Stupid Attitudes

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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 [1].

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 in- terest". 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 [2]. 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 [3] and

corrupt the super-ego values of the group. The unacknowledged goal of most groups is maintenance of their belief system. 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 complacence. Unfortunately, the long-term consequences can be disastrous, as happened in the Penn State scandal centered on convicted child molester Jerry Sandusky [4].

To achieve and maintain a healthy balance, there must be a dynamic tradeoff 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, sup- pressed 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 adjustment 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 tradition-al 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.

References

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