

5 Psychology of Influence

Since the mid-1800s, capitalist societies have provided a mass market laboratory for marketers, advertisers, publicists, politicians and propagandists to test their persuasive powers. Market research, surveys, focus groups, clinical experiments, studies of spending habits and trends and data analysis have all contributed to our understanding of motivation and behaviour in the material world and in the broader context of human culture. Robert Cialdini's applied approach to persuasion provides a core focus for this chapter. Cialdini emphasises that uncertainty and ambiguity are key elements in persuasion psychology. They provide openings for creative – possibly misleading – communication, again reminding us of the trickster's *modus operandi*. Recent advances in neuroscience reveal that reason alone is often unable to remove ambiguity, inspire trust and support optimum decision-making. We need our emotions to point us in the right direction.

Persuasion in the spectrum of influence

Persuasion wears many masks across a spectrum of influence that ranges from giving advice and gaining compliance, to education, promotion, propaganda and physical coercion. These masks disguise persuasion and make it difficult to define without adding numerous qualifications. Gass and Seiter ([1999] 2007) try to balance competing claims to arrive at a definition of persuasion as 'the activity of creating, reinforcing, modifying or extinguishing beliefs, attitudes, intentions, motivations, and/or behaviours within . . . a given communication context' (33–4). Their catalogue of actions and outcomes illustrates the difficulty of defining persuasion easily. Like fish in water, we are immersed in persuasion before we know we are swimming.

Persuasion is

- either ‘pure’ or ‘borderline’: persuasion can be mixed with other intentions (borderline), so it does not always announce itself clearly. Often, it is disguised as something else such as ‘mere’ information;
- interpersonal (extrinsic) or intrapersonal (intrinsic);
- intentional or unintentional: people are not always conscious of persuasive intent, just as they are not always aware of being deceptive;
- successful or not;
- coercive or non-coercive;
- symbolic or non-symbolic communication;
- influenced by media and context;
- adapted for face-to-face, public and mass media delivery;
- sometimes spontaneous and improvised; and
- influenced by socio-cultural factors. (Gass and Seiter [1999] 2007: 22–35)

Persuasion is routinely improvised to fit given circumstances, adjusted for the medium and crafted specifically for an audience whose reception of the message determines its success. Evaluating persuasive messages involves a complex decoding process to distinguish the central persuasive elements – what we are asked to believe or do – from peripheral issues not directly related to compliance. Persuasion is often embedded in friendly banter or humorous anecdotes. Salience – why the message is important to us – determines how the message is decoded or if it is decoded at all. Pratkanis and Aronson conclude that ‘the mass media may not tell you what to think, but they do tell you what to think *about* and *how to do it*’ ([1992] 2001: 28).

Persuasion is ‘a communicative process to influence others. A persuasive message has a point of view or desired behaviour for the recipient to adopt in a voluntary fashion’ (Jowett and O’Donnell 2006: 31). There is room for negotiation: persuasion is ‘transactional’ in its ‘continuous and dynamic process of co-creating meaning’, but it does attempt ‘to evoke a specific change in the attitudes or behaviours of an audience’ (32). The desired changes are ‘anchored’ to beliefs, values, attitudes or norms already held by an audience. The persuasive force of the message seems to originate from within individuals

as something already agreed upon, especially when affirmed by a surrounding crowd. Asking an audience to abandon existing anchors can set them adrift and confuse the argument. When accepting the message no longer seems voluntary, persuasion moves toward coercion, threats and intimidation.

Lakoff's theory of 'neural recruitment' proposes that repetition – of talking points, phrases, metaphors and other figures of speech – comes to dominate thinking. Constant repetition establishes familiar neural pathways for arguments to travel along. Examples of neural recruitment include 'war on terror', 'liberal media', 'lower taxes', 'declining markets' and 'global warming'. These phrases frame issues and set agendas for discussion. 'As the same circuit is activated day after day, the synapses on the neurons in the circuit get stronger until a permanent circuit is formed' ([2008] 2009: 83). A 'recruited circuit' becomes the physical embodiment of the metaphor (84) and, in the absence of deeper and slower thinking, is accepted without resistance. Hegemonic thinking depends on neural recruitment at the level of mass society. Persuasive communicators use common social metaphors and analogies as anchors to build understanding and empathy with audiences.

Empathy is activated when 'mirror neurons' recreate in one mind what is occurring in another mind. We intuitively feel we understand the goals and motivations of another person (Keyesers 2011: 49). The neuroscience slogan '[n]eurons that fire together, wire together' means that empathy and intuition depend on the operations of mirror neurons. Keyesers comments:

While we witness the actions of others, our own premotor cortex resonates as if it was [sic] doing the actions we observe. The mirror system builds a bridge between the minds of two people and shows us that our brains are deeply social. (62)

This experimental finding adds substance to the Theory of Mind first advanced by Premack and Woodruff in 1978 to describe how we assign mental states to others, allowing us to predict their behaviour. Without this capacity, humans would be unable to anticipate responses to their persuasive efforts, especially useful when the goal is to gain compliance.

Gaining compliance

Gaining compliance is a subset of persuasion primarily 'aimed at getting others to do something or to act in a particular way' (Gass and Seiter [1999] 2007: 227). Most research on compliance gaining focuses

on what people do when they want to get something from others. Sociologists Marwell and Schmitt (1967) set the stage for research in compliance gaining with their list of strategies:

1. Promise: You will be rewarded if you comply.
2. Threat: You will be punished if you do not comply.
3. Expertise (positive): You will (eventually) be rewarded for your effort and expertise if you comply.
4. Expertise (negative): You will (eventually) suffer for your lack of skill if you do not comply.
5. Liking: Friendly behaviour prepares the subject to accept your request.
6. Pregiving: Reward the subject before requesting compliance. Foot-in-the-door variant: Give a small token gift before asking for a larger contribution.
7. Aversive stimulation: Punish the subject continuously until compliance is gained. Torture.
8. Debt: Compliance is owed for past favours.
9. Moral appeal: Compliance rests on moral duty or obligation.
10. Self-feeling (positive): You will feel better about yourself if you comply.
11. Self-feeling (negative): You will feel disappointed about yourself if you do not comply.
12. Altercasting (positive): A good person would comply.
13. Altercasting (negative): Only an inadequate person would not comply.
14. Altruism: Other people desperately need your compliance.
15. Esteem (positive): If you comply, people you value will think better of you.
16. Esteem (negative): If you do not comply, people you value will think less highly of you. (Adapted from Marwell and Schmitt 1967: 350–64; and from Gass and Seiter [1999] 2007: 229)

These strategies are context-sensitive, often decided pragmatically and on-the-fly. In general, gaining compliance leverages human relationships using promises of reward or threats of consequence.

Power imbalances directly affect compliance gaining. In their widely cited study, French and Raven (1960) identified five foundations of power:

- *Reward power* is based on control over something of value, such as a raise or promotion.
- *Coercive power* depends on the ability to punish. ‘You’re fired!’

- *Expert power* is based on expertise, knowledge, or skill, and is regularly practiced by trades workers, doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers, priests, and financial advisors.
- *Legitimate power* depends on formal rank or position: presidents, CEOs, law enforcement officers, judges, and guards.
- *Referent power* results when the subject emulates those asking for compliance such as coaches, teachers, trainers, or gurus. (French and Raven [1960] 1968: 607–23)

More powerful people tend to be more direct in their compliance negotiations. Those with a power deficit can resort to deference and politeness, both of which are closely linked to face-saving. As reported by Gass and Seiter, Kellerman and Shea (1996) discovered that the ‘best way to get compliance is by using direct requests (i.e., explicitly ask for what you want); such requests were among the most efficient strategies and were not considered impolite’ (Gass and Seiter [1999] 2007: 236). Compliance strategies are also determined by the persuader’s personality, as well as by gender, culture and age (238).

More recently, compliance gaining research has shifted from strategies to goals, since ‘goals give meaning to situations’ and reflect the personality of the person seeking compliance (Gass and Seiter [1999] 2007: 241). ‘I think you should volunteer because together we can make a big difference in this community’. When seeking compliance, people often pursue different goals at the same time. Primary goals are supplemented by secondary goals, such as maintaining integrity and self-definition; creating a good impression or building relationships; and managing the emotional climate. Secondary goals set boundaries for the primary intent or adjust conditions to make agreement more likely.

A final factor in the complex dynamics of gaining compliance depends on the communication style of the actors:

- *Expressive* people prefer to speak from the gut. They say what they think and feel without much forethought of consequences.
- *Conventional* communicators follow social conventions and try to be cooperative. They express their thoughts and feelings, but within norms for appropriate behaviour.
- *Rhetorical* communicators create their own compliance context. Their ‘rhetorical performance’ is highly sensitive to context and often improvised. They negotiate character, adjust situations, solve problems, and build consensus to foster agreement. Their proactive style and pursuit of multiple goals result in persuasive, competent communications, according to Gass and Seiter ([1999] 2007: 243–4).

As skilful as they are, rhetorical communicators can be insincere and manipulative when acting solely in self-interest. For our own self-defence, we need to understand the psychology of persuasion and its ‘weapons of influence’.

Cialdini’s weapons of influence

Pavlov’s scientific experiments on salivation between 1890 and 1904 initiated a new science of conditioned reflexes. Before Pavlov, digestive glands were thought to produce ‘psychic secretions’ stimulated by food. Pavlov rejected this interpretation and instead hypothesised that psychic activity is actually a ‘conditioned reflex’, a physiological response to the environment originating in the cerebral cortex. This discovery ‘made it possible to study all psychic activity objectively’ as observable behaviours (‘Ivan Pavlov’ [1904] 1967: n.p.).

Pavlov’s theories on conditioned reflexes are significant in Cialdini’s widely cited work on persuasion psychology (2007). Cialdini assumes that people are generally acting in their own self-interest in compliance situations – an assumption we examine in more detail later in the chapter. Cialdini says that persuasion has six patterns of motivation that, when turned against us, become ‘weapons of influence’:

- *Reciprocity*: when we receive a ‘gift’ from someone, we feel obligated to give back in return.
- *Commitment and Consistency*: our desire to keep agreements and appear consistent in our actions is compelling.
- *Social Proof*: we are influenced by behaviours we see around us.
- *Liking*: we are more likely to be persuaded by someone we like and find attractive.
- *Authority*: deference to authority has deep roots in most cultures.
- *Scarcity*: fear of going without and the value of what is rare are two sides of the same coin. (Cialdini [1984] 2007: xiii)

People often take mental short cuts using rules of thumb (heuristics) to make decisions quickly – what Kahneman (2011) calls ‘fast thinking’ – leaving themselves vulnerable to abuse by these weapons of influence. Generally, fast thinking produces an appropriate response, but when unique situations require a revised decision-making process, these short cuts can lead us astray. For example, a person we automatically assume to be a trustworthy authority figure may, in fact, be an imposter trying to deceive us or the gift we cheerfully accept may turn out to have strings attached.

Cialdini begins his analysis of influence with examples of animal

behaviour to illustrate that ‘trigger features’ initiate ‘fixed-action patterns’ – predictable automatic responses that work most of the time to enable survival and nurturance. When scientists played a tape recording of the ‘cheep-cheep’ sound made by her chicks, a mother turkey approached a stuffed polecat – her natural predator – as if it were one of her offspring. When the tape recording stopped, the turkey ceased her nurturing behaviour and attacked the polecat furiously (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 2). In a parallel example, Cialdini cites research that found people waiting in line to photocopy documents are more likely to let someone go ahead of them if the word ‘because’ is included in their request, even when no additional reason is given: ‘Excuse me, I have five pages. May I use the Xerox machine because I have to make some copies?’ (4) Cialdini calls this automatic response ‘Click, whirr!’ (5) to suggest that fixed-action patterns are like tape loops: push the button (with the trigger feature) and the pre-recorded tape plays as usual. He emphasises that we need short cuts in complex social environments; they work to our advantage most of the time. However, the need to assess risk and make decisions quickly makes people vulnerable to false cues and biases. Compliance professionals know how to mimic trigger features, and Cialdini recommends a form of psychological martial arts to defend against manipulation.

Reciprocation and networks of obligation

The reciprocation rule – ‘that we should try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided us’ (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 17) – is an ancient and powerful force of influence. The anthropologist Richard Leakey stressed the importance of reciprocation in building societies: ‘We are human because our ancestors learned to share their food and skills in an honoured network of obligation’ (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 18). As noted earlier, First Nations groups in the Pacific Northwest use a communal celebration called the potlatch to share wealth and create a network of indebtedness.

Reciprocation is the basis for trust, sharing, cooperative action and social cohesion. The rule is regularly engaged by organisations handing out flowers, literature or trinkets before asking for a donation. After we take what is given, it is difficult not to repay the gift. Those who break the rule risk losing their reputation for honesty and becoming social outcasts. Bernard Madoff’s massive Ponzi scheme cheated his investors, broke the reciprocation rule and earned him a 150-year prison sentence (Rushe 2010). Reciprocation accounts for the significance of political contributions, lobbying and other promises of political favour (Open Secrets 2011; Lessig 2011). Contract negotiations,

trade agreements and international diplomacy are all governed by networks of obligation. Regrettably, the reciprocity rule is betrayed when gifts become bribes or excuses for extortion.

Commitment and consistency

‘Once we have made a choice or taken a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment’ (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 57). Acting consistently and keeping commitments are widely viewed as positive character traits associated with reliability, honesty and integrity. Consistency provides the foundation for logic, reasoning and the scientific method. But automatic consistency makes us vulnerable to manipulation and influence. In his 1839 essay ‘Self-Reliance’, Ralph Waldo Emerson warned that ‘a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds’ ([1839] 1957: 153). The expectation to be consistent, he believed, encouraged conformity and limited self-reliance, especially when applied without discernment.

Consistency is particularly difficult when we experience cognitive dissonance: the indecision and anxiety we feel when we are forced to hold contradictory beliefs simultaneously or when our beliefs are contradicted by facts. Tavis and Aronson (2013) build on Festinger’s pioneering work on cognitive dissonance (1957) to argue that people attempt to remain consistent with self-justification, face-saving and denial. They will claim that ‘mistakes were made, but not by me’. This mechanism is particularly apparent when deep-seated beliefs about religion, science or politics are challenged. As we saw earlier, when people’s beliefs are challenged, their resistance to change actually increases – a phenomenon known as backfire (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). In religious or patriotic communities, people risk being seen as outcasts, even traitors, if they are inconsistent in their beliefs. In the 2004 US presidential campaign, John Kerry was aggressively challenged for his apparent lack of patriotism, even though he was a decorated veteran of the Vietnam War. As with reciprocity, the consistency rule engages deep issues of character and social responsibility.

Prior commitment activates the consistency rule. During the Korean conflict, US prisoners of war were more likely to collaborate with their Chinese captors if they had written down their criticisms of US society, even if those criticisms seemed mild. When prisoners signed their names to these confessions, they were, in effect, making a commitment (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 70–1; Marks 1979: 129–30). Writing statements down makes them public and thus more powerful as levers for gaining compliance. Sales agents engage the commitment principle

by asking customers to complete sales agreements, increasing the likelihood that they will follow through with their decision to purchase.

Commitment and consistency increase with investment of time, effort and money. Initiation rites – and their modern counterparts, hazing rituals and military boot camps – impose stressful challenges to encourage group loyalty. '[C]ommitments are most effective in changing a person's self-image and future behaviour when they are active, public, and effortful' (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 92), requiring participants to take 'inner responsibility' for their actions (93). Questions of character, reputation and status are at stake. Those seeking our compliance often ask us to honour commitments we made casually, automatically and without thinking. If we agree, argues Emerson, our foolish consistency betrays a lack of self-reliance.

Social proof

The principle of social proof states that we frequently determine correct behaviour by observing the actions of those around us. Despite its annoying clatter in television comedies, canned laughter has a decisive effect on audience response: audiences not only laugh more, they think the routines are funnier (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 115). Social proof contributes to the bandwagon fallacy when voters, sports fans or technology consumers are urged to 'catch the wave' of popular support. Bandura's important research in social learning theory in the early 1960s showed that children who observed violent and aggressive behaviour by adults became more violent and aggressive themselves (Bandura et al. 1961, 1963). More recently, DeLisi et al. (2013: 132) report that 'violent video game playing is correlated with aggression' and contributes to antisocial behaviour of delinquent youth. Social proof is most influential 'when we are observing the behaviour of people just like us' (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 140) – an insight apparent to anyone who learns a sport alongside their peers. Soap operas and telenovellas are popular, in part because they allow audiences to reflect on appropriate social behaviour. Similarly, movie historians frequently note cinema's role in socialisation and language acquisition.

The need for social proof increases in a climate of uncertainty. Early technology adopters provide an enthusiastic vanguard that can make or break a new technology. Investor confidence, based on social proof, is a subjective valuation of financial markets. 'Pluralistic ignorance' results when uncertain people look around and see other uncertain people not knowing what to do. The contagion of uncertainty can immobilise crowds witnessing public crimes, such as riots, homicide, mass suicide and civilian deaths, because the inaction of others

contradicts any sense of emergency and reduces personal responsibility. People experiencing a medical emergency in public are more likely to be helped when there are fewer bystanders (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 133). During the mass suicide of Reverend Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple followers in 1978, the combination of uncertainty, an unfamiliar location and actions by similar others resulted in tragedy. Jones' authoritative charisma, combined with the pressures of social proof, contributed to the death of over 900 followers, many of them children (Jonestown Institute 2014).

Liking

We are persuaded more easily by people we know and like and who are similar to us. As with the other weapons of influence, familiarity and liking have deep evolutionary origins. In his study of subliminal influence, Mlodinow (2012) suggests that social interaction 'was the driving force behind the evolution of superior human intelligence' (84). To form their societies, where liking and being liked are important for survival, humans need to make complex calculations about who belongs to the community, who is healthy and capable and who is trustworthy. For insiders, repetition breeds familiarity and enhances liking. But for outsiders, lack of familiarity, combined with ethnic and cultural differences, negatively affect liking. The genetic fallacy – judging others based on their origins, ethnicity, religion, profession or class – is used to defend the tribe and keeps outsiders at bay. Zak (2012) argues that the neurotransmitter oxytocin (the 'moral molecule') affects our affiliations, who we will associate with and who we avoid.

At an everyday level, sales parties in a friend's home exploit the liking rule and combine it with reciprocity (sample gifts), commitment (testimonials) and social proof (seeing other people purchase products). The sponsoring host(ess) is instrumental to the success of these parties, because everyone in the room is a friend. Similarly, social networking sites aggregate 'friends' into virtual communities to sell advertising, promote events and conduct market research, all with the appearance of connecting and empowering people. Corporate retreats gather co-workers together to promote familiarity and liking in the context of gift giving, rewards and testimonials. Once liking has been affirmed, reciprocation is expected in the form of increased employee harmony, motivation and productivity.

The 'halo effect' of physical attractiveness enhances liking. 'A halo effect occurs when one positive characteristic of a person dominates the way that person is viewed by others' (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 171). Kahneman states that the halo effect, or the 'mere exposure effect'

(2011: 67), is based on first impressions and ‘exaggerated emotional coherence’ – we like everything about a person we find attractive (82–3). Advertisers link products to celebrities and attractive people or to pleasant emotions and experiences. Political candidates receive more votes if they are attractive, even though voters deny that they are influenced by appearances. Attractive people receive more favourable treatment, both in the courts and in recruitment interviews (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 171). Dressing alike contributes to liking; following fashion trends and wearing uniforms exert a powerful influence on perceptions of character and community. Sports fans adopt their team’s halo of success and suffer with their defeat. With victory, fans proclaim: ‘We’re number one!’ and ‘We won!’ But, in defeat, they complain: ‘They blew our lead!’ and ‘They lost!’ Liking is a powerful force for community solidarity, but can quickly become polarised in defeat.

Even small preferences for liking accumulate into pronounced differences. Research by economist Thomas Schelling shows that slight preferences to live surrounded by similar others eventually led to fully segregated neighbourhoods (Carr [2008] 2009: 159). Polarisation occurs quickly on the internet, where moving around is easy and small differences of opinion can accumulate to segregate people into communities of interest. Polarised blog networks dedicated to political opinion illustrate this form of ‘balkanisation’. In ‘Divided They Blog’, Adamic and Glance report very little cross-linking between conservative and progressive blogs, less than 10 per cent interaction and most of that name calling (2005; Carr [2008] 2009: 163–4). Political segregation leads to ‘ideological amplification’; when people discuss issues with like-minded others, their views become more entrenched and extreme ([2008] 2009: 164). Applied to news-making, ideological amplification leads to biased reporting to partisan audiences, whether progressive or conservative. Circular reasoning is involved: people like this source of news and opinion because they agree with it. It is familiar.

Authority

The Nazi extermination of European Jews is the most extreme instance of abhorrent immoral acts carried out by thousands of people in the name of obedience. Yet in lesser degree this type of thing is constantly recurring: ordinary citizens are ordered to destroy other people, and they do so because they consider it their duty to obey orders. (Milgram [1974] 2009: 2)

Stanley Milgram conducted his famous experiments on obedience to authority at Yale University in the early 1960s during the Nuremberg trials. He initially wanted to understand why the German people obeyed their Nazi leaders in committing ‘abhorrent immoral acts’. Instead, Milgram discovered a more general human trait not limited to nationality or gender. He demonstrated that people will carry out orders in deference to authority figures, despite their own moral misgivings. In Milgram’s experiments, a research assistant dressed in a lab coat directed volunteers to administer electric shocks of increasing intensity to an actor, who reacted with growing distress to the phantom shocks. Shocks were supposedly administered when the actor answered a series of word-pair questions incorrectly; the more incorrect answers, the higher the voltage. Remarkably, Milgram discovered that over 60 per cent of subjects continued to administer shocks up to the maximum 450 volts, despite their own reservations and the actor’s dramatic protests. The experiment was repeated in many locations and confirmed Milgram’s original findings. There were no appreciable differences between men and women in their responses or between people from different social backgrounds. Deference to authority – even the trappings of authority – is a powerful compulsion and easily abused.

People who follow orders that violate a moral code reduce cognitive dissonance by transferring responsibility to authority figures. They assign ‘the broader tasks of setting goals and assessing morality’ to the authority figure ([1974] 2009: 7). Milgram observed that ‘binding factors’, such as the researcher’s politeness (liking), the subject’s commitment to participate and the clinical setting helped the volunteers overcome their moral reservations. Following orders is even easier when they travel through a chain of command, ‘a dangerously typical situation in a complex society’ (11). Milgram cites the example of a US pilot in the Vietnam War, ‘who conceded that Americans were bombing Vietnamese men, women, and children but felt that the bombing was for a “noble cause” and thus was justified’ (9). Milgram’s findings are equally relevant fifty years later, when whistle-blowers are imprisoned as traitors, non-combatants are tortured in rendition sites and civilians on the other side of the world are killed on the orders of generals and politicians.

A 2010 documentary by Christophe Nick, *Le Jeu de la Mort (The Game of Death)*, restages the Milgram experiment as reality television. Directed by an attractive hostess, contestants in a fake game show administer shocks of increasing intensity to their opponents, while the audience demands ‘punishment’. The documentary reveals that 82 per cent of participants – an increase from Milgram’s findings of 62

per cent – were willing to shock their rivals, suggesting that the game show setting with cameras and an audience added additional pressure. Initially, participants signed a contract agreeing to follow instructions, adding the power of consistency into the persuasive mix ('Reality TV' 2010).

These experiments testing the power of authority illustrate its excesses and dangers, but deference to legitimate authority is required for social contracts and stable societies. Children learn to navigate authority from their parents and teachers, and religious instruction emphasises obedience to moral codes. Doctors, therapists and other healers use their authority and physical setting to encourage compliance for their patients' benefit (Frank and Frank 1961). Authority figures and experts offer helpful advice and contribute to our safety and well-being, so we are persuaded to follow their direction.

As observed by Milgram and others, however, unthinking obedience to authority makes us vulnerable to manipulation. Kahneman says that it is easier for other people to take advantage of our illusions than it is for us to protect ourselves from those illusions (2011: 28). Cialdini reminds us that 'we are often as vulnerable to the *symbols* of authority as to the *substance*' ([1984] 2007: 220). Titles, uniforms and other trappings of authority can all be staged to achieve the desired effect. When people posing as experts purposely distort evidence – about smoking, energy use, wealth distribution, food security or potential enemies – their authority ceases to be legitimate. Authenticity and trust contribute to credible authority, and we need discernment to assess the performance and motivation of experts and authority figures.

Scarcity and psychological reactance

The scarcity principle states that 'opportunities seem more valuable to us when their availability is limited' (Cialdini [1984] 2007: 238). 'Loss aversion' has evolutionary origins, and we experience potential loss as more compelling than possible gain: 'Organisms that treat threats as more urgent than opportunities have a better chance to survive and reproduce' (Kahneman 2011: 282). The notion that commodity prices are subject to supply and demand is premised on the scarcity principle, since 'scarce' resources are usually more expensive. When oil reserves are down (or controlled by hostile regimes), gas prices go up. Environmental threats, economic prosperity and national security demand costly sacrifices. Collectors pay the cost of scarcity when buying stamps, vintage automobiles, antiques and paintings by the Old Masters. In advertising, phrases such as 'while supplies last' and

'limited edition' imply scarcity and encourage immediate action. The logic of scarcity is pervasive and easily manipulated.

Threats of scarcity also gain power through the principle of 'psychological reactance' (Brehm 1966; Brehm and Brehm 1981). When existing rights are threatened, our desire to retain those rights and our resistance to their loss increase. Authorities attempting to remove existing rights can stimulate behaviour they are trying to suppress. Increased drug use during a 'war on drugs' is an example of psychological reactance to scarcity and a challenge to authority (London School of Economics 2014). Censoring pornography or prosecuting sex trade workers may engage psychological reactance in people who believe their freedoms are threatened. The National Rifle Association (NRA) intensifies lobbying during debates on gun control in the US. In December 2012, gun sales across the US increased dramatically after mass shootings in schools reignited demands for stricter gun control laws. The NRA responded to the threat of gun scarcity by calling for armed guards in all schools to protect the students: 'The only thing that stops a *bad* guy with a *gun* is a *good* guy with a *gun*', claimed the head of the NRA (Lichtblau and Rich 2012: n.p.).

The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) prosecuted Napster for illegal peer-to-peer file-sharing in 2000 and managed to shut it down, but unintentionally stimulated a global epidemic of illegal file-sharing: forty billion unauthorised music files were downloaded in 2008; and 70 per cent of all network traffic in Europe in 2008 was attributed to file-sharing (Schulze and Mochalski 2009).

Psychological reactance informs James Davies' theory of revolution and provides insight into mass demonstrations associated with Ukraine's Orange Revolution (2004–5) or Occupy Wall Street protests:

Revolutions are most likely to occur when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by a short period of sharp reversal. People then subjectively fear that ground gained with great effort will be quite lost; their mood becomes revolutionary. (1962: 5)

The phrase 'democratic deficit' expresses the idea that democracy has been corrupted by powerful interests, creating a scarcity of good government. Clifford Stott, a specialist in crowd psychology, says that riots are more likely to occur where legitimate authority is questioned (Ryan 2011). When governments and their supporters portray street protests as potential criminal actions or eruptions of irrationality, they reinforce the perception that a democratic deficit exists.

Intrinsic motivation and self-determination

Cialdini's phrase 'weapons of influence' aptly describes the typical stimulus-response pattern of persuasive encounters, but there are limitations to this behaviourist approach. Daniel Pink (2009) reviews research conducted since the 1940s to argue that extrinsic motivation – external rewards and consequences for behaviour, the carrot-and-stick approach – works best for routine tasks, but can be counterproductive for more complex and creative activities. In 1949, Harlow discovered that monkeys readily solved a puzzle without any external motivation, but when they were later given a reward for the same task, they made more errors and solved the puzzles less often (Pink [2009] 2011: 3). Harlow identified 'intrinsic motivation' that was unconnected to biological drives or external rewards as the source of this apparent paradox. His research was contrary to accepted behaviourist theory and remained neglected until Deci and Ryan (1985) applied it to human subjects solving puzzle problems, confirming Harlow's conclusions. Since then, Deci, Ryan and their colleagues have continued to research intrinsic motivation and its relation to self-determination (www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/). Self-determination theory proposes that the human need for autonomy, competence and relatedness drives intrinsic motivation.

External motivation and rewards replace autonomy with control by others. Higher financial incentives for corporate executives actually lower performance, while commissioned artworks were judged in experiments to be less creative than non-commissioned works (Pink [2009] 2011: 39–43). Pink notes that 'extrinsic rewards can be effective for algorithmic tasks – those that depend on following an existing formula to its logical conclusion', but they distract attention from activities that 'demand flexible problem-solving, inventiveness, or conceptual understanding' (44). Intrinsic motivation contributed to the open source software development of Linux, Apache and Mozilla Firefox – all requiring creativity, autonomy, competence and relatedness in the programmer community. Paying for blood donations undermines motivation to donate by removing 'a feeling that money can't buy' (46–7). Volunteer organisations, cooperatives and 'social businesses' based on the model developed by Muhammad Yunus (2008) are motivated more by social benefit than profit. When abused, extrinsic motivation encourages unethical behaviour. People take short cuts to reach quotas and projections or rush products onto the market before they are reliable and/or safe. Policies and practises that use fear and insecurity as external motivations or limit autonomy with excessive controls stifle self-motivation and civic engagement.

Heuristics and biases: thinking, fast and slow

Intrinsic motivation is a central focus in behavioural economics – an emerging field of research combining findings in economics, psychology, sociology and neuroscience to challenge assumptions of classical economics, rational decision-making and risk analysis. Classical economists assume that people act rationally in their own self-interest; they conduct cost-benefit analyses to assess risk and make decisions; and they make choices based on consistent tastes. Behavioural economists are challenging these assumptions with new approaches to rationality, including the role of emotions in decision-making and predictable irrationality. They are discovering that intrinsic motivation competes with – or tempers – extrinsic motivation and is an important factor in persuasion.

Errors in judgement are the new fallacies, though now explained as cognitive illusions and miscalculations. Persuasion does more than appeal to self-interest; it can lead us to make cognitive errors by initiating ‘resemblance’, ‘availability’ or ‘associative activation’ short cuts. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), Kahneman describes the reliance of fast thinking – or System 1 thinking – on rules of thumb (heuristics), biases and gut instincts to make decisions quickly. System 1 thinking, honed over millions of years of human adaptation, is frequently adequate to the task of survival, but not always. We can be led astray when our short cuts are inappropriate, as with Cialdini’s ‘click-whirr’ response. For example, we may have a bias that people of a different culture will take advantage of us, so we reject their sincere offers of hospitality. Unthinking rules of thumb determine how people vote, who they associate with, what issues they support.

Complex, unfamiliar decisions require the slower, more deliberate and effortful System 2 thinking to include reason, reflection and calculation conducted in the neocortex. Our decision to use one system or another is influenced by such factors as cognitive load (what we are paying attention to), cognitive ease (how much effort is required), salience (what is important to us), availability (recent exposure), the halo effect (attractive features that influence liking), the influence of experts (authority) and level of risk. Statistical thinking (System 2) is difficult for most people, so they prefer the beliefs and narratives of System 1 (Kahneman 2011: 183).

Kahneman’s distinction between System 1 and System 2 thinking follows from the social brain hypothesis that extraordinary human brain development over the last 50,000 years results from the increased complexity of living in large social groups. An enlarged prefrontal cortex

supports complex reasoning, reflection and calculation necessary for survival in highly social environments. But this greater capacity comes at the cost of effort, time and response rate. Also,

System 1 is not prone to doubt. It suppresses ambiguity and spontaneously constructs stories that are as coherent as possible. Unless the message is immediately negated, the associations that it evokes will spread as if the message were true. System 2 is capable of doubt, because it can maintain incompatible possibilities at the same time. However, sustaining doubt is harder work than sliding into certainty. (2011: 114)

System 1 is reactive by nature; it responds quickly and with bias to questions of territory, outsiders, mates, ownership, authority, sharing and scarcity. Many efforts at persuasion appeal to System 1 thinking through coherent, if false, narratives and expressions of certainty.

Confidence is an important survival skill and contributes to self-esteem and optimism, but overconfidence is a cognitive error of estimation. It requires the expert to perform a role. Kahneman's sarcasm is evident in his review of Tetlock's (2005) research on expert political judgement: '[P]eople who spend their time, and earn their living, studying a particular topic produce poorer predictions than dart-throwing monkeys who would have distributed their choices evenly over the options' (219). Confidence is a function of cognitive ease and narrative coherence (239–40): solutions come readily to mind and seem to make sense. Experts are 'often less reliable', because they develop an 'enhanced illusion' of their skill and become 'unrealistically overconfident' (219). In *Trust Us, We're Experts* ([2001] 2002), Rampton and Stauber provide many examples of expert overconfidence. In addition, 'the illusions of validity and skill are supported by a powerful professional culture. We know that people maintain an unshakable faith in any proposition, however absurd, when they are sustained by a community of like-minded believers' (217). In many organisational cultures, including political parties, the medical system and corporations, it is often better for career advancement to be certain and wrong, than uncertain and right.

Experts who acknowledge the full extent of their ignorance may expect to be replaced by more confident competitors, who are better able to gain the trust of clients. An unbiased appreciation of uncertainty is a cornerstone of rationality – but it is not what people and organisations want. (263)

In the previous chapter, we saw that the confident testimony of climate denial ‘experts’ competes successfully for public acceptance with the qualified certainty of the global scientific community. Slowly, the wisdom of crowds is gaining credibility against the opinions of experts (Surowiecki 2004; Tetlock 2005; Silver 2012).

Prospect Theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) provided an important early foundation for behavioural economics, since it challenged the classical economic principle of expected utility. Prospect theory states that most people do not simply consider the expected utility (usefulness) of their decisions, but are often motivated by other factors, such as a baseline reference point (where they are already); diminishing sensitivity to additional gains after a certain threshold is reached; and loss aversion, where ‘losses loom larger than corresponding gains’ (Kahneman 2011: 297). Because threats loom larger than opportunities in System 1 thinking, references to threats are more likely to gain attention and shape decisions about purchasing products or supporting political decisions. News gains our attention by focusing on threats and crises: ‘The brain responds quickly even to purely symbolic threats. Emotionally loaded words quickly attract attention, and bad words (*war, crime*) attract attention faster than do happy words (*peace, love*)’ (301). A perceived threat gains impact through an ‘availability cascade’ when vivid images are constantly repeated in media and conversations, thus becoming ‘highly accessible’. ‘The emotional arousal is associative, automatic, and uncontrolled, and it produces an impulse for protective action’ (323). With more deliberate System 2 analysis, we can acknowledge the low probability of risk, but the visceral threat has already left its mark on us like a tattoo.

Terrorism and availability cascades

The availability heuristic predicts a tendency to overestimate the probability of events occurring that are more immediate in our experience and to underestimate events more remote from experience:

In today’s world, terrorists are the most significant practitioners of the art of inducing availability cascades. With a few horrible exceptions such as 9/11, the number of casualties from terror attacks is very small relative to other causes of death. Even in countries that have been targets of intensive terror campaigns, such as Israel, the weekly number of casualties almost never came close to the number of traffic deaths. The difference is in the availability of the two risks,

the ease and frequency with which they come to mind. (Kahneman 2011: 144)

Constant repetition and exposure in the news media makes the nebulous terrorism network seem more threatening than the numbers support. Every time people fly an airplane or cross a border, they are reminded of terrorism by the security apparatus they pass through. Lenin stated that ‘the purpose of terrorism is to terrorise’ (qtd in Silver 2012: 428) to suggest that body count has less impact on changing behaviour than fear. Terrorism is primarily psychological warfare – a form of propaganda aimed at undermining the security and motivation of enemies.

The Global Terrorism Database defines terrorist acts as ‘the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation’. Fear, coercion and intimidation are psychological goals and not primarily concerned with physical casualties. But the spectacle of terrorism broadcast in the media frightens international audiences. Richardson (2006) thinks that the fear of terrorism increases when we do not know what terrorists want. She defines terrorists as ‘disaffected individuals’ who live in ‘enabling communities’ with a ‘legitimising ideology’ (xxii). They are seeking ‘revenge, renown, and reaction’ – the three Rs of terrorism. ‘[T]errorists are neither crazy nor amoral but rather rationally seeking to achieve a set of objectives within self-imposed limits’ (xxii). Richardson believes that most terrorists deliberate slowly about their objectives, while many nations respond quickly, with insufficient reflection on the actual threat. Silver recommends that those predicting terrorist incidents should look at the big picture by concentrating on the possibility of large-scale attacks with many casualties – spectacular terrorism. ‘No Israeli politician would say outright that he tolerates small-scale terrorism, but that’s essentially what the country does. It tolerates it because the alternative – having everyone terrorised by fear – is incapacitating and in line with the terrorists’ goals’ (2012: 441).

The difference between psychological anxiety about terrorism and the statistical probability of an attack on the scale of 9/11 or the London bombings of 2005 is a zone of uncertainty and speculation. ‘Where our enemies will strike us is predictable’, says Silver: ‘it’s where we least expect them to’ (444). This gap of uncertainty provides fertile ground for propaganda by governments and enterprises responsible for security. In *The Power of Nightmares* (2004), British filmmaker

Adam Curtis argues that politicians in many countries use terrorism's threat to promote fear and win elections. Increasingly, as terrorism becomes a 'fact of life', their fearful messages are not addressed to conscious minds, but to their unconscious depths.

Subliminal seduction revisited

The human mind is designed to be both a scientist and an attorney, both a conscious seeker of objective truth and an unconscious, impassioned advocate for what we want to believe. Together these approaches vie to create our worldview. (Mlodinow 2012: 200)

Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) and Key's *Subliminal Seduction* (1973) briefly inflamed the popular imagination with fears that politicians, advertisers and other compliance professionals use subliminal (unconscious) messages to influence audiences. Key's sensationalism likely contributed to a backlash against interest in subliminal techniques, though advances in neuroimaging have stimulated renewed interest. Leonard Mlodinow (2012) focuses on the layering of conscious and unconscious thinking to update notions of subliminal seduction and Freud's theories of the repressed unconscious.

In the new view, mental processes are thought to be unconscious because there are portions of the mind that are inaccessible to consciousness due to the architecture of the brain, rather than because they have been subject to motivational forces like repression. The inaccessibility of the new unconscious is not considered to be a defence mechanism, or unhealthy. It is considered normal. (Mlodinow 2012: 17)

Mlodinow revisits Lippmann's idea that stereotypes help us manage vast amounts of data in everyday experience. Stereotyping gains efficiency by categorising and polarising, transforming 'fuzzy differences and subtle nuances into clear-cut distinctions' (148). Stereotyping is a story we tell ourselves: 'Our subliminal minds take incomplete data, use context or other cues to complete the picture, make educated guesses, and produce a result that is sometimes accurate, sometimes not, but always convincing' (152).

We unconsciously absorb categories and stereotypes through literature, news, films, television, music, computer games and other forms of popular culture. In turn, these categories influence our attitudes and how we act in society. The Implicit Association Test hosted at Harvard (implicit.harvard.edu) reveals that unconscious, 'implicit' stereotyping

influences our feelings about affiliation and kinship. For example, membership in groups influences sensitivity to group norms, a willingness to collaborate and liking. People prefer to associate with in-group members they do not like more than with out-group members they do like. In-group members are perceived as more varied and talented than those in out-groups.

Increasingly, cognitive research emphasises the storytelling habit of mind. Both memory and vision are reconstructions made on the fly as we need them. Mlodinow uses the word 'confabulation' to describe 'the replacement of a gap in one's memory by a falsification that one believes to be true' (190). Similarly, the brain fills gaps in vision to construct a seamless illusion of the scene in front of us. We tell stories about what we are feeling and thinking, stitching together content originating from a shared cultural repository. People are predictably overconfident about their own narratives, but only recognise that tendency in others (Ariely [2008] 2010; Tavris and Aronson 2013). One study found that doctors diagnosing pneumonia in their patients were 88 per cent confident in their assessment, but only correct 20 per cent of the time (Mlodinow 2012: 198). Tetlock (2005) researched the accuracy of 284 experts making 28,000 predictions over a twenty-year period. Experts at all levels of experience rarely perform better than random chance in making predictions, yet remain decidedly overconfident, despite their poor record. Remarkably, the higher the forecaster's profile – based on the number of interviews given – the lower the record of success. Overconfidence leads to cognitive errors.

Motivated reasoning justifies a favoured conclusion, while asserting its objectivity (Kunda 1990). While it is biased in its beliefs, motivated reasoning does not consciously misinterpret facts. Belief in the argument is not constructed objectively in the first place and is seldom altered by opposing arguments. People hold tightly to their beliefs about religion, morality or politics not because they are insincere or dishonest. Their beliefs are based on unconscious biases and stereotypes easily recognised in others, but inaccessible to themselves. Motivated reasoning fills gaps of uncertainty to create stories to live by. In the UK, for example, 'half the population believes in heaven, but only about a quarter believes in hell' (Mlodinow 2012: 206). 'We choose the facts that we want to believe', concludes Mlodinow. Our confabulations push 'us in the direction of survival, and even happiness' (218).

Exercise questions

1. Illustrate Cialdini's 'weapons of influence' with examples from your own experience.
2. Write or film a short dialogue in which an expressive person with some form of power tries to gain compliance from a rhetorical communicator, who is polite, but not easily convinced.
3. Group project: identify and discuss the significant risks facing your society today. Try to identify the biases used to prioritise these risks.
4. Take the Implicit Association Test (implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/) and discuss the results in class. What did you learn about your unconscious associations?
5. Describe a situation in which fast thinking (System 1) results in a predictable cognitive error that can be corrected by slow (System 2) thinking.
6. Describe a situation where you see an availability cascade operating.
7. What arguments are used by your government to justify its policies on terrorism and security? Identify any gaps or abstractions in their rationale for these policies.
8. Describe a social group you belong to. How is membership determined? Who is excluded and why? How do you express loyalty to this group? What are the consequences of dissenting from group norms?



Figure 8 'Won't you accept this invitation?' Photo: M. Soules, Freiberg, 1998.