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The unreflective practitioner: a pilot study on functional stupidity and social work

Den icke-reflekterande praktikern: En pilotstudie om funktionell dumhet och socialt arbete

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ABSTRACT

This study's aim was to operationalise and test a model of *functional stupidity*, a form of unreflective compliance, and explore its appropriateness for understanding how social workers comply with and motivate performing morally or professionally problematic tasks. A sample of 120 social workers from six municipalities in Sweden self-completed a questionnaire containing 20 Likert-type items denoting 10 'stupidity rationales' within three reflective modes of compliance, and a measure of work satisfaction. Most functional stupidity items performed well, with social workers endorsing several rationales for being unreflective at work. Associations among items supported most elements of the model. Both being older and having more work experience were associated with endorsing the fun rationale, while being older was also associated with endorsing rationales within the despair mode. Endorsing cynical mode rationales was associated with lower work satisfaction, while endorsing the fun rationale was associated with higher work satisfaction. This is the first study to operationalise and empirically test the concept of functional stupidity using a quantitative approach. The results indicate that the model has value for understanding how social workers' reflexivity about professional hardships can facilitate periods of unreflective performance that, for good and bad, helps them through the working day.

KEYWORDS
Functional stupidity; compliance; organisations; reflexivity; social work

ABSTRAKT

Syftet med studien var att operationalisera och testa en modell av *funktionell dumhet*, en form av oreflexiv lydnad, och undersöka dess lämplighet för att förstå hur socialarbetare motiverar utförandet av moraliskt eller professionellt problematiska arbetsuppgifter. I studien deltog ett urval av 120 socialarbetare från sex svenska kommuner. Respondenterna besvarade en enkät med 20 Likert-frågor konstruerade att mäta 10 'anpassningslogiker' som härstammar från tre typer av lydnadsmodus, samt en fråga om arbetstillfredsställelse. Överlag kände respondenterna igen sig i anpassningslogikerna och sambanden mellan dessa gav stöd åt de flesta av modellens element. Att vara äldre och ha längre arbetserfarenhet korrelerade med att använda anpassningslogiken kul. Att vara äldre korrelerade även med att använda logiker från lydnadsmodus

NYCKELORD
funktionell dumhet; lydnad; organisationer; reflexivitet; socialt arbete

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förtvivlan. Lydnadsmodus cynism hade ett negativt samband med arbetstillfredsställelse, medan anpassningslogiken kul hade ett positivt samband med arbetstillfredsställelse. Studien är den första som operationaliserar och empiriskt testar begreppet funktionell dumhet med en kvantitativ ansats. Resultatet visar att modellen kan bidra till förståelsen om hur socialarbetares reflexivitet om yrkesrelaterade problem kan främja perioder av oreflexiva handlingar, som hjälper dem att ta sig igenom arbetsdagen.

Introduction

In an ambiguous practice such as social work, the ability to take a step back and reflect can be vital (Brookfield, 2009). Notions of reflection is often ascribed a critical potential, providing a means to oppose structural forces impeding on social work's professional ethos (Askeland & Fook, 2009). In this article, we draw from the concept of *functional stupidity* to explore how reflexivity among social workers can facilitate unreflective moments of organisational compliance. The study aim is to operationalise and test a model of functional stupidity and explore its appropriateness for understanding how social workers comply with the demands of their work when discharging their duties.

Functional stupidity as organisational compliance

Contrary to the assumption that contemporary economy is characterised as 'knowledge-intensive', Alvesson and Spicer (2012) argue that much action in organisations can be described as 'functionally stupid'. In their definition of the concept, functional stupidity implies a) a lack of reflexivity concerning prevailing norms and routines, b) a lack of justification, meaning individuals do not require reasons for doing what they are supposed to do, and c) a lack of substantive reasoning, implying a myopic focus on a given end without questioning its meaning (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, pp. 1199–1200). Rather than being an anomaly in organisational life they maintain that this kind of stupidity facilitates the smooth functioning of organisations. This is because being functionally stupid may both relieve the individual's anxiety relating to his or her job, as well as maintain organisational life without employees' questioning the prescribed conduct and procedures.

Yet action performed without being 'reflexive' is not stupid *per se* (Paulsen, 2017, p. 189). Rather than 'reflect-in-action', as is proposed in Donald Schön's idea of 'the reflective practitioner', in social work certain situations require speedy decisions in order to avoid harmful consequences (Ixer, 1999). Being unreflective can also help the social worker to better handle emotionally demanding encounters with clients (Ferguson, 2018). However, when unreflective behaviour challenges what the individual considers as ethically or professionally correct, it can be labelled as functionally stupid (Paulsen, 2017). From this perspective, functional stupidity is a form of *organisational compliance*, meaning that individuals ignore potential dubious consequences of their work by being unreflective while performing it.

One possible approach to empirically capture such unreflective compliance is to let employees consider their actions in hindsight. In an ethnographic study of employees of the Swedish Public Employment Service (SPES), Paulsen (2017) developed a model of functional stupidity in which he identified three 'reflective modes of compliance', each mode consisting of a set of reasons the employees expressed for doing tasks of which they were critical. These reasons, labelled as 'stupidity rationales', can be understood as explanations of why employees execute tasks they perceive as problematic while trying not to question their meaning in the act of performance. Paulsen's model of functional stupidity contains 10 rationales within three reflective modes of compliance: despair, cynicism and authoritarianism (see Table 1).

Each reflective mode offers its specific rationales for temporarily entering the unreflective mode of functional stupidity. For example, informants in Paulsen's study who employed the stupidity rationale

Table 1. Functional Stupidity: Rationales and Reflective Modes of Compliance (Paulsen, 2017).

Mode	Rationale
Despair:	Healthism
	Constructiveness
Cynicism:	Defeatism
	Ethical empiricism
	Agentic shift
	Work ethic
Authoritarianism:	Adaptationism
	Machismo
	Ego-essentialism
	Fun

'healthism' maintained that staying positive was necessary to avoid burnout and other health-related damage resulting from organisational deterioration (Paulsen, 2017, p. 200). As with the other rationales Paulsen identified among the employees of SPES (see right column, Table 1), such reasoning allowed for a push back of reflection in favour of a 'myopic focus on instrumental issues' which characterises functional stupidity (Paulsen, 2017, p. 204). Hence, functional stupidity is here understood more as a performative category rather than as a mental deficiency.

The reflective modes of compliance are analytically distinguished from each other by the degree to which they manifest *one-dimensional thinking* (Marcuse, 1968). Paulsen (2017, p. 194) argues that three aspects of one-dimensional thinking are relevant. First, to consider only 'that which is' as opposed to what could be, in this case concerning one's work organisation. Second, to reduce 'every intellectual concept, including transcendent ones, to measurable phenomena within the frames of that which is'. Third, to dismiss thoughts 'belonging to the counterfactual realm of potentiality'.

The reflective mode of compliance that is least characterised by one-dimensional thinking is the *despair* mode. People endorsing rationales emanating from this mode of compliance recognise that one's organisation/work could have been constructed differently. However, due to a conceived lack of ability to change organisational deficits, this form of compliance gives rise to feelings of despair. One-dimensional thinking is most evident in the rationales emanating from the *cynicism* reflective mode, in which two-dimensional thoughts of what could have been are tuned down, entailing a 'softer depression that makes it considerably easier to make it through the working day' (Paulsen, 2017, p. 169). The last reflective mode in the model is *authoritarianism*. People endorsing authoritarian rationales for complying at work think two-dimensionally but are not critical towards how things are. In the authoritarian mode compliance is considered a virtue of greater importance than one's professional and personal ethics.

These reflective modes of compliance are dynamic in that individuals may shift in their endorsement of the three modes during the working day. As such, functional stupidity allows us to understand organisational compliance beyond the rather simplistic notions that employees are either brainwashed (Willmott, 1993) or overly reflexive and cynical (Connell & Waring, 2002). Yet the concept has mostly been applied to empirical cases in retrospect, making it all too easy to ridicule employees involved in an organisational scandal as 'clearly stupid' (for a critique, see Butler, 2016). In Alvesson and Spicer's later work, there is also little differentiation of unreflexive actions that are 'stupid' and functional from unreflexive actions that are 'smart' and functional (Alvesson & Spicer, 2013; 2016). By applying an ethical dimension to the concept, it is possible to delineate functional stupidity from functional smartness (see also Paulsen, 2018).

While some rationales within the reflective modes can be conceived of as coping strategies, others express general ways of relating to problematic aspects of one's job. The theoretical assumption behind each rationale is that they denote an attitude of compliance to the current organisation of work. It should be noted that this compliance is *ego-dystonic* in the sense that it differs from instances of 'willing compliance' (Barker, 1993) and is dissonant from the goals and values that the employee

endorses. Moreover, it is an organisational phenomenon, meaning that the behaviour tends to be homogeneous despite a heterogeneity of people within the organisation and stable despite a turnover in personnel (see Wenglén & Svensson, 2008).

Context – transformation of social work in Sweden

Seeing functional stupidity as ego-dystonic compliance to organisational procedures, Swedish social work is a suitable case to look for it. Many social workers in Sweden are employed in municipal social services, a sector increasingly run by rules and routines rather than practitioners' educational knowledge and professional norms (Liljegren, 2012). While the historical role of Swedish social workers can be seen as the regulation of the unwanted behaviour of families and individuals on behalf of the state (Svensson & Åström, 2019), the contemporary influence of neo-liberal ideals in social work organisations is undermining a 'solidary role' of social workers, giving rise to an identity-crisis among practitioners who feel un-able to perform an adequate job (Jönsson, 2019, p. 216).

An expression of how neo-liberal ideals affects Swedish social work is the implementation of New Public Management (NPM) in the welfare state. On an ideological level, NPM tends to individualise social problems and place emphasis on the 'activation' and disciplining of clients while reducing social workers' opportunities for preventive work and structural interventions (Dahlstedt & Lalander, 2018, p. 21). This ideological shift can be recognised in child welfare social work, as practitioners report an increased focus on conducting investigations compared to provision of advice and support (Tham, 2018). On an organisational level the implementation of NPM has led to social work departments being increasingly driven by an ethos of effectiveness such that meeting quantitative targets and completing administrative duties are prioritised over the quality of the relational work with clients (Herz, 2018). Against this background, we want to explore how social workers comply with the demands of their work when discharging their duties through the concept of functional stupidity.

Method

Design and sampling

The study design was a cross-sectional survey employing a self-completion questionnaire. Participants were social workers employed in the Swedish municipal social service. This sector is largely organised in specialised units, e.g. social assistance, child welfare and substance abuse, and involves tasks such as assessment, investigation and forms of care and counselling (Bergmark & Lundström, 2007). While client groups vary between units, practice is regulated by more or less interrelated legislations, where the framework law Social Services Act is the most central (Svensson, 2015).

Due to pragmatic restraints on access to potential participants, a convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit social workers from a frame of six municipalities. Inclusion criteria were that a potential respondent was employed as a social worker or social work assistant, and able to read and write in Swedish. The term 'social work assistant' is here used to denote staff who lack certain qualifications and often handle cases that are more administrative in nature compared to those dealt with by social workers with formal academic training (see Bergmark & Lundström, 2007). Sample size estimates were based on power (.80) to detect a moderate effect for r where α=.05, N=85; and for a multiple regression model with 3 IVs, β=.80, α=.05 and a moderate effect f^2=.15, N=76. Anticipating missing data and to provide options for sub-group analyses, a sample of N=120 social workers was targeted and achieved.

Materials

A questionnaire operationalising Paulsen's (2017) model of functional stupidity was developed by the authors in two stages. In the first stage, the authors discussed the model of functional stupidity and

the conceptualisation of each rationale within the context of its reflective mode and the model as a whole. The relation of the model and its constituent rationales to the organisational world of social work was debated before preliminary items for each rationale were developed. Each item was constructed as a description of how an individual might reflect on problematic aspects of his/her work, with the respondent required to indicate for each statement how well it described his/her own reflections on a five-point scale from *very poorly*=0 to *very well*=4. Given the exploratory nature of the work, the operationalisation of each of the ten rationales was limited to two items, thus producing a Likert-type scale of twenty items. The items went through various iterations before all authors felt they were sufficiently prepared for stage two of the development process, pilot testing through 'think aloud' procedures allowing for an assessment of the cognitive validity of the items (Trenor et al., 2011).

For the think aloud process, three individuals were identified, all known to the first author and with a background in social work. Semi-structured interviews were carried out by the first author, in which the individuals were asked to complete the draft twenty items while reading out each item and verbalising their thought processes as they did so. The interviewer could ask additional questions to clarify any points regarding cognitive or mechanical problems encountered. The interviews were recorded while the interviewer also took notes. Data from the recordings indicated that the informants could relate to the statements and found them relevant to reflect upon. After the first two individuals were interviewed, items one and three were revised. After these revisions, all items were used again with the third individual. After this third interview, a minor revision of item six was made. All revisions made to items related to cognitive problems encountered by the interviewees. The final twenty functional stupidity items are presented in Table 2, together with the rationales and reflective modes they are proposed to operationalise.

The questionnaire also contained items addressing: the participant's age; years of work experience as a social worker/social work assistant; education completed; area of work; and gender. Finally, for the purpose of demonstrating criterion validity of the functional stupidity construct, a single item measure of work satisfaction was included, derived from Dolbier et al. (2005), asking respondents: 'How do you feel about your job as a whole?', response options *completely satisfied*=6 to *completely unsatisfied*=0. Demographic and work characteristic items were presented first, followed by the functional stupidity items (item ordering determined by random number generation), followed by the work satisfaction item.

Table 2. Functional Stupidity Items: Questionnaire Order, Wording and Rationale.

Item Number and Wording	Rationale
1. I always give my best to get my manager's appreciation, no matter the task	Ego-essentialism (1)
2. The problems we deal with at work will always exist, but I try not to think about that too much	Defeatism (1)
3. Despite all the social problems we face at work, my job is a lot of fun	Fun (1)
4. The work situation doesn't allow me to do things to a high standard, but things are what they are	Ethical empiricism (1)
5. Putting myself in the role of an official helps me to make a decision that I don't feel good about	Agentic shift (1)
6. I try to be constructive and get things done, whatever the task	Constructiveness (1)
7. For me, the fun I get from my job balances out the stressful work situation	Fun (2)
8. Rather than dwell on work tasks that make me very anxious, I make sure they get done	Constructiveness (2)
9. I try to think positively about my work so that I don't get burnt out	Healthism (1)
10. I have to focus on the things that work well in my job in order to feel good	Healthism (2)
11. I try to steel myself when I meet emotional clients	Machismo (1)
12. I manage my work by being 'tough but fair'	Machismo (2)
13. No matter how I feel about a task, I do what I am employed to do	Work ethic (1)
14. I have learned to adapt to my work situation, even though I wish things were different	Adaptationism (1)
15. I am trying to come to terms with the fact that this work involves the use of power	Ethical empiricism (2)
16. In order to get my work done I try not to get too emotionally involved	Work ethic (2)
17. I try to appreciate all aspects of my work even those I would prefer to avoid	Adaptationism (2)
18. In my work I follow the regulations, even if they don't mirror my own views	Agentic shift (2)
19. I remind myself that 'someone has to do the job' in order to motivate myself for certain tasks	Defeatism (2)
20. Personally I always do my best at work, no matter what tasks I have been given	Ego-essentialism (2)

Procedure

Six municipalities were contacted to explain the purpose of the study and determine their willingness to participate in the study and, if so, their preferred method of distribution of the questionnaire. The purpose of the study was described to the municipality contacts as investigating how social workers reflected on the challenges and problematic aspects of their work.

In five of the municipalities, unit managers within seven working groups were emailed the questionnaire for forwarding to staff for self-completion and for return directly to the researcher. The unit manager was requested to email a reminder to all staff one week after the initial distribution, with a new copy of the questionnaire attached to the email. By this channel, a total of 189 staff were provided with the questionnaire of whom 36 responded, given a response rate of 19%.

In one of the above municipalities, the questionnaire was additionally distributed to staff mailboxes, together with an information sheet about the study, and instructions for how the completed questionnaires could be returned. Of the 19 questionnaires distributed in this way, eight questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 42 percent.

In four of the municipalities, questionnaires were distributed by the first author at staff meetings (five meetings in total). The purpose of the study was explained, and the questionnaire given out to staff. Questionnaires were completed while the first author was present. Via this channel, 77 questionnaires were distributed, completed and returned (one questionnaires was subsequently excluded as the respondent did not match the study inclusion criteria), giving a response rate of 100%. Thus, the overall response rate for the study was 42.3%.

As there was the potential for a respondent to complete and return more than one questionnaire (i.e. via different channels), duplication checks were performed, and no duplicate questionnaires found.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) v. 24.0 for Windows.

Descriptive analyses explored the characteristics of the sample while univariate analyses examined the distribution of responses on the functional stupidity items. Bivariate associations between the functional stupidity items within rationales were examined before internal consistency reliability analyses were carried out for the items within each reflective mode. Where such analyses proved satisfactory, items within reflective modes or within rationales were summed and combined into scales. Bivariate associations among reflective mode and rationale scales were examined, as were bivariate associations between scales, sample characteristics, and the work satisfaction measure. Finally, a multilinear regression model was developed in which work satisfaction (DV) was regressed on the functional stupidity scales (IVs). Assumptions for multivariable analysis, including normality, linearity, homoscedasticity of residuals and multicollinearity, were examined and found to be met. Level of significance for all analyses was set at $p<.05$ with no adjustment made for multiple testing, and so note should be taken of the potential for inflated Type I error rate.

Ethical considerations

The study was submitted for ethical review according to standard process at Dalarna University and passed. All study procedures were developed in accordance with the 2010 revision of the American Psychological Association's *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct*, internationally regarded as one of the most authoritative ethical codes for governing research with human participants.

Results

The participants were mostly female (n=102, 85.7%), with a mean age of 36.9 years (SD=12.21, range=22-66). Participants had a median of 3 years' work experience (IQR=1-10). Over half of the

participants (*n*=68, 60.2%) held a university social work degree, with the great majority of the remainder having a different university degree (*n*=42, 37.2%). The largest proportion of participants worked in the child welfare area (*n*=41, 36.6%) with the next largest proportion working in the area of social assistance (*n*=37, 33.0%). The mean score for work satisfaction was 4.75 (*SD*=0.94, range=1-6).

Table 3 presents the univariate analyses of the functional stupidity items, together with the bivariate associations for the two items within each rationale. The majority of items demonstrated a satisfactory pattern of responses, with the entire response range for the item used, a mean value for responses close to the mid-point of the scale and an approximately normal distribution around the mean. However, some items demonstrated a less than optimal distribution of responses. No participant selected the lowest response option for any of the Constructiveness 1, Ego-essentialism 2 and Fun 1 items, all of which had mean response values near the high end of the range and small standard deviations, suggesting a poor capacity for such items to discriminate among respondents.

Most (70%) within-rationale correlations were positive and significant, with the majority of these lying between .54 and .33. Of the remaining correlations, the two Adaptationism items were significantly positively associated but at a relatively low level (.19), while the within-rationale correlations for the Defeatism, Ethical empiricism and Ego-essentialism items were all positive but non-significant.

Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's α) analyses with item trial removal were conducted, in order to combine items within reflective modes into scales. For the Despair reflective mode, alpha was satisfactory (.68) with all four items used and no improvement in alpha possible via item removal. For the Cynicism reflective mode, alpha was satisfactory (.71) with all eight items used. However, analyses indicated that alpha could be improved via removal of the Defeatism 1 item, although this improvement was only small (.72). Nevertheless, given the non-significant correlation between the two Defeatism items, it was decided to remove Defeatism 1 and proceed with a seven-item Cynicism mode scale. Finally, for the Authoritarianism reflective mode, alpha was not satisfactory (.54). Although analyses demonstrated an improvement to alpha with removal of the Ego-essentialism 1 item, this improvement was small (.56) and no further improvement possible. Consequently, the Authoritarianism mode scale was not developed.

Analysis proceeded with the two reflective mode scales with satisfactory alpha (Despair and Cynicism, items summed within modes) and those rationales of the Authoritarianism reflective mode whose items had significant within-rationale correlations (Fun, Machismo, Adaptationism, items summed within rationales). In addition, the Ego-essentialism 1 item of the Authoritarianism reflective

Table 3. Functional stupidity variables: Means, standard deviations, ranges and correlations within rationales (N=120).

Variable	Min	Max	*M*	*SD*	*r*
Healthism 1[a]	0	4	2.61	1.10	
Healthism 2	0	4	2.75	.90	.534[a]**
Constructiveness 1[b]	1	4	3.28	.68	
Constructiveness 2[b]	0	4	2.48	.94	.344**
Defeatism 1[a]	0	4	2.42	.98	
Defeatism 2	0	4	1.78	1.16	.177[a]
Ethical Empiricism 1[a]	0	4	2.19	1.01	
Ethical Empiricism 2	0	4	2.39	.99	.166[b]
Agentic Shift 1	0	4	2.42	.95	
Agentic Shift 2[a]	0	4	2.83	.91	.418[a]**
Work Ethic 1	0	4	2.77	1.00	
Work Ethic 2	0	4	2.09	1.00	.333**
Adaptationism 1	0	4	2.66	.98	
Adaptationism 2	0	4	2.24	.87	.186*
Machismo 1	0	4	2.19	.99	
Machismo 2	0	4	2.09	1.05	.405**
Ego-essentialism 1	0	4	2.33	.97	
Ego-essentialism 2	1	4	3.40	.64	.073
Fun 1	1	4	3.45	.65	
Fun 2[a]	0	4	2.99	.95	.488[a]**

Note: [a], *n*=119; [b], *n*=118; *$p<.05$;**$p<.01$.

mode was retained for further analyses, as of the two Ego-essentialism items it had the better response distribution. Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for each rationale and mode, their correlations, and the correlations between modes and rationales and the work satisfaction item.

Most modes and rationales had significant positive associations with each other, ranging from r=.46 for Cynicism mode with Machismo rationale to r=.24 for Despair mode with Machismo rationale. Exceptions to this pattern were: the Ego-essentialism 1 item, which had no significant association with any mode or rationale; and the Fun rationale, which was not significantly associated with either the Cynicism mode or the Machismo rationale.

Work satisfaction was significantly associated with: Despair mode ($r(114) = .30$, p=.001); Fun rationale ($r(117) = .62$, p<.001); and Adaptationism rationale ($r(118) = .21$, p=.023). Additional analyses that examined associations between modes and rationales and staff demographic and work characteristics indicated that age was significantly associated with Despair mode ($r(105) = .19$, p=.047) and Fun rationale ($r(106) = .20$, p=.035), while years of work experience was significantly associated with Fun rationale ($r_s(110) = .20$, p=.038). There were no significant associations between education (social work degree vs. other education) and any mode or rationale. Gender was not considered for further analysis due to the small proportion of male participants.

The final stage of the analysis was the multilinear regression model in which work satisfaction (DV) was regressed on the functional stupidity modes and rationales (IVs). Table 5 displays the unstandardised regression coefficients (B), standard error of B, standardised regression coefficients (β) and significance (p) for each IV after entry of all IVs, model n=114. With all IVs in the equation, R=.68, $F(6, 107) = 14.06$, p<.001. The model explained 44% of the variance in work satisfaction; of the IVs in the model, two were significant: Cynicism mode (β=-.28, t=−3.11, p=.002; sr^2=.05) and Fun rationale (β=.54, t=6.61, p<.001; sr^2=.23). Cynicism mode and Machismo rationale were identified as suppressor variables in that their semi-partial coefficients with work satisfaction were greater than their zero-order coefficients when both variables were included in the model.

Discussion

The study aim was to operationalise and test Paulsen's (2017) model of functional stupidity and explore its appropriateness for understanding how social workers comply with the demands of their work when discharging their duties. Below, we first consider how well our operationalisation of this model performed. Second, we discuss our findings in terms of the appropriateness and potential value of the concept of functional stupidity for social work practice and policy.

Main findings: operationalising functional stupidity

Performance of individual items and intra-rationale correlations

Overall, the items denoting the various stupidity rationales performed well psychometrically. The items' mean values were for the most part close to the mid-point of the response scale and participants' responses covered mostly the entire response range, indicators of the items' capacity to discriminate among respondents. However, some items performed less well in this regard, with

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and Correlations for Modes and Rationales.

		N	*M*	*SD*	Range	2	3	4	5	6	Work Satisfaction
Modes	1. Despair	116	11.13	2.62	4–16	.32**	.40**	.24**	.46**	.17	.30**
	2. Cynicism	118	16.53	4.26	6–27		-.06	.46**	.41**	.18	-.18
Rationales	3. Fun	119	6.44	1.39	2–8			-.03	.26**	.05	.62**
	4. Machismo	120	4.28	1.71	0.8				.26**	.04	-.02
	5. Adaptationism	120	4.90	1.43	1–8					.13	.21*
	6. Ego-essentialism 1	120	2.33	0.97	0–4						.03

Table 5. Multiple linear regression of work satisfaction on poor functional stupidity modes and rationales (n=114).

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	*p*
Despair Mode	.030	.033	.082	.355
Cynicism Mode	-.064	.021	-.283	.002
Fun Rationale	.373	.056	.542	.000
Machismo Rationale	.056	.048	.098	.249
Adaptationism Rationale	.078	.058	.118	.179
Ego-essentialism Rationale 1	.003	.073	.003	.968

Model: R=.664, R^2=.441, R^2_{adj}=.409.

Constructiveness 1, Ego-essentialism 2 and Fun 1 all demonstrating strong positive skew. This might be because these items failed to adequately capture the full extent of the ethical and professional problems they were intended to, or because they express a socially desirable approach to work. Many people regard it desirable to be constructive, as well as to 'do their best' at work. This relates to a 'task-focused orientation' (Fook & Askeland, 2007) where practitioners aim to produce solutions to the problems at hand, rather than to critically reflect on their practices. Hence, these items may require careful consideration from the respondent about the possible negative consequences of such reasoning.

When considering the relationship between items that were developed to measure the same rationale, again the overall pattern of findings was positive with most intra-rationale correlations significant. This was not the case, however, for Defeatism, Ethical empiricism, and Ego-essentialism. While the low correlation between the two Ego-essentialism items may be due to the poor psychometric performance of one of the items, the low within-rationale correlation for Defeatism and Ethical-essentialism may be due to an item's failure to adequately capture the theoretical construct being measured. For example, with the Ethical empiricism items, we wanted to denote a reasoning characterised by one-dimensional thinking (Marcuse, 1968; Paulsen, 2017) concerning problems at work. However, such reasoning is most explicit in the first item of ethical empiricism, while being expressed more implicitly in the second.

Internal consistency of the reflective modes of compliance

The internal consistency reliabilities for the Despair and Cynicism reflective modes were both satisfactory, but this was not the case for the Authoritarianism mode. Contrary to what the model would predict, the Fun and Machismo rationales did not correlate significantly, while the Ego-essentialism rationale was not significantly correlated with any of the other rationales within the Authoritarianism mode. While the failure to produce a reliable measure of the authoritarianism mode brings into question the conceptual validity of this element of the model, the poor psychometric performance of specific rationales (as previously discussed) will have reduced the potential for strong inter-item correlations. Additionally, the low reliability of the Authoritarianism mode could reflect the difficulty inherent in empirically capturing critical resonances of the underlying theoretical constructs.

Elsewhere the model demonstrated good construct validity, the generally moderate-sized positive associations among modes/rationales are substantial enough to suggest these are divergent indicators of the same underlying construct. The positive associations between the Despair mode and the Fun and Adaptationism rationales would be predicted since, while despair is commonly understood as a negative feeling, the rationales in this mode emphasise constructiveness and positive thinking. In terms of criterion validity, the different modes/rationales demonstrated satisfactory gradations of convergence and divergence with the measure of work satisfaction. The positive correlation between Fun and Adaptationism rationales and work satisfaction would be anticipated as authoritarian compliance is characterised by a non-critical attitude, while the Cynicism mode's negative association with work satisfaction corresponds with the model as cynical compliance means to resign when facing the existing order of the organisation (Paulsen, 2017). In the regression model, the shared variance among the variables resulted in the variance of work satisfaction explained by

Despair and Adaptationism being subsumed by the Fun rationale, while the bivariate negative association between work satisfaction and Cynicism mode was inflated.

Social workers' unreflexivity: implications for policy and practice

Notions of reflection have been discussed as potential approaches for social workers to better navigate the complex environments in which their practice is embedded (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2009). Being critically reflective is considered key for practitioners' commitment to professional values and for challenging oppressive practises (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2009). However, the present study shows that social workers endorse several reasons for not being reflective. The great majority of the questionnaire items, representing ten stupidity rationales, had response mean values of 2 or higher, meaning that the participants perceived them to mirror 'quite well' how they relate to their jobs. Depending on how this unreflexivity is motivated, respondents report different degrees of work satisfaction. Trying to adapt to the work situation (Adaptationism rationale), having fun at work (Fun rationale), and being constructive and thinking of one's health (components of the Despair mode) are all reasons for complying with work that are associated with higher levels of work satisfaction.

Of these stupidity rationales, motivating one's compliance by pointing to the fun one gets from work has the strongest positive association with social workers' work satisfaction. Two aspects of fun can be relevant to discuss in a social work practitioner context. First we have the relational aspects of social work. It is plausible that to interact with and help people is perceived as fun by many practitioners. The perception of 'the good relation' as a fundamental tool for social workers is strongly related to their professional identity (Sjögren, 2018). Yet, while to 'work with people' may bring pleasure to individual professionals (Paulsen, 2017, p. 203), such behaviour can be 'stupid' if they legitimise unethical or problematic practices. Secondly, fun can relate to interaction with colleagues. The potential of having fun with colleagues regardless of how one feels towards the job itself is not something specific to social work, but relevant for most work environments. According to Fine and Corte (2017), moments of fun function as 'commitment devices' that smooth interaction and group affiliation, as well as constructing a positive narrative of the group. Regarding social work, it is possible that having fun with colleagues may help social workers to neglect the downsides of their jobs. It may contribute to creating a more positive narrative about the social service department, as well as supporting social work colleagues in handling complicated and emotionally demanding tasks. While this is good for the individual practitioner, it does not necessarily contribute to a critical discussion about the role of social work in society or the ethical consequences of one's practice.

The stupidity rationales that were associated with low levels of work satisfaction were those emanating from cynicism. Cynicism has long been an element of the professional culture in social work, and is contemporarily fuelled by organisational factors as well as a 'risk-aversion' culture among practitioners (Carey, 2014, p. 128, 141). While cynicism has the potential to motivate rule bending and deviation from norms and expectations (Carey, 2014), the present study shows that cynicism runs the risk of entailing poor work satisfaction and compliance to problematic work settings.

Social workers' endorsement of stupidity rationales, as reported in the study, should be seen in relation to the context of Swedish social work. While it is an empirical question to what extent social workers are more constrained by social policy today compared to other points in history (Clark, 2005), there are organisational tendencies in the Swedish social services that seem to impede social workers' possibilities to perform a professionally adequate practice (Astvik et al., 2014; Tham, 2018). Excessive workloads and an increased focus on investigations rather than care and support are trends that might challenge social workers' professional identity. Our respondents' endorsement of stupidity rationales indicates that practitioners need to be unreflective to keep this identity intact and to get their work done.

Study strengths and limitations

This paper describes a pilot study representing the first attempt to operationalise a specific model of functional stupidity and explore its appropriateness among social workers. The success or failure of our operationalisation should be judged in that context. Our expectation is that any future operationalisation of functional stupidity will require more than twenty items in order to be fully successful, given the relatively abstract nature of the concept. However, it would have been foolhardy to have expended effort in operationalising Paulsen's (2017) model via a great number of items without first pilot-testing an initial set.

Items were constructed to apply to the general organisational context of municipal social work rather than describe situations or issues specific to certain sub-fields. While Swedish social work is characterised by specialisation with respect to client groups (Bergmark & Lundström, 2007), practitioners in this sector are likely to face similar work-related problems. When first operationalising a concept with respect to a given population, it is pragmatic to first develop generic measures of that concept, i.e. items that can be argued to apply to the population as a whole. However, a complete operationalisation of any given concept should necessarily reflect variations in how that concept might manifest in different sub-groups of a population. Hence future work should seek to develop the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence-base for how functional stupidity might vary across different fields of social work so that the operationalisation of functional stupidity presented here can be refined in order to be sensitive to such variation.

The operationalisation of the model of functional stupidity was carried out via both conceptual discussions about the items and their relation to the model between two of the authors, as well as 'think-aloud' interviews with informants with a social work background. Despite this procedure, the poor fit between the data and elements of the model may have been partly due to some of the items failing to manifest key theoretical characteristics. However, it might also be the case that the model of functional stupidity as developed by Paulsen (2017), with its specific stupidity rationales and reflective modes of compliance, is more suitable for other front-line professions than social work, or that organisations may develop local rationales that are unheard of in other organisations. A more inductive research design might have provided more insight into the types of stupidity rationales used by social workers in Swedish social services, and thus better inform the development of questionnaire items capturing such rationales. We found that our measures of the different modes and rationales of functional stupidity demonstrated satisfactory gradations of convergence and divergence with our concurrent criterion validity measure of work satisfaction. Work satisfaction was chosen as our criterion measure in the absence of a 'gold standard' measure of functional stupidity and based on conceptual considerations. While it could be argued that work satisfaction is not an adequate criterion measure, there is currently little theoretical guidance by which one could justify an alternative measure.

Our pragmatic use of a convenience sampling strategy will have introduced bias into our sample relative to our target population of Sweden's social workers. Taken together with a relatively low response rate, generalising of our study's findings should be done with great caution. It is also relevant to consider that most respondents were at work while answering the questionnaire (a possible exception would be those who answered it over e-mail), a circumstance that will have influenced their responses to the various items in unquantifiable ways. Given that the questionnaire sought to operationalise functional stupidity, however, it could be speculated that completing the questionnaire at work rather than, e.g. at home, might be conducive to producing the most valid responses in participants.

Conclusion

This is the first study to operationalise and empirically test the concept of functional stupidity with a quantitative approach. An overall successful operationalisation of the concept opens up the

possibility for further studies of social workers' reflective modes of compliance. The results show that social workers endorse several reasons for performing tasks that are counter to their values. Hence, being reflexive about professional hardships does not necessarily entail continual cynicism – or oppositional 'voice' in Hirschman's (Hirschman, 1970) sense. Reflexivity can also facilitate periods of unreflective performance that, for good and bad, helps one through the working day.

Data availability

The dataset is available on request from the authors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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