actual risks of smoking. If it's popular, profitable and secure to proclaim X while proclaiming Y gets you into real trouble, many people begin to sincerely believe X. (If I proclaim X but don't believe it then I'm a hypocrite and a coward -- no, no, I'd better truly *\*believe\** X.)

Cognitive dissonance cuts both ways. A gay activist might claim that due to my religion or internalized social homophobia, I cannot accept the normality of homosexuality and therefore am driven to invent up all kinds of research and "healing" processes. I can turn that around and ask, why are you so passionately infuriated at the thought of a man changing his orientation? Is it because

somewhere in the back of your mind you wish you could live a normal life and only by clinging to the belief that change is not possible do you excuse yourself from the hard work of achieving real happiness?

The vehemence and venom with which some gay activists react to our work is strongly suggestive of cognitive dissonance and their own deep insecurities. This is not the calm disagreement of people who simply subscribe to an alternate theory of sexuality. The possibility of *\*any\** man changing his orientation is a threat to *\*all\** of gay activism.