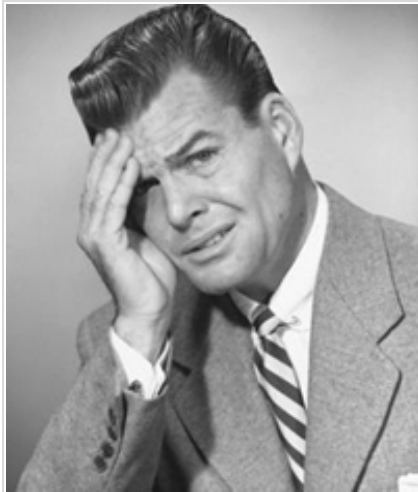


Healthcare reform myths: Stupidity or cognitive disorder?

By **NY Changing Culture Examiner**, Bernie Mooney
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A few weeks ago when Rep. Anthony Weiner held a healthcare reform Q&A at a senior citizens center in Midwood, he was heckled and called a communist for supporting it. Let me sum up what happened: A bunch of medicaid/medicare receiving geezers at a government-funded senior citizens center

called Anthony Weiner a commie while waiting for their free lunch.

Whether you support healthcare reform or not, one thing should be a given, that whatever decision you reach should be based on the facts. Despite efforts to inform people of what the bill is and what it isn't, many still believe the myths about the not-yet finalized bill.

You would think that with easy access to the overwhelming amount of information available on the internet and elsewhere, people would be more informed. Maybe that's the problem. With access to massive amounts of information, people can cherry pick the information that most validates and supports their original view. People want to be right, so they seek out information that supports their worldview rather than information that challenges it. Is this stupidity or is there a more deep-rooted psychological reason for this?

There just might be something at play here beyond simple stupidity. A study done by researchers from four major research institutions* may explain it. The study, *There Must Be a Reason: Osama, Saddam and Inferred Justification*, was published in the journal *Sociological Inquiry*. They focused on the belief, held by many Americans, that Saddam Hussein was linked to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 despite all evidence to the

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contrary.

Dr. Steven Hoffman, co-author of the study, said of the findings, "Our data shows substantial support for a cognitive theory known as 'motivated reasoning,' which suggests that rather than search rationally for information that either confirms or disconfirms a particular belief, people actually seek out information that confirms what they already believe."

"We form emotional attachments that get wrapped up in our personal identity and sense of morality, irrespective of the facts of the matter. The problem is that this notion of 'motivated reasoning' has only been supported with experimental results in artificial settings. We decided it was time to see if it held up when you talk to actual voters in their homes, workplaces, restaurants, offices and other deliberative settings."

Hoffman says, "For the most part people completely ignore contrary information. We did not find that people were being duped by a campaign of innuendo so much as they were actively constructing links and justifications that did not exist."

"They wanted to believe in the link," he says, "because it helped them make sense of a current reality. So voters' ability to develop elaborate rationalizations based on faulty

information, whether we think that is good or bad for democratic practice, does at least demonstrate an impressive form of creativity."

So, does this explain why there is all this insanity over healthcare reform? Instead of suffering from terminal stupidity, are these people suffering from cognitive dissonance?

With all due deference to Dr. Hoffman and his colleagues, I'll stick with the idea that people who believe in death panels and that Obama is going to kill retarded kids are just imbeciles. Of course, this could just be me believing something that helps me make sense of a current reality.

*The survey and interview-based study was conducted by Hoffman, Monica Prasad, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology at Northwestern University; Northwestern graduate students Kieren Bezila and Kate Kindleberger; Andrew Perrin, Ph.D., associate professor of sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; and UNC graduate students Kim Manturuk, Andrew R. Payton and Ashleigh Smith Powers (now an assistant professor of political science and psychology at Millsaps College).

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