Book Reviews

Chapter 12, “Leadership and Individual Responsibility: Encouraging Ethics.” It opens with an interesting article by Kenneth Ashworth, “Ethics Advice to a New Public Servant.” It also includes an excerpt from John F. Kennedy’s inaugural speech regarding the importance of the “city upon a hill,” and an article presenting Eliot Spitzer as a “moral exemplar” by William B. Eimicke. The chapter is a valiant attempt to conclude the book on a positive note, exhorting us that public values in public administration are indeed alive and well, and worth fighting for.

While the book ends on a positive note, it feels incomplete, because the last chapter is the conclusion of the four major areas discussed in Part III. There should have been a Part IV, or perhaps a closing article, to bring it all together and complete the circle so well presented in the preceding parts—foundation, issues, and resolution.

The editors assert that the book is intended for three audiences: public servants, students, and scholars. The writings included are diverse enough to accomplish this purpose. The book provides a multi-faceted study of public sector ethics appropriate for any advanced undergraduate or graduate class, for it presents materials that are both theoretical and practical. The old adage “Jack of all trades, master of none” is appropriate, because the book provides great breadth of discussion and will speak to readers at all levels and in all sectors, but it will not develop experts in any one facet of public administration ethics. At times it falls short of making a clear connection, but most readers should not have any trouble drawing those conclusions on their own. Many thought-provoking discussions will arise from the topics and issues addressed in this book, discussions that are greatly needed not only in the field of public administration ethics, but throughout society as a whole.

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Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me):
Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts

BY CAROL TAVRIS AND ELLIOTT ARONSON
Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 2007

In Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me), social psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson apply Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance to various challenges to integrity in the political and administrative arenas—for example, professional conflicts of interest, professional intuition (rather than open inquiry that clouds judgment), biases as triggers of self-justification, the inability to recognize past mistakes, and psychological barriers to reconciling contradictory viewpoints. Briefly, Festinger asserted
that “cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent,” thereby producing discomfort ranging from pangs to anguish (p. 13). The deceptive “trick” is to enlist some self-justifying rationale to circumvent this troubling condition, a human tendency with considerable potential to compromise the ethical character of public service. As writers, Tavris and Aronson demonstrate particular finesse in packaging an impressive body of scholarly research into an engaging format that will appeal to a general readership (Aronson was Festinger’s graduate student at Stanford in the late 1950s).

The introduction asks how “Fools, Knaves, Villains, and Hypocrites” can live with themselves—drawing largely upon the self-justifying logics of past and present political figures—as the lead-in to their first chapter, which explains Festinger’s assertions and then traces their implications in a variety of private and public situations. Pivotal in the discussion here is the “pyramid of choice” model reflecting dissonance between two conflicting cognitions. Initially, two like-minded persons could marginally favor alternative views (close to the top of the pyramid). Yet over time, each engages in a progression of self-justifications that slides them down to the wider base of polarizing differences. Particularly cogent is the quotation from Watergate figure Jeb Magruder about the “paranoid climate” of the Nixon White House: “Decisions that now seem insane seemed at the time to be rational. . . . We were past the point of halfway measures and gentlemanly tactics” (pp. 35–36).

The second chapter examines “ego-preserving blind-spots” often manifested in the form of personal or professional pride. These perceptual obstacles relate directly to issues involving conflicts of interest and the appearance of impropriety confronted by those in public life. One section of the chapter surveys “The Road to St. Andrews,” a journey of self-deception on the part of political figures embroiled in the Jack Abramoff scandal. Yet public officials are no more inclined to pride and prejudice than others, as shown in an observation of a small group of members of a devoutly religious sect touring the Tolerance Museum in Los Angeles. Visitors enter the main section of the museum through one of two adjacent doors, the first marked Prejudiced, and the second, Unprejudiced (this door remains locked). “When visiting the museum one afternoon, we were treated to the sight of four [of the religious] pounding angrily on the Unprejudiced door, demanding to be let in” (p. 41).

Although the next two chapters focus on mental health professionals and particularly on psychotherapists, they are helpful in demonstrating the sources of dissonance in public organizations as well as the self-justifying tactics adopted in response. Chapter 3, “Memory, the Self-Justifying Historian,” keys in on memory as a selective and reconstructive process that biases conversations about the past. In public organizations, biases can skew one’s account of institutional history—dissonant with the accounts of others—to justify one’s agenda. In Chapter 4, Tavris and Aronson sternly criticize psychotherapists who pass over scientific method and evidence in favor of their intuitions as a basis for professional determinations. The authors focus on clinicians who aggressively try to coax out repressed memories, “knowing” that where there’s smoke, there’s fire. As Tavris and Aronson
point out, psychiatrists are trained in
medicine and medications, but rarely
learn about scientific method, whereas
most psychologists “have a knowledge
of basic psychological findings” (p.
103). They aptly sum up their argu-
ments with the claim that “science is
a form of arrogance control” (p. 108).
Their proposition holds that a spirit of
inquiry counteracts intuitional self-
deception and brings to mind Herbert
Simon’s classic essay warning against
reliance upon a priori reasoning that
derives from the “proverbs of admin-
istration.” Perhaps inquiry is a tough sell
for students and practitioners of public
management—as with psychothera-
pists—because, as the authors suggest,
the brain is hard-wired to reject discon-
firming, dissonant evidence.

Tavris and Aronson stay focused
upon tendencies to reject disconfirm-
ing data in the next chapter, in which
they explore prosecutorial conduct in
the face of incontrovertible evidence
of wrongful convictions, as well as the
nature of the investigatory procedures
leading up to those verdicts. They
play upon a popular television drama
for their title to Chapter 5, “Law and
Disorder.” Here their discussion ex-
plains why many prosecutors refuse
to acknowledge that “mistakes could
be made” in police investigations and
trial processes—particularly in light of
DNA evidence that presumably clears
those convicted. Tavris and Aronson
lament that those serving in the crimi-
nal justice system—police detectives,
attorneys, judges—are seldom trained
in the areas of human perception,
memory, or decision-making under
uncertainty. Instead, presumptions of
guilt tend to be based on “the certain-
ties of pseudo-science,” for example,
the “principle” that a truly innocent
person could never be forced to make
a false confession (p. 153). Such a
claim is fundamental to the widely
used manual Criminal Interrogation
and Confessions (Inbau et al. 1962),
the bible of interrogation methods used to
train more than 300,000 law enforce-
ment officials in effective ways to elicit
confessions (p. 141). Clearly the “Law
and Disorder” chapter takes on special
pertinence in light of the successes of
the Innocence Project, the recent Duke
University rape case, and questionable
interrogations of detainees accused of
terrorism. Nonetheless, the proclivity
to reject evidence that calls one’s past
judgments into question resonates
in numerous professional settings,
particularly those in which accepted
practices enclose learning apart from
an open process of discovery.

After exploring the destructive po-
tential of cognitive dissonance for
marriage in Chapter 6, Tavris and Aronson
proceed in Chapter 7 to the “brambly
territory of betrayals, rifts, and violent
hostilities . . . [that] may differ in cause
and form but are woven together with
the single, tenacious thread of self-justi-
fication” (pp. 188–189). Here they are
careful not to overlook the complexi-
ties involved. However, they identify
two common elements of nearly all
conflicts, ranging from family feuds
to international crises, from which
justifications emerge. First, most con-
frontations involve contested claims of
origins that in turn define blame—for
example, at what point (and why) did
U.S.-Iranian relations sour: In 1953
when the United States backed the coup
bringing the shah to power? In 1979,
when Iranian students took Americans
hostage? Or currently, because Iran
provides Iraqi insurgents with weapons
for use against American troops?

Second, conflicts are typically fu-
eled by conflicting narratives of injury
and injustice—that is, who are the real
(or more or less culpable) perpetra-
tors and victims? On the question of whether villains believe they are “doing evil” (the authors’ words), Tavris and Aronson argue that they do not. As an example, they discuss the case of Charles Grainer and Lindie England in the Abu Ghraib scandal, pointing out that both soldiers justified their conduct with the assumption that the prisoners deserved mistreatment. Further probing the justifications for imposing inhumane acts, the authors suggest that there is a linkage, however counterintuitive, between a strong (rather than weak) self-image and willingness to inflict injury. The logic here is that if folks as terrific as me can do this, then those targeted surely have earned their fate. This proposition is especially significant regarding the intensity of the justifications proffered by individuals, occupational groups, or even nations that typically claim the moral high ground. The chapter concludes with a consideration of how “truth and reconciliation” can come about. Specifically, perpetrators need to recognize and atone for their actions, and victims must abandon their demands for retribution (p. 209).

The concluding chapter begins with the fable of a man asking a guru for the secret to a happy life. The wise guru answers, “Good judgment.” To the next question, about how to achieve it, the guru responds, “Bad judgment” (p. 213). In other words, the progression between claiming “mistakes were made” and admitting “I was wrong” can be awkward and humiliating but also liberating. As a case in point, the authors look to Oprah Winfrey’s tribulations in publicly promoting the published memoirs of an ex-convict and later discovering that parts of the book had been falsely concocted. At first, Winfrey attempted to escape her painful dissonance by blaming his publisher, but she later came clean by “owning up” in front of her television audience. Ultimately, we need to acknowledge human proclivities for self-justification in the face of dissonance. Interestingly, Tavris and Aronson cite the need for external mechanisms as guardrails to prevent us from sliding into self-serving rationales. In the public arena, ethics laws and codes of ethics serve this purpose. Yet organizations should treat those who have the courage to admit mistakes with sensitivity and support. Efforts to recognize dissonance as a fact of life and then deal with it would be all the more possible in a culture that accepted the inevitability of mistakes within humankind and among its public servants in particular.

It is hoped that the preceding chapter summaries make a convincing case for enlisting Mistakes Were Made—the work of two psychologists—as a key resource for graduate instruction in public administration. Through its engaging examples, the book can convince even the more self-confident of students of their ethical vulnerabilities in what Stephen Bailey (1964) called the morally ambiguous contexts that arise in public service. Beyond this, Tavris and Aronson anchor their advocacy for scientific inquiry in graphic human terms. Indeed, their case-supported argument that we can actually injure people through a smug reliance on our own intuitive “wisdom” adds a clearly ethical dimension to instruction in research methods.

The conversational tone of this book disguises its significant contributions to theory and research in the subfield of government ethics, only two of which are mentioned here. First, the book’s focus on individual dissonance in the small group takes the air out of the familiar “bureaucracy is bad” theories, because it counts the government
agency as but one of numerous social arenas from which self-deception can emerge. Second, the book confirms the gnawing realization of public sector ethics researchers that the stretch from moral cognition to actual behavior calls shrilly for experimental research, an enterprise difficult for many in the public administration academy to undertake. In summary, Tavris and Aronson’s *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)* offers anyone interested in government ethics, whether informed citizen, graduate student, or ethics researcher, rich insights into the psychology of human conduct.

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**REFERENCES**

