

Letter to Ian Malcolm at Harvard Press and Russell Weinberger at Edge explaining the situation

Sent Monday, July 23, 2018

Dear Ian (and Russell),

Thanks much for getting back to me. My plan at this point in time is to make the situation public on my Psychology Today blog and release the full written packet (a 16-page document that includes an overview and summary of the situation, the blog posted on my Theory of Knowledge Blog on Psychology Today, references that have the Justification Hypothesis as a key word, a timeline, a table comparing the ideas, a summary of exchanges with the authors, and the actual emails) in two weeks, on Monday, August 6. That packet would go to a number of folks who might have interest in this story. (Part of the reason for the delay is that I am away next week).

What I feel comfortable doing at this time is sharing the basic narrative with the two of you. (I am ccing Dr. Joe Michalski, Associate Dean at King's College in Canada, as he has been a witness and served as a mediator in an exchange with Dr. Sperber about this issue). I am open to dialoguing with you two about various options forward. My goal is to set the record straight in an appropriate way.

[Twenty years ago](#), I developed an idea I came to call the Justification Hypothesis, which is the idea that the human capacity for self-consciousness and reason-giving evolved in response to the problem of social justification that emerged in the human social-linguistic environment. That idea has been in the professional literature since 2003 and is a central theme of my 2011 book, *A New Unified Theory of Psychology*, is the subject of approximately 15 professional journal articles and commentaries, numerous professional presentations, many blogs, and plays a central role in a training system for doctoral psychologists at James Madison University. (Consider, for example, it is a central theme of a workshop on multiculturalism and diversity competencies that I have been involved in since 2008). What exactly is the Justification Hypothesis? Well, could easily be described as promoting the notion that, "What reason does is help us justify our beliefs and actions to others, convince them through argumentation, and evaluate the justifications and arguments that others address to us," which, of course, is the summary on the back cover of Mercier and Sperber's book.

I will acknowledge that the Justification Hypothesis is not well-known within in the cognitive sciences/human reasoning literature, as those are not my professional circles. And so when I came across Mercier and Sperber's argumentation theory of reasoning in 2013 (originally published in a primary 2011 paper in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*), I could understand that they might have missed the Justification Hypothesis in their review of the literature, although even at that time I felt the failure to cite and discuss it problematic. But I believe we should give folks the benefit of the doubt, and thus I did not raise a complaint with them or anyone else. Instead, I simply reached out to the authors in a friendly way to let them know that there was a similar idea out there, and that they should be aware of it going forward.

Specifically, on September 9, 2013, I wrote an email to Dr. Hugo Mercier, introducing him to the idea, stating in that email: "It is called the "Justification Hypothesis" and posits that human reasoning evolved because language created the adaptive problem of "reason giving" (aka justifying, which of course overlaps much with arguing). I employ an evolutionary argument and use the lens to understand modern research similar to the work you have done." I also sent him a 2011 chapter on the idea (which is attached) and the original 2003 paper in which the idea first appeared. Dr. Mercier wrote back stating

he read the attachments, found them “interesting,” and made a comment about a potential difference being their focus on “cognitive mechanisms,” whereas mine is a broader theory of self-consciousness. I thanked him and asked him to keep me informed of future developments.

And so here we find ourselves, 5 years later. Since the time that the authors were made explicitly aware of the Justification Hypothesis, their theory has moved from the argumentative theory to the interactionist theory, which claims that the two functions of human reason giving are argumentation and justification. And the back cover of the book summarizes their purportedly novel theory in a way that could have just as easily been applied to the Justification Hypothesis. And, of course, nowhere in the book is the JH cited, discussed or acknowledged. Instead, they claim in the title of the book, a “**new theory** of human understanding.” In short, their book has an easily demonstrable falsehood in the title, and there is documentation that the authors were informed of the original idea five years ago.

We also know that Dr. Mercier’s first account of the situation was full and complete denial of any knowledge of the Justification Hypotheses. Upon seeing this remarkable denial, I engaged in additional consultation, and it was decided that contact should be made with Dr. Sperber, as it was conceivable that he was not aware of the situation (i.e., it could have been that Dr. Mercier took the ideas and hid them from him). So, we (Dr. Michalski and myself) reached out to Dr. Sperber to communicate about the situation, and received a defensive, hostile, and dismissive reply. Dr. Sperber claimed the idea that there might be intellectual property concerns “delusional.” Remarkably, he also claimed to know directly that there could not have been a problem because he wrote every passage pertaining to justification, and he simultaneously stated that he had never heard of me or read any of my work. Given that every graduate student knows that a literature review is part of a scholar’s responsibility in claiming new ideas, this double-sided dismissal and denial was nonsensical. With his attitude made clear, the next step is to go public.

This summarizes the situation we find ourselves in. As I mentioned, my goal is to set the record straight. I would be happy to dialogue with you about your thoughts about how to accomplish that if you have a preferred path for accomplishing this goal. If you have questions, comments or concerns, please let me know.

Sincerely,
Gregg Henriques (and Joe Michalski)

Gregg Henriques, Ph.D.
Professor