SUMMARY

THE CONFIDENCE GAME

MARIA KONNIKOVA

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Summary of “The Confidence Game” by Maria Konnikova

Written by Alyssa Burnette

The Confidence Game (2016) lays bare the psychology behind pyramid schemes, get-rich-quick scams, and every other con artist trick in the book to help us understand why we so easily fall prey to manipulators.

Introduction

Have you ever read headlines of such notorious scams as the Bernie Madoff scandal and thought, “How can people be so stupid! I would never fall for that!” But have you ever considered that that’s probably just what those con artists’ victims used to think? Because the truth is, everybody has a weak spot that can be exploited; yours just might be different from someone else’s. Fortunately, however, by learning about the personal and psychological weaknesses con artists manipulate, you can understand how they operate and how to keep yourself safe. And that’s what you’ll learn through the course of this summary!

In fact, whether you want to protect yourself or maybe learn how you too can influence people to do what you want, this summary will analyze the steps that tricksters take. (Although we really hope you won’t use this advice to steal anybody’s life savings. That’s not cool). So, let’s take a look at these next few chapters together and learn how:

- You should probably be grateful that you can’t read your partner’s mind
- How an optimistic mindset turned a professor into a criminal and
- How one little boy scammed the entire United States

The Power of Observation

How observant are you really? When you're on a crowded train or in a busy airport, do you ever find yourself looking around and making up hypotheses about who people are and what their lives are like? You might watch a couple fighting and speculate about whether they're newlyweds having their first argument or long term partners on the brink of divorce. Little clues like power heels and a sharp business suit might encourage you to believe that the woman striding down the hall is perhaps very important. You might find yourself speculating about her career. CEO? Lawyer? What kind of meeting is she on her way to? These can be fun little games to play with ourselves, but they also reveal an important truth about human nature: we pay a lot of attention to surface cues, but often decline to delve deeper and find out too much about a person.

Why? Well, psychologist Jeffrey Simpson posited that it's because getting too close to people can reveal uncomfortable truths, even-- or perhaps especially-- when it comes to close relationships. The more we learn about people, the more we're able to tell if they might find us boring or if they're being disingenuous towards us and that's painful to discover. So, sometimes we unconsciously turn a blind eye to emotional cues that might give us a deeper understanding of someone else. This proved especially true in one of Simpson's studies in which he asked married couples to watch video footage of each other discussing something on which they disagreed. As they watched, each partner was asked to write down their own feelings and to speculate about what their partner was feeling. Through this exercise, Simpson found that couples who were less successful at intuiting each other's feelings or "reading their partner's mind" reported higher levels of happiness than those who could do this more accurately.

However, accurately reading someone's emotional state and identifying their weaknesses is crucial for the success of a con artist or "confidence

trickster." The case of Debra Saalfield is a prime example of this, because in 2008, Debra went to see a psychic. Having lost both her job and her boyfriend at pretty much the same time, Debra was feeling vulnerable, hurt, and confused, and the psychic picked up on that before Debra even said a word. The psychic's expert read on body language enabled her to manipulate Debra into writing her a check for $27,000 under the misguided belief that this woman actually had her best interest at heart.

Con Artists Establish Trust

However, there's more to the process of manipulating someone than simply identifying their vulnerabilities. In order to successfully manipulate, a con artist also has to gain their victim's trust, as illustrated by the case of Debra and her psychic. So, what does that look like in practice? Well, if you've ever known someone whose presence can light up a room, who seems to draw everyone to them with an almost magnetic appeal, you've already have a little taster of what this looks like. That's because these people have strong charisma-- the ability to seem likeable and trustworthy-- and although that can often be used for good, as in the case of strong leaders or motivational speakers, this skill can also be manipulated for the purpose of hurting others.

Take, for example, a woman named Joan who Konnikova interviewed as she was crafting this book. Joan had fallen in love with a man named Greg who seemed perfect in every way. He was attentive. He was kind. He even helped Joan remodel her kitchen and care for her sick grandmother, all out of the kindness of his heart! These factors all came together as evidence for Joan that he had to be a truly good person and wouldn't hurt her. But despite all this evidence, Joan couldn't shake the feeling that there was something "off" about Greg. For one thing, he didn't have any friends or family and his explanations for that didn't quite add up. Then, when Joan attempted to call him at work, the office where he allegedly worked had no idea who he was. As more and more holes appeared in Greg's story, Joan soon realized that her seemingly perfect boyfriend had spent two years charming her into believing a lie.

If you now find yourself wondering how that can happen and why people fall for these deceptions, it may help to take a look at a study conducted by psychologist Lisa DeBruine. DeBruine's research interests are concentrated on the psychology of similarity and how con artists employ this to fake a

connection with their victims. She tested this through a study in which she asked participants to work together on a group project with a virtual teammate. Interestingly, her results showed that the project was likely to be more successful if the photo of the virtual teammate had been altered to look like the participant. This proves that people are drawn to those they perceive as being similar to themselves and that they're more likely to trust people with whom they have a lot in common.

That's kind of a no-brainer when you think about it because we all enjoy meeting people who share our interests. But con artists know that similarity can be mimicked for manipulative purposes. Often, in order to inspire a sense of trust, they will create a perception of false commonalities by pretending to share someone else's interests or values. This can be scarily effective because human beings are often so subconsciously egotistical that, after learning someone has the same taste as us, we automatically like or trust them a little more. And that's exactly where the danger begins.

The Classic Tricks of Con Artists

We've all been stopped on the street by someone seeking to raise awareness about a cause. Maybe it's a local high-school kid handing out fliers for their fundraiser or a volunteer for an environmental group, but if you're like most people, you probably try to pretend you don't see them as you walk past. Why? Because you know that if you take time out of your day to get engaged in a conversation about a cause, you'll probably feel compelled to do something about it and most of us don't want to pause our busy lives for a philanthropic side-quest. Con artists know that too, and one of their primary techniques for manipulating you is built on the understanding that if you can get people to agree to a small favor-- like pausing for a moment to hear what someone has to say or giving a small donation-- it's much easier to get them to agree to bigger favors down the road.

This has been proven by a study conducted at Stanford University in 1966, in which researchers discovered that stay-at-home moms were 30% more likely to spend two hours on the phone answering questions in a survey if they had previously agreed to take a moment and answer "just a few questions." This is what's known as the "foot in the door" strategy and it's what con artists employ all the time. One of the best examples of this in practice can be traced all the way back to the year 1900 and the case of a newspaper ad that "went viral" even in that era's limited technology. The ad featured a plea from someone who said their name was Bill Morrison; he was a Nigerian prince looking for American pen-pals. That doesn't sound so bad, right? And because that's what pretty much everyone else who read his ad thought, he garnered quite a few pen pals very quickly. He also got quite a few people to comply with his seemingly innocent request to send him $4.00 in exchange for a few rare jewels from Nigeria.

As you've probably already figured out, the gems never reached his pen-pals. But with multiple people all across the United States sending him

$4.00 at a time, in the economy of 1900, that really started to add up. It also generated enough national concern for many of those people to complain, and when they finally got the police to investigate it, they discovered that "Bill Morrison the Nigerian prince" was, in fact, a 14-year-old American boy who had cooked up the scheme for fun. So, while this enterprising teen may have only bilked a few people out of $4.00, his story just goes to show you that once a con artist gets their foot in door via a small request, they have the opportunity to go farther and cause more significant damage.

They might also attempt another strategy like leading with an unreasonable request and then backing down until they find a smaller favor you are willing to commit to. One great example of this can be seen in the case of England's Lady Worcester who, in 1990, was holding a charity auction to support ethical pig farming practices. During the course of the auction, she was approached by a man she'd never met or even heard of before who claimed to be a nobleman. This struck her as suspicious, given that it was highly unlikely for her to not at least be aware of other members of the English gentry. His offer for her to come visit him at his country home in Monaco was equally suspicious and she wisely declined. However, fearing to appear rude, she did accept his $4,000 check for a bronze pig sculpture, remarking that she wouldn't want to offend him by rejecting him a second time. But as you've probably already guessed, the check never cleared.

Con Artists Play on Their Victims' Needs

Whether in real life or in parodies, we've all seen them: people who think they look so cool and confident while the rest of the world laughs at them behind their backs. And of course, as we watch, the primary question in our mind is, "Who do they think they're fooling?! How do they not see what they look like?!" But though we may not want to consider that thought, the truth is that this might even happen to us far more often than we'd like to admit. Chances are, we've all looked deeply ridiculously without realizing it because people don't always have the greatest powers of self-perception.

And to make matters worse, con artists are experts at pinpointing our blind spots. Just take a look at one example from a 2012 case of an otherwise very intelligent university professor. When he was 68 years old, this man-- whose entire life centered on the pursuit of knowledge and reason-- fell for a picture of a beautiful model he saw on the internet. Although the two exchanged some instant messages online, they never spoke on the phone or saw each other on Skype. He possessed no proof that she was real. And yet, despite all this, he immediately agreed to jump on a plane and meet her in Bolivia. But of course, things didn't go as planned.

The first red flag popped up when he arrived and received word that his date couldn't meet him because she'd had to jet off for an emergency photoshoot in Brussels. The second occurred when she said she'd left in such a hurry as to forget her suitcase and asked him to please bring it to her. If you've ever watched a movie or spent any time on the internet at all, hopefully you're groaning as you brace for the inevitable cringe-y outcome. More importantly, I hope each reader has already identified the fact that this poor professor made every classic internet mistake in the book. And if so, you've probably already seen it coming: the part where it turns out that her "lost suitcase" is filled with two kilograms of cocaine and the professor is arrested for drug smuggling.

Now, the moral of this story might be internet safety, but more aptly, it might be to cultivate awareness of our blindspots. Because the primary reason this poor professor was deceived was because he was so full of self-confidence, he never stopped to question why a 30-year-old model he'd never met would be so interested in him. And although confidence is a wonderful thing and we all need a healthy dose of it, it's equally important that we become aware of our own failings in our self-perception so we can prevent people from taking advantage of us. Because we might not know a lot about human psychology or how it can be applied to us-- but con artists know a lot.

How Con Artists Fool Their Victims

If you think back to scandals like the Bernie Madoff scam we mentioned earlier, it might be helpful to alter the questions you ask. Because instead of asking, "Why are people stupid enough to fall for that?" the question you should be asking is, "What makes people gravitate towards con artists?" The simplest answer, as illustrated by the cases of Joan's con artist boyfriend Greg, Debra Schaalfield, and the Lady of Worcester, is that people are drawn in by an illusion of success! And while of course, it stands to reason that we'd be attracted to people who seem to be charming and successful, the root of that attraction actually goes deeper than we might think.

In fact, our eagerness to believe in a con artist's scheme stems from the fact that people are naturally inclined to be optimistic about the future-- sometimes, too optimistic. That's why con artists are also frequently referred to as "confidence tricksters," because they're able to tap into our inherent optimism and confidence and exploit it for personal gain. A psychology survey conducted in the 1990s confirmed this when it found that all college students overestimated how happy they would be in their upcoming semester by 10-20%, including their estimations of how well their grades would turn out, how successful their relationships would be, and the amount of positive experiences they would have. That eagerness to believe that things are going to work out for us is one of humanity's most beautiful traits. But it's also how we fall prey to manipulators.

The victims of William Miller knew that only too well, because in 1889, Miller asked each of his friends to donate $10 to his business as start-up capital. He told them he could guarantee that his business would generate a weekly return of 10% on their investment, and of course his friends all signed up, with many even inviting others to join in on the get-rich-quick scheme. And because they trusted in their friend and were eager to make more money, they had no idea that these "investments" had never existed in

the first place! Rather, Miller was using each new “donation” to pay the weekly returns to the previous round of investors; his only aim was to keep this scheme going for as long as he could by recruiting a fresh batch of donors.

Our Commitment to Our Beliefs Can Hurt Us

If it's starting to sound like every possible good character trait can lead you into a trap, that's because it's true. Sadly, each of humanity's most endearing qualities-- compassion, generosity, hope-- can be manipulated by those who seek to abuse them. And the same is true of our commitment to our personal beliefs. That's because our beliefs-- whether they're religious, political, or simply tied to the way we see the world-- are something deeply personal to us and we're not eager to be talked out of them. Con artists know this and often use it for their advantage on the principle that sometimes, when people have an experience that contradicts their beliefs, they'll cling to those beliefs even if it means suppressing the experience.

Psychologist Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance can help us explain this behavior. Coined in 1957, this theory suggests that a conflict between our beliefs and reality can be so stressful that we're willing to distort our view of reality so that it can continue to encompass our beliefs, Festinger first began formulating this theory after conducting some research on a cult who believed the end of the world was fast approaching and that only a chosen few would be spared by an alien spaceship. But when the date of their alleged Armageddon passed without the end of the world occurring, so far from giving up their beliefs, the cult realigned reality with their worldview by choosing to believe that their powerful meditation had prevented the apocalypse altogether.

And although most of us (hopefully) aren't crazed cult members, the same is still true for everyone. We may not do it consciously, but once we trust someone or make up our minds that the world works in a certain way, we often resist all evidence which disproves our chosen beliefs. Con artists, in turn, use this to reinforce our trust in them and ensnare us tighter in their web.

What's in a Reputation?

Let's pretend for a moment that you're a detective. You've just solved a major case and earned a significant promotion that's lead to you being heralded as the city's hero. That is, until a rookie officer approaches you with evidence of a major detail you've overlooked. The discovery of this information might change the case's outcome entirely. Your criminal could go free, the victims' families wouldn't get closure, and you'd definitely lose your promotion. But the young officer has a solution: as long as you promote him, he won't share this information. Would you do it? According to the results of a survey which interviewed people presented with this hypothetical, you probably wouldn't. That's because our personal reputation is one of the most valued facets of our identity and we're reluctant to damage it.

In fact, we care so much about our perception in the eyes of others that psychologist Robin Dunbar's 1997 study revealed that 65% of all conversations revolve around gossip. More than almost any other topic, we're concerned with how other people behave, how we behaved, and what other people thought about it, which reveals that our reputation is one of the biggest concerns in our lives. A good reputation is also, in essence, a shortcut for gaining people's trust even if they don't know us personally, which is why it can be a valuable social commodity. It can also be a great tool for con artists as evidenced by a highly effective scam from 1915.

Around this time, a rumor was started that Queen Elizabeth had an illegitimate son with Sir Francis Drake and that a descendant of this son was now fighting a legal battle to reclaim the money that had been stolen from Drake's ship in the sixteenth century as an inheritance. Potential investors were promised that anyone who paid to cover the legal fees would be given a share of the inheritance once it was restored and this potential attracted over seventy thousand investors. However, when the promised investment

was never returned, not one of the seventy thousand victims spoke out. Why? Because each was afraid of being considered foolish for falling for this scheme and feared the loss of their reputation.

Final Summary

Confidence tricksters are everywhere and none of us are immune to being taken in by them. But that doesn't make us weak or unintelligent and it doesn't mean that we should attempt to suppress the qualities which make us easy prey like generosity, kindness, and a willingness to trust. But it does mean that we should be smart and cultivate an awareness of our blind spots so we can identify which aspects of our personality con artists might take advantage of.