

## A Review of The Neurological Basis of Maladaptation

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### Abstract

In Freudian terms, stupidity is a defense mechanism which keeps culturally forbidden desires at a subconscious level. It is bad enough that the mechanism for informing us about our environment is disrupted, but stupidity also isolates us from ourselves. All we are likely to know about our society and ourselves is that which is culturally acceptable. Consequently, much conscious knowledge is only obliquely related to a restricted reality, being limited by subconscious biases and thus often irrelevant to the solution of existing problems.

**Key words:** Freudian terms

### Summary

In Freudian terms, stupidity is a defense mechanism which keeps culturally forbidden desires at a subconscious level. It is bad enough that the mechanism for informing us about our environment is disrupted, but stupidity also isolates us from ourselves. All we are likely to know about our society and ourselves is that which is culturally acceptable. Consequently, much conscious knowledge is only obliquely related to a restricted reality, being limited by subconscious biases and thus often irrelevant to the solution of existing problems.

In fact, all defense mechanisms appear to be stupid to the degree that they maladaptively distort reality and may not be necessary relative to external conditions anyway. For example, the judgments paranoids make are commonly based on fear and may both justify and continue that emotional state rather than reducing a real threat. On the other hand, members of an over-confident, insulated group can become arrogant and careless when temperance and caution are in order, creating problems that otherwise would not exist. Stupidity really is due to a mismatch between the external demands of the environment and the internal imperatives of the schema.

Delusions are classic examples of psychic defenses which, in excess, can be stupefying. At any level of intensity, they provide a person with faulty interpretations of reality to which the victim will cling despite all kinds of contradictory evidence. The schema becomes delusive through a combination of insensitivity and fantasy. Excessive insensitivity to the most obvious facts contrary to an egotist's plans and desires most often leads him to ruin. Likewise, the fabrication of gratifying data can be immediately pleasing while serving to entrench a misleading schema. Of course, excessive amounts of energy may be used to impose delusions on facts, but this is usually, in the long run, a maladaptive strategy. People are defenseless against internalized delusions, but one person's delusion is someone else's religion.

Even when a schema is inadequate, delusions may make it appear to be functional. A pointedly maladaptive schema may become firmly established as a delusive individual ignores signs of difficulty and conjures up rewarding signs of success. This intensification of self-identification is defensive in that the person is his schema. Ineffective as it may be, without it, the individual is lost. In such a case, the person is really in a losing situation, in that he cannot survive as such. To survive, he must adopt a new schema, since the one he has will not adapt. However, by doing so, he would no longer be himself.

The basic principles of ego defense which function and malfunction for individuals may also be applied to groups. The delusion of "Protective destruction" which shaped American conduct in the Vietnam conflict was an idiotic case in point: any time you have to destroy something in order to save it, it is time to back off and reevaluate the situation and yourself. In a more global sense, perhaps our collective epitaph will read, "In order to survive, they self-destructed", for we seem bent on creating an environment in which we will all achieve the perfect equality of extinction.

Such a headlong rush to do things, whatever they are and whatever the consequences, is characteristic of the manic, so we are all manic to the extent that we act without thinking. This impatience of leaping before or while looking is a combination of suspended thought and an inner drive to action. It is interesting to note that clinical manics are often hypersensitive, having acute senses of sight, hearing, etc. It is as if being too sensitive induces stupidity in that the thought process is bypassed, and a direct if irrelevant connection is made between stimulus and response. If it is possible to have human life without a schema, this is it, and the possibilities for stupidity with a "Ready, fire, aim" mentality are boundless, as it is by definition always a case of sheer action without any guidance or control.

The chemical basis for such a mentality is the flooding of the brain with the narcotic-like dopamine, which is released when a new discovery is made. Such a positive stimulus all but assures that the individual will want to recreate the sensation through newer and more intense experiences—that is, (s)he is on a posfeed track toward excess. In extreme cases, abnormal dopamine levels are associated with drug addictions, schizophrenia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which, in turn, are common among explorers<sup>9</sup> and geniuses.

The opposite extreme of excessive control to the exclusion of action is the condition of repression, and it can be as stupid as mania—the one as quiet as the other is explosive. Just as denial is a defense against<sup>10</sup> external threats, repression is a defense against internal threats. The schema inhibits

potentially threatening thoughts or feelings from reaching awareness by proscribing their verbal or behavioral expression. At the level of the individual, the Oedipus complex was one of Freud's favorite repressions. A totalitarian society may also be repressive, as when it prohibits demonstrations which might call attention to problems. As the governor of Genoa commented after the arrest of "Thinker" Giuseppe Mazzini: "We don't like young people to think unless we know the subject of their thoughts."

Of course, repression is a great way to maintain order based on the appearance that all is well, and it reduces the demand to cope with any underlying problems. However, these may surface eventually, although often in forms unrecognizable to the conscience in individuals or to the leaders in society. As a defense mechanism, repression can make us feel better by helping us forget disturbing events, or, to put in another way, as Robert Kennedy's convicted killer Sirhan Sirhan did, "It helps not to remember".

In extreme cases, this process produces the clinical condition of amnesia, which occurs when people cannot subconsciously accept reality and form memories of their own circumstances and behavior. A classic example occurred when Ted Sorensen, President Kennedy's speech writer, was dazed by grief and disbelief and all but blacked for several days after JFK's assassination. As he put it, "...the details of that awful weekend.... unreal... unbelievable... a blur of pain and tears."

Generally, if we ignore for the moment the possible complications of brain damage due to physical trauma, any great psychological shock—a bad traffic accident or combat experience

—may be lost on the schema, which simply is not set up to process the data presented. The mind then can pick up normal functioning after the trauma has passed, to the exclusion of memories of everything that occurred before. The schema survives at the expense of knowledge, leaving the amnesiac functioning without knowing who he is.

While classical defense mechanisms may be, in moderation, effective means for coping with external stress, there are no defense mechanisms which reduce internally generated stress (e.g., when a paranoid perceives non-existent threats). When the schema becomes maladaptive to the point of being primarily self-sustaining or self-destructive rather than responsive to the environment, a condition of mental illness exists, as behavior is more likely to reinforce than reduce the source of stress. Such self-generated stress is produced when the schema motivates, misinforms and leads one to behavior which is irrelevant to the resolution of external problems or the improvement of internal mechanisms of reaction to and control of them.

Although all mental illnesses are stupid, stupidity itself is most similar to the clinical condition of 16 neurosis—i.e., unrealistic behavior which is maladaptive, self-defeating and frequently punished by society. The major difference is that stupidity is often rewarded by society. People usually engage in any form of behavior because of some sort of immediate reward, even if it is simply a smile or pat on the back. In the case of neurosis, social rejection and failure to attain goals may be the prices paid in order to be free from assumed emotional strain. In the case of stupidity, social acceptance may cause the failure to attain important goals, this being the price paid for the psychic satisfaction of belonging to a group.

Sometimes, a schema may break down under routine conditions due to a lack of sustaining 18 reinforcements. This state of depression is an extreme case

of "Doubt" induced by a failure of reality to live up to expectations. No one ever wrote a story about a little engine that was not sure or could not be bothered, but it would have been about saving energy until the apparent pointlessness of behavioral feedback could be constructed into some kind of sensible schema. In the meantime, a stupid passivity would have prevented effective responses to the environment.

In extreme clinical cases, fantasy may produce hallucinations to compensate for missing stimuli. This is often the experience of schizophrenics, whose schemas can provide emotion-ally required comfort and help and/or terror and threats missing from the external world. In this sense, for better and worse, their subjective world is a decided distortion of reality, which can be mixed with fantasy. Of course, their behavior takes on a degree of independence from and irrelevance to their surroundings, but that is the price paid for the creation of a far, far different world from that which recognizes channels break down, and input is created internally which both expresses and justifies the existing emotional state of the individual. In extreme cases, the person will opt to go to prison or even be executed rather than give up his delusional system. In schizophrenic political systems, the orthodox channels of communication break down so that protests become messages transmitted from within to an establishment unresponsive to suggestions or criticisms. Such insulation simplifies the immediate world of the leaders but also promotes the accumulation of long-term discontent throughout the general society.

On the other hand, a system may generate responses or rewards to the gratification of those providing stimulants. An outrageous case occurred when detainees at Guantanamo, Cuba in late 2002 failed to provide desired answers linking themselves to terrorist organizations. The re-action of the interrogators to the 23 lack of reward was to increase the stimulus. The standard saw is that when a stimulus is not rewarded, it is dropped. Here, the response was not a reward to the interrogator, so the stimulus was intensified rather than abandoned. Perhaps classic stimulus/response/psychology should be re-examined.

To complicate matters, people/leaders may abandon basic considerations of stimulus-response/cost benefit ratios and indulge in reckless behavior simply for the thrill of it. Even knowing a course of action is risky and not worth the potential monetary reward, a gambler may take the plunge for what might be oxymoronicly termed "Emotional reasons". Such conduct is difficult to analyze scientifically because it makes no sense, but that just demonstrates the limits of science when dealing rationally with insanity. In a similar but lesser manner, creative people, like actors and poets, may lose their bodies if not their souls when in a productive mode.

Nietzsche noted that madness is the exception in individuals but the rule in groups, and certainly there is often something mindless in conformity. Freud noted people in a group may act like children—suspending both mature judgment and common sense when swept up in the mass psychosis of blindly following a charismatic leader. Indeed, lack of vigilance and acceptance of excessive risks are common when members of a reference group band together to promote a mutual sense of overconfidence. In the inner circles of government, a leader may pressure advisers to rubber-stamp an ill-conceived program, or he might simply exert subtle influence to prevent them from exercising their critical judgment, with the net result in such



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