



HAL
open science

Into the realm of organizational folly: A poem, a review, and a typology of organizational stupidity

Guilherme Azevedo

► To cite this version:

Guilherme Azevedo. Into the realm of organizational folly: A poem, a review, and a typology of organizational stupidity. *Management Learning*, 2023, 54 (2), pp.267-281. 10.1177/13505076211066276 . hal-03662177

HAL Id: hal-03662177

<https://hal.science/hal-03662177v1>

Submitted on 9 May 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**INTO THE REALM OF ORGANIZATIONAL FOLLY:
A POEM, A REVIEW, AND A TYPOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONAL STUPIDITY**

Guilherme Azevedo – Audencia Business School – gazevedo@audencia.com

(last author version before publication, please find the published version at:
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F13505076211066276>)

This 'Provocation essay' is aimed at triggering reflection and fostering renewed research into organizational stupidity and its intersections with management learning. It opens with a critical poem evoking diverse aspects of our daily encounters with the idiocy, nonsense, and absurdity that pervades organizations. It continues with a more comprehensive review of the still diffuse research literature to reveal a typology of three approaches to studying organizational stupidity (systemic-mechanistic, critical-sociological, and cultural-functionalist). It closes with a discussion of how stupidity detracts from reflexivity but can also play useful roles in organizations, which ultimately invites more management learning research on the topic.

Into the realm of organizational folly

Behind those walls stands a fine firm built by bright folks.
From out here, it seems all smart and neat but no hoax:
its innards are plagued by nonsense, are obtuse baroques.

I enter with some silly questions: Please tell me, why all the merry-go-rounds?
Discombobulations: Why so many rat races? Why such vain battlegrounds?
I'm a befuddled scholar: Why the organizational stupidity that abounds?

Oh, let thus my duty be
to understand how that decent manager grew into a hypocrite;
to discover how such great intelligence spawned pages devoid of wit;
to unveil the business histories of their stockpiled bullshit.

Off I go, with good intentions and mixed methods, to do my erudite trickery.
I look further, anew, and again at their laughable stocks of daily misery,
muddling through trails of trials and tribulations, little hope of victory.

Indeed, there I encounter
defunct creativity, for their frigid board members they must please;
cadaverous futures, for short-sighted stockholders they must appease;
decency that is no more, for always another penny they must squeeze.

I see dazed men and women who carry on with their senseless work.
Too many mouths to feed, ends that must meet, mortgages that lurk.
Their souls hung out of sight. They no longer care about this cirque.

But if I contemplate further,
underneath their wacky ways of today I find the heroic sagas of pioneers.
Their mishmashes are the very scars of clever survival through the years.
Their weird morphology is but the archaeology of hard work, glory, and tears.

Through mazes of law and opaque cultural manners, they walk the feasible way.
The tortuous paths, the murky talk, the impractical rituals keep insanity at bay.
Their chicanery saves faces, their cynicism saves jobs, their folly saves the day!

I then return to academic vanity.

Let the struggle with meandering sentences and vague ideas recommence.
Messy data, hellish thick descriptions, scanty glimpses of dubious sense.
Wasteful writing and rambling thinking. My very profession a sad offence.

Back to my days of irrelevant contentment, my life of spoiled bookworm.
Papers sink beneath the waves of oblivion, theories never to confirm.
And yet, behind those walls, there are bright folks building a fine firm.

-o-0-o-

To put it simply, this *Provocation essay* is about organizational stupidity.

By addressing such a pedestrian matter, I wish to call attention to the hidden causes, unsuspected functions, and often dispiriting consequences of the collective idiocy, nonsense, and absurdity that pervades organizations. Despite being a source of trouble and waste to managers, employees, customers, and other stakeholders, this all-pervasive phenomenon remains surprisingly understudied. Yet, better understanding it is particularly crucial to the management learning field (Coraiola and Murcia, 2020) because, by disabling reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2002), organizational stupidity detracts organizations from accumulating knowledge and improving decision making. I thus review the still diffuse literature on the subject and contribute with a more comprehensive perspective, which includes a typology of three approaches to studying organizational stupidity. Concurring with the *Management Learning* vocation of publishing “unexpected, unconventional, unusual and unorthodox” pieces (Bell and Bridgman, 2018: 3), this poem-cum-commentary is ultimately aimed at

using poetry and experimentation to “feed imagination, seed change and cultivate learning” (Brewis and Bell, 2020: 536).

The poem that opens this piece is a critical—perhaps jocose nonetheless—evocation of diverse aspects of organizational stupidity. *Into the realm of organizational folly* is a free-verse elegy written from the perspective of a management researcher. That is all I write about it here, for each reader should approach a piece of poetry with their own gaze. A more explicit explanation of the poem would thus be antithetical to the very nature of that medium.¹ Still, and in the spirit of *writing differently* (Gilmore et al., 2019), I take the liberty of playfully permeating this commentary with occasional fragments {within braces} extracted from the poem. These fragments should add a related, but not always obvious, connotation to the passage. By so doing, I wish to move beyond juxtaposing poetic and academic writing to also set points of contact where the two distinct voices can meet.

A closer look at organizational stupidity

In this commentary I address streams of literature built around the neighbouring concepts of organizational stupidity (McComber and Jenkins, 1972; Albrecht, 1980; Kerfoot, 2003; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Paulsen, 2017); incompetence (Peter and Hull, 1969; Ott and Shafritz, 1994; Wagner, 2002); bullshit (Allen, Allen, and McGoun, 2012; Spicer, 2018; Christensen, Kärreman, and Rasche, 2019); nonsense (Azevedo, 2020); and absurdity (Starkey, Tempest, and Cinque, 2019). Those are typically critical texts that on occasion adopt a humorous twist and usually portray

¹ Although rare, poetry can be a compelling medium to stimulate interrogations and to promote management research discussions. Poems published in management journals have provided critical, ironic, or emotional representations of issues that permeate and surround organizations (Nutman, 1987; Saxton 1998; Reid, 2005). They can be autobiographical, offering humorous retrospectives of academic lives (Inkson, 2010) or more meditative ponderings about career turnarounds (Hatch, 2018). Poetry can be used to produce “alternative (non-mainstream) ways of looking at organization and management” (Kostera, 1997: 345). Moreover, as creativity invites creativity, management research poems have been written as hip-hop mashups (Gartner, 2008) or choir songs (Inkson, 2010) and have been supplemented with sketches and drawings (Saxton, 1998; Inkson, 2010).

organizational stupidity as ubiquitously observable in all fields of management research.

{Organizations' innards are plagued by nonsense.} There is stupidity in public administration (McComber and Jenkins, 1972; Ott and Shafritz, 1994); in financial services (Allen, Allen, and McGoun, 2012); in nursing management (Kerfoot, 2003); in business education (Bedeian, 2002; Olsen, 2011; Starkey, Tempest, and Cinque, 2019); in organizational cultures (Azevedo, 2020); and in management communication (Spicer, 2018).

I begin by acknowledging some antecedents of extant literatures that address stupidity in organizations. That is followed by a proposed conceptual terrain for organizational stupidity research. I then put forward a typology of three major approaches to studying it before concluding with a short discussion.

Some antecedents of present-day organizational stupidity research

Arguably, organizational stupidity research was founded by a few publications up to six decades ago (Parkinson, 1955; Peter and Hull, 1969; McComber and Jenkins, 1972) before eventually regaining some vigour over the last decade (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Paulsen, 2017; Spicer, 2018; Christensen, Kärreman, and Rasche, 2019; Starkey, Tempest, and Cinque, 2019; Azevedo, 2020). On the one hand, organizational stupidity constitutes a phenomenon that should be as old as organizations themselves. On the other hand, some argue that bullshit and absurdity {laughable stocks of daily misery} have become more prevalent in recent times (Frankfurt, 2005; Foley, 2010), in an age of kakistocracy with many societies being ruled by the worst possible leaders (Mohammed, 2020: 246).

The etymology of stupidity comes from the Latin noun *stupiditatem* [dullness, folly, or senselessness], derived from the adjective *stupidus* [dull, foolish, or confounded]. Stupid people are hence those who are slow of mind, lacking intelligence or reason, or given to unintelligent decisions or acts (Merriam-Webster, 2021). When working together they are likely to create stupid

organizations; but a distinctive feature of collective stupidity is that a gathering of intelligent individuals can add up to be collectively stupid. {Great intelligence spawning pages devoid of wit. }

As enunciated in what became known as *Albrecht's Law*:

Intelligent people who can think and act very effectively as individuals can, as a group, exhibit the most profoundly stupid and counterproductive responses to the demands of their environment. (Albrecht, 1980: 236)

Pioneering texts have tried to explain the stupidity burgeoning in organizations, particularly in bureaucracies, by describing mechanisms articulated as laws or principles. Those notably include Cyril N. Parkinson's enunciation of *Parkinson's Law*, postulating that "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion" (Parkinson, 1955, 1957), and Laurence J. Peter's formalization of the *Peter Principle*, stating that "in a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence" (Peter and Hull, 1969). More recently, in what became known as the Dunning-Kruger effect, it has been shown that incompetent people tend to underestimate their own incompetency, whereas those who are more competent tend to be more aware of their limitations (Dunning and Kruger, 1999).

The existing research on organizational dysfunctionalities is evidently much broader than the attempt to describe problematic aspects of organizations as laws and principles named after their proponents. Indeed, some foundations of organizational theory rest upon seminal research on bounded rationality (Simon, 1957; March and Simon, 1958) and upon studies of flawed decisions with catastrophic consequences for working teams (e.g., the death of firefighters who did not drop their heavy tools [Weick, 1993]) or to entire organizations (e.g., deviant decisions at NASA that caused the Challenger space shuttle disaster [Vaughan, 1996]). I argue nevertheless that, despite providing crucial explanations of decision failures, those studies do not fully characterize organizational stupidity research. It could be disputed that limited rationality and bad decision making are by definition stupid, but the assessment of the literature reveals that organizational stupidity research tends to look

at more pathologically pervasive dysfunctionalities than just at precise instances of decision failures (Ott and Shafritz, 1994: 372-373).

Organizational stupidity hence refers to the systemic collective stupidity that can potentially permeate entire organizations (Peter and Hull, 1969; Kerfoot, 2003; Paulsen, 2017). {All the merry-go-rounds, so many rat races, such vain battlegrounds.} For instance—and referring again to a seminal text—Parkinson described, over half a century ago, organizations suffering from *injelititis*, a pathology caused by the rise to authority of individuals with unusually high *injelitance* (i.e., the combination of incompetence and jealousy):

We find everywhere a type of organization [...] in which the higher officials are plodding and dull, those less senior are active only in intrigue against each other, and the junior men are frustrated or frivolous. Little is being attempted. Nothing is being achieved. (Parkinson 1957: 78)

{Defunct creativity, cadaverous futures.} Widespread organizational stupidity can indeed—as discussed in more detail later in this essay—be rooted in systems, in collective behaviour, and in organizational cultures. First, however, it may be useful to shed some light on how the notion of organizational stupidity relates to—and often becomes entangled with—some of its neighbouring concepts.

Mapping the terrain of organizational stupidity research

Organizational stupidity can be conflated with other concepts, notably organizational incompetence, bullshit, nonsense, and absurdity. To outline the scope of organizational stupidity research, it is hence useful to map a specific terrain (Brewis and Bell, 2020: 535) by better understanding how those concepts relate to each other.

Organizational incompetence, which can be defined as the “repeated pattern of an organization not able or willing to learn from its environment, its failures, or its successes” (Ott and Shafritz, 1994: 370), is a quasi-synonym of organizational stupidity, possibly with two minor semantic distinctions.

First, incompetence carries the somewhat more procedural or less derogatory connotation of lack of competence (Peter and Hull, 1969). Second, incompetence (as the lack of qualities needed for effective action [Merriam-Webster, 2021]) tends to be perceived as more likely to be remediated through organizational redesign (Peter and Hull, 1969) and through the acquisition of organizational knowledge, typically by training or hiring (Ott and Shafritz, 1994).

Bullshit can be defined as a colloquial or vulgar noun for nonsense or foolish insolent talk (Merriam-Webster, 2021). It refers more often to what is *said* {the murky talk}, whereas stupidity and incompetence refer more often to what is *done*. Moreover, although both organizational stupidity and bullshit result in time and resources being wasted, organizational bullshit is occasionally recognized as having social functions and as related to specific managerial practices (Christensen, Kärreman, and Rasche, 2019). Organizational bullshit has recently attracted substantial attention from both academics and practitioners, and research on the topic is becoming more sophisticated. Although initial studies addressed mostly the harmful consequences of bullshit (Frankfurt, 2005) and proposed agendas for minimizing the production and exchange of business bullshit (Spencer, 2017), the focus of bullshit research has gradually turned to its performative functions and to the interactions between those involved in its transactions, namely the bullshitter and the bullshittee (Allen, Allen, and McGoun, 2012; Christensen, Kärreman, and Rasche, 2019).

Management research built upon the concepts of organizational nonsense (Azevedo, 2020) and absurdity (Starkey, Tempest, and Cinque, 2019) remains extremely rare. Those terms tend to refer to aspects of organizational life that pose a challenge to organizational members and researchers by being “apparently absurd or contrary to good sense” (Azevedo, 2020: 385). {Wacky ways; tortuous paths.} Consequently, they often invite the reader to “reflect on the human condition and on our current business and social context” (Starkey, Tempest, and Cinque, 2019: 592-593). Organizational stupidity and incompetence are hence more often depicted as inherent to the organization, whereas

texts on organizational bullshit, nonsense, and absurdity tend to adopt a more subjectivist perspective. There is, for instance, no clear agreement on what constitutes organizational bullshit (Spicer, 2018), and it is potentially possible to make sense of what appears to be nonsensical or absurd (Azevedo, 2020). In other words, organizational stupidity and incompetence are often perceived as *belonging to the organization*, whereas organizational bullshit, nonsense, and absurdity can also be *in the eye of the beholder*.

Finally, organizational bullshit is also portrayed as a communication practice “intentionally designed to bear no relationship to truth by purposefully obscuring organizational function and reality” (Mohammed, 2020: 244). {Meandering sentences and vague ideas.} Therefore, although it may at first glance appear just stupid, organizational bullshit is often created and maintained by design (Spicer, 2018: xii). It means that some talented organizational members can purposefully build an architecture of bullshit to serve their interests. That perspective contrasts with the typical understanding that organizational absurdity, stupidity, and incompetence emerge as the unplanned, almost organic accumulation of idiosyncrasies. In that regard, organizational nonsense arguably occupies an intermediate position because it can be both the result of idiosyncratic occurrences and of intentional actions by agents (Azevedo, 2020).

This effort to delineate a research terrain for organizational stupidity sheds some light on the relationships between concepts that occasionally overlap and get conflated. I hence acknowledge the extant uncertainty (Brewis and Bell, 2020: 533) of organizational stupidity conceptualizations but, nonetheless, I refrain from either selecting or proposing a precise definition. Rather, I examine the emergence of a possible management learning literature that comprises a range of views of stupidity in organizations and that also encompasses other organizational attributes deemed dysfunctional. Thus, by treating organizational stupidity in broader terms, I also survey the research literature that addresses organizational incompetence, bullshit, nonsense, and absurdity.

A typology of approaches to studying organizational stupidity

Various are the ways of approaching the stupidity that exists in organizations. My effort to build a more comprehensive perspective reveals, in particular, the existence of three major ways to study organizational stupidity and its neighbouring concepts. Each approach has specific consequences for the management learning field and, together, they form a typology that can help us to assess and examine the organizational stupidity phenomenon in a more structured manner.

A systemic-mechanistic approach

In this approach, organizations are perceived as systems that contain flaws to be corrected. {Obtuse baroques; weird morphologies.} As in a systems theory view, organizational stupidity constitutes sub-optimal equilibria of systems which management should correct by reconfiguring their organizations. The *systemic-mechanistic approach* often enunciates normative directions for improving organizations by making changes to organizational structure, leadership style, and knowledge management:

Stupid organizations will flourish unless the knowledge and experience of all within the organization are harnessed effectively. [...] Without structures such as shared leadership and other forms of participative management, the organization or unit cannot access and use the available information and wisdom in the organization. (Kerfoot, 2003: 92)

Under this approach, organizations are analogous to mechanisms where inadequate outcomes are due to deficient design or lack of resources. Some studies may even equate organizational stupidity with lack of technology as, for instance, in McComber and Jenkins's early proposition of an "organizational stupidity factor":

The rate at which an organization falls behind technology and becomes less able to compete may be called the "Organizational Stupidity Factor" since it represents the rate at which the organization will make stupid decisions. (McComber and Jenkins, 1972: 46)

Alternatively, if the scarce resource is knowledge, the organization will suffer from a collective form of ignorance, hence being prone to making bad decisions (Roberts, 2012). Therefore, although tending to have a less negative connotation, ignorance (i.e., lack of knowledge, or not knowing something) is a major cause of stupidity. This unveils a fundamental relation between organizational stupidity and ignorance, both crucial concepts to the management learning field (Coraiola and Murcia, 2020: 236).

Moreover—and complementing *Albrecht's Law*—under the *systemic-mechanistic approach* intelligent individuals become collectively stupid because they are in the grip of bad systems. Considerations given to systems have priority over those directed at individuals because, as in Pfeffer and Sutton's (2006: 102) “law of crappy systems trumps the law of crappy people:” “bad systems do far more damage than bad people, and a bad system can make a genius look like an idiot.” Thus, organizations may become systems that encourage intelligent people to act stupidly: “Organisations hire smart people, but then positively encourage them not to use their intelligence [and those] who learn how to switch off their brains are rewarded” (Spicer, 2016).

That approach has a straightforward, if not simplistic, relationship with management learning: an organization will be better equipped to learn if it adopts suitable technology, organizational structures, leadership methods, and knowledge management. Studies adopting a systemic-mechanistic approach are still being conducted, but that view tends {as heroic sagas of pioneers} to predate the other two. Interestingly though, despite being built mostly upon early studies of bureaucracies—or perhaps because of that—this approach leans toward proposing solutions that focus on formal aspects of organizations (e.g., structure, technology, and managerial methods). The underlying assumption is that human behaviour and choice can be observed through a prism of rationality (Simon, 1957); and, therefore, these studies tend not to take notice of the collective stupidity that emanates from the human interactions that create and operate systems.

A fundamental limitation of this approach is thus that, by ignoring human factors, it proposes solutions that can actually be unworkable. For instance, one of its fundamental tenets is that managers must redesign their organizations with better systems to reduce organizational stupidity. Such redesign efforts would be particularly profitable because the organization would gain productivity by being less stupid. That poses a perverse conundrum, however: reducing stupidity would be a smart move, but stupid organizations are systems that encourage managers not to use their intelligence.

A critical-sociological approach

The second approach describes and often denounces organizational stupidity as a perverse consequence of combined sociological and institutional factors. Although more sophisticated sociological frames are adopted to explain it, this approach basically agrees with Albrecht's view that organizational stupidity is "an inevitable part of all large human endeavors" (1980: 268). {Trails of trials and tribulations, little hope of victory.} Organizational stupidity can thus be reduced, but never eradicated. In the systemic-mechanistic approach, the antidote to organizational stupidity is to design better systems, whereas here the palliative remedy is to promote organizational learning, reflexivity, and critical-thinking capabilities. Indeed, in this approach, organizational stupidity can be defined as the "refusal to use critical thinking" (Starkey, Tempest, and Cinque, 2019: 595). In their critique, Kenneth Starkey and co-authors denounce management and management education as too often being exercises in *rhinoceritis*, a concept of dysfunctional group thinking adapted from Ionesco's views on absurdity: *rhinoceritis* is "a pernicious and pervasive tendency to conformity that leads to an inability to think critically about the state we are in" (Starkey, et al., 2019: 592).

Organizations thus become the worsened portrait of their creators, i.e., human beings who are imperfect, incapable of full rationality, and sometimes animated by egoism and by lack of respect for others. The *critical-sociological approach* responds to the previous one by taking human nature into

account. It typically combines sociological stances and critical perspectives to explain how human interactions produce organizational stupidity. Such views are often closely related to issues of lack of reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2002) and to organizational learning deficiencies, which are recurrent concerns for the *Management Learning* community (Anderson, Thorpe, and Coleman, 2020). In some instances, this approach can be aimed at identifying and exposing the spurious moral origins and consequences of the stupidity that permeates organizations {decency that is no more}, which fits an agenda that is typical of critical management studies.

Overall, by recognizing that collective stupidity is rooted in human interactions, this approach can portray individuals as both the victims of the oppression caused by organizational stupidity and as the source of the moral flaws that create it. On the one hand, organizations can do stupid things despite their members' and leaders' intelligence, good intentions, and dedication. Learning from perspectives of bounded rationality and of flawed collective decision making, studies adopting a critical-sociological approach can disclose unforeseen dysfunctional consequences of how people learn, communicate, and act, with the blame usually assigned to decision processes turned chaotic (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972); to underlying psychological dispositions causing teamwork failure (Weick, 1993); and to gradual deviation of behaviour due to work complexity and pressure (Vaughan, 1999). On the other hand, some studies in this approach also emphasize the moral imperfection of individuals that, if raised to positions of influence, will contribute to the erosion of the collective moral constitution, thereby making the entire organization degenerate and stupid. {Decent managers growing into hypocrites.} Those texts are typically devoted to revealing the dark side of organizations (Vaughan, 1999; Bedeian, 2002); to explaining how industries and organizations may slip into moral decrepitude (Jackall, 1988); and decrying the process whereby leaders may be blinded by "power, prestige, and performance [that make them] stubborn, stupid, and resistant to valid evidence" (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006: 225; Bedeian, 2002).

Interestingly, when probing into the sociological and moral complexities of organizations that eventually act stupidly, scholars find abundant inspiration in their own academic institutions (Bedeian, 2002; Wagner, 2002; Olsen, 2011; Starkey, Tempest, and Cinque, 2019). {My very profession a sad offence.} That may be illustrated by two notable cases related to the recruitment and leadership styles of deans. The first was told by Johan P. Olsen (2011). He explained in an interview that the fortuitous observation of an academic institution hiring its new dean provided him and his co-authors with the inspiration for their very influential *garbage can model of organizational choice* (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972). The dean search they observed evolved in a chaotic manner, basically due to the random availability of those in charge of the collective decision. It ended with none of the potential candidates being selected. {Discombobulations.} The second case was presented by Arthur G. Bedeian (2002) as the *dean's disease* to illustrate how the moral deficiencies of a leader can contribute to making an entire organization stupid. He borrowed from some organizational stupidity *classics*, such as Parkinson's (1957) *injelitance* concept (see also Brimelow, 1989), to denounce the manifestation of "the darker side of power" in deans' offices:

[There are cases] where deans have doubts about their own competence and are jealous of anyone seen as more able or prominent. In such instances, [... deans] surround themselves with acolytes who are nonthreatening, so as to protect their ego and position. Parkinson (1957) has justly labeled this phenomenon 'injelitance,' defined as a form of organizational paralysis compounded equally of incompetence and jealousy. (Bedeian, 2002: 167)

In summation, this approach identifies the sociological origins of organizational stupidity, denounces the moral flaws of organizational members, and exposes their perverse consequences. The implicit solution it offers to organizational stupidity is to reinforce the individual and collective capacities of communicating, learning, and, more importantly, to reflect critically on the possible flaws of their organizations. However, even if considering that the eradication of organizational stupidity is a quixotic fight because it is rooted in the very nature of human interactions, both this approach and

the previous one implicitly assume that organizational stupidity is inherently bad and should be tackled.

A cultural-functionalist approach

Beyond the idea that stupidity can be culturally induced (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016: ch. 8) and the explicit sense of people “act[ing] stupidly out of a desire to adhere to cultural norms” (Ott and Shafritz, 1994: 375), the third approach suggests that an organizational feature that seems dysfunctional, but that endures over time, probably exists because it fulfils a function. It drops the assumption of organizational stupidity as being dysfunctional or perverse to adopt instead a more subjectivist perspective, which, as argued earlier, is an attribute more often assigned to organizational bullshit, nonsense, and absurdity than to organizational stupidity and incompetence. In the *cultural-functionalist approach*, the perceived organizational pathology can be in the eye of the beholder (Ott and Shafritz, 1994: 373). Organizational stupidity “may provide certainty, regularity, and may be *functional* to maintaining organizational order” (Coraiola and Murcia, 2020: 235, emphasis in original). Therefore, stupidity can have a reason for being. {Opaque cultural manners; they walk the feasible way.} For instance, a language deemed bullshit because it lacks meaning and is inflated with grandiose claims can be simply the result of a genuine attempt to think and communicate better:

[We] have in mind a productive sort of bullshit: bullshit that ultimately produces better thought and better selves. We must acknowledge that benign bullshit is inevitable when people are attempting to write well. (Eubanks and Schaeffer, 2008: 387)

Some of these studies openly adhere to a culturalist view of the firm (Schein, 1985) and are even explicitly aimed at developing “a better understanding of possible origins, functions, and consequences of traits of organizational cultures perceived as nonsensical” (Azevedo, 2020: 398). More often, however, they simply build upon the assumption that organizational features potentially

deemed stupid, bullshit, nonsensical, or absurd can have useful functions (Allen, Allen, and McGoun, 2012: 26). For instance, organizational bullshit can serve managers when they command or strategize (Christensen, Kärreman, and Rasche, 2019: 1593-1595); *functional stupidity* allows workers to “not ask critical questions” (Paulsen, 2017: 200); and there is an ever-growing repertoire of otherwise pointless tasks that are useful for filling the work hours of those stuck in *bullshit jobs* (Graeber, 2013, 2018; Glaser, 2014). {Cynicism saves jobs.} There are thus many reasons for people in organizations to decide *not* to learn (Coraiola and Murcia, 2020: 235-236), and stupidity can fulfil various functions in organizations:

[Functional stupidity] can save the organization and its members from the frictions provoked by doubt and reflection. Functional stupidity contributes to maintaining and strengthening organizational order. It can also motivate people, help them to cultivate their careers, and subordinate them to socially acceptable forms of management and leadership. (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1196)

This approach tends to adopt a particularism stance by perceiving organizational stupidity as context specific. The reasons why workers end up “not thinking too much” cannot be generalized across workplaces (Paulsen, 2017: 200) and apparently trivial considerations such as “why smart executives fail” may require the analysis of specific histories of companies to disclose particular patterns of managerial behaviour (Finkelstein, 2006). {Business histories of stockpiled bullshit.} The surrounding cultural context also matters. For instance, the apparent nonsense of a French corporation’s director spending a long time describing a little-known passage of a philosopher’s life {erudite trickery} may fulfil the crucial function of reinforcing his legitimacy with a “necessary demonstration of erudition” (Azevedo, 2020: 394).

For the cultural-functionalist approach, the “important task is to understand more about what it is and what role it plays in organizations” (Christensen, Kärreman, and Rasche, 2019: 1593). {Underneath their wacky ways.} The effort to disclose those roles can take the form, for instance, of business history research of past managerial failures (Finkelstein, 2006); of cultural interpretations aimed at

making sense of corporate cultures' nonsensical traits (Azevedo, 2020); or of ethnographic research about the "rationales of stupidity" that motivate workers to carry on with the work they know is stupid (Paulsen, 2017: 200-204). The search for the hidden functions of what is apparently stupid also profits from the work done in other disciplines, which reveal, for instance (in sociology, communication, and education studies, respectively): that ignorance can be a productive asset to individuals and organizations (McGoey, 2012); that ambiguity can play an important role in organizational communication (Eisenberg, 1984); and that bullshit can become a form of resistance (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011).

The intersection with the management learning field is perhaps more subtle but very promising: a closer investigation of organizational stupidity can reveal some unsuspected limits to the promotion of organizational learning. In some instances, or beyond a certain level, learning and reflexivity become detrimental and counterproductive. Occasionally, to progress in a job or to preserve an organization, it is better not to act intelligently (Spicer, 2016), not to think too much (Paulsen, 2017), and even to make a strategic use of ignorance (McGoey, 2012). {Their chicanery saves faces; their folly saves the day.} There is, therefore, a time and place for reflexivity in organizations but also a time and a place for avoiding it.

Finally, in contrast to the previous two, the third approach refrains from making objective judgments about the quality or morality of organizations. Instead, it tends to adopt a Boasian cultural relativism perspective and to assume that the functions of what is apparently stupid can only be revealed if one understands the organization's specific features and ways of functioning. {Impractical rituals keep insanity at bay.} That unveils a particularly problematic aspect of the cultural-functionalist approach: its primary interest is neither to correct the organizational stupidity (as in the first one) nor to mitigate it (as in the second one), but just to understand, appreciate, and, possibly, find better ways to accept and live with it.

Three complementary understandings

The main aspects of the approaches composing the typology I describe are presented in Table 1. It can be noted that most of our views on stupidity in the field of management learning have surpassed a systemic-mechanistic approach to embrace a more typically critical-sociological one. However, it has only been very recently that we have evoked the possible functional role of stupidity (Coraiola and Murcia, 2020: 235-236).

--- Insert Table 1 about here ---

Overall, the typology shows that we already rely upon complementary perspectives to explain specific instances of organizational stupidity. For the sake of illustrating how they produce distinct explanations, I revisit here how the literature tries to make sense of the creation of useless jobs by organizations. Early references perceived the issue mostly through a systemic-mechanistic approach:

Granted that work (and especially paper work) is thus elastic in its demands on time, it is manifest that there need be little or no relationship between the work to be done and the size of the staff to which it may be assigned. (Parkinson, 1955: 1)

That phenomenon has recently regained attention, especially since David Graeber (2013)² popularized the concept of *bullshit jobs* and argued that “at least half of all work being done in our society could be eliminated without making any real difference at all” (Graeber, 2018: 26). {Dazed men and women who carry on with their senseless work.} His proposition is more closely affiliated to the critical-sociological approach in that it criticizes current economic models and questions how human interactions eventually contribute to preserving worthless jobs:

[A] bullshit job is a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the

² Sadly, the composition of this essay coincided with the passing away (on September 2, 2020) of the American anthropologist and anarchist activist David Graeber.

conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.
(Graeber, 2018: 9-10)

Finally, a cultural-functionalist approach could probe the possible hidden functions of pointless jobs existing in capitalist societies that should promote efficiency. A key to deciphering this apparent conundrum resides in the assumption that “it doesn’t matter if those jobs do something useful; we just assume that more jobs is better no matter what” (Graeber, quoted in Illing, 2019). That underlying cultural assumption (Schein, 1985) does indeed reflect an entrenched ambiguity of an economic model that combines a neoliberal discourse of austerity and an obsession with economic growth that requires the permanent creation of jobs (Glaser, 2014).

Therefore, by delineating three approaches for addressing organizational stupidity, the typology allows us to advance toward a more complete understanding of the phenomenon even if, as with the proverbial blind men describing an elephant, the full picture can still elude us.

Conclusion

Organizational learning—the most frequent theme of study in *Management Learning* (Anderson et al., 2020: 23)—is hindered by the extant collective stupidity that compromises reflexivity, knowledge gathering, and better decision making. To open up the “existing ways of thinking about knowledge and learning to critical scrutiny” (Bell and Bridgman, 2018: 3) in this *Provocation essay*, I examined the emergence of literature streams addressing organizational stupidity and neighboring conceptualizations. I began by identifying some antecedents to current perspectives, then delimited a terrain for research on organizational stupidity and identified intersections with the management learning field. Taking stock of the existing research on the topic, I contributed a more comprehensive perspective and proposed a typology of three approaches to studying organizational stupidity.

We know—often from painful experience—that stupidity, incompetence, bullshit, nonsense, and absurdity are ubiquitous organizational phenomena, but we still need to understand why they are so

abundant and persistent. {I'm a befuddled scholar: Why the organizational stupidity that abounds?} Although the literature review indicates that research on the topic remains theoretically underdeveloped, some important preliminary efforts have been made. More importantly, this essay points to some specific intersections between stupidity and organizational learning that, I argue, deserve further investigation. There is a vast world of mysterious, unexamined stupidity out there, and it would be silly not to put some effort into better understanding it.

Future research could investigate the performative functions of organizational stupidity and the ways it may serve individual and collective interests. Instead of aiming at its unachievable eradication, management learning scholars should *learn about stupidity* and investigate, for instance, how its gradual acquisition allows individuals to advance and companies to prosper. Growing research evidence shows that, contrary to what we may suppose, certain organizational objectives can only be reached by being stupid (Allen, Allen, and McGoun, 2012; Paulsen, 2017; Christensen, Kärreman, and Rasche, 2019). That is perhaps a disturbing finding for management learning scholars, but a serious look at how stupidity flourishes and thrives in organizations indicates that learning and reflexivity can on occasion be detrimental to individual careers and businesses as a whole. Our incursion into the realm of organizational folly thus warns us that too much of a good thing can be bad. Overall, it also suggests that our research effort to understand organizational learning must be matched by the attempt to also understand how organizations unlearn, forget, and, on occasion, act stupidly. Therefore, I call for more vigorous research into the unsuspected causes and functions of aspects of organizational life that tend to remain unexamined because they are dismissed as *mere stupidity*.

Finally, {return to academic vanity} I insist that studying stupidity is urgent not only because it permeates the organizations we study but also because it pervades the very work we do as scholars. Indeed, academic writing is flooded with bullshit language (Eubanks and Schaeffer, 2008); a

considerable share of the tasks we perform resemble those of bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2013, 2018); and absurdity flourishes with splendid vitality in management research and education (Starkey, Tempest, and Cinque, 2019). I hence hope that this *Provocation essay* encourages us, as management researchers, to reflect more carefully on and to debate more openly all the organizational stupidity and evident ridiculousness that surrounds us. {Papers sink beneath the waves of oblivion, theories never to confirm.} Which brings me back to poetry, to self-irony, and how this commentary began:

My research was so irrela-vent,
That they made me an associate prof of management.
[...] And if managing nothing, your lives are spent,
Then you all may be professors of management!
(Kerr Inkson, 2010, in: *The professor of management*)

References

- Albrecht K (1980) *Brain power: learn to develop your thinking skills*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Allen DE, Allen RS and McGoun EG (2012) Bull markets and bull sessions. *Culture and Organization* 18(1): 15–31.
- Alvesson M and Spicer A (2012) A stupidity-based theory of organizations. *Journal of Management Studies* 49(7): 1194–1220.
- Alvesson M and Spicer A (2016) *The stupidity paradox: The power and pitfalls of functional stupidity at work*. London: Profile Books.
- Anderson L, Thorpe R, and Coleman C (2020) Reviewing Management Learning: The field and the journal. *Management Learning* 51(1), 17–34.
- Azevedo G (2020) Does Organizational Nonsense Make Sense? Laughing and Learning from French Corporate Cultures. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 29(4): 385–403.
- Bedeian AG (2002) The dean's disease: How the darker side of power manifests itself in the office of dean. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 1(2): 164–173.
- Bell E and Bridgman T (2018) Expecting the unexpected in Management Learning. *Management Learning* 49(1): 3–7.
- Brewis DN and Bell E (2020) Provocation essays editorial: On the importance of moving and being moved. *Management Learning* 51(5), 533–536.
- Brimelow P (1989) How do you cure injelitance? *Forbes* 144(3): 42–44.
- Christensen LT, Kärreman D and Rasche A (2019) Bullshit and organization studies. *Organization Studies* 40(10): 1587–1600.
- Cohen MD, March JG and Olsen JP (1972) A garbage can model of organizational choice. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17(1): 1–25.
- Coraiola DM and Murcia MJ (2020) From organizational learning to organizational mnemonics: Redrawing the boundaries of the field. *Management Learning*, 51(2): 227–240.
- Cunliffe AL (2002) Reflexive dialogical practice in management learning. *Management Learning*, 33(1): 35–61.
- Eisenberg EM (1984) Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication. *Communication Monographs* 51: 227–242.
- Eubanks P and Schaeffer JD (2008) A kind word for bullshit: The problem of academic writing. *College Composition and Communication* 372–388.
- Finkelstein S (2006) Why smart executives fail: four case histories of how people learn the wrong lessons from history. *Business History* 48(2): 153–170.

- Foley M (2010) *The age of absurdity: Why modern life makes it hard to be happy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Frankfurt HG (2005) *On bullshit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gartner WB (2008) Entrepreneurship—hop. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 32(2): 361–368.
- Gaztambide-Fernández R (2011) Bullshit as resistance: justifying unearned privilege among students at an elite boarding school. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 24: 581–586.
- Gilmore S, Harding N, Helin J, et al. (2019) Writing differently. *Management Learning* 50(1): 3–10.
- Glaser E (2014) Beyond bullshit jobs. *Soundings* 57(summer): 82–94.
- Graeber D (2013) On the phenomenon of bullshit jobs: a work rant. *Strike! Magazine* (August 2013): 10–11.
- Graeber D (2018) *Bullshit jobs: a theory*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hatch MJ (2018) Nostalgia for because. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 27(2) 138–139.
- Illing S (2018) Bullshit jobs: why they exist and why you might have one. *Vox* May 8, 2018.
- Inkson K (2010) The professor of management. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 19(2) 190–191.
- Jackall R (1988) *Moral mazes: the world of corporate managers*. New York: Oxford University
- Kerfoot K (2003) Organizational intelligence/organizational stupidity: the leader's challenge. *Nursing Economic\$*: 21(2): 91–93.
- Kostera M (1997) Personal performatives: collecting poetical definitions of Management. *Organization* 4(3) 345–353.
- Kruger J and Dunning D (1999) Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77 (6): 1121–1134.
- March J and Simon H (1958) *Organizations*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- McComber CA and Jenkins NB (1972) The organizational stupidity factor. *Management Review* 61(5): 44–46.
- McGoey L (2012) The logic of strategic ignorance. *British Journal of Sociology* 63: 533–576.
- Merriam-Webster (2021) *Merriam-Webster online dictionary*. Springfield: Merriam-Webster.
- Mohammed S (2020) Book review: Business Bullshit. *Management Learning* 51(2): 244–246.
- Nutman P (1987) After they've gone. *Management Education and Development* 18(1): 20.
- Olsen JP (2011, Dec. 12) *The origin of the garbage can model theory*. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=raTM7OSSQ8k

- Ott JS and Shafritz JM (1994) Toward a definition of organizational incompetence: a neglected variable in organization theory. *Public Administration Review* 45(4): 370–377.
- Parkinson CN (1955) Parkinson's Law. *The Economist* Nov. 19, 1955.
- Parkinson CN (1957) *Parkinson's Law, and other studies in administration*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Paulsen R (2017) Slipping into functional stupidity: The bifocality of organizational compliance. *Human Relations* 70(2): 185–210.
- Peter LJ and Hull R (1969) *The Peter principle*. London: Souvenir Press.
- Pfeffer J and Sutton RI (2006) *Hard facts, dangerous half-truths, and total nonsense: Profiting from evidence-based management*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Reid G (2005) Three poems on organisation, control and exchange. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 18(6) 885–888.
- Roberts J (2013) Organizational ignorance: Towards a managerial perspective on the unknown. *Management Learning* 44(3), 215–236.
- Saxton T (1998) The M&A game. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 7(1) 89–90.
- Schein EH (1985) *Organizational culture and leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-bass.
- Simon H (1957) A behavioral model of rational choice. In H. Simon *Models of man, social and rational: mathematical essays on rational human behavior in a social setting*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Spicer A (2016) Stupefied: how organisations enshrine collective stupidity and employees are rewarded for checking their brains at the office door. *Psyche*, 27 September, 2016.
- Spicer A (2018) *Business bullshit*. London: Routledge.
- Starkey K, Tempest S and Cinque S (2019) Management education and the theatre of the absurd. *Management Learning* 50(5): 591–606.
- Vaughan D (1996) *The Challenger launch decision: risky technology, culture, and deviance at NASA*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vaughan D (1999) The dark side of organizations. *Annual Review of Sociology* 25: 271–305.
- Wagner RK (2002) Smart people doing dumb things: the case of managerial incompetence. In RJ Sternberg (Ed.), *Why smart people can be so stupid*. New Haven: Yale University Press: 42–63.
- Weick K (1993) The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38(4): 628–652.