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The Drama of Deception

Being scammed by someone you trust is the ultimate betrayal. It's bad enough that those who are duped heap guilt on themselves, but the world tends to join in the blamefest. And here's just one of many ironies: Those with expertise are not immune to being conned.

By Abby Ellin, published on June 30, 2015 - last reviewed on June 30, 2015

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The Drama of Deception

Being scammed hits so close to home that we're driven to blame the victim.

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Somewhere on this planet there's a Navy SEAL or two who has committed all sorts of violent acts, and chances are few people know he's done them. Not his wife, not his kids, not his parents or friends.

He will never be able to talk about the missions he accomplished in the name of national security. But he might scream in the middle of the night. And when his wife tries to comfort him, he might accidentally strike her, convinced, in his haze, that she's the enemy. And still, he won't be able to explain why. It will be part of his hidden world, the world he cannot discuss but that infects every centimeter of his life.

I was not engaged to that man.

No, the man I almost vowed to love, cherish, and honor was not a hero by any stretch of the imagination—except his. He was not involved in raids on global terrorists. The only people he attacked were his friends, family, and colleagues, though he claimed to be a secret agent, a covert operative with a list of accomplishments so vast the free world would have perished without him.

As a journalist, which is to say, someone who's curious about everything, I pride myself on my ability to suss out deception. More than one boyfriend has noted, wearily, that I'm a magnificent cross-examiner. But though much of what my ex-fiancé told me seemed highly improbable, nothing was verifiable. Besides, as we've all learned courtesy of *American Sniper* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, someone has to do these things, right? While he seemed an unlikely spy, what better decoy than an asthmatic, nasal-spray-wielding nerd?

Certain things were legitimate. He really was a doctor, originally in private practice in Los Angeles (this I know because I had interviewed him for a newspaper article years earlier, which is how we originally met). He really did join the Navy after he and his wife divorced; every morning he ironed his uniform and shined his shoes and clocked in at the Pentagon. He was a member of a task force trying to open a hospital in the Middle East for kids with

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cancer, and he often took off to Iraq and Afghanistan. He called me dutifully, promising to tell me about his trip “when there’s a secure line.”

I tried to curb my natural skepticism. He was supportive and loving and funny and charming. And he was trying so hard to make a difference in the world.

But eventually my curiosity would resurface, and the Inquisition would begin anew. Why couldn’t I visit him at work? (They were cracking down on security.) When would he show me his medals for operations that didn’t officially exist? (Next time we were in Manhattan, where they were locked in a vault.) Where did he meet his ex-wife? (While rescuing her on a secret mission in Iran, where she was held hostage.) What did President Obama want to talk to him about? (His work “chasing bad guys” in the Middle East.)

“You interrogate me!” he’d bark. “You don’t trust me! You can’t have a relationship without trust.”

I became increasingly paranoid, questioning my own sanity. Why did I need to know everything? Couldn’t I just take his words at face value? No wonder I’ve been single all these years.

In the end, Brussels sprouts—not issues of national security—were our undoing.

One night we were out to eat with my parents. The restaurant was nothing special, but he gushed, unsolicited, about the meal. “These are the best sprouts I’ve ever eaten!” he proclaimed. My folks were pleased that he enjoyed the dinner. I was pleased that they were pleased.

So I was stunned when he told me later how much he hated the food. “Then why did you tell them you loved it?” I asked.



“I was trying to make them feel good,” he said. “I was being polite.”

“There’s etiquette and there’s unnecessary lying!” I said. “No one asked you what you thought. Why rave over something you hate?”

That’s when it hit me: If he could lie so convincingly about something so inconsequential, then he could be lying about anything.



I still had no idea whether I was with Jason Bourne, Walter Mitty, or a combination of the two, but I couldn’t live in that liminal space any more. I left him and promptly began crucifying myself for it. Had I blown the best thing that ever happened to me? So what if he embellished his appreciation of vegetables. We all tell white lies. In fact, one study suggests that people tell two to three lies every 10 minutes. Lies permeate our existence—in the workplace, media, government. Not to mention the lies we tell ourselves. Maybe I had been too quick to judge.

Doubt about our breakup gnawed at me for over a year, until one blustery March morning the phone rang: Special Agent Dan Ryan with the Naval Criminal

Investigative Service. A doctor who worked for the federal government had been writing fraudulent prescriptions for Vicodin, among other drugs, including Viagra. I, along with colleagues of his at the Pentagon, his octogenarian aunt, his former father-in-law, his new girlfriend, and a host of fictional people were among the unwitting victims of his fraud. Did I

know this man?

Why, yes, I did.

In my head, I danced a little jig. All that unnecessary angst! All that self-doubt! All along, I had been right. I automatically kicked into journalist mode, calling his ex-wife, his coworkers, his new girlfriend. Each was shocked—devastated!—that the man they'd trusted had used them in such a way. No one suspected he would dupe them.

“I almost had a heart attack when I got the call,” his ex-wife recalls. She told me that they'd met in medical school, not Iran (she'd never set foot in the country), and that he'd actually been married once before her. He was not in the CIA and had never been a SEAL, although their adolescent son believed his father was a military juggernaut. She thought he was bipolar, maybe an alcoholic; I voted for psychopath. We agreed on narcissist.

The Navy revoked his credentials, his medical license was suspended, and, after plea-bargaining, he was sentenced to 18 months in jail. (When he was first arrested, he claimed that he was stockpiling medicine to bring to Iraqi orphans.)

“You're lucky,” my friends said afterward. “You dodged a bullet.” They were right, of course, but their comments irked me. If I were truly lucky, we never would have met.

Others wondered why I didn't get out sooner. “Weren't there red flags?” they asked. “Did you really think he was a war hero?” “If he was really in SEAL Team Six, he wouldn't have been able to tell you.”

I was mortified—embarrassed and humiliated. All told, we were together only for a year, but why hadn't I walked out at the first sign of craziness—which, if I were being honest, arose the first time we had dinner? How stupid I was. Gullible. Pathetic.

The United States of Deception

Being duped contaminates your entire sense of self. It throws you off-kilter, makes you question your perceptions. Like Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight*, whose husband has her convinced she's insane when all along he's deliberately manipulating her, the duped lose faith in their ability to determine what is real and what isn't.



Duplicity is rampant. Popular culture is rife with characters who are not what they seem: Walter White (*Breaking Bad*), Don Draper (*Mad Men*), Francis Underwood (*House of Cards*), Nicholas Brody (*Homeland*), Jackie Peyton (*Nurse Jackie*), Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*). Thanks to Photoshop, the Internet, heavily scripted “reality” TV, websites like Ashley Madison (for married people seeking affairs), and social media, the lines between fiction and reality have blurred for all of us.

But while we might find dupers’ behavior morally reprehensible, we also root for them. America loves redemption narratives. Happy as we are to give some high-profile perpetrators a second chance, however, we are far less generous with their victims.

“Our culture may embrace the redeemed sinner, but the person victimized—not so much,” psychiatrist Anna Fels has observed in *The New York Times*. As a result, it is often the person who lied or cheated who has the easier time. Sure, dupers might beat themselves up a bit or feel a tinge of regret for their transgressions. But they are in possession of all the

information; they may have chosen to act in a dastardly way, but their choices were under their own control. And while the duped are stuck in a crisis of memory, personal history, and emotions, dupers can make better choices going forward. Where would talk shows be without their tearful confessions and promises of new beginnings?

Most people who have been lied to or betrayed, on the other hand, keep it under tight wraps. “People feel shame,” says Donna Andersen, the author of *Red Flags of Love*. Andersen certainly did. Her ex-husband stole \$250,000 from her.

The experience was so unsettling that in 2005 she founded lovefraud.com, a website for people who’ve been conned in relationships. It gets nearly 100,000 visitors a month, she says. Visitors appreciate knowing that there are others like them. “The worst thing in the world,” says Andersen, “is to feel like a chump.”

Those who have been lied to “castigate themselves about why they didn’t suspect what was going on,” says Fels. “The emotions they feel, while seemingly more benign than those of the perpetrator, may in the long run be more corrosive: humiliation, embarrassment, a sense of having been naïve or blind, alienation from those who knew the truth all along and, worst of all, bitterness.”

Their social networks are hardly supportive, Fels observes. “Lack of control over one’s destiny makes other people queasy. Friends often unconsciously blame the victim, asking whether the betrayed person really ‘knew at some level’ what was going on and had just been ‘in denial’ about it.”

When Caroline Hahn*’s father came out as gay during Hahn’s late teens, most of their small town in upstate New York lined up to support him. No one batted an eye when he moved in with his boyfriend. As for her mother? Her experience was “never discussed, except for people talking behind her back,” says Hahn, 39, a magazine editor in New York. “How could she not have known he was gay?’ ‘How could she have been so stupid?’ People were sorry

that my father had had to hide his true identity all those years, but no one stopped to ask my mother how she felt.”

Another reason victims of duplicity are so unsympathetic, experts suggest, is that their experience hits too close to home. We are all, each one of us, susceptible to exploitation, although no one wants to acknowledge how vulnerable we really are.

“Some people will withhold empathy from dupees, casting judgment on them, often from the defensive fear that ‘this could be me, and I’m not comfortable facing this reality, this vulnerability,’” says Steven Becker, a psychotherapist in Westfield, New Jersey, who often works with those who have been duped. Projecting their own vulnerability, people blame the victim and view dupees as having failed to see the signs, therefore having “asked for it,” in a sense.

Martha Rivers,* now 58, had no clue that the man she lived with for 30 years, the father of her two children, was such an impeccable liar. The couple, who lived in tony Greenwich, Connecticut, seemed to have everything: Ivy League educations, all-American athletic trophies, good looks, great jobs. They were happy. Until Martha began finding receipts for strip clubs. And for local hotels. And for \$800 Christian Louboutin heels—which she hadn’t bought. Then she learned that her husband had a long-term relationship with his business partner, whose child he had fathered.

Rivers’s life as she knew it came to an abrupt halt. “You think: It would never happen to me. I would know if my husband were lying to me. Well, it didn’t occur even to my father, who has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology,” she confides. Six years after her divorce, Rivers is still blaming herself for being so clueless.

The deceived also may feel responsible for their own predicament, whether the deception is personal, like Rivers’s, or on a grander scale. Ilene Kent, whose elderly parents lost about 75 percent of their life savings to Bernard Madoff, felt as if they were attacked for Madoff’s

actions. Her father, now in his 90s, believed himself a failure because he hadn't detected Madoff's fraud in advance. Her parents never recouped their losses, financial or emotional.

Blind to Betrayal

As a rule, possessing background information in a domain—say, investing—is a protective factor against exploitation. But desires can overpower critical faculties. “When emotions, such as greed, kick in, we tend to put our skepticism on the shelf,” says Stephen Greenspan, Ph.D., an emeritus professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut and the author of *Annals of Gullibility*.

Greenspan has a personal interest in the subject. He first held his finished book in his hands on December 8, 2008, three days before the world learned of the Madoff scam. In one of the more ironic strikes of coincidence, Greenspan-the-expert-on-gullibility had invested with Madoff. He lost a sizable chunk of change.



Greenspan freely admits that he was not as financially savvy as other Madoff investors, who, he says, were in a position to know more. There had been warning signs, including a 2001 article in *Barron's* in which experts questioned Madoff's outsize returns. “Self-deception is a very strong force, especially when there are many social pressures at work,” says Greenspan. Madoff, for example, had come highly recommended; he was a presence in the Jewish community and had been in charge of the finances of a slew of charitable organizations and of Elie Wiesel, a leading moral authority and winner of a Nobel



Peace Prize.

Some psychologists, however, contend that having background information can actually *contribute* to being deceived. It makes people overconfident. In a 2009 study, researchers at the University of Exeter found that people with excessive knowledge in a specific area are often duped more than those who are less well-versed.

People with extensive knowledge on a subject may hold illusions of superiority, explains psychologist David Modic, a research associate at King's College, Cambridge, who collaborates closely with his former doctoral advisor in the Exeter group. Modic helped develop a scale to measure scam compliance and susceptibility to persuasion. Such people assume they know so much that they jump to often detrimental conclusions about their expertise. "There's a sense of, 'Nobody can take me for a fool; I know so much about it,'" says Modic, who also co-authored a study on victim mentality in Internet fraud. "They feel no need to fact check. This is the point of scams, actually—if it were so easy to discern between what is a scam and what is not, then they would be fairly transparent."

Also, when our self-control is diminished in any way—ego-depleted, in the psych biz—Modic offers, "we tend to ignore warning signals and just quickly try to ease the pressure. If you come across an opportunity to fulfill a desire, you are likely to not check it out thoroughly."

"Scammers don't think other people are stupid—they just think they're smarter," says Maria Konnikova, a writer and psychologist and the author of the forthcoming *The Confidence Game*, about the psychology of the con. The victims, in turn, believe they're smarter. The two are enmeshed in an intricate game of one-upmanship.

Those who have been suckered in the past wind up at greater risk for being suckered again. Why? Because they don't believe it could happen to them twice. As Konnikova puts it, "The

more confident you are in your invulnerability, the more vulnerable you become.”

In general, however, perpetrators zero in on people who they think will be easy marks. David Schwartz, a professor of psychology at the University of Southern California, made a classic discovery about bullies: They don't pick on just anybody, he found. They target people who do not stand up for themselves—people who are nonassertive even in nonthreatening situations.

The bullies are especially adept at determining who the nonassertive ones are. And they engage in a kind of shopping process to single them out for abuse.

The same can be said for dupers. Think back to your school days. Remember being told that *gullible* wasn't in the dictionary? There was always one kid who raced to the G section. He was often the target of relentless teasing.

“Good liars take advantage,” says Paul Ekman, a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of California, San Francisco, who has spent a professional lifetime decoding emotions, facial expressions, and deception. “They can spot someone from a mile away. When I was in grammar school, we already knew who the people were whom we could get away with lying to, and we would mercilessly mislead them.”

Moreover, we don't generally walk around imagining that others are taking us for a ride. “We are built, generally, to give others the benefit of the doubt,” says Becker. “We are not normally in hypervigilant mode, because most of our life experience tells us that most people aren't dupers.”

Yet there is such a thing as betrayal blindness, says Anne DePrince, a professor of psychology at the University of Denver. It especially operates to protect friends or lovers, or to preserve a job or get a promotion, or simply to avoid the disappointment or disillusionment that comes with finding out that someone is not who they claim to be.

It's a kind of willful denial. "This lack of awareness of things that other people think you should have seen as obvious? It may seem to outsiders that if you are being duped you would be hyperattuned to that and immediately kick that person to the curb, but that's not always the case," says DePrince.

Lacey Schwartz grew up the only child in a Jewish household in Woodstock, New York. Despite her dark complexion and kinky hair, she never doubted that she was Caucasian, though outsiders often questioned her lineage. Family lore had it that she inherited her looks from her dark-skinned Sicilian grandfather. But years later, Schwartz, a filmmaker, discovered that her biological father was an African-American man with whom her mother had had an affair.

"I believe everyone in my family was in denial," says Schwartz, 38, who made a documentary, *Little White Lie*, about her experience. "You can convince yourself to believe what you want to believe. Often, you lie to yourself more than to others."

As her mother says in the film: "It wasn't because I was lying. I mean, I didn't see it, really. And then, maybe once I started seeing it, I chose to ignore it."

Betrayal is especially devastating if it is carried out by someone close to you, whom you trusted implicitly. "The closeness of the relationship matters," says Kurt Dirks, a professor of organizational behavior at Washington University in St. Louis and an expert on trust. And the recovery of trust, he reports in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, hinges on whether the betrayal is seen as intentional—a commentary on a person's integrity—or the result of incompetence.

Closeness, ironically, can also be fostered—at least to a certain point—by the act of deception. Those being duped may, like me, invest a great deal of cognitive energy in examining and batting down their suspicions. And yet, the very effort spent in analyzing

concerns has the unwitting effect of heightening the attachment of dupee to duper.


Greenspan draws on the psychological construct of cognitive dissonance, which posits discomfort in the face of conflicting evidence and a drive to resolve the inconsistency. “When you put so much into a particular decision, you tend to selectively emphasize facts that support it and dismiss facts that dispute it,” he explains. “Affect enters into the process in many ways, such as falling in love with the duper.”

Ekman, for his part, believes that liars are so successful not because they are expert fabricators but because the target of the lie wants to believe them. “Do you really want to find out whether your lover is betraying you? Of course you do. But of course you don’t. It’s a terrible thing to discover that someone has been taking advantage of you—that’s why liars succeed. Because we want to believe them.”

So I Was Duped, Now What?

Deception is not going away any time soon. Duping—and being duped—are ancient, even core, elements of human psychology, contends Roy Baumeister, a professor of psychology at Florida State University. “Humans evolved to trust and cooperate with non-kin. Being duped or suckered is an important dimension of human social life,” an ever-present possibility, he observes in the *Review of General Psychology*. We are, in fact, all equipped with a fear of duping, which he calls “sugrophobia,” and over time our neural circuits have rigged up a cheater-detection system.

Being duped creates such an aversive emotional state, he says, that it motivates victims to avoid repeating the experience. But not by abandoning all trust.



“Being trusting is generally a good thing,” says Greenspan. In fact, research shows that highly trusting people are not duped any more than those who are less trusting.



Further, high trusters are more likely to be happy, well-adjusted, better liked, and more often sought out as friends by both low-trusting and high-trusting others.

Being duped occasionally is the unavoidable price we pay for trusting, Baumeister believes. “Remaining suspicious and refusing to take chances on others’ good will is costly because you miss out on a lot,” he says. There’s a middle ground between trusting too much and too little.

Experts agree: Intuition is often our best ally

in determining whether someone is lying. But most of us don’t follow our guts; we cast aside niggling doubts, often berating ourselves for being too cynical. The Exeter researchers found that people who fall for scams often suspect something is off; they just ignore it.

Dupee Donna Andersen developed a Love Fraud Romantic Partner Survey and posted it online. Seventy-one percent of the 1,300-plus respondents said that early in their relationship they’d had a feeling that something wasn’t quite right—but they shrugged it off. When she asked if a third party had warned them to be wary, 90 percent said yes. But they barreled ahead anyway.

Off Duty

And what of Commander Whack Job, as I came to call my former fiancé? We never spoke again, although I did get periodic updates from the Department of Justice. He tried to get his sentence commuted, but the court rejected his plea and he served his time in a West Virginia prison.

Not long ago, I came across an essay my ex had written for a small-town New England newspaper. It was a tribute to the old girlfriend he had reconnected with after we broke up, in which he noted that after they initially met 30 years ago he had “ended up in the military, qualifying as a Special Forces operator, then finally, after nearly dying at the hands of the enemy, made it to medical school and fatherhood.”

I gasped when I read it. Surely someone would not lie so blatantly in black and white. Maybe he *was* telling the truth all along, at least about his military service. Maybe *he* was the victim and the rest of us were awful for doubting him.

My reaction was normal, insists therapist Becker. Most of us don't want to believe that anyone would want to manipulate us or exploit us to such a hurtful degree. “We don't want to believe we've been duped,” he says.

I called his ex-wife, with whom I had become a bit friendly, and she reassured me that he had never been among the military elite. The only windmills he tilted against were in his head.

The overall experience did have one benefit for me: It made me take stock of all my relationships and pay more attention to my gut, especially when meeting new people. If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.

And one thing I know for sure. True heroes don't brag about their victories. They live them once, proudly, stoically—and that's enough.

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