THE STUPIDITY OF ROLES

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INTRODUCTION

If we focus our attention on the belief system of the individual, we find that each is subject to many such systems, as each of us is a member of a number of different reference groups. A person is a member of a family. As a member of each group, the individual has at least one role to play and has an appropriate schema to guide his thoughts and actions as he shifts identity: e.g., a man can be a son to his father while being a father to his son. At each level, from supergroup to subgroup to individual and for each role, there is a schema to be adopted and applied by people cast in roles that shift with issues and circumstances.

A classic example of role shifting was given in an analysis of African society in momentary flux: “...most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as subject to the chief, at another moment as a member of that cult, at another moment as part of this clan, and at yet another moment as an initiate in that professional guild”.1 And so it is with other non-caste societies.

For the sake of contrast, the fundamental difference between human roles and insect castes is noteworthy.2 In highly social insects, an individual is a member of a caste, which is a "Life role". It is a soldier, a worker, a queen, etc. for all of its adult life. Determination of caste membership may be genetic, as in the case of the haploid drones of bee colonies, or environmental, as exemplified by the queens, which develop under the influence of royal jelly. Also note that in all groups of animals where cooperation is vital, it is accomplished by role playing. Only in herds, flocks and schools (of fish) can masses of equal individuals be found, and such groups are characterized by the lack of differentiation of members, with at most only leader/follower designations.

Among humans, anarchy and mass riots are the exception and indicate a breakdown of traditional norms. People are peculiar in that they usually compete for sharing. They have roles and rules for this phenomenon of cooperative conflict, and the winners and losers are usually pretty clearly defined in terms of a commonly accepted and disproportionate reward system. The rules are laws and norms which define how the role players should interact. Within a group, the emphasis must be on cooperative role playing. There are leaders and followers, thinkers and doers, rule makers and rule breakers. There may be any number of roles, all usually defined in terms of their mutual interactions.3 For example, in an educational institution, administrators, faculty members and students all have interacting roles to play relative to each other. Such interactions can be formally defined by laws or rules as well as informally regulated by norms.
and taboos. In all situations, of course, there is considerable room for individual variation, depending on the personalities of the particular players and their subjective evaluations of each other. However, the basic principle is that all members of a group share a common schema which they interpret according to their specific roles.

These differences in schematic interpretation give the various, interacting role players the sets of guiding expectations they need to gain the rewards and avoid the sanctions of the reference group.

Conformity to expectations is usually the best policy, as it promotes cooperation within and among groups. "Rights" and "Truth" usually have little meaning and less impact on decisions about behavior. Most of these are made subconsciously and follow neural paths of least resistance leading to social paths of greatest acceptance. Along with the language of the major reference group, each subgroup has its own identifying jargon to help its members define their place and fulfill their roles. Also, role players have little rituals—manners and mannerisms—which facilitate communication and cooperation within and between groups at all levels.

Thus, the strategy most conducive to successful role playing is one of conformity to reference group norms. "Fitting in" is usually something of a "Lube job"—a matter of confirming existing beliefs by telling people what they already know and doing what they expect will be done.

A given individual has, of course, many roles. In fact, a person has exactly as many roles as there are groups about whose opinion he cares. Unfortunately, playing roles in different groups can occasionally create dilemmas and contradictions in behavior—especially when one tries to be loyal to conflicting reference groups.

Supplementary information The online version of this article (https://doi.org/xx.xxx/xxx.xx) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.
Katrina hit New Orleans in late August, 2005, only to have the police force melt away. As a person shifts roles with changing circumstances, certain attitudes and elements of behavior remain constant and define the "Self". As a manifestation of the individual’s core schema, the self consists of perceptions, motives and experiences fundamental to identity. Moving outward from this central, consistent essence of character, each person has multiple, superficial attitudes and behavioral programs designed for the various roles to be played (e.g., family member, church goer, fellow worker, etc.)—each slightly different and each relating to a role in a different reference group. Behavior in any situation is an expression of the self drawn out by the compounding of given role in specific conditions.

Expression of the self by role playing may not always be healthy. Although it is normal for people to play roles, in that most people do so most of the time, it can be distressing. If playing a particular role means hiding one’s real self, then that is the price that must be paid for the social reward of acceptance. While it may be psychologically distressing to hide from a required role, it can be socially deleterious to bury oneself in a role. Roles and situations are often said to dehumanize or deindividuate the people caught up in them, but it is very human for individuals to take narrow roles to uncritical extremes. Even the happy state of "Being oneself" in a congruent environment can be both ideal and injurious, if the role has become limited or the environment artificially contrived. An example might be the archetypical "Pig" policeman who loves to push people around and gets away with it as long as official word of his abuses can be contained within the precinct. Expression of the self is also affected by the fact that each role has as many dimensions as it has functions. For example, the leadership role has two interrelated functions—goal achievement and group maintenance. Goal achievement requires organization, motivation, sanctions and concentration on relevant environmental factors. Group maintenance depends on mutual respect, trust and friendship of members. A responsible leader accomplishes a given task while maintaining or enhancing group identity usually by being a good role model. However, there is a duality intrinsic to many roles and an inherent ambiguity in determining just how effective any leader really is. Of course, personality plays a part in what kind of leader a given individual is, as a comparison of Generals George S. Patton and Dwight D. Eisenhower makes clear. Patton was goal oriented and one of our best combat commanders; Eisenhower was more the diplomat skilled at maintaining group cohesion. It was the Allies’ good fortune in World War II that both found their appropriate niches and played their proper roles.

For a group to realize its goals, the leader must coordinate the roles individual members play. One way to succeed in this respect is to build on the fact that members sharing a common schema will tend to assume mutually supporting roles which promote cohesion. Although their specific behavioral roles differ, members will interact effectively if there is common agreement about the desired goal. For example, in team sports, the players at various positions have different roles which will interrelate smoothly as long as everyone is committed to the ideal of winning. Unlike sports events, when games end and teams disband, many challenges a society faces are eternal and are dealt with by groups which seem as perpetual as the problems they never solve. A potential problem of and for such permanent groups is that they become committed as much to maintaining their roles as they are to fulfilling them. For instance, disease is certainly older than medicine, but the medical profession is well enough established to have structured ambiguous roles for its practitioners. This was demonstrated by the reaction of the American Medical Association to a rash of malpractice suits which recently plagued its members. A number of possible reforms were suggested to reduce such suits—not malpractice, mind you, just malpractice suits. One suggestion, for example, was to shorten the period a patient would have to file such a suit. This would be fine for the doctors, if not their victims, and it shows that one of the roles doctors play is directed toward
If there is ambiguity in this kind of role playing, it is because there is ambiguity in life. Ideally, doctors would be acting in their own best interests simply by acting in their patients’ best interests. Of course, most of them do this most of the time, but that is not enough in our legally oriented, profit generating society. There is an inherent ambiguity in the expression “Health profession”. Medicine is a business, so most doctors look after their own wealth as they look after their patients’ health.

For the student of stupidity, the important point is that the ambiguity of "Best interest" is due to the arbitrary nature of role dependent judgment. This can make it difficult to determine whether or not a particular act is stupid or not. A person may act in his own worst interest in one sense while playing out the requirements of a conflicting role. Even within a given role, a person may have to emphasize one aspect of it to the neglect of others. A resultant decision or act may be deemed stupid by a judge who considers that which was sacrificed to be more important than that which was accomplished. Even a person’s intentions provide no reliable standard, as they may be misguided and shortsighted and ultimately work against him. All things considered, "Best interest" turns out to be quite unreliable as a guide for evaluating stupidity. Such a judgment is usually ambiguous because it is invariably based on an arbitrarily selected standard, so stupidity is thus induced because a person can easily find some emotionally appealing standard to justify his actions to himself and will then persist in behavior which may work to his actual detriment.

In the face of ambiguity, one may fall back on a more general schema to find a basis for defining a proper role, reducing perceived conflict and establishing a program for response in confusing circumstances.

In American society, the official schema is the law. Laws provide guidelines for behavior and courts arbitrate when conflicts cannot be settled informally. Of course, the law itself is as ambiguous as lawyers can make it, so Americans often fall back on business principles as guides for judging behavior. For example, for hospital administrators, the crucial criterion for admittance is not a prospective patient’s state of health but his ability to pay. When a person goes to a clinic, he needs to take his lawyer and accountant. Treatment begins only after payment is guaranteed and forms for medical irresponsibility are filled out. (It is a Godsend that the law of "Malice of intent" which gives the media license to libel does not also apply to the medical profession.)

Ambiguity is compounded by the fact that, in most cases, a role is shaped by a schematic compromise of means with ends. Most people have general goals (happiness, wealth, etc.), and most behavior toward these goals is guided by general constraints (laws and ethics). That is, as most of us seek to achieve our goals, certain forms of behavior are prescribed and others condoned. Only in extreme cases is a schema dominated by an "End" to the point that a totally unconscionable person (like a Hitler) would do literally anything to attain it. Likewise, only in exceptional cases (like loving Christians) do people live by a schema which defines success in terms of how they behave rather than what they achieve.

If there were less ambiguity in life, people would be clearer about their goals and more easily find appropriate means of achieving them. The schema is a general guide which provides a quasireligious ethic for behavior. This may or may not be consistent with the goals, which are determined largely by the emotionally loaded terminology of the reference group.

For example, in the field of civil rights, the change from discriminating against blacks and women to discriminating for them marked a great change in attitude toward the races and sexes but no change in attitude toward discrimination. The goals flip-flopped from segregation to integration, while the means remained the same. In any event, the change in attitudes toward minority groups was accomplished as awareness of the inconsistency between idealized goals and behavioral reality made people uncomfortable with their traditional values and norms. These had been diplomatically articu-
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On Mar. 12, 1956 in the U.S. Senate by Walter George, who claimed southerners had been “Very diligent and astute in violating the spirit” of any laws that “Would lead the Negro to believe himself the equal of a white man....”17 The fact that the reasoning supporting racism was unsound had little impact on the strength of the attendant beliefs and fears,18 leading one to conclude the reasoning was really rationalizing deeper seated beliefs and fears.d Majority group members transcended their psychic inertia when they realized they would be more comfortable with accommodation than with continued resistance to mounting social pressures. The result of such forced integration has led to a new form of racism now based on experience with intermixture rather than ignorance—that is, prejudice based on personal contact rather than bigoted theory. Meanwhile, well-intended liberals are turning psychological somersaults and performing cognitive handstands to avoid un-PC conclusions.19

On the other hand, when values become tarnished by the realization that they have ceased to be serviceable, and problems of the street overcome nostalgia, beliefs change. This occurred in the South in the 1960’s and in eastern Europe in the 1990’s. Norms and attitudes are recast into new molds as schemas are altered in response to problems which can no longer be ignored. A schema provides a set of beliefs (which pass for an understanding about the universe), a program for directing behavior and, most important of all, a sense of identity. As a guide for a person attempting to cope with an uncertain environment, the schema is clearly adaptive.

a. For example, President Reagan found his first Secretary of State, Gen. Alexander Haig to be paranoid and power hungry (Reagan Diary. June 14, 1982.) while Haig found the president was not mean—just stupid.

b. One was to admit errors. It turns out that candor reduces law suits. Contrary to all kinds of legal advice and doctors’ expectations, a University Michigan Health Survey found that apologizing to patients for medical mistakes and offering compensation up front resulted in the lawsuit rate plummeting and hospitals saving bundles. (Sun-Sentinel. Aug. 23, 2010. Editorial. 14A.) Is this a stupid article or what?

c. An interesting wrinkle on this theme comes in an early form of discrimination at Harvard University. Early in the 20th century, admission was based on open examination, which resulted in a lot of Jews being admitted. When Abott L. Lowell, who spoke only to Cabots, became president, he instituted a program of “Geographic diversity” designed to limit the number of Urbanites (Jews) at the school. (Feldman. Scorpions. Twelve; New York. 2010. 25.)

d. An odd wrinkle in racism manifested itself when the first white abolition societies in America refused membership to blacks. (Strausbaugh. p 26.) During the Progressive era (1890-1910), the few blacks living in the north tried to assimilate and were for the most part accepted by whites, but in a kind of detached insanity, Progressives nevertheless embraced eugenics as a purely intellectual coping strategy for this nonproblem. Hitler gave eugenics a bad name, so after WWII, liberals adopted the notion that all races are created equal in all abilities. However, neither the eugenic Progressives or PC liberals provided a shred of valid scientific evidence to support their position (Sowell. 2013. Intelligence and Race. Basic Books; New York.) perhaps because race is not a scientific concept.
2 | NOTE

5. Proshansky and Seidenberg. op. cit. 383.
6. Ibid. 384.
10. Ibid. 271.
11. Ibid. 277.
13. Proshansky and Seidenberg. op. cit. 387.

How to cite this article: J.F.W.P.D. THE STUPIDITY OF ROLES. Academy of Social Science Journals. 2020;1714-1719. https://doi.org/DOI 10.15520/assj.v5i7.2624