

Lesson 3b Psychological Factors

There are psychological factors that predispose the uninformed, misinformed or disinformed to ignore information or to accept or perpetuate disinformation.

- (1) Willful or deliberate ignorance: the conscious choice not to know.
 - a. There are varieties of willful ignorance, and they have both positive and negative dimensions.
 - b. Willful ignorance is different from self-deception because willful ignorance is always intentional, whereas self-deception is not: the willfully ignorant can recognize that they are willfully ignorant, whereas the self-deceived are typically not fully aware that they are self-deceived. Willful ignorance (being more conscious) is, therefore, more culpable than self-deception.
- (2) Information avoidance is not the same as willful ignorance and may not be the same as self-deception.
 - a. Information avoidance as “any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information” (Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 341).
 - b. Reasons for information avoidance include: the information may demand a change in one’s beliefs or an undesired action, or the information itself or the decision to learn information may cause unpleasant emotions or diminish pleasant emotions (p. 342).
- (3) There is a growing literature on the social psychology of gullibility, summarized by Forgas and Baumeister.
 - a. Gullibility is “a failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action” (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019, p. 2).
 - b. Gullibility can occur in one of two situations: “Either an individual’s beliefs are manifestly inconsistent with facts and reality, or an individual’s beliefs are at variance with social norms about reality” (p. 2).
 - c. The psychological foundation of gullibility “appears to be the universal human capacity for trust - to accept second-hand information we receive from others as a proxy for reality” (p. 5).
 - d. Forgas and Baumeister look at six psychological mechanisms of gullibility.
 - i. The search for patterns and meaning: because human beings want to make sense of reality, they often find patterns and causation where there is none. (p. 8).
 - ii. Acceptance bias: “the near-universal tendency for human beings to accept rather than reject information” (p. 9).
 - iii. The power of heuristics: “Human beings are more prone to believe interesting, captivating stories and narratives that are salient and easy to imagine” (p. 9).
 - iv. Overbelief in the self: we are prone to “self-serving biases and distortions” (p. 10).
 - v. Social mechanisms of gullibility: “all symbolic knowledge is socially constructed and shared. Comparing our views and ideas with the views and ideas of others is the way all symbolic reality is constructed” (p. 10).

- vi. Epistemological failures to monitor and correct. Human beings fail to monitor and evaluate incoming information correctly in terms of their logical merits (p. 11).

(4) Factors related to Trump supporters.

- a. Pettigrew (2017) outlines five factors that influence the uncritical acceptance of Trump by his supporters:
 - i. authoritarianism
 - ii. social dominance orientation (SDO, i.e., they prefer to associate only with socially dominant groups)
 - iii. prejudice
 - iv. low intergroup contact (i.e., a little familiarity with groups other than themselves)
 - v. relative deprivation (i.e., feeling that others are much better off than they are)
- b. Trump supporters are less motivated by perceived economic anxiety than a loss of status
- c. There is a diversity of motivations among Trump supporters: resentment, greed, power, need to significance, prejudice, with different supporters prioritizing different values.

Part of the problem of dealing with persons imbued with espousing or promoting fake news is that one tries to approach them rationally. Taking clues from the previous lesson, there are many psychological factors at play that enable the success of various forms of self-deception, where rational arguments do not work. The first factor is what is called willful ignorance, which is not a matter of accepting or promoting disinformation but ignoring information. Hertwig & Engle (2016) developed a taxonomy for deliberate ignorance: it is a device for, emotional regulation and regret avoidance, suspense and surprise maximization, performance enhancement, strategic behavior, impartiality and fairness, and cognitive sustainability and information management (pp. 361-364). While the authors do not answer the question about when this deliberate choice is right for the individual or society, it “is beneficial, rationally or ethically appropriate” (p. 365). Nevertheless, they are aware that there is a sinister side to it, “when it is used to evade responsibility, escape liability or defend anti-intellectualism” (p. 365). Gigerenzer & Garcia-Retamero (2017) agree that, contrary to the view that willful ignorance is irrational and counterintuitive, it has beneficial aspects in certain circumstances: when dealing with issues such as death and divorce as well as the pleasurable events (p. 195).

Kevin Lynch argues that willful ignorance is different from self-deception because willful ignorance is always intentional, whereas self-deception is not. The willfully ignorant can recognize that they are willfully ignorant, whereas the self-deceived are typically not fully aware that they are self-deceived. Willful ignorance (being more conscious) is, therefore, more culpable than self-deception. (Lynch, 2016, p. 521). Alicke (2017) agrees, arguing that willful ignorance tends to be more adaptive than self-deception, and is “a “cognitive strategy that people adopt to promote their emotional well-being,” whereas “self-deception is less controllable and more likely to be detrimental” (n.p.). Self-deception is less manageable (given its unconscious nature) because there are few resources to have the self-deceived face the truth.

Information avoidance is not the same as willful ignorance and may not be the same as self-deception. Sweeny et al. (2010) define information avoidance as “any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information” (p. 341). They suggest that the reasons

for information avoidance include: the information may demand a change in one's beliefs or an undesired action, or the information itself or the decision to learn information may cause unpleasant emotions or diminish pleasant emotions (p. 342). They note that these are not the only reasons for information avoidance. Golman, Hagmann, & Loewenstein (2017) take an approach that shares in some of the modes of self-deception. For the methods of information avoidance, they include physical avoidance, inattention, biased interpretation of information, forgetting and self-handicapping (choosing tasks that poorly match their capabilities) (pp. 99-104). The reasons they posit for the varieties of information avoidance share some of Hertwig & Engel's six motivations for deliberate ignorance (above): hedonically driven information avoidance (such as risk, loss and disappointment aversion, anxiety, regret aversion, optimism maintenance or dissonance avoidance); belief investments, such as intrapersonal strategic avoidance (e.g., resisting temptation, motivation maintenance, avoiding projection biases, or abdicating responsibility) or interpersonal strategic avoidance (pp. 104-120). Many of these methods of information avoidance or the varieties of information avoidance can provide the strategies of the disinformed to remain disinformed.

There are growing studies in social psychology on the phenomenon of gullibility. Gullibility is defined by Forgas and Baumeister (2019) as "a failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action" (p. 2). It is related to credulity, the tendency to accept assertions that are not supported by evidence. According to them, gullibility can occur in one of two situations: "Either an individual's beliefs are manifestly inconsistent with facts and reality, or an individual's beliefs are at variance with social norms about reality" (p.2). While the former would seem to challenge and deny those who believe in the flat earth or who believe that John Kennedy, Jr is alive and well and working with Trump (as QAnon theorists believe), the latter is harder to pin down. "We often use the term *gullible* to describe persons whose beliefs violate some consensual rather than scientific standard of how reality should be viewed" (p. 2). "As long as knowledge is incomplete and subject to future falsification, identifying gullibility is more a matter of consensual value judgment rather than a statement of inconvertible fact. Gullibility may thus often be a matter of perspective, residing in the eye of the beholder" (p. 3). Having said that, it seems clear, based on a consensual understanding, the balance of powers in the federal government is being undermined. What has aggravated matters is the rise of the internet. Before mass communication and self-publishing, there was

the privileged class of experts, truth-seekers, and truth-tellers who ... were institutionally established in our social systems and whose job was to discover and communicate the truth. They have now lost their privileged position and information monopoly. And now it seems that truth in public life is now also at risk (p. 5).

There is slippage in loyalty to national newspapers, which used to be arbiters of consensual truth, partly aggravated by claims by Trump that they publish fake news when their stories about him are critical.

Why are people gullible? According to Forgas and Baumeister,

One of the psychological foundations of gullibility, paradoxically, appears to be the universal human capacity for trust - to accept second-hand information we receive from others as a proxy for reality (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Indeed, our evolutionary history (Harari, 2014; Pinker,

2018; von Hippel, 2018) suggests that perhaps the most revolutionary cognitive development of our species occurred when we made the dramatic leap from being creatures who are bound by immediate reality to becoming creatures who can accept and act on consensual symbolic information or “memes” as if it was reality (Dawkins, 1976; Dennett, 2017). This ability to accept symbolic information from others and treat it as real is also one major foundation of all human cultural evolution (Harari, 2014). (p. 5).

The authors then look at the psychological mechanisms of gullibility. They present five: (1) Imagined causation or pattern recognition: because human beings want to make sense of reality, they often find patterns and causation where there is none. (p. 8). (2) Acceptance bias: “the near-universal tendency for human beings to accept rather than reject information” (p. 9). Information provided tends to be treated as true, and time and effort must be made to render it false. The authors add: “The acceptance bias shows how gullibility occurs when people are distracted by other information, emotion, or time pressure.” Given the din of hundreds of information channels and the emotionally charged political atmosphere, it is no surprise that people rally around a few sources. (3) Power of heuristics: “Human beings are more prone to believe interesting, captivating stories and narratives that are salient and easy to imagine (Kahneman & Tversky, 2000). When we are exposed to salient, frequent, and thus easily remembered information, due to a strange ‘mental bug’ in our information processing system, such information will also be seen as more true, reliable, and valid” (p.9). Coupled with the first two mechanisms, we can easily see the effect of Fox News or MSNBC or other news or social media channels. “Typically, what is familiar, readily available, salient, focal, representative and colorful captures our imagination and attention and is given far more credence than it deserves” (p. 9). (4) Overbelief in the self: related to the Dunning-Kruger effect (see Lesson on Cognitive Authorities), we are prone to “self-serving biases and distortions” (p. 10). People hold onto their beliefs considerably more than is warranted. (5) Social mechanisms of gullibility: “all symbolic knowledge is socially constructed and shared. Comparing our views and ideas with the views and ideas of others is the way all symbolic reality is constructed” (p.10). Perhaps grounding Dings’ assertions that in social self-deception, other people are a means to our self-deceptive processes, Forgas and Baumeister assert that “In an inherently ambiguous and uncertain environment, humans will spontaneously construct shared norms and standards that, however arbitrary, will impose a semblance of consensual order and predictability on their view of reality (Sherif, 1936)” (p. 10). Once these consensual norms are established, they are difficult to modify. When we think of the notion of consensual reality promoted by Fox News, all fostered by the previous psychological mechanisms, we can believe that their viewers’ notion of reality will be difficult to change, mainly because it is reinforced by so many channels: friends, colleagues, political associates, church fellowship members, social media, etc.

What others think and do continues to have a powerful normative influence on human behavior, even if those norms are not internalized, and indeed, disbelieved (Asch, 1951). It turns out that the very process of openly discussing divergent views about reality can be a mechanism that promotes the acceptance of more extreme and biased views, as the voluminous research on group polarization phenomena shows.... (p. 11).

The final psychological mechanism that Forgas and Baumeister consider is (6) Epistemological failures to monitor and correct. Human beings fail to monitor and evaluate incoming information correctly in terms of its logical merits, based on what Forgas and Baumeister call "metacognitive myopia," a failure to think about our thinking. Unfortunately, this is not a natural way in which human beings think, despite all the textbooks on formal logic and scientific successes built upon it. The lessons on logical fallacies and ethical principles were included in Lessons 8 and 9 to help address this issue.

In addition to the research on gullibility, there is also a significant amount of psychological literature dedicated to trying to understand the factors that influence supporters of Trump. Thomas Pettigrew's (2017) paper, "Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters," shines a light on this group. Without dismissing the political factors that may be at work or claiming that this list is exhaustive, he identifies an array of factors reflecting five major social psychological phenomena that account for the bulk of Trump supporters' devotion: authoritarianism, social dominance orientation (SDO, i.e., they prefer to associate only with socially dominant groups), prejudice, low intergroup contact (i.e., little familiarity with groups other than themselves), and relative deprivation (i.e., feeling that others are much better off than they are).

Pettigrew finds that many Trump supporters are attracted to authoritarian characters. Authoritarianism is characterized by such traits as "deference to authority, aggression toward outgroups [meaning any group with which the individual does not identify], a rigidly hierarchical view of the world, and resistance to new experience" (Pettigrew, 2017, p. 108). Authoritarians see the world as dangerous, and fear guides their response to it. While there is a debate among social psychologists about whether authoritarianism is a personality construct or a political ideology, Pettigrew argues that "there is no necessary conflict between these two perspectives" and that authoritarianism usually starts as a personality orientation, which then leads to an engagement with right-wing political ideology. From an authoritarian view, the motivation lies in fear, and the rhetoric of Trump provides fuel for the fire, which leads his supporters to consider him to be an authority of matters of American security, leading them to support him in his efforts to secure the borders against outgroups, including through family separation and a border wall between the United States and Mexico.

Pettigrew defines SDO as "an individual's preference for the societal hierarchy of groups and domination over lower-status groups" (p. 108). People who want to maintain the current social hierarchy have an SDO. They believe members of other groups are inferior to members of their own. People with strong SDO are "typically dominant, driven, tough-minded, disagreeable, and relatively uncaring seekers of power" (p. 108). Trump's assertions that he alone can solve the nation's problems and that those who oppose him are "losers" are good examples. Losers now include all newspapers and media who are critical of him, while Fox News, Republicans, and conservatives are winners. Trump's supporters embrace of authoritarianism and SDO also make them more likely to accept outright lying by commission or omission or by paltering a part of the morally acceptable behavior of politicians, according to research published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, by [Jonas De Keersmaecker](#) and [Arne Roets](#) of Ghent University in Belgium. This approach is generally more applicable to Republicans rather than to Democrats (De Keersmaecker & Roets, 2019).

Pettigrew's third factor points out that Trump supporters are anti-outgroup generally as well as anti-immigrant. In the 2016 election, Trump launched rhetorical attacks on immigrants, Mexicans, and Muslims. His actions in office have reinforced that stance: bans on entrants to

the country from certain Muslim countries, harsh restrictions for asylum seekers, the separation of children from their parents at the border as a measure to discourage immigration, and claiming that some white nationalists are “very fine people.” Support for Trump correlates highly with a standard scale of modern racism, which Trump has fully articulated in such remarks that Congresswomen Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna S. Pressley of Massachusetts and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, should go back to where they came from, making references to their ethnic origins, and by having his supporters at his rallies chant: “send her back” (Davis, 2019).

Pettigrew (p. 108) also observes that there is growing evidence that Trump's white supporters have little contact with groups other than their own. They have less experience with minorities such as Muslims, Mexicans, or even Black Americans, than other Americans. Low intergroup contact makes it easier to dismiss members of other groups as foreign, un-American, or inferior. Ignorance of others allows one to self-enforce negative stereotypes, as in Trump's references to immigrants as “animals” (Davis & Chokshi, 2018).

Pettigrew's fifth factor, relative deprivation, is particularly supportive of collective social self-deception. A myth arose after the 2016 election that Trump had won because he appealed to poor and unemployed people. However, Trump supporters were less likely than others to be unemployed, employed part-time, or looking for work. Moreover, those voters living in districts with more manufacturing were less inclined to vote for Trump. However, the original narrative rightly identified a sense of deprivation. It just failed to identify that this was a perception of deprivation, not its actuality. Trump supporters felt that other members of society were better off than they were and that their expectation of where they would be in life had been severely contracted.

In the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* of May 2018, Diane Mutz reports that Trump supporters are less motivated by perceived economic anxiety than loss of status. She says that their “changing preferences were related to changes in the [Republican] party's positions on issues related to American global dominance and the rise of a majority-minority America: issues that threaten white Americans' sense of dominant group status” (Mutz, 2018).

Trump supporters nurture resentment, perhaps less so for economic issues than for loss of status, which motivates their deception and self-deception. Hours of Fox News and social media sites denigrating “welfare queens,” welfare programs, the more frequent appearance of minorities on media, and the media's and advertising's version of what an ordinary American home is supposed to be like are fanning the flames. Trump supporters feel impotent to regain their dominant position as white people, but feel they can gain potency through elevating their in-group by supporting someone who promises to defend the existing social hierarchy. They feel that they are victims of the forces of politics, corporations, education, and demographic shifts, and the president's focus on those themes makes them feel empowered. Trump's notion of self-empowerment ironically lies beside his claim that they have little power, but the irony appears to elude them.

Tobin Smith, a former Fox News Commentator, suggests that their programming fosters an addictive process based on resentment to:

- Understand the elderly white conservative viewer’s pre-tribal mindset, which is a compilation of their resentments, indignations, cultural values, religious values, political values, racial perspectives, regional outlooks, and worldviews.
- Scare or outrage the crap out of viewers by boring down on a recently exposed tribal nerve like a psychic dentist with a drill, presenting a heresy or an innately scary image of non-white/ non-Christian foreigners, immigrants, or terrorists doing horrible things.
- Produce each seven-minute rigged outcome opinion-debate segment around the carefully selected partisan heresy such that the “fair and balanced” debate is massively rigged for the conservative pundits on the program to . . .
- Deliver the climactic and righteous rhetorical victory for the partisan right-wing viewer to trigger the jolt of dopamine and serotonin that the addict anticipated and knew was coming.” (Smith, 2019, pp. 474-475)

In this lesson, we see that there are many psychological factors that affect or predispose whether someone accepts information or ignores or avoids it, how we are gullible with respect to it, and how we are susceptible to social and collective forms of enforcement or reinforcement with streams of information or avoidance of streams of information. We looked at some of the issues that drive the motivations of Trump supporters.

Exercise suggestions will call on participants to consider the following questions:

- (1) Can you remember the occasions in which you were gullible? Can you sort out which psychological mechanism(s) may have been involved: the search for patterns and meaning, acceptance bias, the power of heuristics, overbelief in the self, social mechanisms of gullibility, or epistemological failures to monitor and correct?
- (2) Quackery has long been a form of attraction to the gullible. During the coronavirus outbreak, two examples are Jim Baker, a televangelist, promoted the use of a silver solution for curing or preventing the disease and Trump recommend the injection or ingestion of bleach or disinfectant. Look at <http://quackwatch.com> , and so an analysis of popular quackery over the years. Where is the notion of “snake oil salesman” come from? See Quackery: A Brief History of the Worst Ways to Cure Everything by Lydia Kang MD, Nate Pedersen (1917). Find CBS Qackery clip.
- (3) Can you find a few well-founded psychological studies that show how the misinformed or disinformed engage in one or more of the following behaviors to maintain their ignorance, disinformation, or self-deception?
 - a. Sustaining oneself in ignorance - deliberately choosing not to know.
 - b. Preexisting attitudes and the continued influence of misinformation or disinformation, in a manner of confirmation bias.
 - c. Information avoidance.
 - d. Misperceptions: understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics.
 - e. The role of cognitive ability on the impact of false information on social impressions.
 - f. Use of social media to increase racist behavior.
 - g. Self-deception as a function of social status.

- h. In addition to the study above, psychological studies regarding Donald Trump's supporters (or any other cult or cultish leader).
- i. Unfalsifiability (the practice by which people, when confronted with facts, reframe an argument in a way that makes it impossible to test to validate their viewpoint).

Discuss and evaluate the following article in terms of psychological concerns: Kolbert, Elizabeth (2017). "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds," *The New Yorker*, February 27, 2017.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds>