

ONE

The Illusion of Invulnerability

Or, How Can Everyone Be Less Gullible Than Everyone Else?

They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist . . .

—General John B. Sedgwick (Union army Civil War officer's last words,
uttered during the Battle of Spotsylvania, 1864)

It was January 1984 and I was on the lookout for Big Brother. Being a social psychologist—one who researches mind control, no less—I'd been pumping up for George Orwell's banner year for some time. In a few weeks, I would be offering a special course called "The Social Psychology of 1984." That morning, I'd been preparing my outline.

I wanted my students to become familiar with the despots. How might unwitting victims defend against tyrants like O'Brien, the party spokesperson in *1984*, who tells us, "You are imagining that there is something called human nature which will be outraged by what we do and will turn against us. But we create human nature. Men are infinitely malleable"? Grr!

We would hunt down Big Brothers. I reread the opening page of Orwell's novel:

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith . . . , who was thirty-nine, and had a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, went slowly, resting several times on the way. On each landing, opposite the lift shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran.¹

I'd begin with the obvious totalitarian monsters. There were Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini. I was moving my way down the list when the doorbell rang. Damn. No doubt it was the pushy, scam-artist salesman I'd heard so much about from my neighbors. I walked to the door. Big Brother's image (as I recalled it from an old magazine illustration, at least) was in my mind's eye and the music from the shower scene in *Psycho* was playing in my ears. I put on my best natural-born-killer stare and ripped open the door. But, alas, it was Mario, a sweet young gentleman who—I'd completely forgotten—had an appointment to clean my chimney. Mario jumped back, frightened, and courteously asked if he had come at a bad time. I apologized for my rudeness and invited him in.

This was the first time Mario had worked for me. We'd met just a few days earlier at a children's soccer game. I liked Mario at once. He was soft-spoken, un-self-centered, and had a clever sense of humor—just the sort of person I find easy to talk with. It turned out we had quite a bit in common. Both of us were recent fathers. We'd traveled to many of the same places. We knew some of the same people. To cap off my attraction, when I revealed my occupation and that I sometimes wrote for popular magazines, Mario excitedly recalled reading one of my articles a little while back. In fact, he still talked to friends about it. When I learned that Mario worked as a chimney sweep—I knew that my fireplace was long overdue for maintenance—I hired him on the spot.

After recovering from my nasty greeting at the door, I left Mario to his task and returned to working on my Big Brother list. Let's see, we should certainly study Mao Tse-tung, or should I call him Mao Zedong? Then, after these hall of fame dictators, we'll move on to recent clones—maybe Idi Amin, Mu'ammar Gadhafi, Saddam Hussein. An hour later, I was getting around to the Svengali-like cult leaders. I could start with Charles Manson, then Jim Jones, and . . .

Mario called out to announce he was finished. After I inspected his work, Mario handed me the bill. It was a few dollars less than our agreed-upon amount. "The job was easier than I expected," he proudly explained. Was this a good man or what?

"But," he added, "I had a problem requiring action. There was damage on several bricks that posed a serious fire hazard." Apparently only one known chemical, something known informally in the trade as brikono, would correct the problem. Unfortunately, brikono was very expensive. It had just jumped in price, and was now listing for a

“criminal” \$200 a quart. Even worse, it was very hard to find at any price. But he made me promise I’d call around for at least two quarts before lighting the fireplace. I thanked Mario. We said good-bye. He got into his truck.

A few moments later he was back at my door with a big smile on his face. “I found two quarts of brikono in the back of my truck,” he said. “They’re the last of my old batch. You can have them for the old price—\$125 apiece.” I inquired about his fee for the work. “How about I just put it on for free and you can owe me one?” he answered. I wrote out a check on the spot. The job took all of twenty minutes.

Two days later I was again hard at work on my Big Brother hit list. At the moment I was considering whether to add a category for terrorist psychopaths. We could study the Boston Strangler and then the Hillside Strangler and . . .

Suddenly I thought of Mario, and—as EST guru Werner Erhard, yet another master of manipulation, would say—I *got it*. I phoned the chimney-sweep company. They’d never heard of Mario. I tried the soccer league commissioner. Same answer. I called my bank. Sorry, my check had been cashed. Two hundred fifty dollars’ worth of brikono?

Suckered again.

Looking back, I suppose my \$250 were well spent. One of the most successful means for building resistance to mind control is early, controlled exposure to the tricks we’re likely to encounter. Two hundred fifty dollars may not have been the cheapest of inoculations, but who knows how much the next Mario would have cost me. My dose was hardly a permanent cure—I’m forever surprised by my gullibility—but it has led me to sound the danger alarm that much sooner on many warranted occasions.

More important, Mario expanded my vision of mind control. “The Social Psychology of 1984,” it became clear, needed to become much more than a hunt for Big Brothers. In today’s world they are the least of our problems because we usually recognize them. We know who and what we’re dealing with. It’s the people we’re unprepared for who present the greatest threat. The fast-talking salesman puts us on alert. But the nice guys, the friendly thieves who sell beneath the threshold of our awareness, put us at their mercy.

The psychology of persuasion emanates from three directions: the characteristics of the source, the mind-set of the target person, and the psychological context within which the communication takes place.

Think of it as them, you, and—as Martin Buber called it—the between. Any or all of the three can tilt the power balance either toward or against you. If the latter occurs, you're vulnerable.

Mario had me going on all three fronts. First, I was seduced by his appeal as a person—his nonthreatening, trustworthy, family-man come-on. Second, his patient, careful arrangement of the context made the unreasonable appear reasonable. The context, this matter of the between, is a complicated one. How it impacts people encompasses much of the domain of my field of social psychology, and of this book. If Mario hadn't built up slowly to his brikono pitch—if he'd come on a "cold call," as it's known in the trade; or, if I'd met Mario in another context (Sing Sing would have been nice)—his pitch might have been laughable. But, as my grandmother used to say, if I had four wheels I'd be a bus. Finally, Mario had the good fortune to walk in when my mind-set—watching for ominous Big Brothers—had me ridiculously disarmed for his amiable assault.

Psychological disarmament is what often sets the stage for persuasion. One of life's crueler ironies is that we're most vulnerable at those very moments when we feel in least danger. Unfortunately, the illusion of invulnerability pretty well defines our resting state. Even when there is no manipulative outsider pulling our strings, most of us have a tendency to view our futures with unrealistic optimism. Studies have shown that people generally approach the threats of life with the philosophy that bad things are more likely to happen to other people than to themselves. With uncanny faulty logic, most people will tell you they're less prone to become victims than everyone around them.

Our perception of immunity casts a wide net. Studies have found, for example, that people will tell you they're considerably less at risk than other people when it comes to disease, death, divorce, unwanted pregnancy, work and jobs, and natural disasters.

Disease. Most people believe they're less likely than others to be stricken by diseases—everything ranging from pneumonia and lung cancer to senility and tooth decay.² The ratio of individuals who believe they're less at risk than the average person to those who say they're more at risk is 2 to 1 for lung cancer, 3 to 1 for influenza, 5 to 1 for pneumonia, 7 to 1 for food poisoning, and 9 to 1 for asthma. In some cases, there may be some sensibility to this perceived immunity. When people say (as almost everyone does) that they are less likely to develop lung cancer, for example, perhaps they're actually taking

precautions to prevent this disease. In many cases, however, the people who are most at risk are the ones most convinced of their immunity. In an Australian study, for example, an overwhelming number of smokers said their own risk of developing heart disease, lung cancer, and other smoking-related diseases is significantly less than that of other smokers. Another study, this one in the United States, followed smokers who went through a smoking-cessation clinic. Those who relapsed midway through the program actually gave lower estimates of their smoking risks than they'd given at the beginning of the program. In yet another U.S. survey, it was found that only a small minority of smokers (17 percent) believed the tar level of their cigarette brand was higher than average.³

Death. Most people are convinced they have a better chance of living past eighty than the next person. In one study, college students (the maestros of perceived invulnerability—take it from a professor), after being informed the average age of death in the United States is seventy-five, went on to estimate their own age of death at, on average, eighty-four years.⁴

Divorce. The current divorce rate in the United States hovers around 50 percent. But if you ask single or currently married people, it seems the next victim is always going to be someone else. In one large survey, people who had recently applied for marriage licenses estimated, with impressive accuracy, that about half of all marriages made in the United States today will end in divorce. But when asked about the probability of their own marriage dissolving, the median estimate was exactly 0 percent.⁵

Should the impossible happen, and their marriages don't work out, respondents were just as unreasonably optimistic about how they'd be affected. More than 40 percent of men expected to get primary custody of the children if they divorced, even though the same men estimated that children live primarily with their divorced fathers only 20 percent of the time. Women, on average, estimated that 80 percent of divorced mothers have primary custody of their children, but more than 95 percent of them expected this to be the case if they divorced. Women estimated (very optimistically) that 40 percent of divorcing women are awarded alimony, but 81 percent of them were confident they would get it if they asked. And those deadbeat fathers we read about? Not in any of these homes. Women estimated (fairly accurately) that some 40 percent of parents who are awarded child support actually receive all

their payments. But, if they were the ones awarded support, 98 percent of the women were sure their spouse would pay up faithfully.

Unwanted pregnancy. Sexually active women college students, asked to compare themselves to peers, said they were 34 percent as likely to get pregnant as other coeds, 21 percent as likely as other women their age, and 20 percent as likely as average American women of childbearing age.⁶

Work and jobs. College students say their colleagues are over 42 percent more likely to end up with lower starting salaries than they are, 44 percent less likely to end up owning their own home, and 50 percent less likely to be satisfied with their postgraduation job. People in general believe they're 32 percent less likely to get fired from their jobs than are other people.⁷

Natural disasters. In a survey of people living in California's high-risk earthquake areas, respondents underestimated the likelihood of a major quake occurring in the next two decades by 27 percent.⁸ In another survey, people who had experienced the devastating 7.1 earthquake that struck northern California in 1989 were asked to estimate the likelihood that they and other people would be seriously hurt by a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, in the future. Three days after experiencing the quake, the obviously shaken survivors had turned pessimistic: they said they were more likely to be seriously hurt by a future disaster than were other people. But when questioned again three months later, the same survivors had returned to their old illusions of invulnerability: they believed the likelihood they'd be hurt in the future was significantly less than that of either the average student or the average person living in their area.⁹

And the list goes on. Studies show we underestimate our own chances of being victimized by everything from being sued to getting mugged to tripping and breaking a bone to becoming sterile. "All men think all men are mortal but themselves," as poet Edward Young wrote.¹⁰

I'm not saying our illusion of invulnerability is cast in stone. Hardly. Studies show, for example, that when someone close to us is victimized, we often flip 180 degrees, now becoming unrealistically pessimistic about what may happen to us. This is especially true when the victim seems at all similar to ourselves. If someone your age drops dead of a heart attack, and you hear that person lived the same lifestyle and ate the same diet you do, I challenge you *not* to consider your own vulnerability.

There are also vast individual differences in the voracity of our beliefs. Some individuals are obviously as chronically pessimistic about the future as others are optimistic. (“How do you know the sky has fallen?” asked Henny Penny. “I saw it with my eyes,” said Chicken Little. “I heard it with my ears. And a piece of it fell on my poor little head.”) It’s notable that the most severe pessimists often grasp their vulnerability most clearly. In one study, for example, clinically depressed and psychologically normal people were asked to surmise what others thought about them. The depressed group, it turned out, more accurately judged the impression they made than did the normals. People in the normal group tended to have inflated images of themselves.¹¹ Depressives, it seems, must forgo the comfort of self-enhancing, selective blindness.

Nor does the illusion of personal invulnerability seem to be hard-wired at birth. It’s telling that there are cultural differences. Down-playing one’s vulnerability doesn’t sit very well, for example, in group-focused cultures like those throughout much of Asia, where your personal well-being is less important than the prosperity of the larger collective. For example, studies in Japan—arguably the crown jewel of group-oriented cultures—have found that people there rate their own likelihood of encountering serious future problems—disease, divorce, academic failure, and the like—as about the same as for their compatriots.¹² In many ways, in fact, the Japanese go out of their way to avoid overoptimism about their own futures. In a national public opinion poll taken in 1990 by the Japanese Cabinet Public Information Office, only a small minority (23.4 percent) of people in Japan said they expected to be better off in the future than they are now. And this was before the subsequent downturn in the Japanese economy.¹³

In the West, however, the illusion of invulnerability is the prevailing norm. A 1998 Gallup Poll found Americans’ expectations about the quality of their future “at all-time highs, well above any ratings previously recorded by Gallup” over the past thirty-four years. The survey reported that 72 percent of Americans expected to be having “the best possible life” for themselves, or close to it, five years from now; however, only 26 percent said their lives had been nearly that good five years earlier.¹⁴

The illusion is remarkably resilient. Two weeks after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, 53 percent of Americans said they were somewhat or very worried that

they or a family member would be the victim of a future attack. By January, the figure had shrunk to 38 percent.¹⁵ A poll taken six months after the attacks was even more revealing: 52 percent of American believed it was somewhat or very likely that there would be new terrorist attacks in the United States over the coming several weeks, but only 12 percent said there would likely be attacks in their own community.¹⁶

If we can convince ourselves we're immune to natural events like disease and earthquakes, it should be no surprise we also believe ourselves capable of controlling mere psychological forces like social influence and persuasion. In fact, when it comes to social behavior, we carry an added illusion about ourselves: that our very personalities render us better armed than our neighbors to resist manipulation. Research unequivocally shows that people—once again, particularly westerners—typically believe they're stronger and more capable than their peers. We rate ourselves as above average on a long and diverse list of desirable characteristics, ranging from intelligence and personal competence to leadership and social skills.¹⁷

My students Nathanael Fast and Joseph Gerber and I studied how the better-than-average illusion applies to persuasion.¹⁸ We began by asking subjects to rate how strongly various personality characteristics were related to vulnerability to psychological manipulation. The highest-rated characteristics were then presented to 268 university and community college students, who were asked to compare themselves to other students their age and gender on each.¹⁹ The better-than-average effect appeared in almost every case:

- Fifty percent of students said they're less naive than the average student their age and gender; only 22 percent said they're more naive than average.
- Forty-three percent said they're less gullible than average; only 25 percent believed they're more gullible than average.
- Forty-six percent rated themselves less conforming than average; only 16 percent said they're more conforming than average.
- Seventy-four percent described themselves as more independent than average; less than a tenth as many (7 percent) rated themselves less independent.
- Sixty-three percent said they're above average in self-confidence; only a fifth as many (13 percent) said they're less self-confident.

- Fifty-five percent said they're more assertive than their average peer; only 15 percent said they're less assertive.

People also told us they possess special knowledge and skills that protect them from unwanted persuasion:

- Seventy-seven percent said they're more aware than average of how groups manipulate people; only 3 percent said they're below average.
- Sixty-one percent said they're more knowledgeable about methods of deception than their average peer, compared to 11 percent who said they're below average.
- Sixty-six percent believe they have above-average critical-thinking skills, compared to 5 percent who said they're below average.

In the world of perception, we're a lot like the citizens of Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, a place "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average." And so, of course, bad things are not going to happen to us.

There are, of course, vast individual differences in the better-than-average effect. Some people have the opposite problem—a tendency to focus on their shortcomings and deny their strengths. The effect may also vary depending on the situation. But what's most remarkable is how generalized the bias is: it's the norm—as in "normal"—in our culture to think we're more capable than the next person of fending off undesirable persuasion.

How do otherwise intelligent people convince themselves, in defiance of all odds, that they're more competent than everyone else? Social psychologists call the process the fundamental attribution error. When asked to explain *other* people's problems, we have an uncanny tendency to assign blame to inner qualities: to their personality traits, emotional states, and the like. If I hear you've been suckered by a salesman, I conclude it's because you're easily deceived. When it comes to ourselves, however, we usually blame it on features of the situation. If I get suckered, it's because the salesman rushed me or conned me or I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In part, the fundamental attribution error results from the information we have to work with. I know I don't usually let myself get

taken advantage of, so it must be something unique to the situation that made a difference. But the error is driven by more than just rational information processing. It's a self-deluding, psychological comfort blanket that helps us forget how vulnerable we are. Few of us want to dwell on the true randomness with which perilous events so often strike. By attributing people's misfortunes to something unique about them, we deceive ourselves into believing the same fate can't befall us.

Fortunately, once burned, many of us are more reticent the next time around. Others, however, get taken in again and again. Why don't they learn from their mistakes?

There's a self-sustaining element to the better-than-average illusion. Research has found that the least competent among us are often the most overconfident of their abilities. In a recent series of experiments, cognitive psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger gave Cornell University college students tests reflecting a variety of skills: English grammar, logical reasoning, and humor. In each area, those scoring in the lowest quartile turned out to be the most likely to grossly overestimate how well they'd performed. In English grammar, for example, subjects who scored in the tenth percentile guessed that their scores were in the sixty-first percentile and that their actual ability was in the sixty-seventh percentile. On the logical reasoning test, subjects who scored in the twelfth percentile estimated, on average, that they'd scored in the sixty-second percentile, and they placed their overall skill level in the sixty-eighth percentile.²⁰

Why don't the incompetent learn from their failures? One reason, Dunning and Kruger believe, is that the skills required to succeed at a task are often the very same ones necessary to recognize failure at the same task. If you're weak at logic you're also probably less capable of evaluating the logic of your argument. The skills required to construct a grammatical sentence are the same as those needed to recognize if a sentence is grammatically correct. "The same knowledge that underlies the ability to produce correct judgment is also the knowledge that underlies the ability to recognize correct judgment," Kruger and Dunning found. "To lack the former is to be deficient in the latter."

We see this defect in many domains. In tennis, it has been shown, novices are less accurate than masters at judging whether they hit a successful shot. Beginning chess players are poorer than experts at estimating how many times they need to look at the board before

memorizing a position. Amateur physicists are worse than experts at gauging the difficulty of physics problems.²¹ In effect, not only do the less competent perform poorly and make poor choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to recognize their deficiencies. This isn't necessarily the case for all skills. Less-competent people are, for example, more likely to grasp reality in situations where they get direct and unambiguous feedback. When a golfer hits a shot into the woods, for example, he knows he's done something wrong.

In the domain of persuasion, however, conditions are ripe for self-sustaining incompetence. For one thing, the feedback we get in social encounters is usually unclear and, so, is wide open to self-serving perceptions. When an outsider is trying to manipulate us, the problem gets even worse. The clever manipulator feeds our illusion that we're above being manipulated. The salesman who just sold you last year's leftover will go out of his way to let you know what a fine choice you've made. Gullibility begets gullibility.

There exists an unusual neurological disease known as anosognosia. The condition, which is caused by certain types of damage to the right hemisphere of the brain, leads to paralysis on the left side of the body. But more remarkable, the patient is unable to acknowledge his own disease. "Imagine a victim of a major stroke," observes neurology professor Antonio Damasio, "entirely paralyzed in the left side of the body, unable to move hand and arm, leg and foot, face half immobile, unable to stand or walk. And now imagine that same person oblivious to the entire problem, reporting that nothing is possibly the matter, answering the question, 'How do you feel?' with a sincere, 'Fine.'"²²

As dramatic as the denial of his condition is the anosognosic's complete lack of emotion or concern about its gravity. The news that he's suffered a major stroke, that there's a high risk of further brain and heart damage, in some cases that he's suffering from a cancer that has invaded his brain, is met with blasé, detached equanimity, never with sadness, tears, despair, or anger.²³ When asked to look at his paralyzed limb, the patient has no difficulty acknowledging it's his and there's something wrong with it. But he's unable to make an internal connection between the condition of *that* arm or leg and *his* physical condition. As a result, no matter how many times he's asked, "How do you feel," the answer is, "Fine."

Gullibility can be thought of as a social psychological analog of anosognosia. The chronic patsy refuses to acknowledge his weakness.

His denial is nourishing to his self-esteem. “Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge,” Charles Darwin observed.²⁴ But it also prevents you from avoiding the same mistake next time.

The illusion of invulnerability is a comforting notion. And, as many health psychologists will tell you, optimism is sometimes an important ingredient of psychological adjustment. But *over*optimism can exact a stiff price. It leaves us psychologically disarmed. It’s often said that laughter is the best medicine. Perhaps, but a little realism may keep you out of the hospital in the first place. Research shows, for example, that:

- People who feel at risk for health problems are more likely to gather disease prevention information.
- Smokers who minimize their own risk of disease are less likely to try quitting.
- Sexually active women who deny their chances of becoming pregnant are less likely to use effective methods of birth control.
- People in high earthquake risk areas who downplay their danger are more likely to live in poor structures.²⁵

Oftentimes, in fact, how you face your vulnerability can be more important than the vulnerability itself. It’s well established, for example, that individuals born with fair skin are considerably more susceptible to skin cancer later in life. With proper education, however, light-skinned people are more likely to take precautions that minimize their risks—for example, wearing sunscreen and avoiding direct sunlight. Paradoxically, then, the very people who are genetically disposed to skin cancer may be the least likely to end up with it in the end—that is, if they’re willing to confront their vulnerability before it’s too late. As the geneticist David Searls observed, “The tendency for an event to occur varies inversely with one’s preparation for it.”

It’s natural to have an image of the “type” of person you are. It’s comforting to think there is considerable predictability in how we behave—that, based on our past, we can identify our frailties and our strengths and that within these boundaries we’re in safe territory. Often we’re right. But frequently not. There’s no such animal as the type of person who can’t be manipulated to act out of character. Worst of all, these errors often occur just when we have the most to lose.

Certainly, some of us truly are more resistant. There are people who tend to be less gullible, or less susceptible to conformity, or cooler under pressure. These individual differences are what psychologists call traits. Add the traits together and you get what we call our personality. For many years, the guiding mission of the field of psychology was to “describe, explain, and predict” people’s behavior. But after dedicating almost a century²⁶ of research to developing personality assessment instruments—it is estimated that there are more than twenty-five hundred commercially published psychological tests now on the market—psychometricians have learned in no uncertain terms that traits are nothing more than probability statements. In any given place and time it’s only *somewhat* more likely you’ll be stronger or weaker or smarter or more foolish than the fellow sitting next to you, no matter what score you got on some personality test. In fact, the demands of the situation—the particulars of the time, the place, and the social context—are often better predictors of how people will act than is the *type* of person they are.²⁷

The power of the situation is the driving force in effective persuasion. We’ll see in the coming pages how social psychological forces often cause a person to do things he never would have predicted—sometimes for the better, too often not—no matter who he is or how he has acted in the past. Several years ago, an Everest climb leader was asked whether an old veteran climber had a chance at the summit. “He may,” the leader responded. “But in the end it’s the mountain that will decide who will climb it.” Similarly, whether you’re persuaded may simply depend on who and what you’re matched against.

The psychology of persuasion may be a subtle process. But its effects, once in motion, are anything but. When the elements of the situation are arranged so they exploit your inner needs—perhaps your craving to be accepted or appreciated, to be seen as a good person, or simply to feel safe—it can feel like being struck by a laser. At these moments you are no more able to be your “usual” self than if you’d been locked in chains. A friend of mine named Debbie describes it well. Usually, Debbie says, she thinks of herself as a person willing to speak her mind. But there are certain situations—most notably, when it involves bucking the consensus of her friends—in which speaking out is so difficult that it seems physically restrained. “When I try to talk,” Debbie says, “I feel verbally paralyzed. I literally can’t say the words. It’s as if

my vocal cords have been anesthetized. I'm no more able to rise above my inhibitions—even when I know I should—than it must be for a person with muscular dystrophy to walk normally.”

Perhaps, you say, you really are less vulnerable than most. You say you know what these influence experts are up to, and you're too savvy to be taken in by their nonsense. If you believe this, you're in good company. It's perfectly normal. Unfortunately, most of you are wrong.

Consider advertising, perhaps the most straightforward domain of persuasion. The rules of this game are right on the table: you get to watch the show or read the magazine; companies get time or space to try to persuade you to buy what they're selling. Does advertising work? Barely at all, say most consumers in surveys, of which there have been many. Advertising, people maintain, is such an obvious form of manipulation that it's ridiculous to think it has the intended effect on us. It doesn't, eh? “Almost everyone holds the misguided belief that advertisements don't affect *them*, don't shape their attitudes, don't help define their dreams,” observed advertising critic Jean Kilbourne. “What I hear more than anything else, as I lecture throughout the country, is ‘I don't pay attention to ads . . . I just tune them out . . . they have no effect on me.’ Of course, I hear this most often from young men wearing Budweiser caps.”²⁸

If you believe you're immune, I have a few questions for you. What comes to mind when you hear the words “Golden Arches”? When you hear the phrase “Just do it”? Who's Tony the Tiger? What kind of person smokes Marlboros? What tastes great, but is less filling? You can ask these questions of practically anyone, anywhere, in the United States (and many other countries) and get the same answers.

And why shouldn't this be? Advertising accounts for 40 percent of the average American's mail and 70 percent of our newspaper space. American companies spend more than \$200 billion a year on advertising.²⁹ It costs, on average, \$250,000 to produce a national television commercial and another \$250,000 to put it on the air. For premier events, costs skyrocket higher. Why would businesses spend a million dollars to produce a commercial for the Super Bowl and another million and a half to screen it?³⁰ Because they have figures to show that it will probably more than pay for itself.

They might even hit the jackpot. During the 1999 Super Bowl, when Victoria's Secret ran a thirty-second spot featuring a parade of

models decked out in panties and bras, more than a million fans left their television sets to log onto the company's web site.³¹ And lest you think it's just rabid men who are prey to ads, consider why companies would spend a million dollars for a thirty-second spot during the Academy Awards.³² Probably because advertisers know the show, which Madison Avenue calls "the Super Bowl for women," will have over 60 percent of the females in the nation in front of their sets. The *Chicago Tribune* painted the picture all too accurately in an ad it placed in *Advertising Age*. The ad shows several people arranged in boxes according to income level under the slogan "The people you want, we've got all wrapped up for you."³³

Prescription drug companies, which have only recently begun direct, mass consumer advertising, would certainly agree. A study conducted in 2000 by the National Institute for Health Care Management, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group that conducts health care research, concluded that retail spending on prescription drugs is now the fastest-growing item in the nation's health care budget. It clearly pays off: spending on direct advertising, the study found, is strongly coupled with increased sales.

The twenty-five most heavily advertised drugs the previous year, in fact, totaled more than 40 percent of the rise in retail drug spending. For example, consumer advertising for the cholesterol-lowering drug Lipitor, a product of Warner-Lambert, rose from \$7.8 million in 1998 to \$55.4 million in 1999; sales increased 56 percent (to \$2.6 billion) over the same period. AstraZeneca invested \$79.4 million advertising Prilosec, an ulcer medication, in 1999; sales increased 24 percent, to \$3.6 billion. Bristol-Myers Squibb spent \$43 million in consumer advertising for the oral diabetes drug Glucophage in 1999; sales increased 50 percent, to \$1.2 billion. Even if advertising only accounts for a portion of these sales figures, the investments were obviously extremely profitable. As another indicator of the effects of direct consumer advertising, the study points to increased visits to doctors' offices for the most heavily advertised illnesses. Between 1990 and 1998, for example, visits for allergy symptoms were relatively stable at 13 million to 14 million patients per year. In 1999, however, advertising for allergy drugs increased markedly—Schering-Plough spent \$137 million on Claritin alone, the most spent on any drug—and visits for allergy symptoms jumped to 18 million.³⁴

The most accurate technique so far developed for isolating the effectiveness of advertising is the "split-cable" method. In these studies,

advertisers hire cable companies to intercept the cable signal before it reaches households. They then send different advertising to different people in the same market. Members of each household are given ID cards that they show every time they make a purchase. Variables such as past brand and category purchases and special promotions for particular products are statistically controlled.

Split-cable tests verify the effectiveness of good advertising. They typically find that more than half of all advertising campaigns significantly increase short-term (within six months) sales, a remarkable figure when one considers the variability in advertising quality. Success rates are highest for new products, where advertising leads to increased profits in 60 percent of all tests; moreover, for campaigns that are successful, the increase in sales averages a whopping 21 percent. These, however, are just the short-term effects. In follow-up tests, studies found that groups that received more advertising were still buying an average of 17 percent more of the product one year after the advertising ended and 6 percent more two years later. In one major study, the increase in sales volume actually widened over a two-year follow-up period for 40 percent of the products that were previously advertised heavily. Good advertising easily pays for itself.³⁵

Children are particularly vulnerable. Almost all major advertising agencies have children's divisions. These often have cute names: Kid2Kid, Just Kids, Inc., Small Talk, Kid Connection. There are major industry publications like *Youth Market Alert*, *Selling to Kids*, and *Marketing to Kids Report* that chronicle the latest market research.³⁶

For food alone, the average American child sees over ten thousand commercials each year; 95 percent of these promote candy, soft drinks, sugarcoated cereals, or fast foods.³⁷ Studies show that children who watch more television are more likely to ask their parents for foods they see in commercials, to eat more of these foods, and to go to frequently advertised fast-food restaurants.³⁸ Two decades ago, children drank twice as much milk as soda. Thanks to advertising, the ratio is now reversed. A survey conducted by the Center for Science in the Public Interest found that eight- to twelve-year-old students could name more brands of beer than they could presidents of the United States.³⁹ Another survey found almost every six-year-old in America could identify Joe Camel, as many as could identify Mickey Mouse.⁴⁰

A frequent aim of children's advertising is getting them to nag their parents. Marketers use terms like the "pester factor" and "nudge

power.”⁴¹ Perhaps the leading authority on marketing to children, James McNeal, has conducted systematic analyses of children’s “requesting” styles. In his book *Kids as Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children*, McNeal shows there are seven main styles of nags: *pleading* (“Mom, Mom, Mom”; “please, please, please”), *persistent* (ongoing requests), *forceful* (“Well, then, I’ll go and ask Dad”), *demonstrative* (tantrums in public places, holding their breath), *sugar-coated* (“you’re the best Dad in the world”), *threatening* (pledges of running away from home or hating you forever if the request isn’t met), and *pity* (“All the kids will make fun of me if I don’t have one”).⁴²

Advertisers apply information like this, often with all-too-impressive results. One study found that on 65 percent of the occasions parents denied their child a product for which the child had just seen an ad, the denial ended in their having an argument. In another study, children saw a program either without commercials or with two commercials for a toy. They were then shown pictures of a father and son and told the father had just rejected the boy’s request for the toy. Sixty percent of the children who hadn’t seen the commercials thought the boy in the picture would still want to play with his father; less than 40 percent of the children who saw the commercials thought he would. Still worse, when asked whether they’d prefer to play with the toy or another child, twice as many children who’d seen the commercials opted for the toy. Worse yet, when asked whether they’d prefer to play with a “nice boy” without the toy or a “not so nice boy” with the toy, 70 percent of the children who hadn’t seen the commercials chose the nice boy; only 35 percent of the children who’d been exposed to the commercials chose him.⁴³ Advertising delivers.

And most people do concede that advertising works. Just not on them. My students Joseph Gerber, Karla Burgos, Albert Rodriguez, and Michelle Massey and I recently conducted a study in which we showed people various magazine ads. Knowing the illusion of invulnerability, it didn’t surprise us that people usually said they were unpersuaded by any of the ads. It didn’t matter what the content of the ad or how it was phrased—whether the ad appeared technically sound, credible, or well-researched—people told us none of the ads affected them. But then we asked how other people would react to the same ads. Now it was a different story: subjects said others would be more persuaded and more likely to buy the products in almost all the ads we showed them. Finally, we posed two questions aimed point-blank at this self-serving bias. First,

“How affected are you by advertising?” And second, “How affected do you think most people are by advertising?” Overwhelmingly, we were told others are much more influenced by advertising than they are.⁴⁴ Welcome to Lake Wobegon.

Advertisers know all about your skepticism. If you put yourself in the category of the immune, then you should know there are specialists whose very job is getting through to people like you. They look for ways to slip under your radar.

One approach is to camouflage the ads as background. Web surfers, for example, are known to be tough sells. Research shows that conventional advertising on web sites is increasingly being ignored. One way some advertisers have tried to get around this is by sponsoring “advergames” that display their products. Procter & Gamble sponsors an online game called Mission Refresh in which players help the hero destroy dandruff creatures with bubbles and bottles of Head & Shoulders shampoo. Dodge Speedway lets you race a car that’s plastered with the company’s logo; ads for Dodge cars appear on every billboard along the track’s walls. Major companies like Toyota, Ford, General Motors, Radio Shack, and Sony Entertainment have developed games featuring their products.

Advertisers can covertly monitor these games to get information about the styles and preferences of the players, to be used for future marketing. The games can usually be spread virally, meaning they can be sent to friends via e-mail. Often the games are pieces of larger television campaigns in which television viewers are encouraged to visit the web site and web site users are urged to watch the television program. There is accumulating evidence for the advergames’ effectiveness. Before Toyota’s Adrenaline racing game appeared on Microsoft’s MSN Gaming Zone site in 2000, for example, a survey of Gaming Zone users found Toyota’s brand awareness ranked number six among major car companies. Three months after the game went online, Toyota’s brand awareness leaped to number two.⁴⁵

The motion picture industry has for many years been selling so-called product placement, whereby they charge companies to display their products in films. When a movie close-up shows an actor wearing a particular brand of sneakers or a character talks about a certain brand of potato chip, there’s a good chance it’s the result of a paid endorsement. James Bond’s BMW roadster, the Ray-Ban sunglasses worn by the stars of *Men in Black*, and all of Forrest Gump’s Dr Pepper drinking

“One of the best things about meeting the president was you could drink all the Dr Pepper you wanted,” Forrest declares) all appeared courtesy of company sponsorships.⁴⁶ The tobacco industry has been notably active in this practice. Cigarette advertising is banned on television, but it has been permissible for tobacco companies to pay to have movie characters smoke their brands or otherwise display their logos. In the movie *Superman II*, for example, Philip Morris paid \$42,000 to have Superman destroy a Marlboro (one of their brands) truck. When the movie, with scene intact, was later shown on television, the company had to a considerable degree managed to circumvent television’s ban on tobacco advertising.⁴⁷

It’s been argued that product placement is deceptive advertising. Opponents of the practice have petitioned the Federal Trade Commission to require that sponsors be listed in the movie credits. (Some even want the word *advertising* flashed on-screen whenever a product appears.) The FTC has declined these petitions, concluding that product placement presents no obvious pattern of deception.⁴⁸

Embedded product placement reached something of a new level in the summer of 2001 when Fay Weldon, the popular British novelist, accepted an “undisclosed sum” from the Italian jeweler Bulgari to mention its brand at least a dozen times in her new book. It was shock enough to hear that a well-known writer had sold billboard space in her book—appropriately titled *The Bulgari Connection*—to an advertiser. Equally notable, however, was the depth of the product placement: the novel includes a character obsessed by the aesthetics of Bulgari, vivid descriptions of Bulgari pieces, and a plot involving the sale of a painting that contains a Bulgari necklace.⁴⁹

Not only does Madison Avenue have ways to sidestep your mistrust; it has created an entire school of advertising that thrives on it. Like jujitsu masters, the advertisers align with your mistrust and then turn it against you to promote what they’re selling. They flatter your hipness, your cleverness, “conceding” that they know you’re far too astute to be manipulated by advertising. One way is to dress the ad up as an anti-image message. For example:

- An ad for Scotch whiskey tells us: “This is a glass of Cutty Sark. If you need to see a picture of a guy in an Armani suit sitting between two fashion models drinking it before you know it’s right for you, it probably isn’t.”

- A shoe company tells us: “If you feel the need to be smarter and more articulate, read the complete works of Shakespeare. If you like who you are, here are your shoes.”
- A Sprite ad shows teenagers on a beach drinking a brand named Jooky. As the camera pulls back, we realize it’s actually a television commercial. Two teenagers are watching the commercial. They open their own cans of Jooky and are clearly disappointed. The logo for Sprite then comes on with the slogan “Image is nothing. Thirst is everything.”
- A sneaker ad says: “Shoe buying rule number one: The image wears off after the first six miles.” Another sneaker advertises: “Marketing is just hype.”
- The U.K. division of French Connection ran a series of double-page advertising spreads using the slogan “fcuk advertising.”⁵⁰
- In 1987, ABC Television advertised its new season of shows with self-deprecating humor that sounded like put-downs you might hear from an intelligent, witty friend sitting in the chair next to you. One spot, for example, showed a viewer sprawled in front of a TV under the headline “Don’t worry, you’ve got billions of brain cells.” Another ran the headline “If it’s so bad for you, why is there one in every hospital room?” Good question.

Advertising critic Leslie Savan refers to the sort of person these ads target as “winkers.” The winker condescendingly rolls his eyes at the idiocy on television, convinced that his detachment puts him in control of what he’s seeing rather than the other way around. The advertiser poses as his understanding consort in this nonsense. The message: if you want to be the type of person who’s too clever to be taken in by condescending advertising, you’re one of us. But, as Savan observes in her classic book *The Sponsored Life*,

as a defense against the power of advertising, irony is a leaky condom—in fact, it’s the same old condom that advertising brings over every night. A lot of ads have learned that to break through to the all-important boomer and Xer markets they have to be as cool, hip, and ironic as the target audience like to think of itself as being. That requires at least the pose of opposition to commercial values. The cool commercials—I’m thinking of Nike spots, some Reeboks, most 501s, certainly all MTV promos—flatter us by saying we’re too cool to fall for commercial values, and therefore cool enough to want their product.⁵¹

In other words, you above-it-all winkers, Madison Avenue has your number, too. They know the best way to reach people wary of propaganda is to disguise it to look like anything but. It's all in fun, just entertainment. While you're laughing, maybe rolling your eyes, the commercial does its work.

But perhaps you're still not convinced of your vulnerability. The balance of power, you say, is changing. The professionals have overplayed their hands and today's educated consumers have caught on to their game. You might argue that our culture has become so media savvy, informed, and cynical, our lives so inundated with salesmen and hucksters, that most of us are unaffected by all but the most extraordinary acts of influence. Whether today's consumers are less gullible is open to question. What's clear, however, is that the other camp, the experts with something to sell, have more effective tools in their arsenal than ever before.

Consider, for example, the burgeoning field of consumer anthropology, a professional discipline that has become a staple research tool of applied psychologists in areas ranging from sales and marketing to politics and religion. Not long ago, new anthropology Ph.D.s' might have chosen between studying a primitive culture in the South Pacific or the social order of chimpanzees in Sumatra. Now they're as likely to be paid to watch shoppers move through Safeway or Bloomingdale's. Or, if they want something more ethnic, they can get a job with a major sneaker company to hang around inner-city streets to learn what language and images to use to package the latest shoe—name, color, logo, advertising models—so it will sell in the ghetto. Toyota has had social scientists following a group of young people around the last three years to get ideas for designing cars that appeal to youth.⁵² Other anthropologists are now hired to spend time in consumers' homes, looking through their closets and bathroom cabinets and listening in on their conversations. Every potential market is fair game.⁵³

Consumer anthropologists have devised an arsenal of sophisticated techniques to help their clients sell more. They conduct "beeper studies," "fixed-camera analyses," "shadowing," "visual stories," "brainstorming sessions," and—the holy grail of the industry—"focus groups."⁵⁴ Children are big targets. Consumer researchers stage slumber parties where children are interviewed throughout the night. They conduct focus groups for children as young as two and three. Children are surveyed outside toy stores, fast-food restaurants, and anyplace else

they're likely to be found. Companies spend fortunes learning about consumers. Look-Look, an international research company specializing in youth culture, employs more than ten thousand children they've identified as trend-setters to report on what they and their friends are doing and talking about.⁵⁵ The research unit of Nintendo U.S. interviews over six thousand children each month.⁵⁶

If I were trying to help my client decide at which location to set up a new fast-food restaurant, for example, I might pay local pedestrians to carry around a palmtop computer for a few days and "beep" them at regular intervals. At each beep the pedestrian would pull out the computer and answer questions ranging from where they are to whether they're hungry to what sort of mood they're in and how adventurous they feel. In a few days we'd know which location would capture the most customers.

Or if I were advising my supermarket client how to arrange his products on the shelves, I might set up video cameras to monitor the most minuscule movements of shoppers hunting and gathering their way through the store. Some organizations put tiny cameras inside the frozen-food cases. I'd look, for example, at the "capture rate"—how much of what's on the shelves is actually seen by shoppers as they move through the market. In supermarkets, the rate turns out to be about 20 percent. Then I'd determine the "reliable zone"—the shelf placements that are seen by most shoppers. In most markets this goes from about knee level to just above eye level. Next I'd target the "conversion rate"—the proportion of browsers who see the product and decide to buy it. I'd interview the owner about his product line.

Grocery industry studies show that about two-thirds of consumers' purchases are unplanned. So I'd make sure the items less likely to be on customers' shopping lists—maybe a new breakfast cereal—were squarely in the reliable zone. (The vast majority of women carry lists into supermarkets, but only about a quarter of men do—yet another observation of consumer anthropologists.) Necessities that we know will be hunted down—milk, for example—could afford to occupy less-visible space. The owner might also tilt the bottom shelves up a bit and, when push comes to shove, keep smaller items (the sponge scrubbers, say) in the reliable zone and concede larger items (laundry detergent, perhaps) to space in the hinterlands.⁵⁷

Specialists in a new subfield known as retail anthropology will tell you all this about your shopping habits and considerably more. Paco

Underhill, for example, author of the book *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*, works as a consultant to many of the largest retail stores. His discerning cameras have charted people's movements through stores with disturbing precision.

Underhill and his research team have learned, for example, that shoppers entering a new store need a few moments, about five to fifteen paces, to settle down and get their bearings. They need to slow down from walking speed to shopping speed, particularly if they've just rushed in from a parking lot or a busy street. As a result, they take little notice of anything placed squarely at the entrance—an area Underhill calls the “decompression” or “transition” zone. Underhill advises his clients not to attempt anything important in this zone and to take steps to keep the zone as small as possible. “I guarantee it,” he observes. “Put a pile of fliers or a stack of shopping baskets just inside the door: Shoppers will barely see them, and will almost never pick them up. Move them ten feet in and the fliers and baskets will disappear. It's a law of nature—shoppers need a landing strip.”⁵⁸

Shoppers also have an uncanny tendency to drift toward the right. (In England and Australia, where people drive on the other side of the road, it's to the left.) Because of this, the most valuable real estate in a store is the front right just beyond the decompression zone. This is where the make-or-break merchandise that requires maximum exposure should be placed. Shoppers also have a strong tendency to reach to the right (including in England and Australia), meaning the best way to get a product into the hands of customers is to place it slightly to the right of where they're likely to be standing. “If you're stocking cookies, for instance, the most popular brand goes dead center—at the bull's eye—and the brand you're trying to build goes just to the right of it,” Underhill has found.⁵⁹

He's also tackled the problem of getting shoppers to explore the furthest reaches of the store, to keep them from going halfway down an aisle and reversing field. He studies which products and displays pull customers to the rear displays. These usually turn out to be basic staples that people buy a lot of and know the store carries. Gap stores, for example, have learned to place denim on the back wall.

This just scratches the surface. Shopping scientists can tell you everything from how much time you'll spend in a store (in one national housewares chain, for example, it's an average of 8 minutes, 15 seconds for a woman shopping with another woman; 7 minutes, 19 seconds for

a woman with children; 5 minutes, 2 seconds for women alone; and 4 minutes, 41 seconds for a woman shopping with a man) to how long you'll stare at a label before making a purchase (women spend an average of 5 seconds reading the label of shower gels, 16 seconds for moisturizers).⁶⁰ In other words, consumer anthropologists know more about your habits than you do. They can bounce you through a store like a billiard ball.

Consumer anthropology isn't inherently malevolent or even anti-consumer. As Underhill sees it, his research ultimately causes sellers to meet the desires of shoppers rather than the other way around. "Build and operate a retail environment that fits the highly particular needs of shoppers and you've created a successful store," Underhill observes. "Just as [anthropologist] Holly Whyte's labors improved urban parks and plazas, the science of shopping creates better retail environments—ultimately, we're providing a form of consumer advocacy that benefits our clients as well."⁶¹

There's some truth to Underhill's argument. Nonetheless, there's no avoiding that the increasing sophistication of this new breed of applied social science leaves us more susceptible to their message. Consumers may be getting wiser, but the professionals are, too. It's like an evolving war between viruses and antibiotics—stronger antibiotics are countered by more resistant viruses, which leads to the development of new antibiotics, and so on. The problem is that because it's a full-time job for the professionals, they're like the viruses—always a step ahead of you.

This book is intended as consumer anthropology, too, but from the opposite perspective. I've spent the last several years watching the experts, trying my hand at sales, and attending seminars, sales events, and the like to observe people's vulnerabilities—how, when, and where we're prone to manipulation. The chapters that follow draw on a wide range of research and disciplines, all under the assumption that the more we understand about the psychology of the persuasion process—what we're liable to encounter and how most people will react—the better we shift the balance of control to our side.