



The Stupidity of Irrelevance



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Abstract

The process of adapting institutions to new purposes is a normal part of cultural life. Generally, people are disposed to use whatever is at hand (be it a tool, organization or idea) to deal with a problem. This approach may be effective in resolving an immediate problem, but it means that the item may come to have a function different from if not at odds with its original role. The resulting cognitive state may then become one of schematic dissonance, with language strained to match up altered behavior to established values. In the extreme, a system becomes irrelevant to not only the environment but itself.

Introduction

As in the case of cognitive dissonance in an individual, tension may [1] occasionally motivate society to achieve consonance. In both cases, the schema will act to save itself, so if challenging data, disturbing perceptions or criticism cannot be ignored or rejected, words will be redefined so as to convert dissonance into confusion. The discrepancy between behavior and superego values may thus be reduced at the expense of identity, clarity and accuracy. While an appearance of continuity with the past is maintained, words are revalued to lend verbal support to prevailing behavioral norms and public image.

Thus, there are three methods by which we induce irrelevance:

1. Adhere to an obsolete verbal value system while adopting new behaviors;
2. Adhere to obsolete behavioral norms while professing new values; and
3. Devise a compromise conflict between necessary behavior and converted values.

All three are maladaptive in their own ways, but the compromise conflict condition is by far more common than the two extremes, as it disperses stress over both fields.

The first method is the English mode of clinging to tradition while moving toward resolution of real problems. The history of the House of Lords is an admirable example of a traditional system retaining its tradition and little else while Commons tends to reality, with its efforts usually accompanied by loud noises to the effect that nothing new is being done-just the old

being restored [1]. The second method is that of the phony liberal who agrees that change is necessary but never gets around to it. A folksy example would be the American who, in the 1960's, agreed that the schools would have to be integrated some day. The third method (i.e., compromise) is one of virtuous pragmatism: one adapts as necessary and makes it appear to be ideal. An example of this process is found in the optimist who tries to convince himself and anyone who will listen that necessity is "Right on", this is the best of all worlds possible at this moment and current behavior is the realization of historic tradition and religious morality but tweaking the system is OK.

All three methods reduce dissonance by distorting information-by denying reality and/or inventing fantasy. This distortion is the mechanism by which the schema responds to induced dissonance, and it makes people inherently stupid. It is apparently impossible for any culture to be accurately adjusted to its past traditions, super-ego values, behavioral norms and external reality. Compromises are made somewhere and may shift around depending on conditions. Thus, society may be adjusted but not "Accurately", in that incoming information about how the system interacts with its environment will be distorted to favor the short-term survival advantage of the group in power. This is but another example of how the neurotic paradox contributes to stupidity.

This systematic distortion of information makes human societies characteristically self-deceptive, with people disposed to believe they are living up to their ideals although they are not. The existing schematic dissonance is usually subconscious due to the misleading nature of words, so society stumbles smugly along while at odds with it, its environment and its equally

stupid neighbors. In fact, the only really effective control of development comes not from inside but from physical limitations (what cannot be done) and competition with other groups which are also out of touch with themselves.

In general, internal criticism is of limited value as a control mechanism for growth and development of a social system. There usually tend to be few, if any, effective critics within any organization. When not dismissed out of hand as a crank or an outsider, anyone with valid criticism is made an outsider, as ostracism is the common reward for honesty, accuracy and integrity. Thus, criticism without power is largely wasted, producing little but woe for the critic him/herself.

Perhaps there are so few effective critics because anyone with any brains at all quickly finds that most human organizations are just not set up for effective criticism. The basic working assumption is that everything is just fine. Outside criticism is deflected and internal feedback is supposed to be positive reinforcement from sycophants promoting their careers by corrupting the mighty. At best, criticism has a place on the fringe, where cranks and comics can be tolerated as amusing diversions which require no adjustment by the establishment.

The resistance of organizations to criticism is inherent in the human condition. Criticism is invariably disruptive, since group spirit, if nothing else is disrupted when unrecognized problems are made explicit. Such disturbances are unwelcome to those in power. While a critic may think he is performing a service by calling attention to an obvious problem, he is often treated as if he caused it [2]. Actually, critics should be considered society's early warning systems, sensing symptoms of problems before anyone else does and making coping easier than might be possible later. However, the need of the establishment to maintain the appearance of internal order and the image of competence among those in power is most compelling and makes appreciation of legitimate criticism difficult at best. Thus, opportunities for correction and improvement may be sacrificed for the sake of a pleasing facade.

Veritable proof of this phenomenon comes in the form of "Smedley's Syndrome"—a form of ethical honesty which often comes to the fore when an insider is freed from the cognitive constraints of an intellectually repressive organization. Such was the case of General Smedley Butler, who, as a dedicated marine, played muscle man for American imperial business interests. When he retired, he turned on those whom he had spent a lifetime serving and denounced them in very certain terms. He had presumably not done so earlier when he was still mentally and ethically owned by the organization he served. When his career was no longer defined by the military pecking order, his perceptual world opened up and he could see his place in a wider moral context [2].

Leaders can achieve a sense of order by providing all members of the reference group with a social milieu which distorts their cognitive world toward acceptance of the status

quo. Being inversely proportional to the size of the group, the strength of this general phenomenon of misdirecting thinking by social support becomes most intense in a leader's own tightly knit coterie. The result is group think, which in its pure form is characterized by cognitive complacency and promoted by blissful ignorance. Actually, group thinkers are only half ignorant they ignore only contradictory information. Confirming data get all the attention which can be lavished upon them by sycophants, who have surrendered their independence of thought to the group karma or leader. The reluctance of members of the clique to voice objections to approved policies usually leads to an illusion of unanimity and a false consensus. Both of these are built less on raw data than on misinterpretations by members committed to the appearance of positive group image.

Whether in the concentrated form of groupthink or in the more diffuse forms of general stupidity, misinterpretation of data inhibits effective adjustment to problem situations. All situations are not created equal: [3] one may invite a favorable interpretation while another begs to be ignored. Situations which demand that the perceivers make psychic adjustments may be considered "Problems". These are solved if the adjustment is anticipated as being to the advantage of the adjustors.

One of the main problems people have is that a schema which functions in solving a problem may hinder the solving of problems created by the initial solution. Thus, the very human catch phrase, "If you think we have a problem now, just wait until we solve it". This goes a long way toward explaining the dysfunctional attitude of America's mighty corporations toward pollution: the companies formed to exploit our natural resources are basically indifferent to the mess they create for everyone to live in because there really is no profit in clean-ing it up. In a similar vein, America created a monumental mess for itself when getting rid of Saddam Hussein in the second Iraqi War: granted, in a way it is good he is gone, but replaced by what? [4].

This type of problem creating belies the basic assumption of behavioral scientists that behavior is adaptive. Maladaptive behavior is thought to be anomalous some kind of breakdown of the normal adaptive mechanism. Along with the inevitability of death and the impressive predominance of extinction in the fossil record, the record of failure of human civilizations confronts us with an unsettling question: how can any mechanism which is supposed to be adaptive be so incredibly bad at its job? Much as we prefer to accentuate the positive and optimistic, it appears that life is characterized by mechanisms built-in for the demise of systems. Life goes on, but the individual organisms, societies and species are pre-programmed to pass away.

Perception

In vertebrates, incoming sensory data are picked up by the five major senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. However, even in monkeys, info picked up by the eyes does not go directly from the optic nerve to the visual cortex of the brain; it first passes through temporal lobe where it is edited and modified [5]. In the

case of our own species, this process can lead to maladaptation through limited, distorted and/or inventive tinkering with data. It is a feature common to schematic systems and makes stupidity a normal part of the human experience, since stupidity is based on the subjective nature of perception, which requires the observer to be actively involved in the process [6].

First of all, people select information stupidly. Any individual or organization takes in only a fraction of the data available. Since information gathering must be limited, it might be ideal if it were selected at random, so that it would reflect accurately the general state of the environment. However, perception is a directed process, with certain elements in the surroundings receiving inordinate attention and others being ignored. At best, this can permit the system to function effectively in a limited milieu in which attention can be directed toward phenomena considered relevant to acknowledged problems or beckoning possibilities. At worst, the system puts itself out of touch with parts of the general environment.

If stimuli fit the perceiving schema, in that they conform to expectation, they barely register and are promptly dismissed. This accounts for the overwhelming majority of informational bits which are picked up by any system—they are simply too routine to warrant one's attention. A good example of this process is the oblivion of a driver to most of the stimuli continually bombarding him as he goes along. As long as everything fits expectation, with traffic patterns in the normal range and the road right where it belongs, the driver may be unaware of even his own presence [7].

However, the perceiver will immediately pick up on any aspect of the environment which does not quite fit the schema. Anything exceptional will be noticed and, if necessary and possible, adjustments made. In fact, the schema may adjust itself a little to allow for future variations similar to any experienced. Alternatively, incongruous data may be cognitively massaged to fit the schema in the way that if you are a hammer, everything starts looking like a nail [8].

Beyond this normal range of perception and adjustment, however, the schema can be a limiting and debilitating factor when it prevents appreciation of events which would be emotionally distressing if acknowledged. This is the basis for the fabled ostrich strategy for avoiding awareness of threats or other unpleasantnesses. Such selective ignorance of stimuli is characteristic of the schema as a mechanism for non/misperception and a program for stupidity.

This selective ignorance is the result of the schema's "Perceptual defense", which acts as a filter through which stimuli must pass. This defense protects us from the anxiety that would be aroused by perceiving threatening stimuli. The physiological basis for this phenomenon is that the threshold level for threatening or anxiety-arousing stimuli is higher than that for neutral stimuli [9]. Of course, this kind of defense can be stupid, if knowing would help or permit coping: ignoring warnings is not much of a way to defend oneself.

In the mind of a paranoid, on the other hand, fear creates threats by substituting beliefs for reality. His language confirms his beliefs, and he strives to be free of knowledge [10]. This exemplifies the role the schema can play in creating misperceptions by projecting itself onto stimuli. The process of perception is not accomplished by analysis of discrete bits of information in independent isolation. It is affected by the building of a verbal picture of the environment. As one might suspect, the picture constructed is not based on the data, all the data and nothing but the data but is shaped according to the perceiver's experiences, preferences and goals [11]. As a result of "Focused screening", data which do not conform to the existing gestalt are screened out by a brain which fills in missing info so modification becomes a postfeed system based disproportionately on information which confirms the schema as well as invented data which make an experience easier to accept and retain [12]. Sad to say, President George W. Bush took advantage of this principle to further his Iraq-centered agenda after the attacks of 9/11 [13].

In general, paranoids are skillful dissemblers, so they often pass unnoticed. They may give themselves away, however, because they are nearly always consumed in unmasking enemies, which they see everywhere. They are endowed with the gift of seeing through masks, which they tear off, whether they are there or not [14].

Fantasy usually provides data to fit the schematic gestalt so as to improve a bit on reality. In the act of misperception, people routinely add their own knowledge to data they do receive from the environment [15] and compound the mixture with a bit of imagination. The movie and digital recording industries are based on a failure of perception to detect discrete stimuli as such but rather have the brain blend them together into cohesive wholes thus seeing or hearing something that is not there [16]. As many jurists have found, witnesses may testify to perceptions which are really more impressions created by their own schemas. In a light vein, this process provided the basis for Mark Twain's comment that he could remember everything that happened and some things that didn't. In a serious vein, conjured images of WMD were invented to rationalize invading Iraq in 2003 [17].

The verbal arm of the schema really is a cognitive construct which consistently contributes to perceptual misinterpretation. In-coming data are used to solidify or modify the schema so as to make it more refined if fundamentally unsound. Thus, the schema is inherently conservative, with conflicting data misinterpreted or blended with some fabricated facts to fit into existing definitions and patterns of thought [18]. If the discrepancy between the new stimulus and existing schema is too great, the data may be totally rejected. In extreme cases, the whole system may freeze, as when a rabbit is transfixed by headlights.

Along with contributing to misperceptions of the environment, the schema tends to limit expectations of behavioral results. A certain effect is usually desired when one undertakes

a course of action. That desired end is commonly anticipated, and its perception is favored over other possible effects. This problem is particularly important when actions can have long-term, negative consequences. A prime example would be the difficulties created by the use of the insecticide DDT. True, the poison accomplished its intended purpose of killing agricultural pests and carriers of disease, but it had other, unanticipated consequences as well-it spread throughout the environment and concentration within predators as it passed up the food pyramid to the decided detriment of a number of species including our own. These results were as unexpected as perception of them was unwelcome.

This process of misperception in turn depends on associating stimuli and cognitions by constructing elaborate complexes which integrate incoming data with the existing schematic network of related elements. As entering information connects with known elements, it becomes part of the schema. In general, it is easier to learn material which is consistent with the schema, since the more elaborate the connections, the better the material will be remembered [19]. However, by categorizing perceptions via verbalization, limitations are placed on possible associations and general relevance of behavior.

Accordingly, as the schema develops, it becomes directional, bending incoming data to its own support, deflecting conflicting data, misinterpreting situations and generally making itself decreasingly accurate as a representation of the totality of reality and increasingly a source of self-gratification for the beholder. This means that human affairs do not tend to work out for the best; they tend to work themselves out according to their own natures, whatever they are [20]. Responses become less and less relevant to environmental stimuli and more and more reflections of inherent biases of the schema. In addition, even the initial successes of a schema may work against it if it is rigorously applied to situations beyond its range of definitions, [21] thereby leading to reactions which are irrelevant. Thus, maladaptation is virtually inherent in any system which is committed to maintaining its integrity while imposing itself on reality. This is the basis for the general capacity of human organizations to self-destruct.

This self-destructive tendency is primarily a result of a failure of self-perception. People simply do not see in themselves traits they do not wish to see [22]. If specific acts must be performed, they may be misinterpreted by the agent into a favorable verbal context by convenient labeling so as to minimize embarrassment, shame or anxiety. People may also make themselves feel better by projecting their own problems or shortcomings on to others [23].

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