

Can Scholars Be Deceived? Empirical Evidence from Social Psychology and History¹

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Abstract

This paper explores several telling anecdotes and reviews psychological research demonstrating that scholars, however proud they may be of their independent thinking, can be influenced and even deceived by subjects, events, and processes in their research. Arthur Conan Doyle's belief in fairies, Uri Geller the so-called psychic "spoon bender," and the "discovery" of Noah's Ark are explored to provide examples of how researchers can be influenced. Next cognitive dissonance, demand characteristics, and other variables studied by social psychologists are discussed to help illuminate why scholars can be deceived.

My purpose in this paper is to deliver this not-so-earth-shattering news: Scholars can be deceived -- sometimes quite spectacularly. The evidence is overwhelming, and space permits me to present only a few examples, gleaned from history and experimental social psychology, of everyday scientists and renowned scholars who have been duped into believing the unbelievable, accepting the unacceptable, and, in the worst cases, enticed into lending their names in support of the perpetrators of the worst evils of the twentieth century. Some of my examples involve well-intended scholars who were hoodwinked and bamboozled. Other scholars have actively if naively aided and abetted fraudulent research. And finally, some have knowingly permitted or even perpetrated deception for reasons of personal gain or to advance a private agenda.

But some--perhaps many--scholars have simply reacted predictably to ordinary yet powerful social influences with varying degrees of awareness and hubris.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the Fairies

Perhaps no name is more associated with deductive reasoning and solid detective work than that of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Doyle was also, however, a believer in spiritualism who declared the evidence for life after death to be "overwhelming."

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Doyle proved to be significantly less studious than his literary alter ego when he was asked to investigate evidence provided by two Yorkshire girls, Frances and Elsie, who claimed that they were in contact with fairies and gnomes and had actually photographed them. After the girls supplied him with these photographs, Doyle was sufficiently impressed to engage the assistance of Edward Gardner. Gardner, also an avowed spiritualist and theosophist, was entrusted to find professional photographers who could authenticate the photos of fairies and gnomes dancing in the Yorkshire woodlands.

This was Doyle's first mistake: Given the radical nature of the claim (that fairies and gnomes exist), his investigators should have included skeptics as well as believers. Doyle did not believe this precaution was necessary, however, because the photos were taken by children who, he stated, were incapable of being clever enough to falsify them. In addition, Doyle trusted the opinion of his friends who knew the two Yorkshire girls to be of high moral character. In other words, Frances and Elsie were both too dull and too innocent to engage in photographic fakery.

Perhaps in part because of the attention they were receiving from the famous Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the Yorkshire girls soon produced a new series of photographs. These, however, were eventually proven to be fraudulent. Frances and Elsie (also known as Iris and Alice to protect their privacy) never admitted to forgery. And indeed, the first set of photographs has never been adequately explained. However, in the 79 years since the appearance of the first set of photos, I am not aware of any credible replication of these photographic explorations into the realms of fairies and gnomes. The question of the existence of these creatures appears to have been answered. (This fascinating case is well-summarized in James Randi's (1982) provocative book, *Flim-flam*.)

How did Doyle come to believe in the existence of fairies and gnomes? It seems clear, at least to several historians, that Doyle was rendered vulnerable to this hoax by his deeply held belief in spiritualism. To spiritualists of that era, believing in the existence of a nether world populated by spirits such as fairies and gnomes was not outrageous. At least one historian has also insinuated that Doyle's great need to believe in spiritualism may have been caused by unresolved grief over having lost his son in World War I.

Uri Geller and the Scientologist

Can belief systems make us more vulnerable to deceptions and con artists? A more recent example might be the tainted investigation of Uri Geller, the purported Israeli psychic. Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff, scientists associated with the prestigious Stanford Research Institute (SRI), rocked the scientific community with their articles on Geller and another psychic, Ingo Swann. Their findings on Geller were published in *Nature*, one of the most respected scientific journals. Geller became an overnight sensation, and ultimately a very wealthy one at that.

I want to make two points here. First, one of the reasons we do not hear very much about Uri Geller these days is because his so-called psychic powers have been thoroughly debunked, most notably by MacArthur Fellow and magician-turned-debunker James Randi (1982). About 10 years ago, I saw Randi bend spoons and stop watches, and I can understand how anyone could mistake these tricks as proof of astounding paranormal ability. To my knowledge, Geller has never done the reverse--straighten a bent spoon--a feat that apparently cannot be performed by magicians, and thus a feat that might be better proof of psychokinetic talent.

My second point is that, according to Randi (1982), two of the individuals I have mentioned (parapsychologist researcher Puthoff and the purported psychic Ingo Swann), were practicing Scientologists at the time of the SRI studies. Scientology doctrine, as I am certain at least some of you know, accepts psychic abilities as both real and attainable by any Operating Thetan. I would argue once again that, like Doyle, this researcher's beliefs made him vulnerable to being hoodwinked.

Noah's Ark

My third and final example (Cerone, Oct. 30, 1993; Feder, 1998) does not involve knighted authors or Stanford researchers, but rather an intentional hoax perpetrated on mass media, unwittingly aided by the Institute for Creation Research (ICR), an organization that seeks and proffers scientific evidence in support of a literal interpretation of the Bible. The hoax played off claims made in the film, "In Search of Noah's Ark," originally released by Sun International Pictures in 1973. This movie asserted that remnants of the original ark had been sighted on Mt. Ararat in Turkey. On February 20, 1993, CBS aired "The Incredible Discovery of Noah's Ark," which featured an interview with George Jammal. Jammal was already known to Sun International and the ICR from initial interviews about his Ark discoveries in 1986. In the 1993 CBS documentary, Jammal provided physical evidence: a piece of wood he claimed was from Noah's Ark. In reality, Jammal had prepared the piece of wood by soaking it in a variety of sauces including wine, teriyaki sauce, spices, alcohol, and seeds, then microwaving and baking it. When Jammal's claims made it into *Time* magazine, the trickster decided it was time to come clean (and to obtain legal counsel). He admitted to the hoax, provided proof of his long-standing membership in an anti-religious organization, and stated that his intent was to show how easy it is to pull the wool over the eyes of the ICR, Sun International, mass media, and Bible-literalist scholars throughout the world.

The Social Psychology of Influence

Social psychology is often a mundane science, yet some of its most resilient findings have involved the study of social and psychological influence. Some of these findings are especially relevant to those of us engaged in researching new religious movements.

What factors--unrelated to actual facts--enter into the decision-making processes of scholars and scientists? Some are obvious, some not so obvious, and most are rather banal.

Social psychological research has repeatedly demonstrated that we are more likely to believe and judge as accurate statements made by those we perceive as attractive and prestigious (cf., Cialdini, 1984; Baron & Byrne, 1991). Individuals judged to be prestigious do not have to actually make these statements; merely being associated with these statements (the halo effect) is enough to significantly affect us. Thus, when a group sponsors a conference listing Nobel laureates and professors from famous universities among its speakers, it may not matter what the speakers say or even if they actually attend.

The same holds true when we hear statements made with great confidence. The more confident the speaker sounds, the more likely we will judge him or her to be accurate (Bloomfield, Libby, & Nelson, 1996). This is why hypnotically refreshed testimony has been disallowed in some American courtrooms. Even though hypnosis does not in fact produce more accurate recollections than other methods, hypnotized witnesses tend to testify with increased confidence and may, consequently, exercise "unfair influence" over juries (Brown, Schefflin & Hammond, 1998). Schefflin (1996), however, argues on legal grounds that such testimony should not automatically be banned and should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

The influence of scientists' prior beliefs on their judgments of evidence quality may also significantly bias their evaluations. University of Texas psychologist Jonathon Koehler (1993), for example, studied 297 advanced graduate students in the sciences and 195 practicing scientists. He found that research results supporting the scientists' prior beliefs were evaluated as more accurate and credible. In both studies, this effect was larger for general, evaluative judgments than for more specific, analytical judgments.

John Innes and Colin Fraser (1971) of the University of Birmingham summarized the research on bias in terms of their source, namely the political ideologies, cultural backgrounds, biographical characteristics, and personal characteristics of scientists. In considering the implications of biases, three reactions to bias were discussed: ignoring, controlling, and understanding. Innes and Fraser proposed that understanding the operation of bias might be furthered by working towards a taxonomy of biases, organized in terms of the sources of biases and the points in the research process at which they intrude.

The issue of financially-induced bias is trickier than one might think. For one thing, it is not always clear who is paying for what. Many organizations, including some new religions, may use front groups to bankroll books, studies, and conferences. Of course, this tactic is certainly not unique to NRMs. The tobacco industry bankrolled dozens of studies, some by highly-respected researchers, most of whom (perhaps not

surprisingly) concluded that the connection between smoking and health problems might be spurious, or was strongly mitigated by other, non tobacco-related factors. Here's a more recent, personal example. I recently received (unsolicited) the "1998 Annual Report of the National Center for Responsible Gaming." According to its mission statement, the NCRG exists "to help individuals and families affected by gambling disorders" by, among other things, "supporting the finest peer-reviewed basic and applied research on disordered gambling behavior." A close examination of the report yielded the following information: of the 20 individuals on the Board of Directors, 11 listed casinos, parent companies of casinos, or gaming industry professional associations as their affiliations. The donor list is even more interesting. Of those donating at least \$300,000, 6 of 7 were casinos. Of those donating \$100,000 to \$299,000, all 3 were casinos. Of those donating \$50,000 to \$99,000, all 7 were casinos. Would anyone really be surprised to learn that the studies supported by the NCRG tend to emphasize the role played by biological and comorbid psychiatric factors in the development of compulsive gambling? If bad biology or mental illness is found to be the root cause of gambling problems, then the gaming industry could use these results to deny any liability for harm suffered by compulsive gamblers. My point is simple: It is not unreasonable to question the objectivity of gambling research paid for by the gaming industry, just as it was highly appropriate to question studies on the health risks of smoking that were financed by the tobacco industry.

Might the same be true in the study of NRMs?

I am currently reviewing two books that present the results of sociological surveys of the U.K. and U.S. membership of the Soka Gakkai International. The SGI is a new religious movement that practices the Buddhism founded by a 13th century Japanese monk, Nichiren Daishonin. Both books are published by the Oxford University Press, certainly a publisher with name recognition and associated prestige. Both books are, in my opinion, extremely well-constructed and informative studies that are unabashedly friendly toward the SGI. The first study, by Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere (1994) was published as *A Time to Chant*. It was funded by Oxford University and the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. The second study, by Phillip Hammond and David Machacek (1999) has just been published as *Soka Gakkai in America*. It was funded by the Boston Research Center, which, to their credit, the authors squarely identify as an arm of the SGI. The Hammond and Machacek book even provides an accounting of how much funding was provided (\$28,000). This is only part of the story, however, because both books have been heavily advertised in official SGI publications, and I know members are strongly encouraged to buy them. If the Philadelphia keikon is at all indicative of other SGI community centers, thousands of these books have been advanced ordered. I bought *A Time to Chant* at the Philadelphia keikon, which at the time stocked a dozen or so copies. (The SGI bookstore salesperson told me "Oh yes, we sell a lot of these.") I conservatively estimate that these books have sold or will sell well into the thousands, perhaps even into the tens of thousands. In academia, this constitutes a runaway best seller. And while I doubt any of the authors are using their

royalty checks to purchase beach front property on Martha's Vineyard, I would not be surprised if, compared to other sociologists, they have a somewhat easier time getting published by Oxford (or some other press) in the future. And publishing in academia means survival and, better yet, advancement.

But academics may not generally respond to overt financial reward, for most of us like to think our opinions cannot be bought. However, cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Kelman, 1974), one of the most researched and cross-validated constructs in social psychology, helps us to understand why it is unnecessary to buy us outright. In general, if you want to influence scholars, don't pay them too much! You'd do much better to underpay them. Since few of us want to think of ourselves as "cheap labor," when we are underpaid for our services we tend to resolve the ensuing dissonance by experiencing our behavior as a product of true conviction rather than avarice. This is the psychological mechanism behind many initiation rituals. From religious rites to fraternity hazing, cognitive dissonance leads to attitude change, "hardening" of belief systems, and greatly increased affiliation (bonding and loyalty).

I have briefly reviewed our vulnerability to making inaccurate judgments as a result of our prior beliefs, expectations, attractions, and financial relationships. Many or even most of you were probably aware of these social psychological influences. So you and I are immune to them, right? Not according to Robert Kraut and Steven Lewis of the Bell Labs. In their study, published in the *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, they found that we scholars are only moderately accurate at estimating the impact of these incidental influences on our judgments (Kraut & Lewis, 1982).

Misplaced Loyalties

The next two examples hit closer to home for me, although they are admittedly quite extreme. I want to make my own bias clear here. I am the son of two Holocaust survivors, with no surviving direct relatives on my father's side. For my entire adult life this fact has had a profound influence on how I perceive social movements. I am antitotalitarian at a very gut level, and that has biased me in the direction of being critical of any movement with a totalistic world view and a strong emphasis on obedience to authority. As many of you may know, the National Socialist German Worker's Party--the Nazi Party--started out as what I would now label a political cult. The Nazi Party gained some surprising supporters and apologists. Most would later claim that they continued to support the Party because they simply could not believe anyone would be capable of the atrocities being reported in sporadic leaks from political prisons and concentration camps.

Carl Jung, the kinder, gentler psychoanalyst who is the psychospiritual godfather of the contemporary New Age movement, conducted seminars in 1932 with Wilhelm Hauer, the founder of the German Faith Movement. Shortly after the seminars, the German Faith Movement was officially adopted by the ascendant Nazi party as the official

religion of Germany. Although Jung then distanced himself somewhat from Hauer's official position, he continued to urge Hauer to publish with him and to hold joint seminars on "comparative religion" (Noll, 1995).

The renowned founder of modern existentialism, Martin Heidegger, was a much more blatant toady for Nazism. Heidegger wrote his first book in 1927, and swore loyalty to Hitler in 1933. That same year, he eagerly replaced the dissenting rector at the University of Freiburg. Heidegger headed the movement to unite workers and students into the Party and signed orders firing Jewish professors. When Hitler wanted him in Munich in 1933 and Berlin in 1935, Heidegger remained at Freiburg, and after 1934 he resigned as rector, pleading too much political influence. His fervent support of Nazism during the year he was rector was given when their power was weakest, and because Heidegger appeared to have distanced himself from the Party after 1933, investigations by the French after the war cleared him of war crimes.

However, thanks largely to the German historian and Heidegger biographer Hugo Ott (1993) and to Victor Farias (1987), the author of *Heidegger and Nazism*, even Heidegger's supporters have had to admit that he was and remained a wholly convinced Nazi, organizing paramilitary camps for his students, spouting martial rhetoric about the "inner truth and greatness of National Socialism," and denouncing colleagues -- including his own teacher -- as Jews. According to reviewer Anthony Gottlieb (1990) of *The New York Times*, the jurors at the denazification hearings in 1945, which more or less cleared Heidegger's name and made his rehabilitation possible, were hoodwinked - as was Martin Heidegger.

Conclusions

Where does all this evidence leave us? Am I advocating that all research is ultimately subjective and flawed, or that since everything is subjective, there exists a multitude of constructed and equally valid realities? Hardly. Even the "hard" sciences are not completely objective, and periodically undergo radical paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1962). Perhaps I am philosophically a positivist at heart, for I believe we are capable of gradually drawing closer and closer to the truth in most matters, even in the most complicated and illusive matter of human behavior and experience. And, I believe, the truth or falseness of some things--like the existence of fairies or gnomes, or the validity of a Dianetics personality test---are just downright demonstrable.

Science has rules, flawed as they may be, for adjudicating a theory "mostly" or "partially" true, or "mostly" or "partially" false. In science, three characteristics of a study, construct, or theory--replicability, parsimony and predictability--are routinely assessed as a means of judging overall validity. Thus, although (using standard scientific principles) nobody has yet been able to explain Elsie's and Iris' first set of fairy photographs, the fact that nobody has been able to replicate this feat without resorting to fraud has rendered the fairy construct moot. The same has held true for a great

many other extreme claims in science, from reports of fantastic psi abilities to the now-debunked initial report of the successful generation of power using cold fusion. On the other hand, we have a huge literature, with studies that have been replicated utilizing broad assortments of subjects and situations, of the relative ease with which even the most renowned scholars and scientists can be influenced, manipulated, and fooled.

All the social sciences fall short in the realm of predictability. Here I will again remind you of my antiauthoritarian bias. I admit that I do not know if any sociologists of religion have ever predicted any of the heinous behaviors and tragic outcomes that have occurred among some new religionists. On the other hand, I do know a number of NRM critics (“cult experts”) who, employing a totalist or “mind control” paradigm, correctly predicted the course ultimately taken by David Koresh during the Waco standoff. I know several early ISKCON defectors who predicted the eventual discovery of rampant physical and sexual abuse in the Krishnas’ gurucula school system; the same holds for Rajneeshpuram. And prior to the tragic bombing of the MOVE compound I (along with Roberta Eisenberg and Dr. Linda Dubrow) correctly predicted the course of the showdown with MOVE during a meeting in City Hall with an aide to the Philadelphia Commissioner of Health. More recently, following the Heaven’s Gate suicides, a number of cult critics (my own group again included) sadly and correctly predicted the eventual suicide of Wayne Cooke, who seemed shaky during interviews and then killed himself following the initial mass suicide.

NRM apostates who have been deprogrammed or exit-counselled have been largely discounted by scholars in the fields of religion and the sociology of religion. I submit that this is a result of bias and is in effect throwing the baby out with the bath water. It is a fact that the simplistic “brainwashing” paradigm adopted by some deprogrammed or exit-counselled apostates did not predict or explain the large number of voluntary defectors, or the inability of NRMs to effectively recruit and retain new members. Eileen Barker is correct when she states that (and I am paraphrasing), if cults are trying to brainwash people, they are doing a lousy job of it.

But the fact--and I admit to this fact--that the majority of cultists do not appear to be harmed by their involvement does not necessarily mean that their group is harmless, or that they have not been exposed to harmful influence. History is replete with examples of the poor judgment and even tyranny of majorities; it is why we have checks and balances in our republic. Perhaps we need to be more like biochemists and physicians in our research strategies. When a drug works on 90% of patients, but seems to be associated with harmful side effects in the other 10%, medical researchers do not simply discount the complaints of the minority. The FDA and the courts do not accept these kinds of percentages, either. Rather, these researchers work hard to determine what is causing the harmful effects, and if the effects cannot be remedied, the drug may be pulled off the market. Although First-Amendment rights preclude “pulling cults off the market,” these rights certainly do not, as some researchers seem to imply, ban criticisms of cults. Indeed, the added protection the First-Amendment gives to religious

cults *obligates* us to be forthright and bold in our criticisms in order to safeguard the rights of cult victims.

I wish to end my comments with some thoughts that might allow for future cooperation in our respective fields of research and study. I believe anyone who studies highly controversial and polarizing social movements needs to be especially respectful of how prior biases impact on subsequent research strategies and interpretations of data. In fact, I go so far as to state that it is not enough to rely on ourselves and our like-minded peers; we need to routinely employ critical consultants from “the opposing side” to keep us honest. This advice applies to cult critics as well as so-called cult apologists. It is time for us to admit that we have all probably been misled and perhaps even duped a few times. I know of at least one instance in which I jumped to a conclusion about a group without examining all of the facts. We need to be more careful about our research designs and tentative with conclusions that employ one paradigm when others may also be applied. I have worked as a forensic psychologist, so let me shock you by saying that people sometimes lie! Sometimes research subjects are deceptive even after we ask them to tell the truth! Sometimes people even learn how to deceive themselves, and sound as though they really believe their own lies. I want to remind us all that, in the field of parapsychological research, deception and outright fraud--and the inability of scholars and scientists to accurately detect them--are so rampant that the Parapsychological Association itself has officially recognized the need to have psi experiments reviewed by magicians and other illusionists skilled at detecting sleight-of-hand and other forms of trickery. I wonder what we would discover in the field of cultic/NRM studies if our own research were subjected to analogous procedural checks and balances.

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