A stupidity-based theory of organizations

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Abstract

In this paper we question the one-sided thesis that contemporary organizations rely on the mobilization of cognitive capacities. We suggest that severe restrictions on these capacities in the form of what we call functional stupidity are an equally important if under-recognized part of organizational life. Functional stupidity refers to an absence of reflexivity, a refusal to use intellectual capacities in other than myopic ways and avoidance of justifications. We argue that functional stupidity is prevalent in contexts dominated by economy in persuasion which emphasizes image and symbolic manipulation. This gives rise to forms of stupidity management that repress or marginalize doubt and block communicative action. In turn, this structures individuals' internal conversations in ways that emphasize positive and coherent narratives and marginalize more negative or ambiguous ones. This can have productive outcomes such as providing a degree of certainty for individuals and organizations. But it can have corrosive consequences such as creating a sense of dissonance among individuals and the organization as a whole. The positive consequences can give rise to self-reinforcing stupidity. The negative consequences can spark dialogue, which may undermine functional stupidity.

Introduction

An enormous body of writing on knowledge, information, competence, wisdom, resources, capabilities, talent and learning in organizations has emerged in recent decades, in which there is a common assumption of 'smartness'. Although this term has not been used systematically in the study of organizations, it captures the underlying premise that a vital issue for contemporary organizations is their ability intelligently to mobilize cognitive capacities. This assumption is evident in claims that 'as the pace of change increases, knowledge development among the members of the company becomes the key to competitiveness, to remaining in the front line … Business has simply become more knowledge-intensive in all companies, and corporate investment in education and training is more extensive than ever before' (Wikström and Normann, 1994, p. 1-2). Some authors point out that 'workers' cognitive and social capabilities are elements of the forces of production and, over the long term and in broad aggregate, the pressure of competition forces firms and societies to upgrade those capabilities. The development of capitalism thus tends to create a working class that is increasingly sophisticated' (Adler, 2002, p. 392). Similarly, two management gurus (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, p.88) have suggested that the most effective way for firms to remain competitive is to 'hire smart people and let them talk to one another'.

These broad claims are mirrored in one of the central leitmotifs of contemporary organization theory: firms thrive on the basis of their knowledge (Nelson and Winter, 1982; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Spender, 1996; Grant, 1996). Knowledge is seldom

clearly defined, but is considered 'the most strategically important of the firm's resources' (Grant, 1996, p. 110) and 'the central competitive dimension of what firms know how to do is to create and transfer knowledge efficiently within an organizational context' (Kogut and Zander, 1992, p. 384). Researchers take it for granted that 'the foundation of industrial economies has shifted from natural resources to intellectual assets' (Hansen et al., 1999, p. 106) and that 'many sectors are animated by new economics, where the payoff to managing knowledge astutely has been dramatically amplified' (Teece, 1998, p. 55). For some, a 'new paradigm' of management has appeared which means 'tacit and local knowledge of all members of the organization is the most important factor in success, and creativity creates its own prerogative' (Clegg et al., 1996, p. 205). Underpinning all this is the assumption that the intelligent mobilization of cognitive capacities is central to the operation of (successful) organizations.

There are of course ongoing controversies about what exactly constitutes knowledge in contemporary organizations (e.g. Blackler, 1995; Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001; Scherer and Spender, 2007; Schultze and Stabell, 2004; Spender, 1998). Many of the references to 'knowledge' are vague and all-embracing (Schreyogg and Geiger, 2007). Nonetheless, the idea that valuable, rare and inimitable knowledge is significant to organizational performance has a strong rhetorical value. Instead of engaging in these debates about what knowledge 'is', we want to question the assumption in this field that sophisticated thinking and use of advanced knowledge, is a core characteristic of many contemporary organizations. We think this 'broader set of assumptions ... shared by several different schools' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011, p. 225) needs to be challenged. It creates a one-

sided, widely-shared and rather grandiose portrait of the smart, knowledge-based firm and its employees. This picture may be appealing, but it misses how effective organizational functioning calls also for qualities that do not easily fit with the idea of smartness.

There is a huge body of work on non-rationality in organizations, which reminds us of the limitations to the intelligent mobilization of cognitive capacities. Some researchers document how cognitive limitations lead to practices that could be labelled 'semi-rational' (e.g. March and Simon, 1958; Brunsson, 1985). Others highlight more serious forms of irrationality, which are produced by unconscious elements, group-think and rigid adherence to wishful thinking (e.g. Schwartz, 1990; Wagner, 2002). In our view, these studies miss a set of deviations from smartness, which are neither semi-rational nor purely stupid. To capture these processes, we propose the concept of *functional stupidity.*

Functional stupidity is organizationally-supported lack of reflexivity, substantive reasoning and justification. It entails a refusal to use intellectual resources outside a narrow and 'safe' terrain. It can provide a sense of certainty that allows organizations to function smoothly. This 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 also can motivate people, help them to cultivate their careers and subordinate them to socially acceptable forms of management and leadership. Such positive outcomes can further reinforce functional stupidity. However, functional stupidity can also have negative consequences such as trapping individuals and

organizations into problematic patterns of thinking, which engender the conditions for individual and organizational dissonance. These negative outcomes may prompt individual and collective reflexivity in a way that can undermine functional stupidity.

By advancing the concept of functional stupidity, we make three, overlapping contributions. First, we disturb a common field assumption that contemporary organizations operate mainly through the mobilization of cognitive capacities (e.g. Spender, 1996; Grant, 1996). We do this by pointing out how the denial of cognitive capabilities can actually facilitate organizational functioning. Second, we seek to extend existing accounts of the limits to rationality and thoughtfulness in organizations (e.g. March and Simon, 1958; Cohen et al., 1972; Ashforth and Fried, 1988; March, 1996), by providing a concept that allows us to account for how the use of cognitive capacities may be limited by relations of power and domination rather than a lack of time or resources, or cognitive fixations. Finally, we propose a concept and theoretical explanation for what we think is a pervasive, but largely unacknowledged aspect of organizational life. We think that the term 'functional stupidity' might be evocative and resonate with the experiences of researchers, practitioners, citizens and consumers. Thus, our approach may help to illuminate key experiences of people in organizations, that often are masked by dominant modes of theorizing which emphasize 'positive' themes, such as leadership, identity, culture, learning, core competence, innovation and networks. It should open up space for further in-depth empirical investigation of this topic. Through these three contributions we hope to offer an 'interesting theory' (Davis, 1971) that develops some counter-assumptions and encourages new lines of inquiry (Alvesson and Sandberg,

2011).

To make our argument, we start by looking at existing concepts that have been mobilized by organization theorists to explore the other side to smartness, then introduce the concept of functional stupidity. We develop a general model of functional stupidity by identifying the contexts, triggering conditions, processes, outcomes and feedback loops. We conclude the paper by drawing out future lines of research and implications for practice.

The Limits to Smartness

There is a long history of work in organization theory that encourages caution in relation to rationality and smartness in organizations. Perhaps the best-known strand is the work that charts the limits to rationality in organizations. The concept of 'bounded rationality' captures actors' inability to make completely rational decisions due to lack of time, information and information processing capacity (Simon, 1972). This means actors will make, at best, reasonable or acceptable decisions, but only within the bounds of the resources and time available. Some studies point to how much work is conducted in 'mindless' ways (Ashforth and Fried, 1988). People carry out their tasks based on existing cognitive scripts that specify 'a typical sequence of occurrences in a given situation' ((Ashforth and Fried, 1988, p. 306). There are formal and informal procedures that guide responses to situations and demands. When learnt, these informal procedures make it possible for individuals to act without too much thinking, which promotes

cognitive efficiency. But learned scripts can blind their adherents to processes that fall squarely outside them.

A similar idea is articulated by Argyris (1986) who points to the prevalence of 'skilled incompetence' in large organizations. He argues that many managers and professionals are skilled because they know what to do when faced with a situation, and often do it instantaneously. However they are incompetent insofar as this skill leads to ultimately negative outcomes by avoiding difficult and searching questions. Skilled incompetence is often reinforced by defensive routines in an organization. These are routines that make certain issues undiscussable and help managers to avoid surprise, embarrassment and threat. However, these routines also allow managers to avoid learning and inquiry into difficult questions. The result is that the organization becomes trapped into patterns where the very skills and abilities of employees lead to habitual avoidance of asking difficult but pressing questions.

The garbage can model of decision-making (Cohen et al., 1972) places a greater emphasis on ambiguity, dynamics and unpredictability in organizations. It highlights how making decisions often involve a more or less random configuration of problems, solutions and opportunities. Building on this, March (1996) argues that 'foolishness' is required in complex environments with ambiguous goal preferences. Foolishness is an exploratory kind of reasoning whereby we act before we think. 'Foolish' action helps to clarify, shape and test preferences. It allows trial through action and imperviousness to feed-back. This facilitates new activities which have yet to show evidence of being

successful (March, 2006). Here, the high level of ambiguity simply prevents people from mobilizing their cognitive capacities fully, and acting rationally.

Another strand of research highlights the role played by ignorance (e.g. Smithson, 1989; Roberts and Armitage, 2008; Ungar, 2008; Abbott, 2010). This work points out how 'a lack of knowledge or awareness of where knowledge exists or, more precisely, is *claimed* to exist' (Ungar, 2008, p. 303, emphasis in original) is an endemic aspect of modern knowledge intensive settings such as science or government policy making. This is because at the same time that modern fields of knowledge produce a sense of certainty about particular issues, they also create a sense of uncertainty about other issues. For instance, scientific inquiry into climate change has produced a sense of certainty about some issues (such as the long run increase in planetary heat in the last century), but also revealed new areas of ignorance (such as the precise causes of it) (Ungar, 2008). This kind of 'expert' or acknowledged ignorance sits alongside 'amateur' or denied ignorance (Abbott, 2010). An excellent example of this is a study that found that senior managers frequently were ignorant of the technical details of Total Quality Management programmes and, thus, had unrealistic expectations of to expect when they were adopted (Zbaraki, 1998). This highlights how 'pseudo-knowledge' allows people to confuse superficial familiarity with a deeper understanding of the subject matter. A belief in mastery and knowledge, then, hides a 'deeper' level of ignorance.

The concepts of bounded-rationality, skilled incompetence, garbage-can decision making, foolishness, mindlessness and (denied) ignorance take us some way to understanding the

borders to smartness. However, we believe that there are sharper deviations from smartness that are not accurately captured by the concepts detailed above. These ideas hardly call into question the field assumptions that see the mobilization of cognitive capacities as central to organizational life. Many of the concepts discussed above tend to focus on the inevitable limitations of rational knowledge and intelligence. They also propose 'softer', more pragmatic versions. This means that the other side to smartness, which lies outside semi-rational functioning, is largely missed. The concept of ignorance focuses on content and indicates that just adding knowledge through the use of experts or education would deal with the issue. This tells us little about the limits to the active use (or non-use) of cognitive and intellectual capacities. Mindlessness is somewhat different because it points to how templates for cognition make routinized and efficient behaviour possible. It focuses on rather narrow and predictable elements such as cues and scripts. Like bounded rationality, this work often emphasizes a form of efficiency. By doing so, it largely ignores the broader issues of lack of reflection or questioning. Something similar can be said about Argyris's (1986) idea of skilled incompetence, where the norms of efficient interaction sometimes mean that awareness of and dealing with problems is avoided. In addition, each of these concepts tends to have a cognitive bias towards 'embrained' processing of knowledge. This focus tends to obfuscate affective or motivational issues including anxiety, uncertainty and unwillingness to disrupt organizational harmony or efforts to secure a sense of self. This research does not clarify how cognitive limitations are linked to affective issues. Perhaps even more importantly, this research does not consider how issues of power and politics may fuel the disinclination to use intellectual resources. To address these shortcomings, we introduce

the concept of functional stupidity.

Functional Stupidity

Stupidity resonates with many anecdotal accounts of organizational life. Seemingly normal and sensible organizations, such as the Ford Motor Company under the late Henry Ford, and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation during the tenure of J. Edgar Hoover, embody the pathologies of their very influential leaders (Kets de Vries, 1980). During the happy days of the 'new economy' in the late 1990s, many individuals and organizations developed an irrational exuberance for the Internet. The result was a premature willingness to over-value the potential of online ventures and side-step many normal practices of prudent investment (Valliere and Peterson, 2004). During the most recent financial crisis, many working in the financial industry placed irrational faith in their complex financial models (Lewis, 2011). This contributed to ignorance about the real risks that many financial institutions were running. In these cases, we find intelligent and knowledgeable people actively refraining from using their cognitive and reflexive capacity.

These examples are forms of stupidity, in which there is clear deviation from 'normal' organizational functioning. But in many cases, stupidity is a normal feature of organizational life and is not so easily linked to negative outcomes. For instance, stupidity can be seen in the (non-)adoption of managerial practices. According to Pfeffer and Sutton (2006), most managerial practices are adopted on the basis of faulty

reasoning, accepted wisdom and complete lack of evidence. This is also emphasized in studies of management fashion (Abrahamson, 1996). Companies rarely adopt Human Resource Management practices that are good for employees and are profitable (Pfeffer, 1994). When they do, they often stop using them after some time. If Pfeffer is right, this may appear as simply unintelligent or irrational, but this is hardly the full explanation.

The example invites the suspicion that stupidity is systematic in organizations. Building on this suspicion we would argue that stupidity needs to be taken seriously, as a part of organizational life. Furthermore, we would claim that stupidity should not just be equated with pathology, irrationality or dysfunctional thinking which disrupt the smooth functioning of organization life. Rather, stupidity may be actively supported by organizations and may create rather 'functional' outcomes. We now explore in more depth how stupidity has been conceptualized and clarify the way we would like to approach it.

In folk psychology stupidity is usually equated with some kind of mental deficiency. To be stupid at work is to suffer from what might be called an 'epistemological lack'. To be stupid is not just (as is ignorance) to lack knowledge, it is also to lack the ability or willingness to use or process knowledge (Sternberg, 2002). Cognitive psychologists have pointed out that this may not be due only to a lack of intelligence needed to process knowledge, but may be because of a fixation within problematic algorithms of thought or a lack of willingness to question one's own deeply held beliefs (Stanovich, 2002). Stupidity then is seen as the inability or unwillingness to mobilize one's cognitive

resources and intelligence. Some suggest that stupidity is not just an expression of individual cognitive features, but is actually encouraged by broader modes of modern knowledge (Ronell, 2002) or organizational cultures (ten Bos, 2007). This suggests that stupidity in an organizational context is an organizationally supported inability or unwillingness to mobilize one's cognitive capacities.

Taking these ideas further, we can view what we refer to as *functional stupidity* as being characterized by an unwillingness or inability to mobilize three aspects of cognitive capacity: reflexivity, justification and substantive reasoning. Lack of *reflexivity* involves an inability or unwillingness to question knowledge claims and norms (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). This happens when members of an organization do not call into question the dominant beliefs and expectations they encounter in organizational life. Organizational rules, routines and norms are thought to be given, natural and good (or unproblematic or inevitable) and, therefore, not worth thinking about in negative terms. For instance, employees may not consider or question organizational (im)morality because 'what is right in the corporation is what the guy above you wants from you' (Jackall, 1988, p. 6). Such a lack of doubt involves the repression of organizational members' capacities to use reason, to scrutinize and criticize aspects of an organization.

The second aspect of functional stupidity is lack of *justification*. This entails actors not demanding or providing reasons and explanation (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). Given relatively 'open' social conditions (such as freedom of speech), individuals tend to consider all statements in terms of sincerity, legitimacy and truthfulness. They are also

inclined to argue or ask for justification when confronted with what is viewed as problematic validity claims. This is what Habermas (1984) refers to as communicative action - a dialogue that creates views and norms that are well-grounded in arguments. By not asking for justification, individuals are disinclined to engage in dialogue or ask for rationales for doing something. This often means assuming that an account of the reasons for a decision or action is not required. Not requiring justifications allows practices to be accepted without any significant critical scrutiny or robust process of reason-giving. For instance, organizations will often adopt new practices with few robust reasons beyond the fact that they make the company 'look good' or that 'others are doing it' (Alvesson, 2013a; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Zabracki, 1998). Refraining from asking for justification beyond managerial edict, tradition or fashion, is a key aspect of functional stupidity. It also results in the reproduction of problematic conditions and a shortage of what is sometimes referred to as 'voice' in the organization (Morrison, 2011).

The third aspect of functional stupidity is a lack of *substantive reasoning*. This happens when cognitive resources are concentrated around a small set of concerns that are defined by a specific organizational, professional or work logic. It entails the myopic application of instrumental rationality focused on the efficient achievement of a given end, and ignorance of the broader substantive questions about what that end actually is (Alvesson and Willmott, 2012). For instance, an accountant may compress a broad range of issues into recordable numbers, thereby ignoring many of the more substantive debates around what those numbers exactly represent and the moral implications associated with using those numbers in decision making (Dillard and Ruchala, 2005). This is a form of

stupidity because it can halt a reasoned investigation and consideration of the possible links and implications of one's action. Instead, it frames questions in very narrow and focused ways.

Functional stupidity is not a purely cognitive issue. It is related also to affective issues such as motivation and emotion. The *motivational* aspect involves an unwillingness to use one's cognitive capacities. A lack of curiosity, closed-mindedness, identity construction as an 'organizational person' or a 'professional' (who is inclined to see the organizational or occupational paradigm as unquestionable), can be a very important barrier to broader thinking. Related to this are *emotional* aspects of functional stupidity. Anxiety at work and personal insecurity may reinforce functional stupidity. It is important to realize that emotions are key elements in how we relate to and interpret the world, which often informs cognitive processes (Jaggar, 1989). In this sense, there is interplay between inability and unwillingness: the more the ability, the less that willingness is needed. In contrast huge willingness may lead to efforts to compensate for ability, which could result in efforts to transcend – or perhaps reduce – forms of functional stupidity. This, of course, is not just a matter of individual capacity and motivation. Societal, organizational and occupational contexts are central (Ronell, 2002; ten Bos, 2007). These can cultivate or discourage thoughtfulness, critical reasoning and dialogue. Here, the mechanisms of power are important, including disciplinary power which form a specific subject around the norms ofbeing.

Although we draw attention to *organizations as generators of functional stupidity*, there

are some occasions when narrow thinking deviates from the dominant norms of an organization. After all, most organizations prescribe certain degrees of reflexivity, justification and substantive reasoning. However, in many instances being reflexive, requiring justifications and engaging in substantive reasoning are not accepted as normal parts of organizational life. In some cases these demands might be considered a pesky waste of time. In other cases, they may be thought of as dangerous or potentially subversive activities that must be actively discouraged and sanctioned. This kind of organization supported stupidity can certainly have negative consequences such as decreased autonomy and organizational mistakes. However, it can also have some significant benefits such as ensuring that organizations function smoothly. Stupidity, therefore, is a mixed blessing for organizations – and for the people in them. It encourages organizational members to refrain from asking difficult questions. It also facilitates employees to play along with the dominant norms. But it can be seen as ungrounded faith in the visions, goals, strategies and practices of an organization that helps members to control their doubts. It typically has an individual side and an organizational side. It is both something individuals do and something that is cultivated within the organization as a whole.

We can now offer a more comprehensive definition of our core concept - functional stupidity. For us *functional stupidity is inability and/or unwillingness to use cognitive and reflective capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect ways.* It involves a lack of *reflexivity,* a disinclination to require or provide *justification,* and avoidance of *substantive reasoning*. It is related to the intertwined elements of cognition, motivation

and emotion. In many cases functional stupidity can produce positive outcomes in the form of significant benefits to organizations and employees. The narrow and circumspect use of reason, high levels of means-ends oriented intelligence, and the partly positive outcomes, differentiate functional stupidity from 'pure' stupidity. Thus, the use of intelligence and functional stupidity may co-exist. Intelligent people (who score high on IQ tests for instance) are not immune to functional stupidity (Ronell, 2002).

A good illustration of functional stupidity is the commitment to information in organizations. Feldman and March (1981), some time ago, noted an excessive interest and focus on information. People require it, talk about it, have strategies and tactics related to it, and complain about shortages of it. At the same time, they feel there is too much of it. People do not have the time and interest really to use it. In short, there is an over-interest in and under-use of information. Feldman and March suggest that the preoccupation with information is widespread due to the high cultural value attributed to information. Information symbolizes reason, reliability, security, even intelligence. Mobilizing information is thus more a matter of legitimation than functionality: 'Using information, asking for information, and justifying decisions in terms of information have all come to be significant ways in which we symbolize that the process is legitimate, that we are good decision makers, and that our organizations are well managed' (Feldman and March, 1981, p. 178).

Paradoxically, it is the cultural value placed on information as a key element in rationality that accounts for the over-emphasis on information. An over-focus on

information prevents its practical use. This myopic focus on information is underpinned by an inability or unwillingness to think about the substantive reasons associated with the use of information, to ask for justifications for demands for information, and to engage in broader reflexive thinking about information. Such a strong focus on information gives the impression of full use of cognitive capacity, and a sense of competence and organizational rationality. However, at the same time, it hides the functional stupidity in confusing information with rationality.

Dynamics of Functional Stupidity

We have argued that functional stupidity is a general element of organizational processes rather than an issue only of individual cognition. To understand functional stupidity in organizations, we need to consider broader social and organizational dynamics. In our view, functional stupidity is prompted by the contemporary *economy of persuasion* which emphasizes symbolic rather than substantive aspects of organizational life. In organizations this encourages a major focus on *symbolic manipulation* – often in the form of attempts to develop strong corporate cultures and identities, corporate branding and charismatic leadership, exercised often through *stupidity management*. This happens when various actors (including managers and senior executives as well as external figures such as consultants, business gurus and marketers) *exercise power* to *block communicative action*. The result is that adherence to managerial edicts is encouraged, and criticism or reflection on them is discouraged. Externally imposed attempts to

regulate the use of cognitive capacities are taken up by employees through what we call *stupidity self management*. This happens when employees *limit internal reflexivity* by cutting short 'internal conversations'. This helps them to marginalize doubts and focus on more positive and coherent understandings of reality. Ambiguities are repressed and a false sense of certainty about organizational processes emerges. This can give rise to a sense of *certainty* that produces *functionality* for both the organization as a whole and the individuals within it. Such positive outcomes can have self-reinforcing effects by further encouraging *stupidity management* and *self-stupidity management*. However, functional stupidity also can produce individual and organizational *dissonances* that are difficult to avoid. When acknowledged, this *dissonance* can encourage *reflexivity,* which, in turn, can undermine self-imposed *limits on internal reflexivity* and socially imposed *blocks on communicative action*. This can have the effect of corroding *stupidity management* as well as *stupidity self-management*. In what follows, we develop this argument (see: Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Context: Economy of Persuasion and Symbolic Manipulation

The developed economies have witnessed an explosion of *economies of persuasion*. These are economies in which the manufacture of seductive images has become increasingly central to work and to organizations (Alvesson, 2013a; Foley, 2010; Klein,

2000). Such economies emerge against a backdrop of an economy of (post-) affluence where much of what organizations produce does not find spontaneous demand (Galbraith, 1958; Lasch, 1979). This means organizations devote a significant proportion of their efforts to creating demand for their products by promoting expectations, producing images and influencing desires. Certainly, not all aspects of developed economies are obsessively focused on image production and circulation. There are sectors of the economy that focus mainly on more traditional forms of production (such as agriculture or manufacturing) or product development (research and development-based industries). In addition, Western economies are made up of large numbers of organizations engaged in the provision of routine services (Fleming et al., 2004; Sweet and Meiskens, 2008). Nonetheless, image intensive economic activity has become increasingly 'hegemonic' insofar as organizations engaged in extremely mundane activities are focusing significant proportions of their resources on image crafting activities (Arvidsson, 2006; Kornberger, 2010).

In economies of persuasion, activities such as branding, marketing, public relations, sales and image building, often become more significant than production (Alvesson, 1990). This can weaken 'substance' and 'craft' as the key features of organizations (Sennett, 2006, 2008) and emphasize *symbolic manipulation*. This involves the crafting of images and the engineering of fantasies (Alvesson, 1990). Such activities are directed mainly at external groups such as customers, stakeholders and the broader public (Hatch and Schultz, 2003). However, symbolic manipulation can also be directed at employees. Employee-focused campaigns indicate appropriate feelings, convictions and identities

(Hancock, 1999). They can take the form of corporate culture initiatives (Casey, 1995), branding programmes (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008), organizational identity building (Dutton et al., 1994), efforts to infuse spirituality into the workplace (Bell and Taylor 2003), linking work to the pursuit of social good (Fleming, 2009), a focus on exciting activities, such as leadership, rather than mundane administration (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003) and use of increasingly hollow status markers such as pretentious titles, impressive policies that are decoupled from practice, and other grandiose representations (Alvesson, 2013a). While the precise content of these programmes may differ, they are all efforts to persuade and seduce employees into believing in something that improves the image of their organizations, their work and, ultimately, themselves.

Major efforts to create a favourable image of the organization for employees are not always entirely successful. Some employees will resist symbolic manipulation through overt responses such as workplace counter cultures (Collinson, 1992) or more covert cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Fleming, forthcoming). Others will be ambivalent (Whittle, 2005). However, a significant proportion of employees will 'buy in' to this symbolic manipulation, and become extremely devoted to the firm, enthusiastically accepting and embracing its corporate values (Alvesson, 1995; Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992). Many employees operate in contexts that value and reward conformity more than autonomy and independent thinking (Willmott, 1993). The implication is that well functioning employees are expected to adhere to this image. They must be persuaded, to persuade themselves and to persuade others about the positive qualities of the organization and its outputs. Of course, people can act strategically and be cynical, but a

belief in image production makes persuasion of others easier, more credible and ultimately can create a more positive organizational climate and work experience

Organizational Trigger: Stupidity Management

Organizational contexts dominated by widespread attempts at symbolic manipulation typically involve managers seeking to shape and mould the 'mind-sets' of employees (Willmott, 1993). A core aspect of this involves seeking to create some degree of good faith and conformity and to limit critical thinking (Fleming, forthcoming). Attempts to shape the psychological, emotional and moral orientations of employees are found not just in symbolic intensive organizations; they are aspects of contemporary management and organization generally (Alvesson, 2013b). Well-known manufacturing firms such as Ford (Parker, 2000), and large public sector bureaucracies such as the English civil service (du Gay, 1999), sought to infuse particular cultural values into their employees. However, it is in 'postmodern', image-obsessed organizations that attempts to manage culture, images and brands have become primary managerial tasks. A key element here is *stupidity management*, which occurs when a range of actors seeks to limit the fully shared exercise of employees' cognitive capacities. It involves the management of consciousness, clues about how to understand and relate to the world, and regulation of the processes through which consciousness is negotiated among the actors. A range of organizational actors including peers, junior and senior managers and external figures such as consultants and management gurus, are potential stupidity managers.

Stupidity management is typically underpinned by *blocking communicative action*. The dynamics of communicative action are inter-subjective reasoning and dialogue through which 'actors seek to reach an understanding about their action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement' (Habermas, 1984, p. 101). Communicative action can be blocked when there is systematically distorted communication that prevents the emergence of dialogues that allow validity claims to be questioned, and the search for good reasons for accepting a truth or normative claim is cut short (Forester, 2003; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007, 2011). In organizations, blocking communicative action entails encouraging adherence to certain beliefs and practices and discouragement of critical thinking about them (Deetz, 1992). Stupidity management involves a strong emphasis on positive understanding of organizational practices. This happens through uplifting messages such as organizational visions, missions, values and strategies that promise an impressive, up-beat and identity-confirming organizational world. Independent thinking is discouraged by an emphasis on the rationality of formal structures and procedures and the imitation of others in order to make things look good and legitimate. This is a key element in institutional processes, although not directly pointed to by proponents of institutional theory, who see this as a neutral and natural process (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Stupidity management also counteracts thoughtfulness and the exploration of doubt. It entails monitoring and more-or-less subtle sanctioning of subordinates and colleagues who raise issues that go beyond narrow, instrumental and constrained concerns.

A central aspect of blocking communicative action is the exercise of power. We acknowledge that the concept of power is an 'essentially contested concept' (Lukes, 2005; Clegg et al., 2006). However, for our present purposes we take it to broadly entail the 'dimension of relationships through which the behaviours, attitudes, or opportunities of an actor are affected by another actor, system, or technology' (Lawrence et al., 2012 p. 105). Power can be exercised in at least four ways (Fleming and Spicer, 2007): direct suppression, setting the agenda, shaping ideological settings, and the production of subject positions. Let us look a little closer at each of these modes of exercise of power in the context of stupidity management.

In some cases, stupidity management involves direct attempts to suppress communicative action. Sometimes this happens through direct warnings and interventions. In extreme cases employees are asked deliberately to cultivate their stupidity. For instance, an advertising agency director advised his copywriters never to visit the factories producing the items they were promoting. He argued that knowing the truth about the manufacturing process and the products would make it difficult to write the kind of copy (by his own admission, often superficial nonsense) that needed to be included in the advert (cited in Klein, 2000). In an even more extreme example, the director of another advertising firm asked his employees to 'walk in stupid every morning' (Burrell, 2007). Direct interventions to encourage functional stupidity can occur in more subtle ways. This may happen when stupidity managers seek to steer employees away from issues that go outside proscribed cognitive or ideological boundaries. For instance, employees in a large corporate bureaucracy who raised ethical issues were deemed to have odd ideas and to be

not fully reliable for important tasks and positions (Jackall, 1988). Similarly, junior consultants in a management consultancy firm who talked negatively about extreme work pressure associated with understaffing were considered 'show-stoppers' (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009). Arguably, organizations are full of more or less systematic, explicit or clear examples of persuasions and sanctioning, which block processes of communicative action by ensuring that people do not raise wider issues in exploratory or critical discussions. As the airing of problems and critique are prohibited, the capacity to engage in critical reflection is reduced.

Stupidity management can also work without direct intervention (through subtle or more active means). It can entail setting the agenda around what can and cannot be raised during collective deliberation. This may operate through purposeful attempts by management to manipulate the agenda. For instance, employees in an IT consultancy who wanted to discuss problems were met with the response that criticisms were allowable only if accompanied by constructive proposals for how to deal with them (Alvesson, 1995). In this case, such issues would make it onto the agenda for legitimate discussion and consideration only if coupled with 'constructive suggestions'. This marginalized broader critical discussion which was not accompanied by immediate solutions. Thus, deeper deliberation can be curtailed by defining what is worth discussing and what should be considered irrelevant. This can significantly narrow the scope of issues to which the employees' cognitive capacities might be applied, and how they might be used.

Stupidity managers may seek to block processes of communicative action by propagating

broader ideological frameworks that define the preferences and underpinning assumptions of the actors engaged in the deliberation. Sometimes ideological frameworks are intentionally propagated. They can be expressed through cultural management that emphasizes ideals and values, and also in more subtle ways. For instance, some organizations have a set of ideological values that celebrates action (Brunsson, 1982). In these organizations, too much deep consideration and analysis of a particular issue is actively discouraged in favour of quick and decisive action. This means employees are frequently asked to follow the corporate cliché: 'stop thinking about it and start doing it'. For instance, in organizations undertaking change programmes, reflexivity and careful consideration of consequences are discouraged in favour of showing that things are being done (Watson, 1994). The result is that changes 'are pushed through by managers trying to make a reputation and a career, who do not stay on to see them through' (Watson, 1994, p. 117). Of course, there are times when there is a need to act quickly and decisively due to a clear and present danger (Grint, 2005). However, these genuine emergencies are rare. Often, a clear orientation to action is driven less by a pressing situation than by an action orientation.

A final way that stupidity managers might seek to exercise power is through the propagation of particular subject positions. This entails the construction and propagation of particular organizationally sponsored identities (Knights and Willmott, 1989). An excellent example of this is general celebration and propagation of the subject position of 'leader' – and its corollary of 'the follower' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). Empirical studies show that many middle managers adopt the identity of 'the leader' because it

gives them a sense of self esteem (Alvesson and Svenningsson, 2003). Recent work on the restructuring of the UK public sector has traced how a widespread attachment to 'leaderism' (O'Reilly and Reed, 2010) has significantly narrowed the scope of potential identities available in public sector organizations (Ford et al., 2008). This can significantly restrict how organizational members can use their cognitive capacities. Sometimes such restrictions occur through the promotion of 'inspirational' understandings of leadership coupled with 'strong' cultures and 'cultish' features (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002). However, in many contemporary workplaces, humanistic modes of 'facilitative', 'authentic' or 'transformational' leadership have replaced authoritarian forms of leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011). This does not liberate communicative action. Rather, the assumption that leaders are morally, spiritually or socially superior to their followers endures (Alvesson, 2013a). The assumption is that the strong leader sets the path, creates enthusiasm, builds a feeling of belonging to a team, provides employees with the right ideas and orchestrates personal growth. A true follower relies heavily on the leader to do the thinking and decision-making about the key issues, such as visions, strategies, values and identities. Co-workers are expected to adapt follower positions and passively to accept what the leader suggests (e.g. Hartnell and Walumbwa, 2011). The more emphasis on leadership, the more frequent the elements of followership and subordination. This marginalizes the use of critical reflection on the activities one is being led to accomplish. Of course, after careful deliberation, an individual or group may decide that leader and follower identities are required (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). However, complete absence of deliberation about leadership can result in uncritical, unreflective and justification-free leader-follower

relations.

In sum, stupidity management involves a wide range of actors seeking to restrict and distort communicative action through the exercise of power. This can occur through direct interventions, agenda setting, propagating broader ideological beliefs and creating subject positions. However, two points of qualification are worth adding. First, these processes of stupidity management are not mutually exclusive: they may work in tandem. Returning to the IT consultancy study mentioned above (Alvesson, 1995), we see that all four modes of power are at work simultaneously. The managerial assertion that employees should criticize only if they have constructive proposals for solutions, can be seen as a direct expression of power (shut up!), agenda controlling ('postpone raising the issue until you have come up with a solution'), an assertion of ideology ('be positive and constructive, don't complain'), and a form of identity creation ('Be a good organizational citizen'). Second, the forms of stupidity management we mention can work through episodic interventions as well developing more systemic restrictions on communicative action (Lawrence et al., 2012). The former are interventions in specific situations; the latter refer to developing and maintaining the cultural and institutional grounding that supports socialized and/or organizationally ingrained capacities for functional stupidity. In this sense more systematic stupidity management plays a role in maintaining the broader features of context, which we discussed in the previous section. Often these two forms of management work together. For instance, emphasis on the importance of being consistent with the company's brand not only narrows processes of collective deliberation but also can reproduce the broader economy of persuasion (Kärreman and

Rylander, 2008).

Process: Stupidity Self-Management

We argued above that functional stupidity is triggered by various forms of stupidity management that discourage reflection and critical thinking. This prompts constraints on individuals employment of their own cognitive capacities. Individuals do this by engaging in a process of *stupidity self-management*, involving the individual putting aside doubts, critique and other reflexive concerns and focusing on the more positive aspects of organizational life which are more clearly aligned with understandings and interpretations that are officially sanctioned and actively promoted. Negative aspects of organizational life, including doubts about the meaningfulness of work and production, are marginalized. This encourages a relatively coherent and positive self-narrative that generates a sense of faith and optimism on the part of organizational members. It means also that individuals are likely to avoid interaction and communication when there are doubts, critique or when justifications are called for. This ultimately creates a sense of certainty and consistency. In what follows, we unpack this process in more detail.

When individuals are confronted with an organizational context that they find problematic, but which includes no space for doubts or objections, they react in different ways (Ogbonna and Harris, 2002). Some subjectively distance themselves from the organization and engage in an internal process of reflexivity. Others take a pragmatic approach, subjectively distancing themselves while behaving more or less according to

the organizational norms. A third group may sign up to and even 'internalize' dominant notions. The individuals in this third group bring their own senses of self into alignment with the dominant themes in the organization (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). This can be seen as a process of *limiting internal reflexivity* (Archer, 2003, 2007; Mutch, 2007). It involves more or less active management of the individual's reflection on his or her own personal project. When collective processes of reflexivity are blocked, many individuals refrain from engaging in a dialogue with themselves in such a way that unsettling substantive questions are quashed, as are the search for justifications or reflexive examination of one's basic premise. Typically, we need some confirmation of our feelings of doubt. If people around us discourage efforts to explore substantive questions through dialogue, then the theme may be dropped or marginalized. This is not to suggest that internal reflexivity completely ends or does not take place. Rather, it is carefully managed and directed in such a way that negative and contradictory lines of thought are curtailed. In cutting short the internal conversation, a kind of 'intra-communicative distortion' occurs. This means employees are able to avoid experiences of anxiety and uncertainty that accompany contradictions. The wealth of positive representations offered by economies of persuasion may influence the internal conversation and make the individual more inclined to move away from independent, reflexive and critical thinking.

A crucial part of this involves focusing on more positive and 'safer' aspects of organizational life. Individuals do this through using representations that are officially sanctioned by the organization. Some examples include versions of corporate reality manifested in power point presentations, corporate strategy statements and dominant

understandings of the corporate culture. This means that the individual's own internal reflexivity does not radically clash with the dominant representations in the organization. It reduces the possibility for dissonance, provides a sense of existential security and gives the individual a sense of protection from sanctions. This sense of protection and security comes from the individual being able to avoid demanding thinking, concerns about their sense of self and the risk of disapproval from authorities and peers. People do not insist too much on thinking for themselves, but assume that management knows best and/or that fashion or tradition represents superior knowledge. A positive sense of self follows from identification with positively framed organizational discourses. Subjective attachment to the notions of well-structured career progression (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007), visionary and inspirational leadership (Conger et al., 2000), or being 'world class' (Prasad et al., 2011) can structure one's internal conversation in positive and appealing ways.

However, positive evocations frequently clash with the realities of work. Sometimes employees see work as boring, harsh, unethical or simply wrong in terms of productive arrangements and practices (Costas and Fleming, 2009). This clash between positive evocations encouraged by stupidity managers, and more negative experiences of everyday life, creates a significant sense of dissonance. This can lead to a range of resistant responses including alienation (Costas and Fleming, 2009), cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), activism (Spicer and Böhm, 2007) or exiting from the organization (Cederström and Fleming, 2012). However, it can lead also to more compliant responses, stupidity self-management being one. This entails employees dealing with dissonance by

bringing into line their espoused beliefs and their everyday experiences, and by ensuring that their internal narratives are based on a more positive understanding of their experience. Employees engage in a kind of pragmatic, non-reflective calculation whereby they work out what will be best for them, by at least symbolically accepting the 'positive' values prompted by the organization in order to get ahead (Ogbonna and Harris, 2002). To do this, employees selectively 'edit' their experiences so that they match the positive vision promoted by various stupidity managers.

Because negative or contradictory experiences are mentally airbrushed from the picture, employees are able to maintain a relatively coherent and positive world-view. This gives them a sense that the ideas promoted by management are sincere and will prove beneficial. For instance, employees in a large professional services firm tended frequently to celebrate the meritocratic nature of the career paths and the managerial hierarchy in their organization. At the same time, they ignored many of the arbitrary ways the career system actually worked (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). By focusing on the more positive representations of the career system, many experiences of 'imperfect' practices were constructed as deviations rather than as indicative. They were seen also as an expression of individual circumstance rather than system failure. Employees in this firm reminded themselves of how ambitious the firm was in assessment and promotion matters. One consultant claimed that '[Other companies] know that we have rigorously tested them [the employees] before they were offered [a job] and that we also have developed and educated them. Our people are very attractive' (p. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007, p. 717). Considering formal structures and procedures rather than their

own experiences and observations allowed consultants to focus on a narrow range of positive and confirmatory experiences. This reduced complexity, and created a far more positive outlook. It depended on critical reflection being kept to a minimum, not asking for justifications and ignoring doubts related to the career system.

By engaging in processes of stupidity self-management and cutting short the internal conversation, organizational members are able to push doubt and questioning to one side. This frequently means that employees can avoid expressing views on substantive problems, seeking justifications, and engaging in reflexive thinking. It means also that doubts tend not to be communicated and to fade away.

Outcomes: Certainty and Dissonance

Functional stupidity is a mixed blessing for organizations and the people in them. It can have positive results for both, but also less desirable outcomes.

An important positive outcome of functional stupidity is that it provides a sense of *certainty*. Organizational members are able to adopt a more relaxed attitude to reflexivity, critical scrutiny or justification. For the individual, this minimizes disruptive reflection. Instead of shouldering the burden of doubt and risking the diversion of intellectual resources into 'non-productive' critical thinking, existential anxiety and other miseries, organizational members can plough their energies into negotiating the (post-) bureaucratic structures of the organization and building careers. The result is that

organizational life and one's career involve much less friction. But perhaps more importantly, functional stupidity provides individuals with a positive sense of certainty about who they are, what they want and the steps they might need to take in order to get it. In this sense it helps to support feelings of coherence, distinctiveness, positive value and direction with regard to who one is, what one stands for and one's trajectory (Alvesson et al., 2008). If an organizational member is able to block out or to minimize potential observations and experiences that discredit their identity project, they can avoid fragmentation, contradiction and vulnerability. This makes functional stupidity an important resource.

Functional stupidity also provides a sense of certainty for the *organization* more broadly, because it discourages difficult questions from organizational members, requests for substantive reasons and broader justifications for actions, and the propagation of doubt through being reflexive. Questioning can be costly because it requires significant time and resources to engage in critical thinking. For instance, if organizations where called on frequently to justify their actions, they would need to devote significant resources to creating and articulating these justifications. In many cases the structures and actions of the organization would be difficult to justify, promoting doubt among organizational members. This could decrease legitimacy and dissolve commitment to uncertain courses of action (Brunsson, 1985). By cultivating functional stupidity, organizations are able to avoid the costs associated with broader critical thinking. By refraining from asking difficult and probing questions, they are able to create a sense of purposefulness and certainty around the organizations' activities, despite the questionable basis of many of

them.

While functional stupidity can generate a sense of certainty, it can also have negative consequences. This can occur, when a large *dissonance* appears between official sponsored discourses (which are reinforced through stupidity management and stupidity self-management) and the lived realities of the individuals, and the organization as a whole. At the individual level, this can happen if limiting the exercise of cognitive capacities reduces autonomy, narrows the range of choices (opened up by reflection) or becomes a source of dissatisfaction over time, if and when it became clear that earlier thinking (or the shortage of it) had led to missed opportunities. It may throw doubt on the meaning and purposes of the individual's working life. Reducing critical reflection may be reasonable in some cases, but in other cases, glaring contradictions and troubling ambiguities might be difficult to ignore. In such cases organizational members are faced with the question of whether they are willing to acknowledge these contradictions and face a corresponding loss of certainty. By acknowledging the dissonance, members may become increasingly disappointed about the distance between the rhetorical pronouncements of the organization and actual activities. This can lead to cynicism and alienation, decreased motivation and a highly limited sense of commitment to the organization (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Costas and Fleming, 2009). It can also result in employees ending up on a career path that is not satisfying (Ibarra, 2003).

The prevalence of functional stupidity can create significant problems also for the whole organization. This often occurs when the dissonance is prompted by mistakes caused by

avoidance or mis-recognition of problems. For instance, one of the most palpable drivers of accidents is an organizational or occupational culture that encourages people to avoid asking difficult questions and critiquing established frameworks of knowledge (e.g. Starbuck and Milliken, 1987). One of the drivers of the recent crisis within a number of financial institutions was an unwillingness to raise doubts about risky investment strategies (Lewis, 2011). This led many bankers to ignore increasingly large discrepancies between shared assumptions about markets, and reality. The eventual consequence of this was the collapse of many financial institutions and a broader systemic crisis.

In sum, functional stupidity can be an advantage and/or a disadvantage. For instance, the norm of criticizing only if you have a constructive proposal, can lead to functional outcomes such as a good organizational climate and efforts to be creative. But it can have negative outcomes such as the suppression of awareness of problems, narrow instrumental orientation and lack of learning.

Feedback: Self-Reinforcing Stupidity and Reflexivity

Functional stupidity can have pervasive feedback effects. Perhaps one of the most pronounced of these is that functional stupidity can become self-reinforcing. This happens when employees stop asking searching questions and are rewarded with a sense of (false) certainty about their own careers and about the organization as a whole. This can produce a sense of *functionality* for the individual and the organization. By this we

mean, there is a shared sense that aspects of organizational life are operating efficiently and effectively. For instance, experience of certainty might also be accompanied by more material rewards such as promotions, pay-rises and smooth organizational performance. When this sense of certainty (and the accompanying performance) is threatened by difficult questions or contradictions, organizational members often seek to protect it by retreating into deeper functional stupidity. In other words, the individual learns gradually not to think in certain dimensions and domains. Such a move can entail reinforcing one's faith in managerially sponsored discourses. By doing so, organizational members and the organization as a whole seek salvation from the potentially identity-threatening, disorder-creating and uncertainty-inducing consequences. It means also that organizational members are able to reaffirm the continued smooth functioning of the organization and their own compliance and career paths within it. This can create a self-reinforcing loop of more functional stupidity leading to more (illusory) certainty and smooth operations. A kind of reflexive laziness or incapacity follows. However, this can be accompanied by diligence and intellectual sharpness in other respects: significant creative and intellectual work can go into optimizing means for the accomplishment of (given) objectives.

Functional stupidity is not just self-reinforcing. As mentioned above, there are some cases when widespread functional stupidity can create less positive outcomes in the form of dissonance. Often such dysfunctional outcomes are minor and are overlooked in order to preserve a positive sense of self and the organization as a whole. However, there are instances when the dissonance between the rather narrow commitments encouraged by functional stupidity, and the outcomes, becomes so great that it is impossible to ignore.

This prompts *reflexivity*. Reflexivity in individuals occurs when their experiences clash with their own self- and/or organizational identity narratives. Such clashes can often spark pronounced rounds of self-reflexivity, the search for broader justifications and broader substantive reasoning about desired ends. Sometimes this leads to the response: 'How could I have been so stupid!' But less drastic experiences and responses are also common. For instance, professionals facing unemployment were prompted to engage in deep and often profoundly self-reflexivity when thinking about their future (Gabriel, 2010). Although such self-examination often proves painful, it can certainly undermine dynamics of functional stupidity. There are some cases where organizations actually encourage individual reflexivity that induces negative feedback. For example, in an attempt to recruit an executive from another industry, a senior executive asked a Pepsi executive: 'Do you want to continue to sell sweetened water for the rest of your life'? (Sculley, 1987). Similarly, direct selling companies often seek to recruit and motivate members by encouraging them to reflect on the dissatisfying 'rut' that is their everyday work life (Pratt, 2000). By doing this, existing commitments are shaken up and processes of internal reflectivity are prompted (and sometimes prompt shut down or sale of the company).

As well as undermining functional stupidity at an individual level, negative outcomes can have profound implications for the whole organization. When organizations make mistakes visible and risk public critique, they are sometimes prompted or even obliged to engage in a process of collective self-reflexivity. These processes occur particularly following mistakes that lead to major disasters. Many well-know corporate disasters and

accidents (e.g. Gephart, 1993; Brown, 2000) or financial improprieties (e.g. Brown, 2004) have prompted in-depth inquiries. These inquiries sometimes give rise to profound processes of self-reflection, more substantive questions and the search for broader justifications. For instance, during an inquiry into changes in an Australian public broadcaster, broader questions were asked about the organization's existence, its identity and its goals (Spicer, 2005). However, inquiries can also become forums where groups seek to avoid deeper and more searching questions, side-step fundamentally systematic changes, and ensure a return to 'business as usual'. For instance, recent government inquiries into the failures in the UK banking sector during the 2008 global financial crisis frequently revealed leaders of financial institutions seeking to avoid responsibility and self-reflection that would result in profound changes to the way the financial system operates (Whittle and Mueller, 2012). Public inquiries are by no means the only forums that allow deeper collective self-reflexivity, the search for justification and substantive reasoning. There are many other spaces within and around organizations that can host stupidity-disturbing dialogue. These include broader social movements (Spicer and Böhm, 2007), insurgent movements within organizations (Creed et al., 2002), the media (Pattriota et al., 2011) and even leaders who are willing to open up broader reflection on fundamental assumptions within an organization (Hatch, 2011). Although such dialogue may actually act to reinforce or perhaps side-step fundamental questions, it at least can act as a space that potentially could undermine functional stupidity by prompting processes of individual reflexivity and (partially) unblocking collective communicative action.

Conclusion

Management and organization studies abound with positive-sounding reports of the importance of well educated and bright workers in knowledge-based firms that are at the forefront of the knowledge economy. There is 'a broad consensus that modern economies are becoming increasingly knowledge-intensive' (Adler, 2001, p. 216). Many assume that being able to put knowledge to work intelligently seems to the essence of what (successful) organizations do (Kogut and Zander, 1992). We have argued that the field assumption of 'smartness' underpins a broad and somewhat diverse set of ideas about organizations. It emphasizes the significance of the sophisticated use of cognitive resources in contemporary organizations. We think this assumption calls for significant reservation, nuance and qualification (e.g. Alvesson, 2004, 2013a; Böhm, 2005; Fleming et al., 2004; Sweet and Meiksins, 2008; Thompson et al., 2001). The dominant descriptions are often glamorous and pretentious. Furthermore, we think the consensus in this broad field needs to be challenged – perhaps key developments and contemporary conditions *also* mean that modern economies and organizations become more 'stupidity-intensive'?

To develop this challenge, we have tried to offer something different by drawing attention to the significance of functional stupidity in organizations. Our understanding of functional stupidity is that it emerges from the interplay between unwillingness and a (learned) incapacity to engage in reflexivity, a partial closing of the mind, freezing of the intellectual effort, a narrowed focus, and an absence of requests for justification. It means

buying into questionable, but symbolically appealing claims about contemporary organizational structures and practices dominated by knowledge-intensity, visionary leadership and post-bureaucracy. Functional stupidity includes a (wilful) lack of recognition of the incompleteness and uncertainty of our knowledge and the frequently debatable nature of dominant goals and dominant logics. As such, it works as a doubt-control and uncertainty-coping mechanism. Functional stupidity can help to marginalize sources of friction and uncertainty. However, in our view, what is crucial is that functional stupidity is not just an aberration in organizational life. In many cases it is central insofar as it is supported by organizational norms, and facilitates smooth interactions in organizations. Being clever and knowledgeable is fine and necessary, but so is refraining from being reflexive, avoiding asking for justifications for decisions and structures and minimizing substantive reasoning about values and goals. In this sense, functional stupidity can be helpful in producing results - for organizations as well as for individuals. It is productive because it cuts short costly and anxiety inducing questions and creates a sense of certainty. In this sense, it is a pillar of organizational order. While functional stupidity comes with many benefits, it can also create significant risks for individuals as well as organizations as a whole. Functional stupidity can backfire by creating a sense of dissonance: increasingly yawning gaps between shared assumptions and reality may eventually produce accidents or disasters. So functional stupidity may not always be entirely functional. The contradiction in the term implies this and points to the internal tension in the concept. Functionality indicates the potential benefits. Stupidity draws attention to the risks and problems involved. Like many things in organizational life, it is a mixed blessing – at once, functional and stupid. This makes it important and

interesting to consider and monitor, both academically and practically in organizations.

By articulating the concept of functional stupidity, we seek to go beyond existing accounts of the limits to 'smartness' in organizations. In particular, we have pointed out that the shortage of reflection, critical thinking and requests for justification is not an unavoidable contingency created by bounded rationality (March and Simon, 1958), the chaotic nature of organizations (Cohen et al., 1972), environmental uncertainty (March, 1996), widely shared cognitive scripts (Ashforth and Fried, 1988), or the nature of modern professionalized expertise and specialized knowledge (Ungar, 2008). We see functional stupidity as being created not through intellectual deficits but through political expediency and the operation of power. To put this another way, organizational members become functionally stupid through a series of cultural and institutional beliefs and arrangements salient in an economy of persuasion, and framing reinforced by managerial (and self-managerial) interventions (such as encouraging a narrow action orientation, the celebration of leadership, attachment to structure, a strong belief in institutions) which discourage reflexivity, substantive reasoning and justification. This happens through a combination of indirect and more systemic stupidity management, and more direct forms of episodic stupidity management, and stupidity self-management. Each of these interventions discourages critical reasoning, substantive concern and requests for justification. This can create a strong system of control that produces highly functional outcomes. In this sense our account of functional stupidity helps to show how structures of control can work by limiting or constraining knowledge and rationality, rather than, as many Foucauldian scholars would claim, just 'producing' it (e.g. Knights et al., 1993;

Flyvbjerg, 1998; Clegg et al., 2006)

We do not see ourselves as immune to functional stupidity. We see functional stupidity as a general condition that pervades many spheres of social life (Alvesson, 2013a; Foley, 2010), including academia. Contemporary academia could be seen as a hothouse for functional stupidity. In academia, huge amounts of time and energy are expended on writing papers for publication in top ranked journals, in our bid to 'play the game'. These paper may be read or used by very few, and mainly by those eager to pad out the reference lists attached to their own papers (Gabriel, 2010). Rarely is there any serious discourse around the meaningfulness of this enterprise (cf. Grey, 2010), apart from occasional debates about 'relevance' (e.g. Keiser and Leiner, 2009; Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009). Perhaps this is because publications are not only a measure of our 'market value' but also are seen as an expression of our intelligence and knowledge. The result of an article being accepted for publication can be a deep sense of satisfaction and strong identity-confirmation, simply because it 'proves' how smart we are. Of course there are material rewards, but these are often less important than the symbolic ones. One could say that functional stupidity is a key resource for any institution eager to maximize careerism. This can make researchers into willing journal paper technicians who focus on writing papers for leading journals within a narrow subfield. This may detract from broader scholarship with slower and less predictable results and, perhaps, with a greater likelihood of saying something really interesting and/or socially useful (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2012).

To sum up, this paper makes three contributions. Firstly, our concepts of functional stupidity and stupidity management have some potential to shake up dominant assumptions about the significance of knowledge, intelligence, creativity, learning and the general use of cognitive resources. We see this literature as one-sided and ideological and in need of opening up through consideration of something quite different. Secondly, we provide a different assumptions by proposing the notion of functional stupidity. In doing so, we highlighted how organizations cultivate functional stupidity and propose a framework for its operation. Thirdly, we have sketched some ideas for research in this area, to encourage investigation of avoidance of critical reasoning, blocking of communicative action and curtailing of the internal conversation.

Implications for Research and Practice

The concept of functional stupidity addresses an aspect of organizational life that, to date, has been largely ignored by researchers. We think it offers a number of interesting avenues for future research.

First, it would be interesting to explore how functional stupidity plays out in different contexts such as emotionally intensive (e.g. caring organizations), aesthetically intensive (e.g. hospitality), process intensive (e.g. routine services work) and knowledge-intensive (e.g. universities, high tech firms). It might be particularly interesting to study organizations and work where contribution to the social good is disputed, such as advertising, fashion, tobacco or the arms industries. Such investigation would require

comparative case studies in a range of different sectors or work contexts. Second, we do not know how functional stupidity changes and evolves over time. Paying attention to this temporal dimension might demonstrate how functional stupidity increases or falls depending on aspects such as organization age, degree of institutionalization, emergence of a new fashion, and whether the organization faces a relatively benign or a crisis ridden context. Third, it would be of interest to see how individuals develop over time in terms of the ability and willingness to think critically, to reflect more deeply and to raise issues that are experienced as problematic and call for justification. Are neophytes more inclined towards independent thinking and to require justifications, or does experience, a broader overview and greater confidence lead to such an orientation? Fourth, it would be interesting to study whether and how use of reason and functional stupidity co-exist or interact. Future research could explore the relation between organization processes that facilitate the use of knowledge for functional purposes, and processes that encourage organizational members to abstain from reflection, thinking beyond instrumental concerns or asking critical questions about the reasons for organizational practice. Fifth, it is uncertain what happens if there is a mismatch in functional stupidity between organization and individual. Exploring this tension might reveal how 'smart' people survive in 'stupid' firms and how 'stupid' people make their way in 'smart' organizations. Finally, there are some methodological challenges associated with studying functional stupidity. Simply explaining the concept to respondents and asking for their responses is one option. This would help to test the face validity and applicability of the concept. However, a more oblique way to capturing functional stupidity could involve asking questions about doubt, reflections, requirements for

justification and experience, and talking about lack of meaning and purpose at work. Respondents could be asked probing questions about their own experience of meaningfulness and meaninglessness at work, and their efforts to critically and reflectively raise issues and initiate discussion. Respondents could also be asked for their opinions on whether their counterparts engage in reflection, critical questioning, request justifications, or protest at what is seen as irrational or unethical arrangements and acts.

In addition to providing a range of new questions for investigation, our argument has some implications for practice. The primary inference of our study is that it calls into question one-sided notions of knowledge as well as broader, smartness-based ideas. By recognizing the role played by functional stupidity, we hope to promote a more humble attitude in organizational settings which frequently emphasize knowledge-intensiveness and general smartness. A second implication is a reminder to practitioners that stupidity in organizational life is not necessarily an aberration. Rather it is a frequent and organizationally produced norm. We hope to encourage a recognition among practitioners that what might appear to be an act of stupidity may not be due to an individual's cognitive deficiencies, but to active stupidity management. We hope that if practitioners are able to recognize the various promoters of stupidity, they may be able to reflect and possible reconsider the stupidity management practices in their own organizations. We hope also that such reflection may help practitioners to make greater use of anti-stupidity management – or at least to work in different and better ways. Third, we have shown that stupidity should not be rooted out of the organization completely: it can be an important resource that organizations should cultivate, maintain and engineer.

In many cases, a dose of functional stupidity is what is required. Employing very highly qualified people may be a disservice to them and to the organization. Supporting a degree of functional stupidity is an important managerial task. Fourth, and counter to the previous point, managers should seek to guard against excess functional stupidity. We have pointed out that while functional stupidity may help organizations to function, it can have negative consequences such as disappointment and failures. In order to avoid these, practitioners must be willing strategically to inject some aspects of critical thinking into organizational life. This will help to unsettle forms of functional stupidity that have become too ingrained. In this sense, a central task for many managers is to strike a balance between the intelligent use of knowledge on the one hand, and propagation of functional stupidity on the other. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we hope that the concept of functional stupidity will facilitate more critical reflection on smart organizations. In particular, we hope to prompt wider debate about why it is that smart organizations can be so stupid at times.

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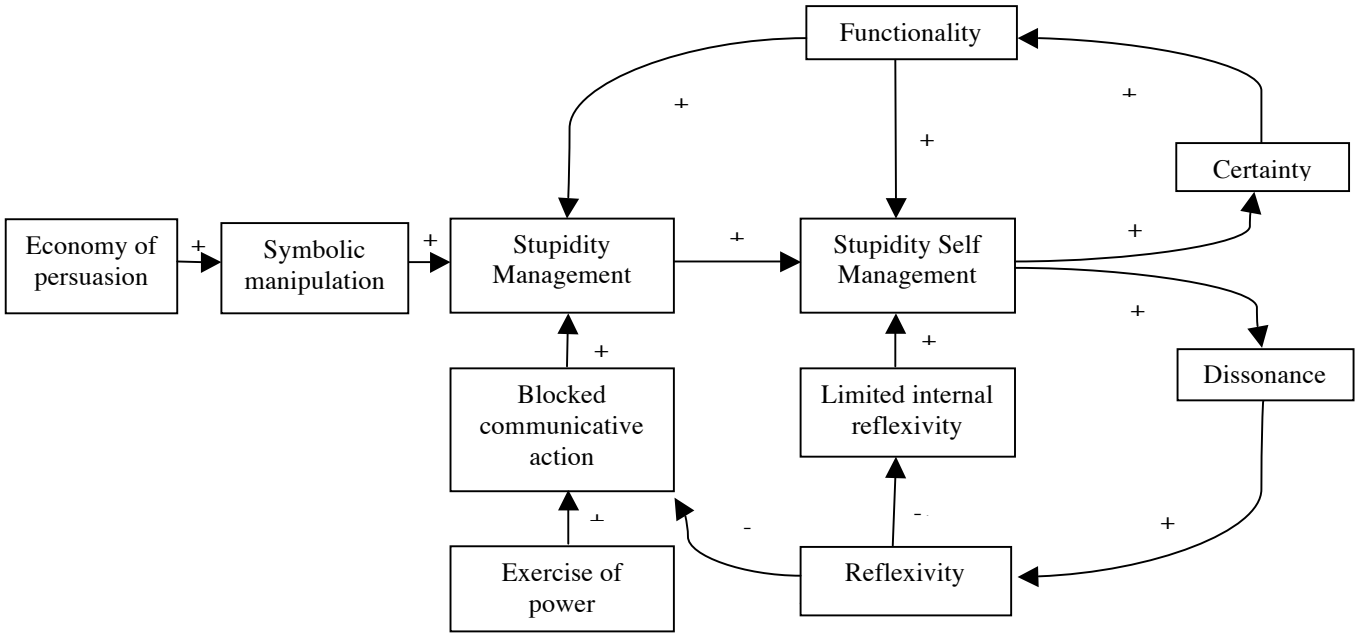

Figure One: A Model of Functional Stupidity