



Book Review

Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid edited by Robert J. Sternberg. 2002. Yale University Press. New Haven & London. ISBN: 0-300-09033-1.

Reviewed by Tony Dickinson

Whether one believes acting stupid to be the antithesis of acting smart or intelligently [most of us?], or perhaps prefers to regard stupid behaviour as foolishness in the face of misplaced wisdom [Sternberg], this volume brings together a rich diversity of approaches and opinion to one of life's persistent questions. Some 15 authors gather here in an attempt to inform the reader what stupidity and smartness consist in, whilst providing a breadth of examples from both the empirical literature (laboratory studies, psychometric survey) and the popular press (typically involving embarrassed politicians). Over the course of some eleven chapters, a number of recurrent themes and proposals address the ways in which stupid behaviour might best be characterised, identified or defined, but of more interest (at least to me) was to also find a number of attempts to explain the behaviours so described. A number of the contributors point (directly or indirectly) to particular instances of 'stupidity' which may well have been construed as having demonstrated adaptive, rather than maladaptive behaviour under different circumstances. In this respect, the reader is repeatedly lead to the view that per-

sonal trait labels such as smart, intelligent or stupid, should be viewed as context dependant terms, if not entirely context-specific, characterisations of human behaviour. In short, what might be considered stupid behaviour under one circumstance, might well be considered smart behaviour in another. So, why do these authors think that smart people can be so stupid?

Whilst psychometric correlates of the 'smart' and 'intelligent' are cited throughout the book (high IQ, high 'G'-factor, either high or low scoring on various personality inventory components), no convincing data is presented in an attempt to directly correlate any independent measure of 'stupidity' with psychological theory. As a result, perhaps, a significant number of this volume's authors sought to explain 'stupid behaviour' as a person's failure to adapt to novel circumstances. However, this does little more work than to merely restate the antithesis: that 'good' intelligence ontologically scaffolds in response to the need for increasingly flexible, dynamic behaviours in the face of challenges beyond the ken of one's current (and likely more reflexive) response repertoire. Using examples from business and industry, at

least two chapters [Wagner and Austin & Deary] remind us that circumstances involving unfamiliar, ill-formed or poorly-defined problem spaces will more likely result in decisions thought stupid in hindsight, but they also point to conflict management as being a significant variable. Such findings serve to inform us that our attempts to transfer template problem-solutions (or indeed any previously successful habits of mind) to novel situations may later prove to have been a poor strategy (think Chamberlain & Hitler), or even complete folly (think Clinton & Lewinsky). Sociopersonal factors were also frequently cited as being of importance in explaining stupidity, with managerial incompetence in particular being shown to correlate with the (personal) emotional stability of managers, as did their degree of insensitivity to the needs and expectations of their subordinates and co-workers.

But if there is a recipe here for our avoiding stupid behaviour, such may be derived only from our interpreting the combined arguments and views put forward over the entirety of the volume. If it is true that we become good at what we spend most of our time doing (as I'm fond of telling my students is indeed the case) then this book suggests that we should devote a fair proportion of our time to recognising the significance of all our inter-, intra-, and extra-

subjective personal circumstances. We need to be alert to identifying the critical changes in our situation(s) [Halpern]. We also need to be prepared to adapt to such changes (possibly in novel ways) without recourse to reflexive habit and reward by immediate gratification [Ayduk & Mischel]. Furthermore, we should strive to consider the power of uncertainty, such that we might then learn what might be (rather than concentrating our attention upon what one thinks currently 'is') the case [Modeveanu & Langer]. Furthermost, we must continue to construct and reconstruct past scenarios in such a way as to only attach to them, the theories and constraints that do the most explanatory work for us [Stanovich]. Without wishing to offer any guarantees here of increasing one's intelligence, the ideas circulating this volume nonetheless provide the reader with a window through which we might see a means of understanding, whilst reducing the frequency of, both our own and others' acts of stupidity.

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