

*Potemkin Stupidity*

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**Potemkin Stupidity**

What if the village idiots' apparent stupidity is simply a façade for some ugly truth? Perhaps seemingly stupid acts are guided by some underlying agenda that one prefers to ignore. A quick review here should answer some questions. What is stupidity? Who is Potemkin? How does one define Potemkin stupidity? Where can one see some examples of Potemkin stupidity? Finally, why should this concern us?

**What is Stupidity**

How does one define stupidity? There are three recent streams of research that define what is included in *the science of stupidity*. Sheppard & Young (2020) have categorized these as identifiable stupidity, functional stupidity, and the stress-stupidity system.

**Identifiable Stupidity**

People have something intuitively specific in mind when they use the label “stupid.” Like U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s words on obscenity: “... I know it when I see it...” (Gerwitz, 1996, p. 1023). When we see someone do something “stupid” we can identify it and, most times, be able to employ Forrest Gump’s line, “Stupid is as stupid does” (Pappas, 2015, p. 1). Aczel, Palfi, & Kekecs, (2015) in their analysis of people’s response to viewing ill-considered actions, found subjects employed “stupid” to identify three scenarios.

One, stupid is *confident ignorance* or failure to maintain a balance between confidence and abilities. Thus, actors take high risks while lacking the needed skills to perform the action.

This is not just a circumstance of being ignorant of one's ignorance – the “Dunning-Kruger effect” (Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Dunning, 2011) – but being certain about one's abilities despite being presented with evidence to the contrary.

Two, stupid is the absentminded *failure of attention* or lack of practicality. Aczel et al. (2015) note that “absentminded” individuals in otherwise good health knew the right thing to do but did not pay sufficient attention to avoid a “stupid” act. An example would be an otherwise able person who was so busy texting that they walk into a lamppost in broad daylight.

Finally, stupid is *lack of control*. This includes obsessive, compulsive, impulsive or addictive behavior, not some psychological disorder. One example is the case where political party members reject their own statutory recommendations because the opposition brought the bill to the legislature (see Sheppard & Young, 2020).

### **Functional Stupidity**

Alvesson and Spicer (2012, 2016) provide us with “a stupidity-based theory of organizations” (p. 1194). They discuss what they call “functional stupidity” – an “inability and/or unwillingness to use cognitive and reflective capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect ways... a disinclination to require or provide justification, and avoidance of substantive reasoning” (p. 1201). This is a mixed blessing with good and bad possibilities.

**Good functional stupidity.** Functional stupidity offers group members a sense of certainty for smooth organizational operations (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; 2016). A relaxed attitude toward being reflective, it saves the group from frictions and doubt. This allows group members to focus on organizational goals and how to achieve them. Functional stupidity allows organizations to avoid costs associated with constantly justifying all their actions.

**Bad functional stupidity.** Functional stupidity may also create an organizationally supported lack of reflection that brings about a refusal to use intellectual resources outside a narrow and safe space (Sidhu, 2015). Group members lack the ability or desire to use or process knowledge (Sternberg, 2002), question claims to knowledge or norms (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009), or use cognitive resources and intelligence (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

### **The Stress Stupidity System**

Sheppard and Young (2020) outline how the above forces interact when organizations and the people within them encounter a unique situation. Some external stressors trigger a performance gap between expected and actual results. This creates a decline in the organization's ability to address key survival elements (e.g. legitimacy for governments). This triggers the functional stupidity subsystem. If this is a familiar situation, a routine response may be enough to address the stressor. If the situation is less familiar and the proper response is ambiguous, we observe identifiable stupidity. This triggers “stupidity in response.” At this point, decision makers may be motivated to address their stupid intuitional actions because there is

sufficient pressure for change. If decision makers are disinclined to change, the threat rigidity responses of information restriction and constriction of control will intensify stressors (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981).

All of this means that organizations and/or their stakeholders' inapt decisions create sub-optimal results. Simply, stupidity leads to some kind of failure. Both individuals and "organizations are widely encouraged to learn from their failures, but it is something most find easier to espouse than to effect" (Cannon & Edmondson, 2005). There are numerous reasons for this but one that seems plausible is that one executes a stupid act for reasons that are not readily obvious. We have labeled this "Potemkin Stupidity"

## Who is Potemkin?

Grigory Potemkin (1739–1791) was a high-ranking Russian government official (Mindlin, 2007). Under his governorship, New Russia (now the southern Ukraine) developed with suspicious rapidity. Some claimed that the true living conditions in the region were quite poor relative to what Potemkin reported. To assess the situation, Catherine the Great came to personally inspect the region by riverboat. However, it was later alleged that to hide conditions from the Czarina, Potemkin had false riverbank villages built. Hence the phrase "Potemkin village" has come to mean a deception that conceals some unpleasant truth (Mindlin, 2007). Generally, placing Potemkin in front of a phrase means that there is some ongoing ruse that hides an ugly truth (e.g. Mindlin, 2007).

## Defining Potemkin stupidity and two examples

Potemkin stupidity is some act that could be labeled as stupid and yet people or organizations repeat it often for some less than desirable hidden rationale. We present the following two examples.

### **The Peter Paradox**

The Peter Principle (1969) tells us that in a hierarchy, people rise to their level of incompetence. That is, we promote someone if they are good at their job. If they are good at their new job, we promote them again. This goes on until the person lands a job for which they are not competent. This is not really an optimal way to acquire competent managers. In subsequent work, Peter (1973) proposed a number of ways to address this problem.

The paradox here is that 50 years later, we still promote people in the same way. We meet the criteria for stupidity here and apply functional stupidity to a critical staffing decision. Peter (1973) tells us how to do it better but we do not necessarily do so. What's going on?

It may be that we do not use staff promotions to find good managers but rather have cheap employees. One criterion for staying in a job is the chance for career advancement. This means employers pay those at the bottom of the hierarchy less and entice them with the promise that more comes later. The Potemkin stupidity here is that we are not ignoring the Peter Principle because we are stupid. The ugly hidden truth is that workers who have not reached their level of incompetence are cheaper if we ignore the Peter Principle, promise employees a brighter future, and promote in the traditional manner.

### **Trump Trickery**

Donald Trump's 2016 electoral success has, among other things, been attributed to "...intensified political partisanship in the presence of well-institutionalized racially coded campaign strategies and rhetoric..." (Bobo, 2017, S85). Does this explain his 2020 successes? How did Trump garner over 70 million votes while overseeing the highest unemployment rate in 80 years (Amadeo, 2020) and the worst epidemic in 100 years (Betz, 2020)? Hamblin (2020) notes that one exit poll showed coronavirus "was the most important issue guiding more than 40 percent of voters. But... 80 percent of Republican voters said they believe that the virus is at least 'somewhat under control' in the same week that cases reached record numbers" (para. 4). Here is a critical issue for voters, a government failing to address it, and 80 percent of the members of a major political party supporting what appears to be failed efforts. Are they all stupid? Something else must be going on here. As Hamblin (2020) opined, "Much of what he [Trump] said and did as president was thinly veiled white supremacy, misogyny, race-baiting, and class warfare" (para. 5).

This is not to say all voters selected Trump for reasons relating to race. Actually, non-college-educated minority voters increased support for Trump from 20 to 25 percent driven by a strong anti-socialist message to the Cuban community (Zhang & Burn-Murdoch, 2020). Trump legitimately earned increased support among upper income voters (Zhang & Burn-Murdoch, 2020) – likely due to his tax policies.

## **Why should all this concern us?**

If you've gotten into a dispute with anyone and believed their point of view exhibits their stupidity there are three possibilities. One, they really are stupid. Two, they may have an honest difference of opinion borne of a different set of experiences. Three, Potemkin stupidity may be present, suggesting there is a point of view meant to drive an inapt decision based on less than well-meaning criteria.

So when people do something that appears to be stupid, it may mean they are stupid. Dig deeper and you may find someone's apparent stupidity is actually Potemkin stupidity. Patinas

of stupidity may be hiding a nastier truth that cannot be dismissed by believing someone to be the village idiot. The destructive state of discourse surrounding the 2020 U.S. presidential election gives one pause to ask if those we debate have an honest opinion, are ill informed, or are pursuing worrisome unacceptable ends.

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