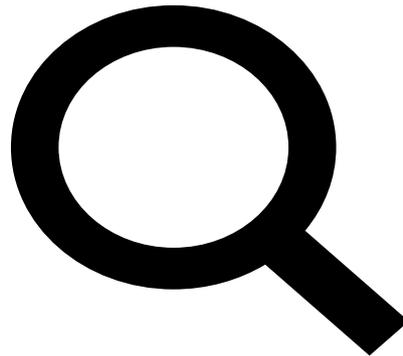


I happen to know the secret of academic success. So far I have never divulged it because, well, charity begins at home. But it looks like the field of cognition and culture might be in need of a shot in the arm, so to speak. So I agreed to part with the secret, against a small compensation negotiated with the ICCI.

There is some truth in the old adage that it takes an enormous amount of education to be truly credulous. Indeed, years of familiarity with several academic fields have convinced me that the proposition is quite literally true. Being an academic means (at least in some disciplines I am familiar with) believing a great number of impossible things before breakfast, and, it would seem, the more preposterous the better.

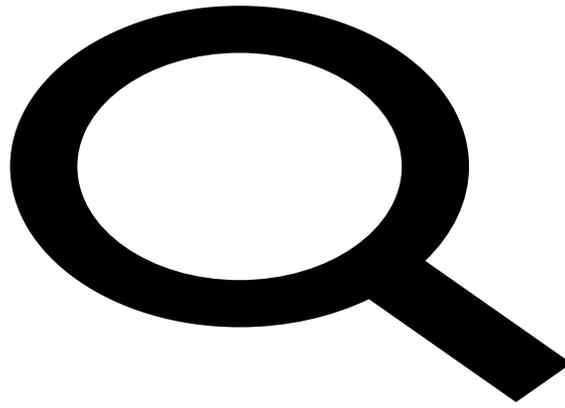


Consider for instance the academic fondness for the idea that madness is “defined by culture”, as discussed [here](#) by Ophelia Deroy. One could discuss the serious claims made by Deroy and the various issues they raise (which I did [elsewhere](#)). For the time being, note just this. The notion that there is nothing to madness, except what “culture” decrees, is counter-intuitive to most people in most societies in the world - except to Western academics. Most people in most places who had any contact with insanity inferred that something was really non-standard in some other people’s mental functioning. Hence, probably, the frisson of the notion that it is all arbitrary and changing.

To turn to more telling examples, consider relativism, which tells us that people literally live in incommensurable worlds. Or the common anthropological idea that kinship has nothing to do with reproduction and genetics. Or the literary critics who say that writing is primary and orality is a derived form of communication. Or the notion that gender is completely unrelated to sex.

The mechanism that made these strange notions popular is actually not so mysterious.

It is a simple variant on the age-old technique of bait and switch, that is, giving the sucker something attractive to expect (the bait) and then substituting a dud once the customer is hooked (that’s the switch).



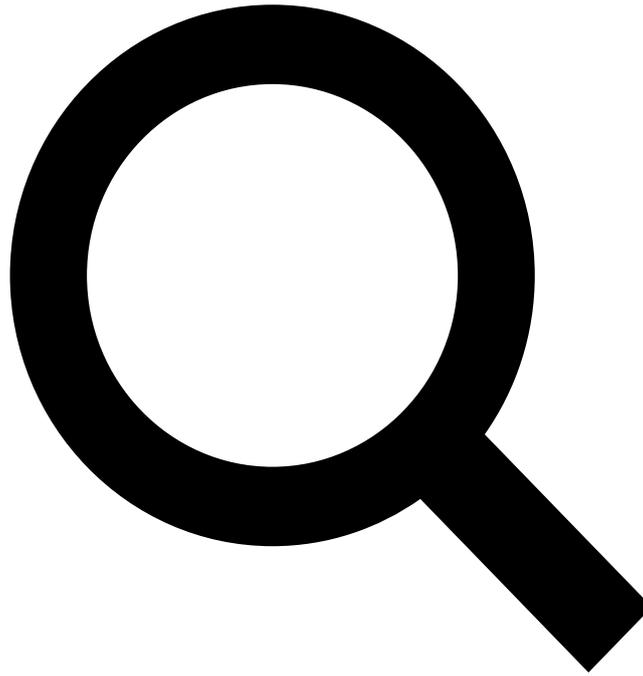
Most of the academic ideologies I mentioned, and I imagine many others, are attractive because they seem to violate some of our common assumptions. Madness is not brain dysfunction! Manhood has nothing to do with being a fellow! One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman!

But on closer inspection, it generally turns out that the initial, amazing, challenging statements in fact disguised crashingly banal assumptions. Suppose you point out to your academic ideologue that, for instance, if maleness and manhood really are completely unrelated... then it is puzzling that an extraordinarily vast number of [socially constructed] “men” happen to be [chromosomal] “males”, and that such a coincidence is spooky. You will probably be told that you did not quite understand the original statement. What it meant was that the meaning of maleness could not be derived from possession of the Y chromosome... Or if you point out that some forms of insanity occur in many cultures at the same rates, that they trigger highly similar behaviors, are associated with the same genetic predispositions and correlate with similar neuro-functional features, you will be told that you did not understand. What was meant was that the cultural construal of madness was not derived directly from brain dysfunction...

At which point, you might be forgiven to think something like “so that was what all the fuss was about?” and you would be right of course. When push comes to shove, the flamboyant, earth-shattering, romantic, swash-and-buckle assault on our entrenched certainties seems to be, well, a bit of a damp squib.

Many academic radicals are sheep in wolf's clothing.

For a sadly funny illustration of this, consider Jacques Derrida's extraordinary contortions when persistently nagged by John Searle in a memorable series of [interviews](#). Every time John the mongoose seems to have caught his interlocutor at some dreadful inconsistency (you said that here was no objective truth, then you agreed that this cup of coffee really was objectively on this table, did you not?), Jacques the cobra squirms out of his grip and slithers away into a feeble rewording of the initial claims (... er, I only meant that this would be an existentially impoverished version of reality and objectivity... or verbiage to that effect).



Now, if you can bear with me, there are serious, interesting cognition and culture issues here.

First, it may be important for us to understand the epidemiology of academic fashions. In a field like ours, where science has a hard time breaking the shackles of common intuitions and incoherent theories, there may be lessons to learn – if only of a defensive kind.

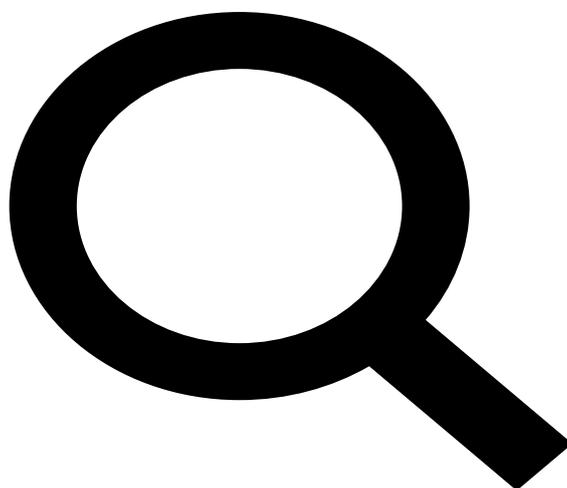
Second, the bait and switch is of course not exclusive to academic fads. In his [book](#) on the psychoanalytic cult, Ernest Gellner made a point very similar to this. There is something rather intriguing and counter-intuitive to the central claim, that the self is not unitary, that there is some other, powerful and generally inscrutable source of agency inside our minds, beyond our conscious selves. But bold psychological theorising then floundered into extreme banality. The unconscious turned out to be very much like a person, with goals, interests, strategies, cunning, etc. So you were licenced to treat it as an imp or some malevolent ghost inside the machine – which of course is not exactly new, just another version of the angel and the beast. (As Gellner added, compare this to the cognitive unconscious of, e.g. linguistics – which is totally un-person-like). Gellner also suggested that this may be a feature of many successful ideologies – a winning combination of initial, explicit shock and subsequent but implicit reassurance.

Third, the point about education being necessary for downright gullibility may not be a joke. But if it is serious, then a lot of epistemic psychology should be revised. A standard perspective in cognitive and social psychology is that minds start by believing, as it were, and it takes hard work to unbelieve. For instance, Dan Gilbert ran [many studies](#) in which people are more likely to judge statements true if their encoding of the statement was interrupted – which supposedly shows that mental systems hold information as true, whenever they represent it, until they (effortfully) add an explicit “false” tag to it. But this is implausible, for many reasons. The effect disappears if you use anything but information of minimal semantic content and minimal relevance to the subjects, if you present sources for the information, etc. More generally, it would be an odd design feature to have mental systems believe in order to understand, when organisms are faced with not altogether honest signalers... Indeed, it may be that mental systems are initially disposed to unbelieve, and that they

“bracket” information provided from others until some additional reasoning leads to holding the information as reliable. This would also explain why academics are good at believing nonsense – they simply have more intellectual tools at their disposal to undo native skepticism.

So what about sexual intercourse?

Well, in France a long time ago, quite a few academics were enthralled by Jacques Lacan, a psychoanalyst who had perfected the art of the guru to a tee. Believers walked around citing the works of the master and trying to convince outsiders, apparently in all seriousness, that profound truths were expressed in the master’s statements, such as e.g. “the problem of women is that they are not”, “feelings are always reciprocated”, “the phallus is the signifier”, “language is structured like the unconscious” (or perhaps the other way around), and, most poignant, “there is no such thing as sexual intercourse”. Some people seemed to discern deep metaphors where I (then a wee lad) could only perceive blatantly false platitudes (except for the last statement, which was actually true of all French psychoanalysts of my acquaintance).



Of course, there is another road to success, or so we should hope. There is the patient building and testing of scientific models. To be sure, it takes more effort than the guru bait-and-switch. On the positive side, it does not require that you believe impossible things or even that you abstain from sexual intercourse, if you like that sort of thing.

PS – It may seem to some readers that this post was strongly inspired by Dan Sperber’s [The guru effect](#) and [Rethinking Symbolism](#), as well as Steven Pinker’s [The language instinct](#) (pp. 427ff) and Hugo Mercier’s [work](#) on argumentation as the evolutionary context of reasoning. It is of course the other way around.