



Stupidity and Mental Illness: Normal and Abnormal (Normal Human Behavior as Maladaptive)

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Opinion

Introduction

The normal human condition is a state of compromise between two competing tendencies—one to test and the other to deny reality [1]. Actually, denying reality is an extreme; misconstruing it through the misinterpreted power of words is the norm. Of course, a touch of fantasy can further reduce any anxiety which might be induced by accurate perceptions of the environment [2]. Thus, prevention of anxiety and promotion of group cohesion combine to produce a schema which is both more and less than a reflection of reality. Irrationality helps the slightly neurotic normal people adjust to each other even as it prevents them from knowing themselves or achieving a long-term adjustment to their limitations. If it is any consolation to the nearly insane, there is not a shred of evidence supporting the notion that life should be taken seriously [3].

Freud

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 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.

Defense Mechanisms

In fact, all defense mechanisms appear to be stupid to the degree that they maladaptive distort reality and may not be necessary relative to external conditions anyway [4]. 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 overconfident, 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.

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.

Repression

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 external threats, repression is a defense against internal threats [5]. 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 [6]. 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" [7]. 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, Manchurian Candidate Sirhan Sirhan did, "It helps not to remember" [8]. 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 [9]. 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" [10]. 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 not set up to process the data is 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.

Ego Defenses

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 [11], 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.

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Madness

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 [12]. 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 [13], with the net result in such instances usually being pointedly maladaptive.

The madness of a group, like that of those who followed Adolf Hitler or Charles Manson, derives much of its impetus from social support. Madness of the individual, like that of Hitler or Manson, often develops when a creative person is ostracized by general society but followed by a cult. Obviously, in the two examples mentioned, the individuals warranted ostracism not just for being different, but for being diabolical. However, society is not usually very discerning in its wariness of people who fail to conform to expectation. It is also worth noting that general creativity can develop in those ostracized. As they are estranged from a schema they never really identified with anyway, those on the fringe may develop self-reinforcing schemas of their own. Whether this leads to madness, genius or a mixture of the two is another matter for arbitrary/subjective judgment. To complicate the matter, bear in mind that the insane lack their own terminology and language to describe and define their condition and ours. Everyone

is obliged to use the labels of the presumably reasonable and adaptive establishment to deal with insanity [14].

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