Duped, Scammed and Suckered: the Development of the Sugrophobia Scale

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The research reports the development and validation of a scale measuring sugrophobia, a trait motivated by a desire to avoid the aversive consequences associated with being duped. The final Sugrophobia Scale includes nine items representing three dimensions (apprehension regarding marketplace transactions, vigilance against duping, and anticipated remorse over possible duping).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

To date, little academic attention has been placed on duping despite its serious financial and emotional consequences. Vohs, Baumeister and Chin (2007) introduced the term “sugrophobia” to describe a consumer’s aversive emotional response resulting from one’s own choice to engage in an interpersonal exchange, typically economic in nature, that leads to the perception of having been taken advantage of. The term’s root derives from the Latin sugro, which means to suck; thus the term may literally be translated as a person’s fear of being suckered. Sugrophobia is a self-protective mechanism that motivates consumers to avoid the aversive self-conscious emotions (e.g., self-blame, embarrassment) associated with being duped.

The present research creates a psychometrically sound measure of trait sugrophobia. Although sugophobic motives may arise in a variety of situations where there is the possibility of being “sucked”, we assume that some people simply go through life constantly on guard against the possibility of being duped while others rarely worry about it. It is for this reason that Vohs et al. (2007) suggested that creating a valid and reliable measure of individual differences in sugrophobia should be possible. Such a scale would be of considerable use to researchers in a number of different realms, including prosocial behavior, decision-making, behavioral economics and social dilemmas.

Marketplace transactions are paradoxical in that they are both antagonistic and mutually beneficial. For example, a new car buyer benefits with a source of transportation, while the seller benefits from the money. However, negotiating the price is an antagonistic exercise because both parties seek to maximize self-interests. A fundamental problem in an exchange is that it is difficult to objectively determine how much of X should be traded for Y. Yet, due to increased role specialization in modern markets, consumers must rely on sellers’ products and services to survive. These issues give rise to the possibility that one party may profit at the other’s expense. Hence, some level of sugrophobia is normal and adaptive for consumers. However, there are also negative consequences associated with the trait. Beyond the heavy cognitive resources required to maintain a constant state of vigilance against being scammed, high sugrophobes are also apt to signal their distrust to potential trading partners who are otherwise acting fairly and this may lead to negative effects. Finally, high sugrophobes may miss out on some opportunities that are otherwise acting fairly and this may lead to negative effects. Finally, high sugrophobes may miss out on some opportunities that are genuinely good deals because of their persistent vigilance to avoid being scammed (Cialdini 2001).

Underlying a consumer’s perception that they “have been had” or unfairly manipulated by a marketing agent is a complex cognitive appraisal process centered around the notion of equity (Campbell 1995). Along these lines, Vohs et al. (2007) identified four conditions necessary for duping to occur. First, the victim must believe at the outset that a standard of fairness was operating. Second, the outcome must be perceived as being unfair in a direction that disadvantages the victim. Third, the victim must believe that the trading partner intended to dupe, which means the norm of trust was deliberately violated. Fourth, the victim must believe that she or he made choices along the way that contributed to the outcome and duping could have been avoided had different decisions been made.

There are both cognitive and emotional consequences associated with being duped. One such cognitive consequence is counterfac-