

Interpreting Stupidity

Editorial

James F. Welles*

Department of Psychology, USA

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***Corresponding author:** James F. Welles, Department of Psychology, PO Box 17, East Marion, New York, USA

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Abstract

In a positive vein, we may derive some psychosocial benefits from the arbitrary and subjective ways we misinterpret our behavior. We commonly indulge ourselves by holding self-serving, inconsistent, unrealistic beliefs which characteristically contradict our behavior. With such cognitive dissonant aids, people can live in mental worlds which transcend reality and, to the extent that some healthy fantasies are realized, improve their material circumstances. Such cerebral boot-strapping is common in humans and provides support for the coping mechanism which can also be simultaneously so helpful and maladaptive.

Introduction

For better and worse, the normal human mentality protects us from ourselves so that we cannot recognize the irrationality of our belief systems nor the inconsistencies between them and our behavior. What kind of inconsistencies? We are rewarded for lying and cheating, although our superego value system tells us we should be fair and honest. We are advised to be meek and humble by the powerful and mighty. A person really could be justly accused of being stupid just for doing as he is told. Usually, most people are street wise enough to resolve such paradoxes pragmatically by seeking tangible rewards and leaving ethical considerations to the empty-handed.

Although recognizing stupidity is a very arbitrary/subjective process, it should be easy to cite the conditions which characterize stupid behavior.

Stupidity is commonly considered possible only when and where courses of behavior are optional. If conditions have deteriorated to the extreme point that only a maladaptive act is available, stupidity is no longer the issue. However, it may have been stupid to have become boxed in in the first place.

On the other hand, it is just as stupid (in the sense of being wasteful) to under reach one's level of competence as to overreach it. In the first case, a system fails to develop its potential because it really is not challenged and therefore is not functioning as efficiently as it might. In the second case, stupidity can lead people into an environment or situation in which they cannot function effectively because their behavioral options are unsuited to the conditions at hand. In such a situation, an overambitious system finds itself unable to cope with the problems confronting it. Life's best compromise of competence

is to find an environment in which a decent level of efficiency can be sustained over a long period of time, with a reserve capacity available for coping with emergencies.

Another condition thought to characterize stupidity is “Counter-productivity”. A stupid belief system promotes its own demise by directing its devotees to behave in ways “Perceivably” in their own worst interest. If this is a valid point, how do we explain that such behavior is so common? Nations sleep while their enemies march: on the other hand,

paranoids defend themselves in the face of nothing. Companies squander millions on an executive’s pet project while rejecting products or improvements which would net those millions and more. The explanation is that stupidity is perceivable as such by all but those engaged in it at the time. These simply cannot perceive their own behavior as stupid because it does not appear to be so in terms of their own belief system.