



Rethinking Freud's Structural Model: Four factors that Explain Stupid Behavior

Stephen Greenspan

Emeritus Professor of Educational Psychology, University of Connecticut, USA

Correspondence

Stephen Greenspan, PhD

Emeritus Professor of Educational Psychology, University of Connecticut, USA

- Received Date: 11 June 2026
- Accepted Date: 19 June 2026
- Publication Date: 23 June 2026

Abstract

Freud's so-called "Structural" (Id-Ego-Superego) model of psychopathology is well-known to psychiatrists and others, but in fact it was abandoned by him soon after its promulgation and was never developed into a general theory of behavior. This article takes up that challenge by converting the three domains (portrayed by Freud as if they were warring forces inside one's head) into three broad intrapersonal constructs widely used in the personality literature: (1) Conation (volition, comparable to Id), (2) Cognition (comparable to Ego), and (3) Character (comparable to Superego), and adding (4) Context, an external situational factor that was missing from Freud's model. Any individual behavior, adaptive as well as maladaptive, is described as resulting from the three internal forces interacting with a specific contextual challenge. This revised "Four C's" framework is termed "Stupid Action theory," as all important astuteness-relevant behaviors—in line with Piaget's equilibration (as opposed to academic) view of intelligence—can be evaluated according to how wise (safe) or stupid (unsafe) they are in adapting to a situational challenge that might pose hidden or obvious dangers to one's physical or social interests. This updating of Freud's structural model has implications for studying the overlooked problem of "morosophy" (stupid behavior of smart people), and for exploring a variety of risk-ignoring individual as well as group behaviors that cannot be attributed solely to low IQ or psychopathology.

Rethinking Freud's Structural Model: Four factors that Explain Stupid Behavior

The so-called Structural (Id-Ego-Superego) model is the second of the two theories of personality (termed by him "soul" in a non-religious sense) developed by Sigmund Freud [1]. The Topographical (Conscious-Unconscious-Preconscious) was the earlier [2] model. Freud intended to bring the two models together, but that never really happened. As the Topographical Model has direct utility as a framework for psychoanalytic psychotherapy, Freud largely abandoned the Structural Model, justifying the abandonment by pointing to the lack at that time of comparative research needed to validate his underlying hypothesis about the id being an instinct-driven system present at birth and which he saw as evolved from innate animal defenses against predators [1]. Freud viewed the Structural model as provisional, and never developed it into a general theory of human behavior, despite the fact that it is frequently described as such.

In fact, Freud applied it mainly to a small class of undesired behaviors (slips of the tongue, misplacing things and memory lapses) and provided no place for social context.

Nevertheless, there are those who feel that the Structural model (which is much more widely known among the public than the Topographical model) had considerable promise and wished it had been developed further. This essay represents a belated effort to do just that. But first I shall devote some attention to the topic of stupid behavior, as viewed by Freud and others.

The Problem of Stupid Action

In this paper I write about "stupid action" rather than "stupidity" or "stupid people." In doing that I mean to signal that my focus is on people with at least average intelligence who occasionally do foolish things rather than on people whose foolish behavior results from low general intelligence. The term "morosophy"—combined Greek words "moros" (foolishness) with "sophia" (wisdom)—was coined by van Boxsel [3] and is sometimes used to refer to these "wise fools" [4]. Freud and his followers were not, for the most part, interested in people with generally low intelligence, i.e., Intellectual Disability, except to indicate that they are not suitable candidates for psychoanalytic therapy [5], and to sometimes raise the (usually badly mistaken) possibility that someone's delayed development may actually reflect "pseudo feeble-mindedness" [6].

Copyright

© 2026 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

Citation: Greenspan S. Rethinking Freud's Structural Model: Four factors that Explain Stupid Behavior . Psychiatry Behav Health. 2026;5(1):1-6.

Freud had a definite interest in “folly,” by which he meant both neurosis itself and (more relevant to this paper) isolated mistakes. Freud’s main work in this vein was the small book “The Psychopathology of Everyday Life” [7] in which his structural theory was unveiled. For the most part, it dealt with interesting if minor manifestations of stupidity, such as parapraxes (slips of the tongue), memory lapses and object misplacements. More serious forms of stupidity, such as placing one’s own life in danger, were not addressed by the structural theory but rather were addressed later, first by Anna Freud [8] under the rubric of defense mechanisms such as denial or minimization. The purpose of both forms of stupidity, as explained by psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler [9] in his book “The talent for stupidity” is to protect the individual from the anxiety that comes from confronting something undesirable or threatening.

A major aspect of Freud’s Structural Theory, and of psychoanalytic theorizing in general, is the relative absence of attention to the external reality that the person has to deal with. This can be seen in the writings of Jacques Lacan, who described his project as recapturing Freud’s essence. To Lacan, the essence of psychoanalysis is to enable the patient to escape the “error of duping” [10]. As someone whose scholarship for years has focused on people who have been duped [11], I expected that a book which identified duping as a central problem for psychoanalysis would devote at least some attention to the challenge of surviving in a world of dupers. In fact, the only duper Lacan ever talked about was the duped person, who was portrayed as victimized not by the lies told by others but by the lies (especially about their desires) told by themselves. This solipsistic nature of psychoanalytic theorizing limits its ability to shed light on a phenomenon usually defined by failure in the world.

Redefining Stupidity as Poor Adaptation to Life

The Swiss child development scholar Jean Piaget defined intelligence as “adaptation to life” [12]. Piaget started out as a biologist and viewed intelligence as an active, self-regulating biological system that reorganizes itself to survive and thrive in its environment. His developmental theory viewed intellectual growth as proceeding through four distinct stages in the quality of a child’s accommodation to the outside world. This “equilibration” view was in contrast to the solipsistic psychoanalytic view of emotional intelligence described above. It also stood in contrast to the psychometric view of academic intelligence [13] as a score on an IQ test, although one can argue that IQ test items—originally borrowed from school curricula [14]—are a relatively good predictor of the quality of one’s adaptation to educational challenges.

However, stupidity, as the word is colloquially used, refers to poor adaptation to aspects of social and physical life outside of academia. An example of stupidity as poor non-academic adaptation, given by Wagner [15] involved an intellectually gifted professor with an anger problem who was fired from his newly acquired job as a college president for continually picking fights with members of his college’s Board of Trustees. According to Wagner, and Robert Sternberg, in whose book “Why are Smart People so Stupid” Wagner’s essay appeared, such stupidity partly reflected an absence of “tacit knowledge” (the unwritten rules that govern all social settings). In this case, the tacit knowledge required was understanding that insulting comments which might be tolerated (even if resented) by a college professor’s peers would be less likely to be tolerated by

high-status trustees who have the power and willingness to fire a college president.

As both Freud and Piaget based their theories partially on an evolutionary biological metaphor, it is worth considering the purpose of intelligence from a Darwinian perspective. From such a perspective, the central purpose of intelligence is to keep an organism safe from threats to its survival [16]. Conversely, stupidity can be described as behavior that endangers one’s survival, both real (as in death) and symbolic (as in being sacked from a job). It does this through behavior that fails to recognize or give sufficient weight to risk. Thus, poor handling of risk, defined as “the probability or possibility that an adverse event, hazard, or action will result in loss, injury, or a negative outcome” (Merriam Webster), is a central concept in any definition of stupidity that is grounded in real-world behavior.

In the animal world, stupid (risk-ignoring) behavior typically results in biological death, such as when a fly gets entrapped in the web of a spider. In the world of human stupidity the outcome of stupid risk-obliviousness could also mean death, as in the surprisingly common practice of taking a dangerous selfie [17]. More typically, however, the non-survival outcome of human stupid behavior is a kind of “symbolic death,” such as by engaging in behavior that could result in the unintentional loss of valued property or relationships.

One can, therefore, divide human stupidity into two major categories. The first is “practical stupidity,” where the ignored risk is physical (such as the traffic that someone overly engrossed in their cell phone might walk into) and the undesired outcome is death or serious injury. The other major category is “social stupidity” where the risk involves a symbolic death, in the loss of something highly valued, such as a career.

In my own writings about foolishness [18], I further divided social stupidity up into two sub-categories: “induced social stupidity” and “non-induced social stupidity.” Induced social stupidity (another word for gullibility) occurs when a subject fails to recognize the risk from deceptive machinations of one or more other persons. An example would be failure to recognize or resist a con artist trying to steal one’s money. Non-induced social stupidity comes mainly from the poor judgment of the subject themselves, and is not triggered by deception or manipulation. An example would be telling a smutty joke in an inappropriate setting, such as during a church event.

Turning Freud’s Structural Model Into a General Theory of Stupidity

Freud’s structural model has three limitations that prevent it from being used without alteration as a general theory of stupid (i.e., risk-oblivious) action. The first limitation, as mentioned, is the absence of a situational operator. A second, almost equally problematic, limitation is the use of three extremely vague concepts: Das Es (the It), Das Ich (the I) and Das Über-Ich (the Over-I) converted by Freud’s English translator James Strachey, into the slightly less nebulous Id, Ego and Superego. A third, less serious limitation is the need to replace Freud’s archaic “cortical homunculus” metaphor (the image conveyed of three little men fighting it out for dominance within one’s head) with a theory in which three motivational elements each contribute (sometimes in concert, sometimes in opposition) in variably powerful ways to produce a smart or stupid behavioral solution to a specific environmental challenge.

Drawing on the writings on human motivation by Martin Ford [19] I came up with such a modification of the Structural model,

and have psychologist and psychoanalysis historian Robert Shilkret [20] to thank for pointing out the similarity of the two models. I term it the “Four C’s model of stupid action” as each of the four elements starts with the letter “C.” The three elements closest to Freud’s original model are Conation (equivalent to the Id), Cognition (equivalent to the Ego) and Character (equivalent to the Superego). The fourth element, “Context,” is the situational operator that is missing from Freud’s conceptualization. Each of these four elements is described here:

The First C: Conation (Id)

Conation is a term that was widely used by psychologists in the past but that is not used much anymore [21]. In an earlier formulation of the theory I referred to this factor as “affect/state.” But conation, while including affect and state, goes beyond them and can be described as “volition”, namely a need or drive to act in a particular way. For example, if someone has a very strong need to accumulate wealth (either because of greed or having suffered a financial loss) they would be less likely to be dissuaded by the risky or possibly illegal nature of an aggressive tax-avoiding investment scheme. Conation is roughly equivalent to Id, in that Freud conceived of the Id as the source of needs, desires and impulses including both sexual and aggressive drives. Both the Id and Conation involve a quality of impulsivity, which if unchecked can get a person into serious trouble. Biological state imbalance, as through alcohol intoxication, is a major, if often underappreciated, conative contributor to stupid action. A useful approach to assessing conation in a particular case is to determine the relative degree of motivating “needs” a person has. In this regard, I rely heavily on the “16 basic desires” checklist developed by Steven Reiss [22].

The Second C: Cognition (Ego)

Cognition refers to the fact that many situations pose a cognitive challenge, to which an individual has to decide how much weight to give to various arguments or facts. While IQ or educational level is part of cognition, the construct is much broader, and includes such things as social judgment, cause-effect thinking, relevant content knowledge, and ability or wish to access alternate sources of information. In terms of the example given above, in which a greedy or financially stressed person is presented with a very attractive financial scheme, Cognition (like Ego) would enable the person to better recognize why the afore-mentioned investment scheme might be risky or illegal. As in Freud’s discussion of the Ego, Cognition would thus enable one to hold off from acting on an attractive if dangerous impulse.

Ego has been described as operating according to the “reality principle” and the function of Cognition is to help a person to accurately understand what is real/ safe and what is illusory/ unsafe. Cognition includes “Executive Functioning” (EF), an indicator of goal-directed (means-end) and flexible thinking that many, such as Bertollo and Yerys [23] consider superior to IQ in capturing how competently people behave in the real world. Evidence for the centrality of EF to commonsensical action comes from the finding that subjects with slightly low IQ but very low levels of EF (a pattern common among individuals exposed to alcohol in utero) are very likely to behave foolishly [24,25]. In contrast, people with intact EF are much better able to make safe decisions, even when their IQ is ordinary or slightly impaired, except, when in ambiguous, stressful, intoxicated or coercive conditions, which is when someone’s potential for stupid action is most likely to be exposed.

The Third C: Character (Superego)

In an earlier formulation of the theory, I referred to this factor as “personality.” It refers to enduring traits, interests, values and behaviors that make someone the unique individual that they are. Using an example involving a pull towards gullibility (a common even if relatively overlooked form of social foolishness) character explains why people vary in terms of how easy or difficult it is to manipulate them with information, whether truthful or not, that plays upon their fears or interests. As formulated by Freud, the Superego refers to a person’s morality or conscience, and is the “brake” mechanism that holds a person back from doing something they see as wrong, even if their Cognition/ Ego might see it as realistic or safe. Someone’s moral compass (or lack thereof) remains an important component of character, and one that is close to the typical meaning of the word.

The Fourth C: Context

This factor, previously referred to by me as “Situation” does not appear in Freud’s Structural model, and it refers to the fact that almost every behavior that can be described as smart or stupid involves a response to a situation (whether simple or challenging) posed by a physical circumstance or by one or more other people. There is no end to the forms that context can take. Likewise, situations vary tremendously in the degree of emotional or cognitive complexity that they pose for an actor. Using the example of a superficially attractive investment scheme based on a questionable method for getting out of paying income taxes, the two main contextual factors that might increase or decrease a person’s likelihood of behaving stupidly are: (a) the skill, credentials and forcefulness of the manipulator, and (b) the presence of other people who might encourage or discourage the dangerous action.

Using the Model to Explain a Very Stupid Act

It is my belief that the four C’s model has potential utility as a framework for explaining human behavior, especially behavior that can be considered stupid. In the following pages I provide such an illustration by delving into a very public act of stupidity committed by a former president of the United States: Bill Clinton. The stupid act (actually acts, as it was repeated over a period of months) involved an affair with Monica Lewinsky in the White House. This event has been analyzed by many people, including Robert Sternberg [26] in his book “Why Smart People are so Stupid.” The conference that resulted in that edited book occurred while the sex scandal that almost ended Bill Clinton’s presidency was big news, so Sternberg used it as a centerpiece of his own chapter, in which he presented his “balance theory of foolishness.” Sternberg, who viewed foolishness/ stupidity not as the opposite of intelligence but as the opposite of wisdom (an idea that greatly influenced my own thinking) saw stupid behavior of smart people reflecting two things: (a) an absence of “tacit knowledge,” and (b) personality factors such as obstinancy and feelings of invulnerability. Sternberg recognized that Bill Clinton almost certainly possessed the tacit knowledge that workplace sex by a married middle-aged supervisor (let alone a country’s leader) with a 22-year-old college intern is a very bad idea. He, therefore, based his explanation for Clinton’s stupid action solely on his personality, specifically a sense of entitlement and invulnerability owing to his status and extensive history of unpunished womanizing when he was a Governor.

What are the Basics of Clinton’s Stupid Action?

In June 1995, Monica Lewinsky, a 21-year-old student at

Lewis & Clark University, came to the White House as an unpaid intern in the office of Chief of Staff Leon Panetta. On November 16, 1995, when Ms. Lewinsky was 22, she began a sexual relationship with President Bill Clinton. In December, 1995 Lewinsky moved into a paid position in the White House Office of Legislative Affairs, handling letters from members of Congress, which she frequently had occasion to bring to Clinton in the Oval Office. The affair lasted roughly 18 months and consisted of approximately nine physical sexual encounters, none of them involving coitus, as well as “sexting” phone calls. They took place late at night and when Clinton’s was in his private study off the Oval office. Clinton’s staff, made nervous by the amount of time they were spending together, eventually managed to move Monica over to the Pentagon. While there, she confided in another woman, Linda Tripp, who secretly recorded their phone calls, and passed the information on to Kenneth Starr, a Republican lawyer serving as an independent counsel investigating Whitewater, an Arkansas scandal involving possible investment crimes. Starr [27] coerced Ms. Lewinsky into providing a detailed account of the sexual relationship and provided the basis for an impeachment trial of Clinton, on the ground that he had perjured himself when answering questions about the affair in sworn testimony stemming from a lawsuit filed by an Arkansas woman: Paula Corbin Jones.

What is a Psychoanalytic Perspective on Clinton’s Behavior?

Before using the four C’s model to analyze Clinton’s stupid behavior, it might be worth looking briefly at how the matter was viewed by psychoanalysts, as well as by Clinton himself. In an exercise in self-analysis, Clinton [28] discussed in his autobiography the counseling he underwent to repair his marriage. In that book, and in an interview he gave for a television documentary titled “Hillary” [29] about his wife’s own presidential campaign he said the reason for the affair was to manage the anxiety resulting from the pressure of his life in politics. I admit to my own parapraxis when, after catching a glimpse of that explanation, I mistakenly read the title of the documentary in which the former president gave his explanation for the affair as “Hilarious” rather than “Hillary.”

To me, the most interesting thing about the interview occurred when Clinton said “What I did, it was bad, but it wasn’t like I thought, ‘Let’s see. How can I think of the most stupid thing I can possibly do and [then] do it?’” “It was an interesting response both because it acknowledged that his actions were stupid, but also because he appeared to be buying into the conventional psychoanalytic interpretation (which I suspect came to him from his therapist) to the effect that his womanizing was an unconscious “repetition compulsion,” reflecting escalating anxiety and unresolved internal conflicts stemming from early trauma.

Several articles have been written by mental health professionals who have basically elaborated on this idea. As example, an article by New York psychoanalyst Hanna Turken [30] titled “Clinton needs psychotherapy” argued that “Bill Clinton’s repeated sexual risk-taking signals... a developmentally infantile anxiety-driven self-soothing coping pattern when under stress—an ego ‘regression’ that temporarily restores potency and relief when he feels depleted or threatened.” In psychoanalytic terms, Clinton’s sexual acting out was considered by Turken to be “a regression in the service of the ego...”, further stating that “the omnipotence and grandiosity, which we manage to control as we mature, reappears. At one level there is awareness that

there is danger, but it becomes intellectualized and split off from the feeling ego. Prior to the moment of sexual involvement the ego experience is one of depletion; with the sexual encounter it returns to a place where it can feel stronger and soothed”.

As is typical in psychoanalytic theorizing, Clinton’s primitive coping mechanism was attributed to childhood trauma, in his case the loss of his biological father in a car accident three months before his birth, being raised by an abusive alcoholic stepfather and a free-spirited mother who abandoned him to his stern grandmother for the first four years of his life when she left to pursue training as a nurse-anesthetist [31]. Whether or not one sees much utility in using these factors to explain Clinton’s poor judgment in the Lewinsky matter, there is undoubtedly room for them within a framework (Stupid Action theory) that provides a broad-based method for approaching the question “why did a person as intellectually gifted as Bill Clinton behave so stupidly in the Lewinsky matter?”

What is the Four C’s Take on the Scandal?

Before engaging in an analysis of Clinton’s stupidity using the expanded structural model, I should point out that we are talking here not just about the initial sexual act but a stupid series of sexual acts that continued both physically and with recurring “phone sex” episodes (always initiated by him), for well over an additional year. The first act is relatively easy to explain situationally (and hormonally) but a two year affair requires a more comprehensive analysis.

Conation (Id): I find it very curious that in neither Sternberg’s nor Turken’s (not to mention Clinton’s) explanation of the president’s sexually stupid behavior was there any mention of the first thing that would occur to most adult males, which is (for lack of a better word) his likely horniness. As Freud famously said about a cigar sometimes just being a cigar (and the most titillating tidbit in the Starr Report involves the time that Clinton inserted an unlit cigar in Monica’s vagina and then licked it) it is difficult for me to understand how anyone could attempt to understand the behavior of a man with a very public history as a serial womanizer without discussing his apparently very high sex drive.

On first getting felled by Monica, Clinton told her that “it had been a long time since that happened” which suggests that he felt that his sexual needs were not being fully met in his marriage. On Reiss’ 16-needs checklist, Clinton would undoubtedly be rated very high on “need for romance” (sex). In line with Reiss’ [32] own rating of Eliot Spitzer (a New York governor with his own sex scandal) Clinton would likely also receive a relatively low score on “need for honor” (conventional morality).

Other more abstract aspects of Clinton’s conation (as well as character) profile could be addressed fruitfully by the kind of ego analysis pursued by psychoanalysts such as Hannah Tulken. Of particular interest here would be an attempt to understand Clinton’s apparent need to court danger. But in terms of understanding the proximal id contributor to Clinton’s stupid sexual actions, especially on the first occasion, I believe that one does not need to look much beyond Clinton’s sexual urges.

However, I would add one very important aspect of conation, which is exhaustion, reflected in the fact that his misbehavior with Monica typically happened at a late hour. Clinton was a hypomanic night owl who never went to bed at a reasonable time and got by on very little sleep. Clinton has said [33] that “every major mistake I ever made occurred when I was tired.”

This is in line with the research of Roy Baumeister [34] who showed that when someone experiences fatigue, their ability to exert will is reduced substantially.

Cognition (Ego): As is typically the case when addressing the cognitive contributors to stupid action, the main focus on my analysis has to do with the degree of Clinton's awareness of the risks he was running. There is no question that Clinton knew that the liaison was potentially very dangerous to him politically. This is reflected in his breaking off the first encounter (fellatio, their most common form of sex) without ejaculating, when he told Monica "I have to be sure I can trust you first." After eventually talking about the affair in his interview, Clinton was quoted as saying that he knew that Monica (much younger and less worldly than his other mistresses over the years) would likely blab at some point. But this concern was not sufficient to dissuade him from acting stupidly, so unawareness of risk likely played only a minor part. One possible exception has to do with the fact that Clinton's previous experience with getting away with sexual risk-taking occurred in the relative backwater of Little Rock, Arkansas. Thus, he probably did not fully appreciate that in the much more scrutinized fishbowl of the White House, the likelihood as well as consequences, of eventual exposure were much greater. Nor had he thought through the possibility that his unrelated jeopardy in the Paula Corbin Jones lawsuit laid open the requirement for both him and Monica to be deposed about their affair, thus causing it to escalate into the major political scandal that it became.

Character (Superego): I have already mentioned, under conation, that Clinton likely scores low on Reiss' need to act honorably. He later expressed regret for the negative impact on Monica's life (being the nightly butt of comedians' cruel jokes, torpedoing her chances of having a career or children, becoming suicidally depressed, racking up huge legal bills, etc.). This apparent empathy, along with his admirable post-presidency philanthropic efforts, suggests that Clinton's moral failings were mainly confined to sexual matters. However, a big part of his personality was a highly charismatic and friendly manner with both supporters and critics alike. This charming style, termed "the full Bill Clinton," a form of intense engagement which included such things as locked-in eye contact and prolonged physical touch, contributed undoubtedly to his electoral success. But it was experienced by many (including Monica herself) as being very flirtatious. While this style was not necessarily intentionally sexual, it has been pointed to as evidence for the possibility that Clinton was a sexual predator [35] who was always on the lookout for a potential new victim.

Context: Situational factors, which have not factored into other analyses of Clinton's stupid action, play a central role in the Four C's analysis. The two biggest contextual contributors were: (a) evading the major obstacles posed by the White House setting to Clinton finding an extra-marital sexual partner, and (b) the clear signaling by Monica, through the "thong exposure" incident, that a sexual initiative by Clinton would be reciprocated.

The importance of the first factor (the White House setting) can be seen in an unproven sexual allegation by Kahleen Willey, who accused Clinton, during a 1993 meeting (also in his private study) of aggressively coming on to her sexually. According to (large-breasted) Monica, Clinton denied the allegation by telling her that he found Ms. Willey too small-breasted to pursue sexually. (One does not have to think too long about the form that a psychoanalytic interpretation of Clinton's apparent fixation on

large breasts might take). So the fact that he had relatively safe access to Monica is a factor of some importance in explaining Clinton's stupid affair with her. Another important contextual factor involves Monica's own account of how, when they were first alone, she raised her jacket in the back and showed him the straps of her thong underwear, which extended above her pants. This clearly indicated to the priapic president that Monica would welcome his advances.

Summary: The picture that emerges from use of Stupid Action theory is as follows: Late at night when he was probably both tired and horny, the 49-year-old President was flirting with the infatuated 22-year-old intern Monica Lewinsky, who signalled her sexual interest by flashing her thong. Although undoubtedly recognizing the risks of acting on this opportunity, the near-impossibility of finding a willing sex partner either inside or outside the privacy-destroying confines of the White House made this too good an opportunity for the sex-loving Clinton to pass up. Moving Monica into a paid position where he would have regular access to her, the President was able to pursue his years-long pattern of extra-marital affairs for another year in a relatively safe (but not safe enough) manner, even if it also posed a substantial risk of ruining the young woman's life.

Not being trained or overly-interested in psychoanalytic theorizing, I have not attempted to delve too deeply into Clinton's various hangups or ego defenses. But it is easy to see how these could be fitted into two or three of the elements in the Four C's model. Even without delving much below the surface, I believe that Stupid Action theory still provides a fuller and more commonsensical understanding of this high-profile scandal than I have seen in conventional Freud-influenced analyses.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described and illustrated the potential utility of a theory of stupid action, also referred to as the Four C's model. This can be viewed as an expanded and reconfigured version of Freud's structural model, and provides a vehicle for understanding why someone of average or above average intelligence might on occasion behave in a flagrantly stupid (i.e., risk-oblivious) manner. I used for illustrative purposes the heavily studied (but incompletely explained) example of Bill Clinton's Lewinsky fiasco. I believe that this exercise showed that by adding a contextual element, and changing Id, Ego and Superego the into three well-researched personality constructs that often work together rather than (as Freud depicted them) warring forces fighting it out for dominance, the model has the potential to shed considerable light on the mystery of why a smart person might occasionally do a very dumb thing.

For space reasons I only focused on an individual act of stupidity, but I believe the model may have equal (and perhaps even more) utility as a framework for understanding collective acts of stupidity as well. As example, in a brief paper [36] I used the model to shed light on how risk-obliviousness action (or inaction) on the part of its leaders turned the Xerox Corporation in under 70 years from an iconic company to one that is now teetering on the brink of oblivion. I hope to develop these and other examples into a small book titled "Morosophy: A Theory of Smart Stupidity."

As described earlier, morosophy is an English word that is formed by adding the ancient Greek word moros (foolish or stupid) with the Greek word sophia (wisdom), thus creating a new word meaning essentially "wise fool." Typically the word is used to describe a highly educated person (such as the British physician and author Arthur Conan Doyle who holds the most

incredibly foolish beliefs (in Doyle's case that fairies exist, that mediums can communicate with the dead, and that the magician Harry Houdini escaped from a locked trunk by dematerializing and then rematerializing himself).

But Stupid Action Theory can also shed light on the puzzling phenomenon of "gullicism" [37]: educated people who are cynical towards the truth but suckers for the false. But my main interest, like Freud's, is less on stupid ideas and more on stupid behavior (to which stupid ideas make an obvious contribution). Hopefully, the revitalized structural model, now in the guise of Stupid Action theory, can help to shed light on what may be one of the most important but least understood problems of our times: explaining and combatting individual and mass stupidity.

As may be obvious, stupid action theory could also be termed a theory of "intelligent action," as intelligence is a bi-model construct (with stupidity at the low end) and the same factors (e.g., Monica flashing or not flashing her thong) that illuminate a stupid decision could explain an adequate decision as well. In both cases, the effect is to correct the mistaken idea that someone's IQ level alone provides a sufficient basis for understanding intelligent versus unintelligent behavior.

References

- Freud S. The Ego and the Id. *Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag*; 1923.
- Freud S. The Interpretation of Dreams. *Franz Deuticke*; 1900.
- van Boxsel M. The Encyclopedia of Stupidity. *Reaktion Books*; 2005.
- Kaiser W. Wisdom of the fool. In: Horowitz MC, Cline M, eds. *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. Charles Scribner's Sons; 2005:515-520.
- Freud S, Breuer J. Studies on Hysteria. *Franz Deuticke*; 1895.
- Benton AL. The concept of pseudofeeble-mindedness. *Arch Neurol Psychiatry*. 1956;75(4):379-388.
- Freud S. The Psychopathology of Everyday Life. W. W. Norton & Co; 1990. (Original work published 1901).
- Freud A. The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense. *International Universities Press*; 1946.
- Bergler E. The Talent for Stupidity: The Psychology of the Bungler, the Incompetent, and the Ineffectual. *International Universities Press*; 1998.
- Cima G. "Tout le monde est dupe": the Lacanian ethics of stupidity. *Phi/Psy*. 2021;1(1):25-38. doi:10.4454/phi-psy.v1i1.251
- Greenspan S. *Annals of Gullibility: Why We Are Duped and How to Avoid It*. Praeger/Greenwood; 2009.
- Piaget J. The Origins of Intelligence in Children. Cook M, trans. *International Universities Press*; 1952. (Original work published 1936).
- Rindermann H, Ackerman AL. Piagetian tasks and psychometric intelligence: different or similar constructs? *Psychol Rep*. 2021;124(6):2795-2821. doi:10.1177/0033294120965876
- Anastasi A. What do intelligence tests measure? In: Anderson SB, Hemlick JS, eds. *On Educational Testing: Intelligence, Performance Standards, Test Anxiety, and Latent Traits*. Jossey-Bass; 1983:5-28.
- Wagner RK. Smart people doing dumb things: the case of managerial incompetence. In: Sternberg RJ, ed. *Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid*. Yale University Press; 2002:42-63.
- Slavich GM. Social safety theory: a biologically based evolutionary perspective on life stress, health, and behavior. *Annu Rev Clin Psychol*. 2020;16:265-295. doi:10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-032816-045159
- Bansal A, Garg C, Pakhare A, Gupta S. Selfies: a boon or bane? *J Family Med Prim Care*. 2018;7(4):828-831. doi:10.4103/jfmpe.jfmpe_115_18
- Greenspan S. *Anatomy of Foolishness: The overlooked problem of risk-unawareness*. Hamilton Books/Rowman & Littlefield; 2019.
- Ford ME. *Motivating Humans: Goals, Emotions, and Personal Agency Beliefs*. Sage Publications; 1992.
- Shilkret R. Review of P. Roazen "How Freud worked: first-hand accounts of patients." *Psychoanal Books*. 1997;8(2):163-167.
- Reitan RM, Wolfson D. Conation: a neglected aspect of neuropsychological functioning. *Arch Clin Neuropsychol*. 2000;15(5):443-453. doi:10.1016/S0887-6177(99)00037-3
- Reiss S. *Who Am I?: The 16 Basic Desires That Motivate Our Actions and Define Our Personalities*. Tarcher/Putnam; 2000.
- Bertollo JR, Yerys BE. More than IQ: executive function explains adaptive behavior above and beyond verbal IQ in youth with autism and lower IQ. *Am J Intellect Dev Disabil*. 2020;125(3):191-205. doi:10.1352/1944-7558-125.3.191
- Brown NN, Connor PD, Adler RS. Conduct-disordered adolescents with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder: intervention in secure treatment settings. *Crim Justice Behav*. 2012;39(6):770-793. doi:10.1177/0093854812437021
- Reynolds BW, Basso MR, Whiteside DM. Executive function, impulsivity, and risky behaviors in young adults. *Neuropsychology*. 2019;33(2):212-223. doi:10.1037/neu0000511
- Sternberg RJ. Smart people are not stupid: but they sure can be foolish—the imbalance theory of foolishness. In: Sternberg RJ, ed. *Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid*. Yale University Press; 2002:232-242.
- Starr K. The Starr Report: The Independent Counsel's Complete Report to Congress on the Investigation of President Clinton. *Pocket Books*; 1999.
- Clinton B. *My Life*. Alfred A. Knopf; 2004.
- Burstein N, dir. Hillary. Hulu; 2020. TV documentary series.
- Turken H. Clinton needs psychotherapy. *Psychiatry Times*. 1998;15(11):12-14.
- Renshon SA. *High Hopes: Bill Clinton and the Politics of Ambition*. New York University Press; 1996.
- Reiss S. Does Eliot Spitzer have a normal personality? Fifteen Eight Four: Academic Blog of Cambridge University Press. Published March 1, 2008. Accessed June 16, 2026.
- McKeown G. *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. Crown Currency; 2020.
- Baumeister RF. Ego depletion and self-control failure: an energy model of the self's executive function. *Self Identity*. 2002;1(2):129-136. doi:10.1080/152988602317319302
- Gartner J. In Search of Bill Clinton: A Psychological Biography. *St. Martin's Press*; 2008.
- Greenspan S. Even great companies need to evolve: foolish decisions and the demise of Xerox. *Psychology Today*. Published February 8, 2018. Accessed June 16, 2026.
- Serwer A. Gullible, cynical America: the trouble with believing anything and nothing at the same time. *The Atlantic*. Published March 9, 2026. Accessed June 16, 2026.