



Research dissonance

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ABSTRACT

While academics increasingly recognize the complexity of phenomena that do not easily conform to our reductive understandings, it sometimes remains difficult to reconcile this with a need for clear and conclusive arguments. In this article I share the contradictory forces and unresolved discrepancies in my own work as a means to better understanding the process of coming to terms with empirical and theoretical messiness. In particular, I draw on the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance to better understand the psychological influence this concept has in pushing us to make sense of the world in a way that downplays contradictions, counter-trends, complexity, gaps and unresolved loose ends. Having identified this largely subconscious dynamic, the pursuit for an agentic suspension of the need for cognitive harmony can be a productive means for thinking through the results of our research. Using my own work understanding the impact of the U.S.–Mexico border on the Tohono O'odham, an indigenous group based in Arizona and Sonora, I share how the perspectives of the groups with which I work has helped me think through contradiction in writing up the results of my research. For a more complete understanding I must embrace the counter-currents at play and alternative understandings of these events and places—even if I cannot fully explain away such incongruent forces.

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“Allah is too big, and too open, for my Islam to be small and closed.”¹

[Jehangir Tabari, The Taqwacores (Muhammad Knight and Zahra, 2010, 59:21 min.)]

1. Introduction: A (personal) crisis of representation

In August 1999 I attended a meeting of the Border Trade Alliance in Tucson, Arizona. As was to be expected, the issue of cross-border business topped the agenda. At one point a representative of the Tohono O'odham Nation stood to voice concerns the tribe had about being caught between two countries rushing into an accelerating global partnership. The importance of economic topics was not disputed, but what about reuniting the indigenous Tohono O'odham of southern Arizona and northern Sonora who remained divided by the border despite increasing economic integration? How could this fit into the agenda? Other issues not even imagined at this meeting would also become apparent to me in the coming decade: striking

increases in cross-border illicit traffic and corresponding law enforcement (Luna-Firebaugh, 2005; Madsen, 2007; Singleton, 2008), a conjoining of border and national security concerns after 11 September 2001 (Ackleson, 2005; Olmedo and Soden, 2005; Jones, 2009; Madsen, 2014a), and an even further awareness of cultural distinctions between Tohono O'odham living on either side of the border (Spears, 2005; Madsen, 2014b). National and global forces are often perceived as contributing to the demise of local cultures and even eroding the independence and security of local economies (for examples from the Tohono O'odham context, see Lopez et al., 2002; Fazzino, 2008) and this representative's voice was a plea for consideration, a counter-narrative to global trade and integration of capital and a call for increased consideration of the impact this was having on local border residents.

The ideas presented were likely quickly pushed aside in the minds of most attendees, but they peaked my interest and set me on a path over the next few years to further consider just how the Tohono O'odham were faring in their battle for cross-border identity and unity. Eventually, however, the activist perspective that inspired my journey receded to the background of my work. As I pursued my dissertation (Madsen, 2005), worked on the Tohono O'odham reservation at the local tribal college, and took a tenure-track position at my current institution my understanding of the set of circumstances faced by the tribe solidified. The dominant dynamics at play here were long-term forces that

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¹ The book version reads “Allah's too big and open for my deen to be small and closed” (Muhammad Knight, 2004, p. 185). “Deen” is an Arabic term referring not only to “religion,” but more specifically a way of life grounded in religion (in this case, Islam).

worked to divide the Tohono O'odham in various ways (Madsen, 2007; Soto-Berelov and Madsen, 2011; Madsen, 2014a; Madsen, 2014b). Cross-border solidarity was waning even among the Tohono O'odham.

I have confidence in the validity of my interpretations, but they are also only part of the picture and should not blind me or others to the fact that there are still some forces at play that favor Tohono O'odham cross-border interests. Furthermore, while I am careful myself not to get caught up in the idea of a vanishing Native American culture, there is a risk that some could see work that emphasizes the global dynamics of borders at the expense of local and subaltern communities as a reinforcement of the idea of a static Native society in need of preservation (or, alternatively, not worth saving) rather than a dynamic nation carving out its own new but unique path—still steeped in O'odham tradition—in a challenging world. In other words, just because efforts to preserve and re-construct a contemporary cross-border identity are not dominant or do not look like cross-border (or even pre-border) unity did in the past does not mean that they are any less valid.

This paper explores my own work as a manifestation of post-structural anti-essentialism and how the multiple understandings that grow out of that framework are constrained by the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, a psychological phenomenon that is hypothesized to push one to strive for intellectual consistency. By extension, my argument is that geographers more generally can add value to their work by actively seeking out and elaborating on counter-currents and other discrepant understandings in their own case studies and theoretical ponderings. Even if we recognize that the foci of our research rarely fits in the tidy categories and theories of academic study, too often we are inclined to dismiss contradictions as manifestations of personal perspectives (indeed, I find it difficult to get away from that term in this paper!) or downplay incongruences as political points of view rather than take up the challenge of incorporating inconsistent influences and interpretations as an essential part of our writing. Life outside the pages of academic journals can be messy and is not always easily made tidy through our theoretical frameworks (Law, 2004). Even the relative openness of a post-structural world-view (if one can be so defined) has its constraints from which one may sometimes find it useful to step back lest post-structuralism itself become canonical (Schechner, 2000).

This paper is not so much intended to convince readers of the need for more post-structural theorizing (there is plenty of work out there on that topic) but to provide a path for epistemological and empirical consideration of conflict in our research. In what follows, I propose a model for incorporating contradiction and counter-currents that draws on consideration—and ultimately suspension—of the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. Along the way I delve more deeply into how my work has benefitted from the cultivation of contradictory insights presented by others, identify my personal inspirations in this regard, and discuss ways in which conflicting ideas in my research can be effectively accommodated. I conclude with some comments on how what I term “research dissonance” has been productive in my own work in terms of seeking to better understand the Tohono O'odham relationship with the U.S.–Mexico border. In many respects, only an insider or someone who closely follows a subject on an intimate level can point out the contradictions and gaps in a given topic. And since we frequently serve as de facto gatekeepers of our own research it can be difficult for others to point out what is missing. So while this article points out a few examples of the benefits others have achieved by incorporating contradiction, ultimately I dig deeper into my own work to illustrate how counter-currents and absences can be played down to the detriment of a fuller understanding of a topic and the journey to embracing rather than downplaying those contradictions.

My writing here is also intentionally reflexive (inspired by the likes of Haraway, 1988; Ellingson, 2009), a personal manifesto of sorts on the process of coming to terms with empirical and theoretical messiness. I write here not just for post-structural theorists—who are likely either nodding their heads or shrugging their shoulders as they read much of the content on these pages—but the rest of us who could benefit from a path to embracing the messiness of our field work and empirical observations even if we may not generally subscribe to a post-structuralist theoretical perspective.

2. An agenda for acknowledging contradiction: cognitive dissonance

I recently argued with Madsen and Ruderman (*in press*) that an inclusive and holistic ambivalence can be a powerful position from which to work through diverse political perspectives in border studies. Internal conflict is sometimes revealed when we look closely at taken-for-granted concepts and relate them to our work or pre-existing political perspectives. Despite the value of stretching ourselves academically and politically, however, we have difficulty moving beyond the thought processes of our own little niche which provides a familiar and comfortable theoretical springboard for our work. Here I argue further that there is value in actively seeking out, recognizing, and sharing as important and legitimate those empirical and theoretical aspects of our own work that run counter to or otherwise challenge our primary arguments, but can nonetheless provide valuable insights. Rather than undercutting our primary assessment of data and theories, such an approach should be viewed as providing a fuller understanding of the multi-faceted people and places we study. While the empirical venue for doing this is this through an exploration of my own academic work, I build on the limitations and liberating acknowledgement of the role of cognitive dissonance.

2.1. The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

Proposed in 1957 by social psychologist Leon Festinger, the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance suggests that when we become aware our cognitions (ideas, actions, conclusions, etc.) are in conflict due to new data or the introduction of alternative understandings we seek to reduce the discrepancy and strive for consistency. This is accomplished either by changing our initial set of assumptions, rejecting some of the evidence, or some form of rationalization. While some have theorized dissonance reduction during the decision-making process itself, as traditionally used in psychology the idea applies largely to an internal post-decision justification (Festinger, 1964, Ch. 2).² In terms of our academic research, the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance helps us better understand why we are sometimes prone to eliminating incongruent elements of our work. This paper, however, takes the position that pre-emptively embracing rather than retrospectively minimizing cognitive dissonance can be beneficial and I advocate here for an agentic suspension of what Dissonance Theory takes to be an innate tendency. Such an approach guides us away from unwittingly closing off venues to alternative or supplemental—but certainly still legitimate and often critically needed—understandings of our research topics.

Given that this paper both critiques and embraces elements of Dissonance Theory, some clarification of terminology is in order. With the terms “cognitive dissonance” and “research dissonance” (or just “dissonance”), I refer simply to discrepancies in one's cog-

² For a review of diverse strands in research on the Dissonance Theory, see Harmon-Jones and Mills (1999).

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