

The Cognition of Schema

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The brain of an infant may be the blank tablet envisaged by Locke, but as it is shaped by both experience and language it develops into the mind of an adult. As the character of the maturing individual becomes defined, the mind shapes experiences decreasingly according to immediate stimuli themselves and increasingly according to linguistic interpretations of and emotional reactions to perceptions. Thus, the environment does not dictate human behavior but provides a context for its expression. The basis for interpreting environmental stimuli is the schema—the cognitive program (Ger: Weltanschauung) which acts as a template for perceptual experience and provides expectations and explanations about objects and their relations to and interactions with each other. It is populated by or constructed of memes, which are subjected to selection pressure by the psychocultural environment and thus are not necessarily as true as they are gratifying and popular. Just as a reigning intellectual paradigm defines each of our modern sciences (e.g., atoms in chemistry), a schema defines the mental life of an individual by providing an intellectual frame of reference for information, ideas and behavior. Traceable back to Edmund Husserl's phenomenological observation of the mind's tendency to organize experiences, like Piaget's mental structure, it comprises the "Cognitive map" of the individual's reality and determines his 1.) world-view, 2.) self-concept, 3.) self-ideal and 4.) ethical convictions.

While providing basic notions about principles of nature and theories about how the world works, the schema both fosters and inhibits further learning. It is particularly good at promoting learning of refinement, whereby established expectations are confirmed and reinforced and responses made more subtle. However, learning of novelty is made less probable and more difficult by preset patterns of thought which limit an individual's range of cognitive adjustment. Thus, the schema encourages self-corrective, fine tuning of itself even in cases in which it remains a maladaptive behavioral program.

The learning process can be broken down into two interrelated steps: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the perception of stimuli and the incorporation of experience into an existing schema; it is accomplished by assigning the percept of an object or phenomenon to an established cognitive category as defined by the individual's vocabulary. Accommodation is the change or modification of the schema due to the assimilation of new information. Minor adjustments, refinements and modifications of the schema are very common and occur with little or no awareness or emotion. The resulting schema is the individual's reorganization of his experience into a system which provides both predictability of events and a sound basic strategy for successful behavior.

Attitudes: However, as an individual matures, the presence of the schema tends to dominate the process of assimilation by defining perception in progressively restrictive terms and by the formation of attitudes which

evaluate perceived data. Attitudes determine whether a given fact is construed favorably or not. This point is easily demonstrated by a play on a standard form of humor: "I have some good news and some bad news: the Yankees won last night". This is good news to Yankee fans and bad news to a Yankee haters.

Laugh or not, there are three factors which may contribute to the formation of attitudes. First of all, attitudes may be rooted in a person's need to know about the environment. Such attitudes are data based and provide a verbal knowledge system to which incoming bits of information are compared or contrasted. Attitudes may also be adopted because of externally applied social rewards and pressures of normative group influence. Finally, attitudes may be expressions of the value system of the individual and provide him with the self-satisfaction of self-sustaining internal rewards.

Along with their function of evaluating information, attitudes also act to promote the achievement of goals deemed to be worthy, to maintain self-esteem and to express views. Most important of all to students of stupidity, attitudes determine what a person considers to be his "Best interest". This is crucial if stupidity is deliberate, informed, maladaptive behavior—that is, behavior counter to one's own best interest.

The determination of "Best interest" thus turns out to be quite an arbitrary process. The basic problem with such an evaluation is that judgment is so "Attitudinal". For example, the extreme case of homicide may variously be considered a crime (murder), necessity (self-defense), heroic (combat) or simply negligent if not accidental: the evaluation of the act depends very much upon the circumstances and the attitude of the judge.

It is by interacting with the environment that people reveal their attitudes—the beliefs, values and ideas which the reference group's language and norms have molded into a schema. Socialization internalizes this system so that it defines who and what a member is and does. As a young person matures or an initiate conforms, external rewards and punishments become anticipated and behavior adjusts to preconceived expectations.

It is important to note that the creed of a group functions as a unifying force. Political and economic systems (e.g., democracy, capitalism, etc.) are often misconstrued as descriptive of how societies interact with their environments. Actually, along with behavioral rituals which are also binding, such systems are concrete expressions of ideological creeds which promote group unity. When the system's values are internalized, the individual feels himself to be part of a homogeneous



group of people comfortable with themselves regardless of what they are doing.

One of the inherent drawbacks of intense group loyalty, however, is that it can interfere with logical analysis of problems and corrupt the super-ego values of the group. The unacknowledged goal of most groups is maintenance of the schema. Reason is used to rationalize, and value-based perception is skewed to favor the schematic/social quo. Conformity is the standard and intellectual integrity a threat to short-term, immediate complacency. Unfortunately, the long-term consequences can be disastrous, as happened in the Penn State scandal centered on convicted child molester Jerry Sandusky.

To achieve and maintain a healthy balance, there must be a dynamic trade off between the short-term social needs of the group and the long-term intellectual imperative of information. This inherent compromise is typical of the human condition and displays itself as emotional conflict, suppressed or expressed, in all but the total conformist. One of the saving graces of a schema is that, consistent with the theory of cognitive dissonance, it can easily make minor adjustments—changes which reduce rather than arouse emotional tension. Accumulated minor adjustments can add up to a significant schematic alteration which would be traumatic if forced in one step. This process is comparable to the gradual evolution of one species into another by the accumulation of genetic mutations.

Minor adjustments make it possible to retain the schema while behavior adapts to novel circumstances. This is ideal for a stupid society, as it permits vague and ambiguous leaders to do somewhat more or less than they should while their followers can believe their cause to be sacred. As new behavioral norms emerge, so too may an identity crisis or conflict gradually evolve as traditional values are deemphasized for the sake of group cooperation in new circumstances. The mechanism of successful schematic adaptation to novelty is, usually, largely language dependent, as it is language that provides the basis for our cognitive life, including the expanded mental capacity to be both very intelligent and very stupid.

Language: Language probably evolved as a means of sharing information and promoting group cooperation, but as a correlated side effect, it shaped the human psyche by the very nature of words. These are really audible symbols which represent selected, generalized aspects of the environment. In this sense, language is a code, with each particular language necessarily biased and restrictive as it defines perceptions in terms of the specific culturally determined categories to which the encoded symbols are attached.

It is the linguistic requisite for categorizing which makes the human way of experiencing nature different from that of all other species. While making the human psyche unique, our verbal tradition prohibits "Freedom of experience" from the human condition, as only feral children can escape the subjective impact that the specific verbal values of his given reference group imposes. Each language segments the environmental continua (motion, color, sound, etc.) into various arbitrary categories. Collectively, these provide the cognitive context in which members of the language group think, feel and evaluate experience: that is, we live by symbols.

Although categorizing permits the streamlining of some perceptions for the sake of mental efficiency, there are drawbacks. For example, every group is somewhat compromised by the very human tendency to indulge in "Stereotyping". This is a process of "Over-generalizing" to the point that important discriminable experiences are treated equally. As we go through life, we fill out our verbal categories

with discrete items or events. When we deal with people, for example, certain salient characteristics which members of some perceived group share in common (skin color, language, religion, etc.) are considered determining factors in evaluating the group in general. For the sake of expedience, individual variation may then be ignored and generalizing carried to the extreme that all people who can possibly be placed in a given pigeon-hole are lumped together mentally under the label for that category.

Not only do we lose information to stereotyping, but the many groups of people become separated from each other because their different languages segment the common environment into different categories. Sad to say, when people in "Opposing" cultures experience the same stimuli differently, they often squabble about their perceptions and reactions rather than enlightening each other with complementary views of the world. Only in superficial matters can alternative interpretations be accepted as interesting or humorous without being threatening. On the other hand, most of history's great religious and military conflicts had their origins in perceptual/philosophical differences of competing groups which found they could not live in both the same and different worlds.

Such conflicts underscore the point that language functions as a "Defining system" for people. It is through words that "Relevance" is determined for each of us by our culture with behavior being shaped by the structuring of our reactions to what we construe to be relevant. What may really be relevant to one's best interest may not be identified as such by a necessarily if unfortunately biased language system.

This bias of the language system is based on the descriptive categories and labels used to construct a person's cognitive world. As the schema is formed, accuracy and objectivity of perceptions are sacrificed for and by euphemisms. These enhance self-esteem by giving favorable interpretations of the actions of the individual and his reference group and negative stereotypes to rivals and opponents. This verbal phenomenon can be carried beyond the selection of words even to their pronunciation as happened, for example, with the affected Spanish accent favored among the leftist elites of the United States in the 1980's to show their support for the pro-Soviet regime in "Knee-car-AH-gew-ah".

As for terminology, when dealing with Vietnam, the Johnson administration began with a humanistic way of thinking and talking about the war but ended up following the lead of the military. The change to a detached attitude and then to a dehumanizing outlook was facilitated by euphemisms. "Gooks" were to be "Converted" into "Body counts" by "Defoliation" and "Surgical air strikes"—itself a misnomer for inaccurate bombing—which were to accomplish "Attrition" which would precede "Pacification". It was as difficult to argue against such strategy as it was easy to misjudge American's best interest in those terms, as opposed to "Napalm" and "My Lai".

A few years later, the Nixon administration had a similar problem judging its own best interest and literally got hung up on the terms "Executive privilege" and "National security". The Nixonians were also disposed to use derogatory terms for their presumed enemies—meaning the press, students, hippies, Jews, Italians, Germans, blacks and liberals in the State Department and Congress and committed to destroying anyone who did not support the Nixon team.

Along with defining means and experience, words shape the schema by directing attention to certain facets of the environment which are deemed important by the verbal value system. Each language system has an inherent tendency to emphasize certain experiences while others



are trivialized. Thus, accuracy of overall perception and objectivity of interpretation are sacrificed to verbal appeal as people focus on particular stimuli at the expense of others. Of course, events of expected significance receive the most attention and analysis—particularly if they pose either a serious threat to the schema or an opportunity for a triumphant achievement worthy of the Superego Seal of Approval.

Language further serves as a memory system, in that categorized, encoded experiences act as a basis for comparing the present with the past and for projecting future expectations. Naturally, the process of memory formation is systematically skewed off by forgetting some events that happened and including others that did not. Thus, some aviation accidents (and even more so, near misses) can be redefined out of existence while fantasy provides a rosy picture of what self-serving experts at the FAA (Flying Accidents Administration) can trick themselves into interpreting and believing. The worst that can be said about language in this regard is that it allows people to remain firmly in touch with their delusions, or, as Goethe's Mephistopheles believed: "With words, you can do anything".

While examining the role language plays in the formation and functioning of the schema, we have considered it as a system for encoding, categorizing, stereotyping, defining, focusing and memorizing. We should not forget that it also functions as a communication system, making the individual's schema a product of and contributor to the group creed. As a means of sharing experiences, language is quite efficient, but as a means of permitting people to talk to and about themselves realistically, it is too biased to allow accurate self-analysis.

As a belief system, the schema promotes coping with some problems while limiting the ability to recognize even the existence of others. The schema promotes coping with acknowledged problems if the discrepancy between verbal beliefs and necessary behavior is emotionally tolerable, so in such situations, both individual and group efficiency is enhanced. However, when the discrepancy is so pronounced as to make people self-conscious, and when coping has to be treated as heresy, psychological and social disruption result from the delusive mental set of stupidity.

Interestingly enough, living out the expressed creed—that is, living up to the ideals—can also be aggravating to the devout who flout their beliefs in daily life. Christ was crucified for fulfilling prophecies and embodying ideals. Like most great rebels, he endeavored to live up to stated standards; unlike most, he did. For example, his kicking money lenders out of the temple was an expression of his intolerance for organized impurity. Such a person may be a great model for the dispossessed but is very dangerous for the establishment, so he was betrayed by the leaders of his own community. In this case, they responded in a manner typical of authorities who would be displaced if their promises were realized, and they had no difficulty recognizing what course of action was in their own immediate best interest. His crucifixion was an allegorical warning for everyone that the more one lives up to expressed ideals, the more likely he will suffer for the sin of doing so.

In the absence of whistle blowers, who are usually persecuted to the degree that they live up to the creed, language maximizes the potential of a social group to cooperate at whatever is accepted as necessary. Ironically, it promotes cooperation among members by inhibiting an appreciation of what it is they are doing or to what extent they may have over- or underdone it. Hence, although language normally functions as a screen between people and their environment, it can become a barrier if perception and cognition become skewed off and distorted for the sake of biased values.

In the two dimensional world of the schema, information from the reality of the behavioral environment is often redefined by the social imperative of language. An individual may find himself experiencing momentary cognitive dissonance when finding incoming data from the world of "Doing" contradicting or conflicting with his ideology—the system of ideas built on his established beliefs. The usual reaction in such a situation is to "Save the schema" at the expense of learning about the environment. Thus, numerous Freudian defense mechanisms (e.g., rationalization, repression, suppression, etc.) keep individuals content with their superego value systems, albeit at the cost of improving their behavioral schemas.

Physical reality may be a better source of information, but social values are preferable, as they are comforting and reassuring even while they are misleading. The social world is really a symbolic environment of subjective judgments, all routinely condoned and defined by the prevailing language system. Incoming perceptions are compared to the established schema, and if a way of fitting them in can be found, it will be. If none can be found, the data are usually rejected by the defense mechanisms mentioned above. In more extreme cases, undeniable perceptions may force an uncomfortable awareness on an individual (or discussions in a group) which eventually lead to a new, more inclusive schema. This changing of one's mind is the last resort, however, particularly if it tends to isolate an individual from his social group.

Finally, language extends to matters which are beyond confirmation—that is, matters of the imagination. The universal presence of this facet of human affairs attests to its survival advantage, although there is obviously need for diplomatic caution when evaluating the reality of any such conjured phenomena or processes. Put the other way, there is no monkey dumb enough to give up a real banana now for a promise of all the bananas it can eat after it is dead. If there is some psychological advantage to human individuals who believe stories of an afterlife, there is even more gained by groups which collectively share and coordinate activities based on myths.

Norms: A group is defined as "Individuals who share a common set of norms, beliefs and values" (i.e., a schema). The behavior of any member is usually of consequence to all other members, and for most people, the social support of the group is vital in that it defines existence. A sense of belonging is a most compelling factor in the human experience and the feeling of isolation a tempering sensation unpleasant to most. The vast majority of people do almost all their learning in the immediate presence of others who serve as teachers or role models. Thus, socialization proceeds as initiates learn appropriate behavior and correlated linguistic values which make group members out of an assembly of individuals.

Norms function in the formation of the schema by providing social reinforcement (positive and negative) to the development of both the linguistic value system and the behavioral control system. It is group norms which define group values by shaping the language, attitudes, sentiments, aspirations and goals of the members. These give the in-group a sense of identity and a degree of solidarity proportional to the hostility which may be directed toward conflicting out-groups.

Norms function to induce conformity wherever social organization is found. They provide the means group members use to exert subtle and indirect pressure on each other to think and behave appropriately. They are the customs, traditions, standards, rules, fashions and other unofficial criteria of conduct which organize the interactions of individuals into the codified behavior of group members. In fact, the initiate becomes a member to the degree that he focuses on the norms of a specific group and guides his actions according to them. Identification



is complete when the norms become internalized and function as subconscious reward systems. They then serve as the criteria that sustain the attitudes and objectives of the group as members' judgments and interpretations of perceptions tend toward conformity. The result is similarity if not uniformity of thought and action—a condition which can be regarded as normal or intellectually depressing.

Of particular importance in formation of the schema is the role norms play in shaping the attitudes of group members, since attitudes are the evaluative components of the schema. That is, it is through social norms that words come to be evaluative labels with positive or negative connotations for group identity and survival. Usually, group attitudes are formed as members concurrently share experiences. Such common experiences provide the basis for the formation of attitudes which express the emotional values of and make certain words loaded terms to members (e.g., "Liberty" to revolutionaries, "Good Christian" to the local holy rollers and "Old Siwash" to loyal grads).

These loaded terms and the attitudes they signify provide standards of thought, expression and behavior for the individuals who consider themselves group members. Norms and attitudes then become mutually reinforcing because the attitudes of the group, expressing its essential values, provide strong psychological pressure on members to honor the norms by conformity. In fact, norms and the verbal attitudes they engender make it very likely true blue members will think, feel, believe and behave in socially acceptable, predetermined ways about relevant objects and events. Thus, for example, Joshua commanded his troops to "Devote" the people of Canaan to God under "The curse of destruction" (i.e., execute them).

Groups: When a group determines the set of values an individual uses for judging behavior, it is known as his "Reference group" (i.e., what Edmond Burke once referred to as a "Little platoon"—an association of citizens pursuing their common interests). By shaping verbal attitudes with emotionally laden terms, the reference group provides a standard of comparison for evaluating one's own behavior as well as that of others. As identity with a group develops, a self-conscious sense of obedience to expectation is replaced by a devoted commitment to common values. The fully functional member is a collaborating component of the group and contributes to perpetuating group norms by cooperating with colleagues.

Of course, a reference group is all the more effective in imposing its values on members if it surrounds their heads with halos and arouses in them a sense of holiness. The emotional attitudes then become even more effective in promoting conformity to norms as they assume the mantle of moral righteousness. Beliefs condition the existence of any social group and become all the more firmly entrenched if they are sanctified as they are inculcated into the schemas of the devout. The most effective beliefs structure both the consciousness and the conscience of group members.

Along with shaping verbal attitudes into ethical values, group norms serve to regulate the behavioral actions and interactions of members by providing both a communication network and social support for each individual. The best that can be said for the functional value of norms is that they promote group cooperation. If they do this, the beliefs they promote and sustain will gain the status of sacred ideals. Once a belief is ensconced in the schema to the point of unilateral respect, it defines "Moral realism" which supports and transcends the "Verbal realism" of attitudes expressing its basic values. This process can go to an extreme, as cooperating members sharing the same values reinforce their common belief about reality.

With such social support, a new or altered schema may achieve mass acceptance if it once is established in the minds of a simple majority of group members. This self-promotion of a belief system through intensifying reinforcement is known as "The Gold Effect", having been described by Professor Thomas Gold, F.R.S. The process is akin to genetic drift in that in cultural life, a field is dominated by a factor (an idea rather than an allele) not because it is superior to competing items but simply because it is more common. This fact alone enhances the likelihood that, in cultural life, a self-reinforcing fad will become a posseed mania. In terms of schemas, a popular belief can become extremely popular even if popularity is not directly dependent upon accuracy or veracity.

Such an extreme may be ideal, if the standard of success is group cohesion. A legitimate goal of any society is to keep disputes within reasonable bounds, which is exactly what the common value system of a shared schema renders more probable. Being a human system, it is rarely 100% efficient, but the schema, as formed by common norms, does function to reduce frictional conflicts within a given group. Many cultures provide forums (soapboxes, letters to editors or Congressmen, public hearings, etc.) where the dis-gruntled can vent their emotions without much likelihood of anything being settled or disturbed. A classic example of this phenomenon is the Song Singing of Eskimos—a ritual in which two disputants compose insulting songs which they sing as loudly as possible at each other. Although nothing may be settled by such rituals, they do reduce psychic and social tension by permitting people to express their grievances and release their emotional energy.

If coping with given problems is too difficult within a static, well defined value system, a group may sacrifice its standards for the sake of cohesion. For example, students unqualified to receive diplomas may get them anyway, so as to avoid hurting their feelings. Such inflation of academic symbols does not really address the problem of learning, but it has a positive, short-term effect on some images and is therefore good public relations. In general, a lag or tension is characteristic of a dynamic schema as new behavioral norms conflict with a preconditioned, if outmoded, verbal value system in an accepted state of psychic dissonance.

Of course, the cultural impact of any particular schema is diluted by the many interpretations it receives from the individuals and subgroups which compose most reference groups. For example, the grand "Western schema" is subject to national variations which define the citizens of the Western nations on the international scene. Further, the American variant is subject to different interpretations on the domestic scene by businessmen and laborers, policemen and preachers, etc.

This process of schematic interpretation is somewhat complicated by the dynamic interactions of the given reference group with its environment. When the group is threatened or impacted by external forces (e.g., natural disasters or conflicts with competing groups), the schema serves as a rallying point, commitment to it intensifies and cohesion is enhanced. This occurred with the civil truce (i.e., Burgfrieden) in Germany in 1914 when, class conflict and internal disputes gave way temporarily to a commitment to national unity. Likewise, the rampant patriotism of Americans during WWII exemplified this phenomenon: as called upon by their president, businessmen and bankers, lawyers and laborers (with some "Wildcat" exceptions) emphasized their common nationalistic schema and conformed to patterns of thought and behavior in the best interests of their country. By way of contrast, in 1946, there was a tendency for subgroups and individuals to polarize by perceiving and interpreting events according to their own (i.e. different) best interests even if at the expense of the national supergroup.



Although intense cohesion may be entirely appropriate even in democracies during emergencies, the forced, long-term cohesion of totalitarian states is often the arbitrary concoction of leaders committed to themselves. Conjuring up or creating external threats and crises promotes cohesion, justifies repression and calls for a strong leader as personified by Chinese emperor Sui Wendi circa 600, when he began a war with Korea just for the sake of internal cohesion.

Cohesion can also be artificially sustained by deliberate attempts of leaders to bypass the rationale of the schema and appeal directly to the emotions of the people by downplaying sound argument in favor of weighted words. Hitler was past master at arousing enthusiasm by the structured use of the irrational and his deliberate indulgence in the big lie. His favorite method was the induction of mass hysteria through the use of, symbols, uniforms, marches, salutes and national games prejudices, passions, hatreds, emotions, resentments and biases. His goal was the development of an ethnic/racial pride, and his incredible success in achieving that goal was due to his dealing directly with the hopes, fears and attitudes of his followers. He provided something they valued and wanted to believe in— their own image. The logical if violent and demonic implications of the Nazi ideology had their own appeal to some but were largely (dis)missed by most.

Nor was Hitler content to craft his own messages to the public but deliberately limited access to any others. Germans in the '30's were punished severely for listening to foreign radio broadcasts or even if, during a household search, the dial was left tuned to a foreign station. Indeed, one Johann Wild of Nuremberg was sentenced to death for two radio crimes: Listening to a foreign station and repeating what he had heard.

Roles: If we shift our focus of attention from the schema to the individual, we find that each is partisan to many schemas, as each of us is a member of a number of different reference groups. A person is a member of a family. As a member of each group, the individual has at least one role to play and has an appropriate schema to guide his thoughts and actions as he shifts identity: e.g., a man can be a son to his father while being a father to his son. At each level, from supergroup to subgroup to individual and for each role, there is a schema to be adopted and applied by people cast in roles that shift with issues and circumstances.

A classic example of role shifting was given in an analysis of African society in momentary flux: "...most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as subject to the chief, at another moment as a member of that cult, at another moment as part of this clan, and at yet another moment as an initiate in that professional guild". And so it is with other non-caste societies.

For the sake of contrast, the fundamental difference between human roles and insect castes is noteworthy. In highly social insects, an individual is a member of a caste, which is a "Life role". It is a soldier, a worker, a queen, etc. for all of its adult life. Determination of caste membership may be genetic, as in the case of the haploid drones of bee colonies, or environmental, as exemplified by the queens, which develop under the influence of royal jelly. Also note that in all groups of animals where cooperation is vital, it is accomplished by role playing. Only in herds, flocks and schools (of fish) can masses of equal individuals be found, and such groups are characterized by the lack of differentiation of members, with at most only leader/follower designations.

Among humans, anarchy and mass riots are the exception and indicate a breakdown of traditional norms. People are peculiar in that they usually compete for sharing. They have roles and rules for this

phenomenon of cooperative conflict, and the winners and losers are usually pretty clearly defined in terms of a commonly accepted and disproportionate reward system. The rules are laws and norms which define how the role players should interact.

Within a group, the emphasis must be on cooperative role playing. There are leaders and followers, thinkers and doers, rule makers and rule breakers. There may be any number of roles, all usually defined in terms of their mutual interactions. For example, in an educational institution, administrators, faculty members and students all have interacting roles to play relative to each other. Such interactions can be formally defined by laws or rules as well as informally regulated by norms and taboos. In all situations, of course, there is considerable room for individual variation, depending on the personalities of the particular players and their subjective evaluations of each other. However, the basic principle is that all members of a group share a common schema which they interpret according to their specific roles.

These differences in schematic interpretation give the various, interacting role players the sets of guiding expectations they need to gain the rewards and avoid the sanctions of the reference group. Conformity to expectations is usually the best policy, as it promotes cooperation within and among groups. "Rights" and "Truth" usually have little meaning and less impact on decisions about behavior. Most of these are made subconsciously and follow neural paths of least resistance leading to social paths of greatest acceptance. Along with the language of the major reference group, each subgroup has its own identifying jargon to help its members define their place and fulfill their roles. Also, role players have little rituals— manners and mannerisms—which facilitate communication and cooperation within and between groups at all levels.

Thus, the strategy most conducive to successful role playing is one of conformity to reference group norms. "Fitting in" is usually something of a "Lube job"—a matter of confirming existing beliefs by telling people what they already know and doing what they expect will be done.

A given individual has, of course, many roles. In fact, a person has exactly as many roles as there are groups about whose opinion he cares. Unfortunately, playing roles in different groups can occasionally create dilemmas and contradictions in behavior— especially when one tries to be loyal to conflicting reference groups. A common type of role conflict occurs when one role offers immediate, material rewards while the superego value system of another reference group twinges the conscience. An example of this might be the Christian businessman who wrings his hands over the ethics of making a cutthroat move to advance his career in the corporate hierarchy. A person experiencing such a role conflict has to choose or compromise between external rewards and basic morality.

In many cases, an individual may not be aware of the inconsistent or contradictory demands different roles may be making on him, since the human mind has a great ability to compartmentalize roles into particular settings. Thus, a person may be a good Christian on Sunday, a successful businessman during the week and himself on Saturday. Most of the time, distinctive role programs can be separated subconsciously so that psychic duress (i.e., cogdis) is minimal if not absent.

Occasionally, an individual may be forced to alternate between conflicting roles. An example of this might be a student who plays teacher for an interim. Generally, this is not much of a problem, as most competing groups are usually distinctly separate with few, if any,



common members: not many businessmen are also members of a union; nor are there many Jewish Christians nor many sailors in the army. However, a person trying to alternate conflicting roles does have a problem, as meeting the expectation of one group may cause censure by the other.

Such problems may remain potential, however, and not even apparent under routine circumstances. If there is any inconsistency in behavior, it may pass unnoticed as the conflicting roles normally are separated by time and/or space. A business executive who moonlights as a card carrying musician can play such conflicting roles comfortably enough. On the other hand, a crisis may force a person to choose a role—forcing recognition of who he really is. During a disaster, public servants may favor their families over their jobs. Of course, this is a crucial conflict if the job is related to relief efforts and public safety as when hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in late August, 2005, only to have the police force melt away.

As a person shifts roles with changing circumstances, certain attitudes and elements of behavior remain constant and define the "Self". As a manifestation of the individual's core schema, the self consists of perceptions, motives and experiences fundamental to identity. Moving outward from this central, consistent essence of character, each person has multiple, superficial attitudes and behavioral programs designed for the various roles to be played (e.g., family member, church goer, fellow worker, etc.)—each slightly different and each relating to a role in a different reference group. Behavior in any situation is an expression of the self drawn out by the compounding of given role in specific conditions.

Expression of the self by role playing may not always be healthy. Although it is normal for people to play roles, in that most people do so most of the time, it can be distressing. If playing a particular role means hiding one's real self, then that is the price that must be paid for the social reward of acceptance. While it may be psychologically distressing to hide from a required role, it can be socially deleterious to bury oneself in a role. Roles and situations are often said to dehumanize or deindividuate the people caught up in them, but it is very human for individuals to take narrow roles to uncritical extremes. Even the happy state of "Being oneself" in a congruent environment can be both ideal and injurious, if the role has become limited or the environment artificially contrived. An example might be the archetypical "Pig" policeman who loves to push people around and gets away with it as long as official word of his abuses can be contained within the precinct.

Expression of the self is also affected by the fact that each role has as many dimensions as it has functions. For example, the leadership role has two interrelated functions—goal achievement and group maintenance. Goal achievement requires organization, motivation, sanctions and concentration on relevant environmental factors. Group maintenance depends on mutual respect, trust and friendship of members. A responsible leader accomplishes a given task while maintaining or enhancing group identity usually by being a good role model. However, there is a duality intrinsic to many roles and an inherent ambiguity in determining just how effective any leader really is.

Of course, personality plays a part in what kind of leader a given individual is, as a comparison of Generals George S. Patton and Dwight D. Eisenhower makes clear. Patton was goal oriented and one of our best combat commanders; Eisenhower was more the diplomat skilled at maintaining group cohesion. It was the Allies' good fortune in World War II that both found their appropriate niches and played their proper roles.

For a group to realize its goals, the leader must coordinate the roles individual members play. One way to succeed in this respect is to build on the fact that members sharing a common schema will tend to assume mutually supporting roles which promote cohesion. Although their specific behavioral roles differ, members will interact effectively if there is common agreement about the desired goal. For example, in team sports, the players at various positions have different roles which will interrelate smoothly as long as everyone is committed to the ideal of winning.

Unlike sports events, when games end and teams disband, many challenges a society faces are eternal and are dealt with by groups which seem as perpetual as the problems they never solve. A potential problem of and for such permanent groups is that they become committed as much to maintaining their roles as they are to fulfilling them. For instance, disease is certainly older than medicine, but the medical profession is well enough established to have structured ambiguous roles for its practitioners. This was demonstrated by the reaction of the American Medical Association to a rash of malpractice suits which recently plagued its members. A number of possible reforms were suggested to reduce such suits—not malpractice, mind you, just malpractice suits. One suggestion, for example, was to shorten the period a patient would have to file such a suit. This would be fine for the doctors, if not their victims, and it shows that one of the roles doctors play is directed toward keeping themselves as healers in business.

If there is ambiguity in this kind of role playing, it is because there is ambiguity in life. Ideally, doctors would be acting in their own best interests simply by acting in their patients' best interests. Of course, most of them do this most of the time, but that is not enough in our legally oriented, profit generating society. There is an inherent ambiguity in the expression "Health profession". Medicine is a business, so most doctors look after their own wealth as they look after their patients' health.

For the student of stupidity, the important point is that the ambiguity of "Best interest" is due to the arbitrary nature of role dependent judgment. This can make it difficult to determine whether or not a particular act is stupid or not. A person may act in his own worst interest in one sense while playing out the requirements of a conflicting role. Even within a given role, a person may have to emphasize one aspect of it to the neglect of others. A resultant decision or act may be deemed stupid by a judge who considers that which was sacrificed to be more important than that which was accomplished. Even a person's intentions provide no reliable standard, as they may be misguided and shortsighted and ultimately work against him. All things considered, "Best interest" turns out to be quite unreliable as a guide for evaluating stupidity. Such a judgment is usually ambiguous because it is invariably based on an arbitrarily selected standard, so stupidity is thus often induced because a person can easily find some emotionally appealing standard to justify his actions to himself and will then persist in behavior which may work to his actual detriment.

In the face of ambiguity, one may fall back on a more general schema to find a basis for defining a proper role, reducing perceived conflict and establishing a program for response in confusing circumstances. In American society, the official schema is the law. Laws provide guidelines for behavior and courts arbitrate when conflicts cannot be settled informally. Of course, the law itself is as ambiguous as lawyers can make it, so Americans often fall back on business principles as guides for judging behavior. For example, for hospital administrators, the crucial criterion for admittance is not a prospective patient's state of health but his ability to pay. When a person goes to a clinic, he needs to take his lawyer and accountant. Treatment begins only after payment is



guaranteed and forms for medical irresponsibility are filled out. (It is a Godsend that the law of "Malice of intent" which gives the media license to libel does not also apply to the medical profession.)

Ambiguity is compounded by the fact that, in most cases, a role is shaped by a schematic compromise of means with ends. Most people have general goals (happiness, wealth, etc.), and most behavior toward these goals is guided by general constraints (laws and ethics). That is, as most of us seek to achieve our goals, certain forms of behavior are proscribed and others condoned. Only in extreme cases is a schema dominated by an "End" to the point that a totally unconscionable person (like a Hitler) would do literally anything to attain it. Likewise, only in exceptional cases (like loving Christians) do people live by a schema which defines success in terms of how they behave rather than what they achieve.

If there were less ambiguity in life, people would be clearer about their goals and more easily find appropriate means of achieving them. The schema is a general guide which provides a quasi-religious ethic for behavior. This may or may not be consistent with the goals, which are determined largely by the emotionally loaded terminology of the reference group.

For example, in the field of civil rights, the change from discriminating against blacks and women to discriminating for them marked a great change in attitude toward the races and sexes but no change in attitude toward discrimination. The goals flip-flopped from segregation to integration, while the means, remained the same. In any event, the change in attitudes toward minority groups was accomplished as awareness of the inconsistency between idealized goals and behavioral reality made people uncomfortable with their traditional values and norms. These had been diplomatically articulated on Mar. 12, 1956 in the U.S. Senate by Walter George, who claimed southerners had been "Very diligent and astute in violating the spirit" of any laws that "Would lead the Negro to believe himself the equal of a white man..." The fact that the reasoning supporting racism was unsound had little impact on the strength of the attendant beliefs and fears, leading one to conclude the reasoning was really rationalizing deeper seated beliefs and fears.

Majority group members transcended their psychic inertia when they realized they would be more comfortable with accommodation than with continued resistance to mounting social pressures. The result of such forced integration has led to a new form of racism now based on experience with intermixture rather than ignorance—that is, prejudice based on personal contact rather than bigoted theory. Meanwhile, well-intended liberals are turning psychological somersaults and performing cognitive handstands to avoid unavoidable un-PC conclusions.

On the other hand, when values become tarnished by the realization that they have ceased to be serviceable, and problems of the street overcome nostalgia, beliefs change. This occurred in the South in the 1960's and in eastern Europe in the 1990's. Norms and attitudes are recast into new molds as schemas are altered in response to problems which can no longer be ignored. A schema provides a set of beliefs (which pass for an understanding about the universe), a program for directing behavior and, most important of all, a sense of identity. As a guide for a person attempting to cope with an uncertain environment, the schema is clearly adaptive.

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