

Metapsychology Book Reviews ([www.mentalhelp.net/books](http://www.mentalhelp.net/books))

Review

## ***Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid***

Robert J. Sternberg (Ed.)

New Haven: Yale University Press (2002)

ISBN 0-300-09033-1

Reviewed by Keith S. Harris, Ph.D. on 29 December 2002

We all know of people like that. They are educated, intelligent, sophisticated, verbal and very often successful. They run companies, run for office, teach in major universities, and receive coveted awards for competence in their chosen fields: People that, once in a while, without reasonable explanation, do stupid things - - sometimes *very* stupid things.

This collection of eleven loosely connected chapters provides a good foundation from which to launch an inquiry into why smart people commit serious goofs, and yet leaves plenty of room for the reader to continue with her or his own speculations.

The authors, distinguished academics, are all well respected in their areas of specialization. The list of contributors includes Prof. Robert Sternberg, the current President of the American Psychological Association (for 2003) and a frequently published researcher in the area of intelligence, and Prof. Walter Mischel, with whose work every psychology student is familiar.

The list of stupid acts covered in this book ranges from the commonplace to the epiphanic. For example, the labeling of children with learning disabilities or low intelligence is demonstrated to be an everyday epidemic, with 12% of U.S. schoolchildren being not just labeled disabled, but also actually placed in special education programs (p. 161). At the other extreme are (relatively) rare but highly newsworthy events, e.g., former president Bill Clinton's escapades with Monica Lewinsky and his subsequent embarrassing gymnastics, the analysis of which warrants its own chapter in this book (pp. 106-123).

A basic first requirement in a work such as this, which seeks to bridge science and popular thought, is to define the important terms. The common meanings of *smart* and *stupid* must be reconciled with their more rigorous scientific meanings, in order for science to contribute usefully to the discussion.

Ray Hyman points out early in the book that "The key words *smart* and *stupid* belong to folk psychology" (p. 1). He explains that the popular sense of *smart* is the same as the psychological meaning of the term *intelligence*. (This equivalence, however, for some psychologists, would emphasize the fuzziness of the term *intelligence* rather than help bridge the gap between folk and scientific psychology.)

Although Sternberg provides the reader with a dictionary definition of *stupid*, (p. 232), it is helpful only to remind us of the popular sense of the word. Some of the book's authors see stupidity as the opposite of smartness, while others view it in a different light. According to Hyman, "While most of the [other] authors treat 'stupid' as the opposite of 'smart' (intelligent),

Stanovich [treats] stupid as the opposite of rational” (p. 3). Hyman correctly explains that there is no equivalent psychological term for stupidity, which can variously be seen as “a property of an act, behavior, state or person” (p. 1). Stupid may also be defined as folly (see below).

This emphasis on the meaning of *stupid* and *smart* may seem excessive, but the importance cannot be overstated; after all, it is the reader’s purpose to understand why people who otherwise routinely function in very adaptive, profitable ways, sometimes behave in disastrously inappropriate ways.

The essential questions are: Can someone be both smart *and* stupid? And if so, how does it happen, and under what conditions? Is there anything I can do to minimize my own stupidity, and maximize my smartness?

Once the reader is comfortable with the practical meanings of these terms, he or she can move on to various more specific issues. For example, given the current emphasis on standardized testing in schools, do people who do well academically also tend to do well in the workplace, in relationships, and in making real-life choices? Does being book-smart mean being life-smart?

According to Richard Wagner’s chapter on managerial incompetence, “Academic and practical intelligence are not highly correlated” (p. 60). Wagner references earlier, seminal work by Neisser that demonstrated that while academic problems are characterized by being strictly defined and formulated by others, containing all information needed to solve, and having only one correct answer which is to be found using one correct method, real-world problems are most often characterized by the opposite of all these conditions. In the workplace, or in life in general, problems are most often ambiguous, poorly defined, and have various “right” answers that can be arrived at in several ways. People who are (or become) highly skilled at dealing with the former type of problems do not necessarily become adept at the latter types of real-world problems. Book learning doesn’t translate into practical smarts.

Another interesting issue addressed in this book is the confusion between being “gifted” and being successful. (pp. 24-40). Although schools often appear to be educational factories designed to churn out uniform products, some have set aside a few dollars for programs to help students identified as “gifted”. Although districts have flexibility in how these students are identified, this designation is usually granted to students who score high on a measure of non-verbal intelligence (e.g., Raven’s Progressive Matrices) and who have proven their academic aptitude. Research suggests that when children are praised simply for being gifted (presumably an innate quality), they exert less effort and take fewer risks than when they are praised for their efforts. How does this fit into a book about smart people doing stupid things? Because “many smart people become too invested in being smart” (p. 24), and therefore behave in stupid ways.

According to Ozlem Ayduk and Walter Mischel, another reason smart people do dumb things is *akrasia*, a term ancient Greeks used to refer to a “deficiency of the will” (pp. 87), which results in a failure to exert appropriate self-control. The idea is that “a biologically hardwired automatic response system” (p. 97) is responsible for sending out problematic impulses, and that some people are just better at controlling these impulses than others. Apparently being smart is not highly correlated with having self-control, because smart people succumb to these impulses at

about the same rate as less-smart people. Fortunately, the authors suggest that we can, if properly taught, learn these self-control skills.

One author prefers the term *folly* to stupidity, and further delineates between *blind folly* and *plain folly*. In the former, one simply does not see the likely consequences of a stupid act; in the latter, one sees the risks but proceeds nonetheless. In the latter camp would be smoking or engaging in other almost-certainly harmful behaviors. (I would add a third dimension, *sheer folly*, which would refer to intentional, persistent folly that doesn't even bring the momentary pleasures often associated with plain folly.)

Implicit in many of these chapters is the power of the personal unconscious and the power of groupthink to overrule the individual's own rationality and impulse-control.

This is a book well worth reading, but it was not intended to be conclusive. This is a book designed to broaden the reader's knowledge base and stimulate her or his own thoughts on the subject, rather than to present a tight, packaged account of stupidity. The chapters are not highly integrated, nor do they necessarily present views consistent or contradictory with other chapters. As the introduction explains, the authors were presented with a list of six issues to address, and this list forms whatever degree of coherence is actually achieved among the chapters.

One idea with which I believe all the authors would agree is that intelligence, however defined, is only one aspect of human nature. The degree to which it is genetically influenced is unclear, but in any case most of us do not reach the upper bounds of our potentials. Therefore there is always room to increase our smartness and decrease our stupidity.

# # #

This review may be reprinted and distributed for educational and non-profit purposes.

Keith S. Harris, PhD, is director of research for the Department of Behavioral Health, San Bernardino, California, and an instructor in psychology at Victor Valley College, Victorville, California. His interests are in the areas of decision-making processes, the influences of evolutionary processes on human nature, and the etiology and treatment of serious human mental disorders. Address: Keith S. Harris, Ph.D., 700 E. Gilbert Street, Bldg 6, San Bernardino, CA 92415. Email: kharris@psych-science.com