



Sylvia R. Karasu M.D.
The Gravity of Weight

Our All-Too-Human Gullibility

We often fail to detect deception.

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Many people are prone to believe in those who claim to predict the future. Dante has a special place in hell for these fortune-tellers. Source: Copyright Look and Learn/Bridgeman Images, used with permission

There is a special place in hell for fortune-tellers who professed to divine the future. Those wretched souls, “who wished to see too far” ahead must now “crab backwards” (Dante, *The Inferno, Canto XX*, in *The Divine Comedy*, Ciardi, translator, 1954).

For their sin, they are “hideously distorted ... for the face was reversed on the neck ... as tears that burst from their eyes ran down the cleft of their buttocks ... To look before them was forbidden” for all eternity. Dante openly weeps at their grotesque appearance. His guide Virgil says, “There is no place for pity here” (Canto XX).

Dante does not blame the victims—the gullible ones—who fall for baseless prognostications, perhaps because these victims are the ones to be pitied. Humans seem particularly susceptible and fall prey far too commonly, not only to fortune tellers, but to the schemes and promises of quacks, charlatans, and con men of all types. Even an expert on gullibility, who had just published his *Annals of Gullibility*

(2009) and spent his life researching social intelligence, described how he himself became the victim of financial con man Bernard Madoff (Greenspan, *Skeptic*, 2009)—a “cautionary tale for all” (Dunning, in *The Social Psychology of Gullibility*, Forgas and Baumeister, eds, 2019). It should not be surprising, then, that we like stories about human gullibility: Our folklore is replete with examples.

Both Adam and Eve, believing the crafty serpent, eat from the “Tree of Knowledge,” and are expelled from Eden. (*Genesis: 3*) Further, there is the iconic tale of the Trojan Horse: After nine exhausting years of battle, the Trojans are convinced by a Greek captive that the enormous horse appearing outside their city is an offering to Athena. The gullible Trojans bring the horse, crammed with Ulysses and his men, within their walls—leading to their defeat and the classic expression, “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts”(Virgil, *The Aeneid, Book 2*).

The theme of gullibility appears throughout children's fairy tales: *Little Red Riding Hood*, the *Pied Piper*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and *Pinocchio*. And of course, we all know the classic 19th century Hans Christian Andersen folktale, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, in which the emperor, “so very fond of new clothes” to the exclusion of all else, is swindled by two men who pretend to weave a garment of the finest quality that “would be invisible to everyone who was unfit for the job he held or who was very simple in character.” Delighted initially with the prospect of finding out “what men in my kingdom are unfit for their job,” and then later not wanting to admit he may be one of them, he “dons” the clothing, “light as a cobweb” and appears only in his underwear in a procession before all his people. Effortlessly, all the townsfolk succumb to the ruse for fear of being ridiculed themselves: “How beautiful are our Emperor’s new clothes,” they shout.



Painting of Adam and Eve inside an Ethiopian church. Both Adam and Eve were gullible victims of the serpent. Source: Wikimedia Commons/GNU Free Documentation License 1.2. Photographer: Bernard Gagnon.



Italian painter Tiespolo, "The Procession of the Trojan Horse," circa 1760, National Gallery, London. The Trojans were duped into believing the enormous horse that appeared outside their walls was an offering to Athena.
Source: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.
Unknown photographer.

We don't like feeling duped, i.e., feeling gullible—it is an “aversive feeling” damaging to self-esteem, explain Forgas and Baumeister (2019) in their own chapter, a kind of *cognitive dissonance* in which we experience mental discomfort when we hold beliefs that are inconsistent or in conflict with our behavior (Greenspan, *Annals*, 2009). Protectively, as a way of reducing this discomfort “when a proposition lies outside the envelope of legitimacy,” we tend to “double down” on our false belief and convince ourselves we were not duped at all (Cooper and Avery, in Forgas and Baumeister, 2019). This is perhaps analogous to the “irrational perseverance” we have in failing to abandon a project that is not working (Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, 2011).

Forgas and Baumeister (2019) define *gullibility* as a

“failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action.” Gullibility, though, may be “in the eye of the beholder” and a matter of perspective. It results from a complex interaction involving the social situation; individual cognitive processes such as being bad at reading cues from people, being naïve, or even being poorly informed about a subject; personality factors such as being too trusting or having trouble saying no; and a person’s psychological state such as being under the influence of substances, exhausted, or infatuated (Greenspan, *Annals of Gullibility*, 2009). There is some suggestion that those with high emotional intelligence and greater sympathetic feelings may be less likely to detect deception (Baker et al, *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 2013); a positive mood more likely promotes gullibility than a negative one (Forgas, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2019).



Advertisement for 'Allan's Anti-Fat' remedy, 1880s. Throughout the years, people have been particularly gullible in accepting medications, tonics, and treatments promising outrageous claims for weight loss.
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Further, we tend to see patterns in random events and make causal connections where none exist (Kahneman, 2011). Gullibility involves a tendency to take information at face value without looking for further evidence. A key element in producing gullibility is preventing the development of doubt and suspicions to develop (Laroche et al, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2019).

While everyone can be gullible sometimes, some are more susceptible to gullibility than others; these people suffer from *deception blindness*, a function of being insensitive to cues of *untrustworthiness* and an ability to accept a false premise (Teunisse et al, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 2020).



Hieronymus Bosch (or his workshop), "The Conjurer," circa early 16th century.
Source: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.
Source: The Yorck Project, 2002.

The internet has promoted gullibility and created “a true age of uncertainty,” with “no way to insure what information is worth paying attention to: the truth may be out there but it is increasingly hidden behind curtains of deception, misdirection, and misinformation” (Dunning, in Forgas and Baumeister, 2019). Our attention is a “scarce resource,” and we are now chronically subjected to “information overload” (Sunstein, *Too Much Information*, 2020). There is, though, “a great deal of heterogeneity” in those who seek out information and those who avoid doing so (Sunstein, 2020).

We also have a “near-universal tendency” to accept rather than reject incoming information—an *acceptance bias* (Forgas and Baumeister, 2019). The effectiveness of propaganda, though, stems from its fit

between its content and a population’s preexisting beliefs (Mercier, *Review of General Psychology*, 2017). Generally, we tend to search for and interpret information that confirms rather than refutes what we believe, the so-called *confirmation bias* (Fiedler, in Forgas and Baumeister, 2019).

Disbelieving information is a “secondary process” that requires motivation, ability, prior contradictory information, and a certain amount of distrust (Mayo, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2019). (For a discussion of the importance of skepticism and *reasonable* versus *unreasonable doubt*, particularly in evaluating science, see Allison et al *American Scientist*, 2018).

“Deciding what to believe and whom to trust is one of the most difficult and cognitively demanding tasks we all face.” We suffer from what has been referred to as *metacognitive myopia*—the “human inability to correctly evaluate the source, reliability, and validity of information we receive from others” (Fiedler, 2019). “It would indeed be an ironic and paradoxical effect if the immense success of our scientific age would be undermined by the very scientific progress and information technology it helped to create” (Forgas and Baumeister, 2019).

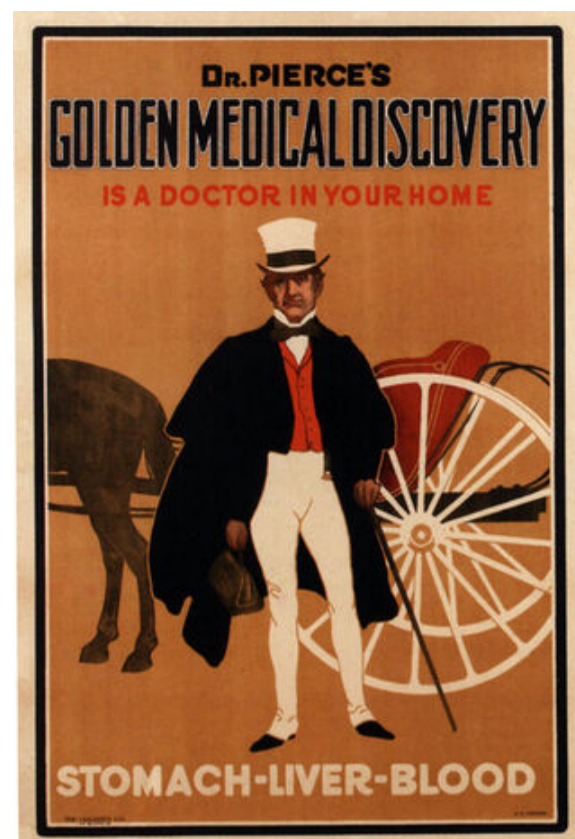
Bottom line: We are all capable of being gullible when we should know better, though some are more prone to *deception blindness* than others. The feeling is highly unpleasant, threatens our self-esteem, and often leads to compensatory “doubling down” on the false belief to convince ourselves we have not been duped. The



Caravaggio's "The Fortune Teller," circa 1596-7. Louvre Museum, Paris. Source: Bridgeman Images, used with permission

internet fosters gullibility because we are inundated with information that may be intentionally misleading, overtly incorrect, and difficult to evaluate for its veracity.

Note: My thanks to Professor Steven Heymsfield, M.D., with his special interest in our gullibility to use diet supplements for weight loss, for suggesting this topic.



"Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery is a Doctor in your home." Advertisement for Dr. Pierce's tonic, 1910s. English School. We are easily duped by unrealistic promises of cure—in this case for the stomach, liver, and blood. Source: Copyright, The Advertising Archives/Bridgeman Images, used with permission

About the Author



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