Functional stupidity: A critique

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Alvesson and Spicer's 2012 paper 'A stupidity-based theory of organizations', published in the *Journal of Management Studies*, is an audacious attempt to introduce a new concept into academic discourse and public debate – the concept of 'functional stupidity'. To a large extent, the authors have been successful: not only has the concept been taken up by organizational researchers, it has also gained widespread coverage in the international business press. In Sweden, where one of the authors is based, the term has even been officially adopted as a new word within the Swedish language (translated as *funktionell dumhet*),[1] and has gone on to inspire an eponymous stage-play.[2] One might be consoled that academic research is having a wider impact beyond the university-based business school, especially from such well-known proponents of critical management studies (see e.g. Alvesson, Bridgman and Willmott, 2009; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009). Surely we should celebrate the fact that critical scholarship is having an influence outside the ivory tower?

But matters are not quite as straightforward as they might appear. Although the idea of functional stupidity is presented as an academic concept, it veers worryingly towards a management buzzword. A concept in organization studies should contribute to 'the analysis of management as a complex and contested phenomenon', whereas a management buzzword serves to stymie debate by

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1   The Swedish Language Council defines functional stupidity as 'an uncritical approach that improves productivity' ('*ett okritiskt förhållningssätt som förbättrar produktiviteten*').

2   *Funktionell dumhet* premiered at Malmö Dockteater in 2014. The play is based on Roland Paulsen's book *Vi bara lyder: En berättelse om Arbetsförmedlingen*, which draws on the concept of functional stupidity.

propagating a 'vocabulary of managerialism' (Collins, 2000: 13). As we will see, functional stupidity can be viewed as *both* a provocative concept for use in critical management research and a practitioner-oriented catchphrase. To this extent, functional stupidity appeals to two very different – and arguably mutually exclusive – constituencies. There is a case to be made that critical management studies (CMS) should not seek to fundamentally challenge managerial hegemony in organizations, but rather to gently reform it (see e.g. Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009). But if we wish to take seriously the ethos of non-performativity as a defining principle of CMS, as outlined by Fournier and Grey (2000), then efforts must be taken to guard against producing research that blurs the distinction between academic concept and corporate slogan. As I will argue, Alvesson and Spicer end up presenting a management buzzword *as if* it were a piece of critical scholarship. This matters, I suggest, because it opens up a space for further research that is based on highly problematic foundations.

This note takes its cue from the 'practical criticism' approach pioneered by F.R. Leavis in literary studies (see Armstrong and Lightfoot, 2010; Armstrong and Lilley, 2008). Practical criticism, as originally developed by Leavis, involves 'a denial that great literature constituted an ineffable mystery, only to be approached in a spirit of reverential awe' (Armstrong and Lilley, 2008: 361). To this extent, practical criticism turns to the text itself for justifications of literary greatness. By the same token, practical criticism also seeks to unmask literature that 'announces nothing but its own genius, but which, because of that very fixation, can do so only in derivation and cliché' (*ibid.*). It is therefore both an evaluative and a debunking exercise. Applied to the social sciences, practical criticism appeals to the qualities of a specific text rather than the dubious benchmarks of journal rankings or, worse, professional standing. Exercises in practical criticism are thus all the more necessary for 'icons of authority' (*ibid.*), such as articles published in highly ranked journals by renowned scholars. It is in this spirit that I attempt a close reading of 'A stupidity-based theory of organizations'.

In what follows, I will summarize the idea of functional stupidity before outlining its 'positive' and 'negative' effects in organizations, according to Alvesson and Spicer. I will conclude by reflecting on the implications of functional stupidity for the future of critical scholarship in the university-based business school.

Introducing functional stupidity

The first point to address is the meaning of functional stupidity. Alvesson and Spicer define it as follows:

> Functional stupidity is [the] 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. (1201; emphasis removed)

Functional stupidity is understood by Alvesson and Spicer as an incapacity and/or disinclination on the part of organizational members to exercise critical reflection about what they are doing (*reflexivity*), why they are doing it (*justification*), and what the consequences of their activities are beyond the immediate task at hand (*substantive reasoning*). Functional stupidity is explicitly framed as an organizational issue, particularly for firms within the knowledge economy (1212-3). To this extent, the authors are writing against the orthodoxy of management thought that attributes the success of organizations to 'the intelligent mobilization of cognitive capacities' (1195). For Alvesson and Spicer, this grand claim about 'smartness' should be nuanced and qualified (1213). Towards this end, they propose the concept of functional stupidity as a way to 'shake up dominant assumptions about the significance of knowledge, intelligence, creativity, learning, and the general use of cognitive resources' (1214).

Alvesson and Spicer point out that functional stupidity is explicitly linked to 'power and politics' in organizations (1198). The phenomenon of 'stupidity management' occurs whenever actors in positions of influence (e.g. managers, consultants, business gurus) attempt to discourage critical reflection that calls into question organizationally-sanctioned norms and values (1202; 1204-7). This in turn leads to 'stupidity self-management' whereby employees intentionally limit their own critical reflection (1212). Ultimately, this has the effect of aligning employees' perceptions of work with the positive organizational visions espoused by senior management, thus minimizing doubt and uncertainty about what they are doing, why they are doing it and what the wider consequences of their activities are. It is worth pointing out that Alvesson and Spicer do not draw on empirical evidence to support their claims, but restrict themselves for the most part to generalizing about organizations on a rather abstract level, using phrases such as 'most organizations', 'some organizations', 'in many instances', 'in some cases', 'in other cases', etc.

At first glance, it would appear that the Alvesson and Spicer firmly adopt a critical position that seeks to challenge common-sense assumptions in the

mainstream management literature. Indeed, the basic premise of the paper is founded quite literally on a joke: we commonly speak about knowledge-intensive firms, but a closer look reveals them to be 'stupidity-intensive' (1213). The same humour is also evident in the very title of the piece, an ironic nod to Grant's (1996) seminal paper 'Toward a knowledge-based theory of the firm'. At least one commentator has recognized the implicit comic intent of functional stupidity (Watson, 2015: 7-8). Certainly, part of the appeal of the concept lies in its cheekiness, overturning a self-satisfied supposition about contemporary organizations with a witty flourish. Viewed in this light, the paper seems to have a rather subversive take-home message.

However, we should be careful not to overstate the case. For, as we will see, Alvesson and Spicer's critical agenda is overlaid by a far more conservative – indeed managerial – aim.

'Positive' aspects of functional stupidity

Alvesson and Spicer make it clear that functional stupidity is a 'mixed blessing' (1201) in that entails both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, functional stupidity has 'significant benefits' (1201) because it provides 'a sense of certainty that allows organizations to function smoothly', which can 'save the organization and its members from the frictions provoked by doubt and reflection' (1196). Here, Alvesson and Spicer claim that a surfeit of reflexivity, justification and substantive reasoning can be disruptive on both an organizational and individual level. For individuals, critical reflection is detrimental because it erodes their sense of certainty about what they are doing and why they are doing it as well as distracting them from advancing their careers. Functional stupidity provides an antidote to this bothersome critical 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. (1209)

Organizations, meanwhile, need to avoid reflexivity, justification and substantive reasoning among employees for bottom-line reasons:

> Questioning can be costly because it requires significant time and resources to engage in critical thinking. For instance, if organizations were 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. (1210)

Addressing concerns raised by employees – let's say, ethical questions about the use of cheap overseas labour – may be prohibitively expensive for organization; for this reason, they should seek to minimize such inconvenient critical reflection. Stupidity management is able to prevent these doubts and concerns in advance by restricting communicative action among employees. What is striking here is the fact that Alvesson and Spicer appear to endorse this lack of reflection even when a course of action would be 'difficult to justify' – in other words, when the doubts and concerns about an organization appear fully warranted. It becomes abundantly clear at this point that the supposed 'benefits' of functional stupidity only make sense when they are viewed from the perspective of senior management, i.e. those with an interest in 'maintaining and strengthening organizational order' (1196).

The closing pages offers some 'implications for practice' (1216). Alvesson and Spicer make four specific recommendations. First, they suggest that organizations should adopt a more 'humble attitude' around knowledge-intensiveness and claims of smartness (presumably, this humbleness involves acknowledging the role of functional stupidity in organizations). Second, they argue that organizations should 'make greater use of anti-stupidity management' (2016). Unfortunately, they do not elaborate on what this might mean. Third, they suggest that functional stupidity is 'an important resource that organizations should cultivate, maintain and engineer' (1216). Although this seems at odds with their previous recommendation for anti-stupidity management, Alvesson and Spicer evidently wish for practitioners to 'strike a balance between the intelligent use of knowledge on the one hand, and propagation of functional stupidity on the other' (1216). This implies that, for Alvesson and Spicer, practitioners ought to mobilize the cognitive capacities of employees on the one hand whilst simultaneously seeking to inhibit them on the other. They write:

> 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. (1216)

While they remain guarded, Alvesson and Spicer appear to align themselves with the task of 'stupidity managers' in these concluding remarks. Alongside its positive aspects, however, Alvesson and Spicer are clear that functional stupidity is not entirely beneficial but contains negative aspects that managers should 'guard against' (as they put it in their fourth and final recommendation) (2016). It is to these aspects that we now turn.

'Negative' aspects of functional stupidity

On the negative side, functional stupidity is said to trap individuals and organizations within 'problematic patterns of thinking' (1196). Such problematic patterns of thinking include 'the suppression of awareness of problems, narrow instrumentality, and lack of learning' (1211). The authors give the example of the 2008 financial crisis to support this view, which they suggest was sparked by a reluctance of organizational members to raise concerns about investment strategies that subsequently proved to be catastrophic. The implication here is that functional stupidity does not solely contribute to the smooth functioning of organizations but also results in 'less desirable outcomes' (1209). This suggests that functional stupidity is indeed a 'mixed blessing' since it entails both advantages and disadvantages for organizations and individuals.

Later on, however, their view shifts subtly but significantly. It becomes clear that the negative outcomes are related to an 'excess' of functional stupidity (1216). In other words, functional stupidity results in negative outcomes only when it *malfunctions* (i.e. when it isn't managed properly by stupidity managers). Alvesson and Spicer write:

> 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. (1213; emphasis added)

What Alvesson and Spicer seem to be saying here is that functional stupidity goes awry when there is *too much* stupidity and *not enough* functionality, which is presumably why it must be managed correctly. Functional stupidity is no longer a 'mixed blessing' because it generates both positive and negative results, but because it entails both a 'functional' component and a 'stupid' component. This seems to modify the concept of functional stupidity in an important way: whereas earlier the 'stupid' component was seen to result in positive outcomes (hence it was seen precisely as 'functional'), now the 'stupidity' component becomes precisely dysfunctional (since it detracts from functionality, at least when it is 'excessive'). Alvesson and Spicer may well see this as an 'internal tension' within the concept of functional stupidity itself, but a more plausible explanation is that it reflects an inconsistency within their argument as a whole.

A final question remains: how should functional stupidity be managed in such a way that it contains more positive (functional) components than negative (stupid)

components? Unfortunately, there are no hints about how this is to be accomplished. In fact, Alvesson and Spicer omit any discussion about what kind of stupidity management they would like to see implemented in organizations or what the perfect balance between 'functionality' and 'stupidity' might look like. How much stupidity is 'too much' or 'too little', and what are stupidity managers to do about it? The neglect of such questions is curious, especially for a paper that makes so much of its 'implications for practice'.

Conclusion

In the closing paragraph of the paper, the authors articulate their wish 'to prompt wider debate about why it is that smart organizations can be so stupid at times' (1216). For Alvesson and Spicer, the answer to this question is clear: organizations seek to limit the cognitive capacities of employees because the alternative is costly and time-consuming, while individuals constrain their own internal reflexivity to minimize uncertainty and advance their careers. Such stupidity management and stupidity self-management is tentatively endorsed by Alvesson and Spicer, provided that stupidity managers take pains to prevent 'excess functional stupidity' (1216).

Since its publication, Alvesson and Spicer's paper has been widely discussed in the international business press. For example, *Fortune* magazine offers a summary:

> Alvesson and colleague André Spicer explain how what they call 'functional stupidity' generally helped to get things done. 'Critical reflection and shrewdness' were net positives, but when too many clever individuals in an organization raised their hands to alternative courses of action or to ask 'disquieting questions about decisions and structures', work slowed.
>
> The study's authors found that stupidity, on the other hand, seemed to have a unifying effect. It boosted productivity. (Hustad, 2013)

We cannot miss the managerial overtones in this description: 'too many clever individuals' may hinder productivity, while functional stupidity allows organizations to 'get things done'. Andrew Hill (2013), writing in the *Financial Times*, presents a similar take on functional stupidity:

> What intrigues me about the theory is the insight that stupidity is essential. Managers need to instill a little stupor into their staff (and imbibe some themselves) for big companies to operate at all. The 'functional' part of stupidity lubricates the work process and fosters greater certainty and a happier atmosphere. If you don't believe there's a place for stupidity, picture the opposite – an atmosphere of 'dysfunctional smartness', in which bright professionals run

amok, questioning everything. Would the gains in terms of corporate self-awareness really be worth the total sacrifice of cohesion and efficiency?

Of course, Alvesson and Spicer are not entirely to blame for the way their work has been received in the business press. But it is certainly possible to read the paper from a managerial perspective as much as a critical one. What Alvesson and Spicer appear to have written is the academic equivalent of 'dog-whistle politics': a business audience will take away one message from the paper, while an academic audience will take away quite a different one. The paper is such a frustrating read precisely because it seeks to appeal to both constituencies at one and the same time, wrapping itself up in knots as it tries to do so.

Why is this such a problem? Should we not celebrate scholars who are able to appeal to multiple stakeholders, appealing to organizational members as much as organizational scholars? What does it matter if this involves rounding off a few edges here and there, provided it allows scholarship to reach out and touch the 'real world' beyond the confines of academia? There is a strong case to be made for producing work that is able to cross boundaries and impact on organizational thinking. But if one is not careful, this may lead to a blurring of the distinction between academic concept and management buzzword.

One of the reviewers for this note suggested that I have been '[i]f anything...too generous' in my critique of Alvesson and Spicer's paper since it is 'a frankly shoddy piece of work which rambles along to an inconclusive conclusion without ever making a coherent argument'. The other reviewer, meanwhile, suggests that the paper is 'a valuable starting point for further theoretical and empirical explorations', despite the fact that it contains 'some ambiguities and inconsistencies'. What this disagreement between reviewers sheds light on, I think, is the different ways in which academic research can be understood in the business school today. Should we strive to produce academic research that is internally coherent, logical and based on careful deliberation? Or should we aim instead to produce work that does not need to be clear and coherent as long as it is a little bit provocative and generates some discussion? If it is the latter, then 'A stupidity-based theory of organizations' has certainly achieved its goal. But the danger of this approach is that it comes to shape the research programme of scholars who take its suggestions for further inquiry seriously – and thus develop a research agenda based on very shaky ground. This paper has been an attempt to raise some critical questions about the paper in particular, but also – more generally – to open up a conversation about what kind of scholarship we should be striving to produce in organization studies.

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