Opinion

The Stupidity of Perception

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Opinion

In vertebrates, incoming sensory data are picked up by the five major senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. However, even in monkeys, info picked up by the eyes does not go directly from the optic nerve to the visual cortex of the brain; it first passes through temporal lobe where it is edited and modified [1]. In the case of our own species, this process can lead to maladaptation through limited, distorted and/or inventive tinkering with data. It is a feature common to schematic systems and makes stupidity a normal part of the human experience, since stupidity is based on the subjective nature of perception, which requires the observer to be actively involved in the process [2].

First of all, people select information stupidly. Any individual or organization takes in only a fraction of the data available. Since information gathering must be limited, it might be ideal if it were selected at random, so that it would reflect accurately the general state of the environment. However, perception is a directed process, with certain elements in the surroundings receiving inordinate attention and others being ignored. At best, this can permit the system to function effectively in a limited milieu in which attention can be directed toward phenomena considered relevant to acknowledged problems or beckoning possibilities. At worst, the system puts itself out of touch with parts of the general environment.

If stimuli fit the perceiving schema, in that they conform to expectation, they barely register and are promptly dismissed. This accounts for the overwhelming majority of informational bits which are picked up by any system they are simply too routine to warrant one's attention. A good example of this process is the oblivion of a driver to most of the stimuli continually bombarding him as he goes along. As long as everything fits expectation, with traffic patterns in the normal range and the road right where it belongs, the driver may be unaware of even his own presence [3].

However, the perceiver will immediately pick up on any aspect of the environment which does not quite fit the schema. Anything exceptional will be noticed and, if necessary and possible, adjustments made. In fact, the schema may adjust itself a little to allow for future variations similar to any experienced. Alternatively, incongruous data may be cognitively massaged to fit the schema in the way that if you are a hammer, everything starts looking like a nail [4].

Beyond this normal range of perception and adjustment, however, the schema can be a limiting and debilitating factor when it prevents appreciation of events which would be emotionally distressing if acknowledged. This is the basis for the fabled ostrich strategy for avoiding awareness of threats or other unpleasantries. Such selective ignorance of stimuli is characteristic of the schema as a mechanism for non/misperception and a program for stupidity.

This selective ignorance is the result of the schema's "Perceptual defense", which acts as a filter through which stimuli must pass. This defense protects us from the anxiety that would be aroused by perceiving threatening stimuli. The physiological basis for this phenomenon is that the threshold level for threatening or anxiety arousing stimuli is higher than that for neutral stimuli [5]. Of course, this kind of defense can be stupid, if knowing would help or permit coping: ignoring warnings is not much of a way to defend oneself.

In the mind of a paranoid, on the other hand, fear creates threats by substituting beliefs for reality. His language confirms his beliefs, and he strives to be free of knowledge [6]. This exemplifies the role the schema can play in creating misperceptions by projecting itself onto stimuli. The process of perception is not accomplished by analysis of discrete bits of information in independent isolation. It is effected by the building of a verbal picture of the environment. As one might suspect, the picture constructed is not based on the data, all the data and nothing but the data but is shaped according to the perceiver's experiences, preferences and goals [7]. As a result of "Focused screening", data which do not conform to the existing gestalt are screened out by a brain which fills in missing info so modification becomes a posfeed system based disproportionately on information which confirms the schema as well as invented data which make an experience easier to accept and retain [8]. Sad to say, President George W. Bush took advantage of this principle to further his Iraq centered agenda after the attacks of 9/11 [9].

In general, paranoids are skillful dissemblers, so they often pass unnoticed. They may give themselves away, however, because they are nearly always consumed in unmasking enemies, which they see everywhere. They are endowed with the gift of seeing through masks, which they tear off, whether they are there or not [10]. Fantasy usually provides data to fit the schematic gestalt so as to improve a bit on reality. In the act of misperception, people routinely add their own knowledge to data they do receive from

the environment [11] and compound the mixture with a bit of imagination. The movie and digital recording industries are based on a failure of perception to detect discrete stimuli as such but rather have the brain blend them together into cohesive wholes thus seeing or hearing something that is not there [12]. As many jurists have found, witnesses may testify to perceptions which are really more impressions created by their own schemas. In a light vein, this process provided the basis for Mark Twain's comment that he could remember everything that happened and some things that didn't. In a serious vein, conjured images of WMD were invented to rationalize invading Iraq in 2003 [13].

The verbal arm of the schema really is a cognitive construct which consistently contributes to perceptual misinterpretation. Incoming data are used to solidify or modify the schema so as to make it more refined if fundamentally unsound. Thus, the schema is inherently conservative, with conflicting data misinterpreted or blended with some fabricated facts to fit into existing definitions and patterns of thought [14]. If the discrepancy between the new stimulus and existing schema is too great, the data may be totally rejected. In extreme cases, the whole system may freeze, as when a rabbit is transfixed by headlights.

Along with contributing to misperceptions of the environment, the schema tends to limit expectations of behavioral results. A certain effect is usually desired when one undertakes a course of action. That desired end is commonly anticipated, and its perception is favored over other possible effects. This problem is particularly important when actions can have long term, negative consequences. A prime example would be the difficulties created by the use of the insecticide DDT. True, the poison accomplished its intended purpose of killing agricultural pests and carriers of disease, but it had other, unanticipated consequences as well it spread throughout the environment and concentration within predators as it passed up the food pyramid to the decided detriment of a number of species including our own. These results were as unexpected as perception of them was unwelcome.

This process of misperception in turn depends on associating stimuli and cognitions by constructing elaborate complexes which integrate incoming data with the existing schematic network of related elements. As entering information connects with known elements, it becomes part of the schema. In general, it is easier to learn material which is consistent with the schema, since the more elaborate the connections, the better the material will be remembered [15]. However, by categorizing perceptions via verbalization, limitations are placed on possible associations and general relevance of behavior.

Accordingly, as the schema develops, it becomes directional, bending incoming data to its own support, deflecting conflicting data, misinterpreting situations and generally making itself decreasingly accurate as a representation of the totality of reality and increasingly a source of self gratification for the beholder. This means that human affairs do not tend to work out for the best; they tend to work themselves out according to their own natures, whatever they are [16]. Responses become less and less relevant to environmental stimuli and more and more reflections of inherent biases of the schema. In addition, even the initial successes of a schema may work against it if it is rigorously applied to situations beyond its range of definitions [17], thereby leading to reactions which are irrelevant. Thus, maladaptation is virtually inherent in any system which is committed to maintaining its integrity while imposing itself on reality. This is the basis for the general capacity of human organizations to self destruct.

This self destructive tendency is primarily a result of a failure of self perception. People simply do not see in themselves traits they do not wish to see [18]. If specific acts must be performed, they may be misinterpreted by the agent into a favorable verbal context by convenient labeling so as to minimize embarrassment, shame or anxiety. People may also make themselves feel better by projecting their own problems or shortcomings on to others [19].

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