



THE ROLE OF SOCIALIZATION IN FOSTERING STUPIDITY

*Dr. James Welles, Ph.D.

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Corresponding author: Dr. James Welles, Ph.D.

Email ID: jwelles103@aol.com.

ABSTRACT

Along with its linguistic/perceptual mechanism for preventing recognition of reality, stupidity has another ally which inhibits effective coping with problems. This is the mechanism by which social life establishes conflicting standards for rational behavior. That is, stupidity is actually encouraged by the basic nature of group interaction.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic/perceptual mechanism, basic nature of group interaction.

No one is perfect. Stupidity is an expression of this basic fact. Not only we are not perfect but we cover for each other because we all know sooner or later it will be our turn to goof up. In considering stupidity, we need not belabor maladaptive, incidental "Noise" in the human system the errors people make from sheer inadvertence, fatigue or accident.^[1] But if we do not belabor them because they are not symptomatic of any significant, underlying behavioral principle, it is important to note that society politely hides our imperfections behind a self-deceptive illusion of mutual assurance.

Second, when imperfect people interact, they are not even trying to be objective, or honest or to learn about themselves. They are usually trying to prolong a social relationship. This provides, for example, the basis for the cozy relations of the media and their sponsors, which may be fine for the sponsors but which necessarily makes the credibility of the media at least suspect. Usually, they overcome this potential image problem with sincere pronouncements and very thorough coverage of events not in the sponsor's worst interest. The abject failure of the American media to inform the public that our foreign policy backed by our military muscle is a front for corporate business interests is an example which easily pops to mind.^[2]

Functions: Most social groups exist for two related functions: group maintenance and goal achievement. The relative importance of these two functions will vary with conditions, and with compromise the normal state, most people live in a genial, casual pursuit of some particular achievement. As sacrifice is the nature of compromise,

one of society's inherent stupidities is that goal achievement must often be traded off so as to perpetuate an organization whose expressed purpose is to accomplish that goal.

It is in this dual nature of group function that one finds pressures for both accuracy in and distortion of knowledge. Generally, rationality is a function of an individual mind with emotionalism induced in direct proportion to the number and intensity of social relationships a lot of contacts or very few deep commitments can induce absurdity. Looked at the other way, to maintain a group, some rationality/"Info accuracy" may have to be sacrificed, making goal achievement a little less likely or more difficult. The ultimate in the chronic stupidity of institutional life is that maintaining the group may become an end in itself, in which case cognitive incest obliterates any pretense at logical justification for self-sustaining acts by group leaders.

Groups undergoing this process begin to separate from reality and define their own existence when the proper handling of and response to incoming information demands socially intolerable adjustments of group procedure and structure. This climaxes when social inertia disrupts effective reactions to the determining, selective external milieu.

Civil service bureaucracies are notorious centers for such useless workfare programs. These repositories for the dysfunctional contribute nothing to the nation's health or wealth. It would be absurd even to suggest a scale for

measuring their monumental waste and pathetic inefficiency. However, if they are an overall drain on society, they contribute indirectly to the pride of a nation which, in its stupid magnificence, provides a place of employment for the hopelessly inept a cumbersome, unresponsive government.^[3] As debilitating as it may be that the workforce is of limited competence, it is worse yet that high ranking government officials may, in their imperial arrogance, deliberately dispense with objective reality in favor of their own fanciful, self-serving version of it^[4] albeit to the detriment of their ability to function effectively with other people in our shared, external world. To put it the same way differently: Never trust the bureaucracy to get it right^[5] because it is typically constituted by "Layer upon layer of fossilized shit".^[6]

Norms: Within the formal context of written laws and rules, daily routine of most social life, institutional and otherwise, is regulated by norms social standards for acceptable behavior, dress, manners, modes of speech, etc. These norms encourage stupidity by providing a systematic pattern of reinforcement conducive to conformity for its own sake. It is the acceptance and approval of members which first induces and then sustains a common schema and its system of values that form individuals into a group.

Life in groups is a given of the normal human experience, with a newborn learning all that is needed to survive from a birth group which provides the necessary information, as the tot matures, via socialization. The initiate not only learns a particular language (with all its perceptual limitations) but also develops a sense of belonging which inhibits criticism of the fundamental assumptions of his culture. People may be critical when ideals are not realized, but they rarely criticize the ideals themselves. To do so automatically classifies one as an outsider, and most people obviously would prefer to belong than be critical.

The process of maturation is one of falling into the opinions of those in one's immediate surroundings. It is noteworthy that this is only indirectly related to reality. Truth is whatever conforms to the verbal environment as the member comes to believe in the assumptions of his peers rather than regarding them as hypotheses to be verified. This may entail some cognitive constraint, but submission by the individual consolidates the collective mental habits of his group. On the other hand, if one regards truth as an absolute, objective entity, telling it in a culture of deceit is usually regarded as a revolutionary threat and may be violently suppressed.

Internalization: When socialization completes this process of mental control, a schema will not be altered unless an external reward is more appealing than the discomfort of changing the schema is emotionally wrenching. People rarely change just for the sake of accuracy, unless they have internalized objectivity and learned to abide by the respect for data demanded by a

disciplined methodology like that of science. Only the more superficial things (like fashions) change just for the sake of change.

When attempts are made to comprehend behavior in terms of maximizing positive outcomes and minimizing negative results, the importance of the internal reward system is often underestimated. Only such a system could account for fiascos like the Edsel, the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and Watergate. The psychological basis for such idiocy is the positive feedback system that socialization and the schema create and the cultural environment maintains.

Conflicting or contradictory data from the external environment are deflected or deflated by the belief system, which develops into a fundamental religion. Any objective analyst may easily discern all kinds of logical inconsistencies and perceptual absurdities in someone else's religious schema, but that type of analysis is invariably based on a rational evaluation of factual data. Actually, devoutly held schemas are functional not because they effectively define and address particular problems but because they help bind self-deceptive people together. This emotional/social dimension as it contributes to group cohesion is usually overlooked by rationalists, thus making their analysis flat and somewhat irrelevant. However logical, neat and smug self-contained texts in cognitive psychology may be, they usually omit this central point and leave the reader with the same vaguely empty feeling he would have were he to see a production of **Hamlet** without Hamlet.

Secular Religions: Although the term "Religion" from the Latin *religio* "Binding down" is traditionally defined in reference to the supernatural, it will be used in this discussion to refer to any compelling belief system, whether the object of the schema is supernatural, natural or manmade. Thus, much of this consideration of stupidity will be dealing with "Secular religions", such as beliefs in democracy, capitalism, equality, freedom or whatever.^[7] Our concern is not with the nature of the belief's object (i.e., God or the state or some "ism") but with the nature of the belief. Indeed, it is worth noting that religious thinking in Western culture is as strong as ever: the object simply has changed from God to the State.^[8] In fact, one could posit that "Belief in God" x "Belief in State" = K, so however dead God is, the state is doing comparatively better although the belief in either may be unjustified /unreasonable if not outright stupid.

The crossover to a state religion was expressed in a denunciation made by Senator Josiah Bailey of North Carolina in 1935 of any attempt to amend the Constitution as a "Violation of ...the Ark of the Covenant".^[9] It was later more thoroughly displayed in a speech former President Herbert Hoover made at the Republican Nominating Convention in 1936: "The American people should thank Almighty God for the Constitution and the Supreme Court... Have you

determined to enter the holy crusade for liberty....? Here in America” (his words underscored by claps of thunder from outside—meaning God was apparently applying some dramatic special effects indicting divine approval) “where the tablets of human freedom were first handed down, their sacred word has been flouted. Today, the stern task is before the Republican Party to restore the Ark of the Covenant to the temple in Washington.”^[10] The speech left the choir and converts standing on their chairs, screaming, cheering, chanting and weeping. Presumably it left everyone else reaching for aspirin tablets and barf bags.

A year later, Senator Burt Wheeler reminded FDR that “The Supreme Court and the Constitution are a religion with a great many people in this country.”^[11] If a such religious belief is unjustified or unreasonable, it usually is so because it is a compromise synthesis of reality cum mentality. Such a condition may be functional and is a normal, acceptable method of balancing the many factors which interact in our social lives. When this compromise is itself compromised, the process of schematic crumbling is simply too ambiguous in the early stages to be defined as such, so it is defined to suit the viewer. Only when the process nears completion i.e., when it is too late, can it be labeled as clearly stupid. Along the way, one finds that the more emotional the attachment to an idea, the less effect facts will have on altering it.

As for religious organizations, the basic requirement is not that they be logical but that they keep in touch with their members. Keeping in touch with the external environment is secondary or perhaps coequal. This commitment to the group does not really make the system less sensitive overall, but it might seem that way, as attention must be directed inward as well as outward. Also, the data that are gathered from the outer world are processed not in their own right but in terms of the internal schema. Naturally, to an external observer (who himself can never be totally objective), the responses of the system might appear irrelevant to the given conditions, but what he often mindlessly fails to consider are the further “Givens” that are not elements of his own schema.^[12]

Mode: One of the basic mistakes made in evaluating behavior as stupid stems from the assumption that people are really trying to achieve a particular goal even one in their own best interest. Many people function more in a particular way than toward a particular end, even though the way may be self-defeating. For example, some fool may be committed to being honest rather than to making favorable impressions: he is simply honest and lets impressions take care of themselves. Such a person might lose out to an imposter, if both are applying for the same job, but the specific goal of getting the job is secondary to his basic commitment to honesty.

The gutters may be filled with people like that too dumb to deceive in a world of scams, but honesty and

objectivity do not always stand in the way of success. William Howard Taft was an amusing example of remarkable insensitivity in social relations: For example, he mentioned Grant's drinking problem in a eulogy to the former President. He spoke to be accurate, not to obtain a particular effect^[13] but nevertheless managed to become President and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

Creed: Although situation ethics may carry most individuals far in a world of superficial impressions, groups need not only belief systems but statements of those beliefs as rallying points for their sense of identity. These pronouncements are the “Creed” of the group. They are not guides for behavior of the members but verbalizations which promote group cohesion by providing superego satisfying justifications for whatever is going to be done. Thus, the military claims that “Peace is our profession”, and courts tout “Justice”. Such creeds have a self-deceptive, hypnotic effect on group members and inhibit the development of any sense that what they do is maladaptive in terms of their expressed goals. At best, creeds make people not knowledgeable but unaware, as the kind of knowledge gained is used to 1.) Sustain the group schema, 2.) Sustain group identity, and 3.) Help the group cope with its environment.

This creed rarely fools our classic objective, outside observer. He is usually quite quick to note when a given group is behaving in ways contradictory to its expressed values, and he then makes the mistake of asserting that the members are hypocritical if not stupid, in that they are engaging in behavior inconsistent with their creed. Once again, we return to the perennial nemesis of arbitrariness by what standard is stupidity judged? The creed? The observer's creed? Goal achievement? Despite obvious incongruities, people may decide subconsciously that it is emotionally preferable to hold on to their creed rather than try to adjust their ideas to fit either their actions or incoming, potentially disturbing bits of information.^[14]

Best interest: If identifying the “Best interest” of a party is difficult for anyone, concerned or not, then we should not be surprised at the persistence of maladaptive behavior even if no one knows what it is. The internal reward system of the self-sustaining schema can promote a course of action totally irrelevant to anything in the perceivable environment. As maladaptive behavior persists, pride becomes a prime motivating factor for perpetuating what is arguably a mistake that is, people would rather go on being wrong than admit it and take corrective measures. If the war in Vietnam might possibly once have been winnable or even justifiable for the United States, those possibilities passed away years before the fighting wound down to its disgraceful conclusion.

The military effort in Vietnam actually turned out to be unusually stupid, in that it was idiotic in two different ways at once. It induced internal conflict while becoming

an international debacle. Often, stupidity is found where a system disrupts itself. Alternatively, a conflict between systems (e.g., countries, religious groups, etc.) may be induced by stupidities that are mutual or complementary, so what might begin as legitimate competition can degenerate into misunderstandings, recriminations and worse. In terms of laying an egg, Vietnam was a double yolker.

In the context of the stupidity of a system struggling against itself, Barry Goldwater once opined he might sponsor a Constitutional amendment which would require all decisions of the Supreme Court to "Make sense". The Court would find it difficult to function effectively with such an unreasonable restriction, and in more general terms, "Making sense" is about the last thing any human system should be expected to do, however, pleasing it may be to behavioral analysts who prefer logic to life.

Types of stupidity: Arbitrariness notwithstanding, there are basically only two types of stupidity. By far the most common is that of principle a system too committed to itself to adjust: its reward system becomes so internalized that it ceases to respond effectively to external change. The other type is, as might be expected, the exact opposite: this is the hypersensitive stupidity of overreacting not only to incidentals in the environment but to fantasies as well. This type usually leads to chaos, with opportunism of the moment substituting for development by a guiding schema characterized by faith in things known to be untrue.^[15] Both types have their places in the dynamic disorder of the tragicomedy we refer to as the human experience.

Once again, it is necessary to point out the compromise nature of the human condition. When an organization has to trade off a logically perfect system which makes sense with itself in order to find a balance with the psychological needs of imperfect people, social reinforcement will shape the behavior of those sharing common assumptions, values and beliefs. If this is a less than ideal process, it is at least consistent with the general biological principle of replacing living systems which were once but no longer are the best adaptation to an environment they altered. The peculiar thing about human systems is not that they create so much of their own environment, but that they usually create one in which they cannot survive with their belief systems both honored and intact in which case they seek refuge in stupidity or patriotism.

Groupthink: One specific form of rigid stupidity as induced by social norms deserves special mention because it has been identified and studied so intently. "Groupthink"^[16] is a very intense form of stupidity as it works its magic on a small, tightly knit band of people too committed to their common schema to save themselves. The Kennedy-condoned Bay of Pigs invasion remains the classic example of groupthink in all

its stagnant glory. All the elements of stupidity became concentrated in the White House as the best and brightest set about creating the perfect disaster. It exemplifies the most dangerous of all possible combinations: smart people in positions of power behaving stupidly.

If it is possible to be too cooperative, then groupthink is both possible and probable. It occurs when a decision making group is highly cohesive, insulated from outside opinion and working on a policy already strongly endorsed by the leader. Under such conditions, no member is likely to risk his group status or membership by pointing out flaws in the considered policy. In the absence of external feedback and internal criticism, anything less than the perfect plan is sure to go awry as analysis is trumped by the persuasiveness of the strongest personality^[17] if not the best argument.

Not only is there this cognitive drawback based on the tendency toward uniformity of opinion among members of an isolated group, there is also an inherent danger in modern bureaucratic systems that leaders derive some sort of perverse satisfaction from being removed from reality. In accordance with Reedy's Law (i.e., "Isolation from reality is inseparable from the exercise of power"),^[18] status seems to demand that those who make the most important decisions have information presented to them packaged in predigested form. Rather than surrounding themselves with truthful advisors as proposed by Machiavelli to his theoretically knowledgeable Prince,^[19] many modern rulers content themselves with deluding sycophants. The miracle is not that such leaders make so many stupid decisions but that they make so few.

Social neurosis: In general society, the lack of critical analysis typical of all stupid systems stems from members' commitment to their group creed (or their commitment to group maintenance). As the schema becomes a religious belief, it is removed a second step from reasonable criticism. (The initial separation from logical control occurs when the linguistic system of the group inhibits negative evaluation of fundamental assumptions, since the words used to convey information convey implicit values as well.) Of course, there is something vexing about a whistle blower pointing out that the system does not work, so nothing is likely to disturb the almighty or the attitude of religious worshippers quite so much as a few accurate, practical observations.

One type of observation is that of a mismatch between creeds and deeds. This problem is inherent in the human condition. Our verbal creed not only allows us to describe our world but also helps us work together in it. It provides us with ideals to live up to and hide behind. Also, our actions are compromises with all the many factors of life which impinge upon us. Small wonder, then, that there are often discrepancies between our verbal and real worlds. This can be stupid, but mostly it

is simply an expression of humans attempting to function in a world of arbitrary compromise.

Counter-productivity: In its latter stages, stupidity is easy to recognize, as it invariably promotes what it should prevent and prevents what it should promote: that is, it is counter-productive. When ideals become stumbling blocks, preventing their own realization, there is something wrong. When, in the name of justice, we walk all over someone's rights, there is something wrong. When, in the name of fairness, we suppress the oppressed, there is something wrong. Just what is wrong is may not be clear, and in a world of conflicting absurdities, we may become a bit jaded and accepting of stupidity as a condition so common that we may not recognize it as anything or certainly not unusual at all.

The ultimate danger really is to be found in the extremism that such indifference permits and fanaticism promotes. Compromise and balance are the first victims when people stop caring enough to note the stupidity surrounding them, so if we accept the absurd, we deserve the disastrous. When control comes not through reason but primarily through conflicting powers, we have a tenuous future at best, and unfortunately, that is exactly our situation today. At least we have structured our domestic power conflicts so that confrontations are channeled through the halls of government and the courts. In such places, the most irrational decisions can be reached with maximal attention to decorum and minimal concern with reality. All things considered, the miracle is not that we get along so poorly but that we get along at all.

Reformers: Invariably, failing excesses of the establishment do engender checks on themselves. Reformers arise among the disenfranchised and proceed to add their particular brand of stupidity to those dominant forms already flourishing. Usually in the names of improvement and progress, reformers become persecutors and strive to reduce life to some grand order through change. They might wreck the economy in their efforts to improve the standard of living, or perhaps they induce riots and war in their quest for harmony, peace and justice. In America, the purveyors of righteousness are always ready to make the country "Right" or great again or for the first time if the human victims can stand it, the public will buy it and the world can afford it.

The main problem reformers must contend with is that the game is stacked against them. Almost everyone early on falls under the illusion that the establishment wants to be fair. It is rather incredible that anyone with an IQ exceeding his age would entertain such a notion. Perhaps this is just a backhanded tribute to the awesome power of stupidity that anyone can believe such a thing. The establishment wants to stay established: if it can be fair and retain final control, it will be, but prevailing institutions are basically indifferent to "Fairness" in and of itself.

By itself, being "Right" is of no particular advantage in a dispute. It can make a person aggravated and an aggravation, but it has minimal persuasive impact. All this shows is how powerful stupidity is as a factor in social life. Institutions promote it by being inherently conservative, trying to impede any significant changes in the status quo. As all judgments are arbitrary, anyone can be both right and stupid. In fact, many people are right and/or stupid, but it is seldom clear who is which and when. What is clear is that the establishment is indifferent to those who are right but powerless, because the mighty tend to judge everything according to their own self-serving, self-sustaining standards for an appealing public image, cultural stability and immediate worldly success.

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