



## I Was a Teenage Psychic

The psychic looks at us from the television screen and says, “Take out your broken watches and your cutlery and bring them close to the television set: I will try to make something happen in your own homes! Broken watches may start ticking again and cutlery might bend; also, look out because other strange phenomena may happen: the chandelier may swing or the TV may go off. . . .”

The psychic then attempts to cause the hands on the TV host’s watch to move backward by way of his “psychic powers.” While doing this, he invites the viewers to concentrate on their own watches, which the psychic is also trying to fix. Suddenly, on the host’s watch we see that the time has gone back two hours! Now is the time to check if something has happened in the homes of the viewers: they are invited to call the TV station and tell about their experiences. The phones in the studio’s offices start ringing with miracles being reported with each call: a watch, stopped for many

years, now runs perfectly; another one has jumped ahead one hour; a Rolex watch, whose whole inside mechanism needed to be replaced at an estimated cost of nearly \$1,000, now works perfectly. Over twenty-four more phone calls from people reporting to have seen their broken watches being fixed follow!

But that’s not all: dozens of other people call to say that their spoons, forks, and keys have bent; a glass of water has begun to boil; a TV set has gone off; and much, much more (see table 1 for a description of the phenomena reported by TV viewers during this hour of broadcasting).

The episode just described really took place in 1992 when, as a guest on a popular Italian TV show, *L’Istruttoria* (*The Inquest*), I had a chance to test a theory I was rather curious about. With the complicity of the show’s host, I intended to pose as a psychic and duplicate a demonstration that, during the 1970s, had made famous a man who claimed to possess real psychic powers: Israel’s Uri Geller.

For a few years, Geller had been able to convince people (including scientists) that he could bend keys and forks, guess drawings in sealed envelopes, and predict future events with the power of his mind. After various investigators showed that his claims had no scientific basis (Randi 1975; Marks and Kamman 1980; Gardner 1981), his career as a psychic superstar faded.

One of the most convincing performances of this charismatic character was, in fact, his apparent ability to cause strange phenomena to happen directly inside the houses of TV viewers. After this phenomenon regularly occurred (as dozens of phone callers could testify each time), the most obvious conclusion for most of the audience was that the phenomenon had to be real because Geller could not possibly have had so many stooges faking support for his claim.

The paranormal, however, most likely has nothing to do with this demonstration; the explanation in fact could lie more easily in an interesting effect of mass suggestion. It was not the first time I posed as a psychic to test this theory. In 1989, in fact, James “The Amazing” Randi asked me to claim psychic powers on a radio show in order to later demonstrate, during the *Exploring Psychic Powers Live!* TV show, how anyone could duplicate this phenomenon just by the clever use of suggestion. I did as Randi instructed and went on the radio show and claimed that as I was talking incredible things would start to happen in the houses of the listeners.

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After only five minutes or so, about twenty people called reporting the strangest things: a television set had turned on all by itself; a cat was behaving strangely; a picture had fallen from the wall; a bulb in a lamp had exploded... and much more.

ing strangely; a picture had fallen from the wall; a bulb in a lamp had exploded; a book on spiritualism had fallen from the table; the whole computer network of a lawyer's office had gone down; and much more.

There was nothing extraordinary about those things. They happen often but nobody pays much attention them or thinks that they must be related to some psychic phenomenon; however, after the listeners had been alerted by me to watch for unusual phenomena, almost any event that occurred while I was talking could easily be interpreted as evidence for my claims by the most suggestible people.

Let's try, then, to understand the psychological conditions that can generate and enhance a similar belief in some listeners.

### Persuasion in Action

We are obviously dealing with some of the major principles of persuasion, including the reciprocity principle, the authority factor, the motivation and coherence principle, the shortage principle, the sympathy principle, and the social confirmation principle. Robert B. Cialdini has summarized these principles very clearly. According to Cialdini, these principles come into play almost automatically and therefore are easily exploited by those who know how they work. Let's see how these principles apply to the situations described above.

First of all, the "psychic" sets the stage: he presents himself to the public as a believable person. In my case, at the beginning of the radio broadcast, the host told his listeners that some Italian universities were conducting experiments on my powers; on TV, I was able to demonstrate my claimed powers by bending and breaking a spoon, correctly guessing a drawing sealed in an envelope, and making some radish seeds germinate in my hand. In other words, I had offered something solid to the viewers: convincing demonstrations of extraordinary powers. The reciprocity principle, which states that we have to reciprocate when we're given something, was then activated. In this case, in exchange for my demonstration the TV viewer might have felt more obli-

gated to give what I had to say more attention.

Furthermore, in both cases my claims were not doubted by the hosts: both expressed their belief in their reality and pretended they were very puzzled. This way, I was benefitting from the authority factor, a principle whose strength has been clearly shown by Stanley Milgram.

Owing to the sense of compliance toward authority, which is profoundly infused in human beings, some spectators may well have surrendered to the judgment of the hosts and undertaken the same attitude of wonder that the hosts exhibited toward my claims. At this point, the message we wanted to get through—namely, that I had real psychic

**Table 1. Phenomena Reported by the TV Viewers of *L'Istruttoria* During an Hour of Broadcasting**

Italian City	Phenomena	Notes
Cesate (Province of Milan)	three watches restart	had been stopped for at least four years
Arezzo	watch runs briefly	had been stopped for more than 100 years
Senago (Province of Milan)	watch starts again	had been stopped for two months
Perugia	clock works again	had been "broken"
Cagliari	two watches restart	had been stopped for ten years
Cuneo	watch jumps six hours ahead	had been stopped at the time
Roma	watch restarts	had been stopped for years
Milano	watch restarts	had been "broken"
Parma	clock runs an hour	had been broken for two years
Napoli	watch runs briefly	had been stopped for years
Milano	clock runs backward	had been stopped for twenty-five years
Frosinone	watch runs fast	had been "broken"
Milano	watch restarts	had been stopped for two years
Bari	clock runs fast	had been stopped for two years
Alghero	watch (Rolex) restarts	owner saved from expensive repairs
Province of Milan	two spoons are misplaced	stopped watch also started
Fidenza	watch jumps an hour ahead	had been stopped for months
Napoli	two watches restart	had been stopped for years
Roma	watch restarts	had been "broken"
Mazzara del Vallo	key bends	It was not the one held in the hand
Catania	watch hands go back and forth	had been stopped for two years
Modena	bent spoon straightens	also the TV set went off
Torino	Four pieces of cutlery bend	
Bari	fork bends "by itself"	
Imperia	glass of water "boils"	had already happened
Cuneo	spoon bends	a watch also stopped
Trieste	spoon bends	had already happened
Napoli	watch restarts	had been stopped for a long time
Cagliari	watch breaks up	
Cagliari	pendulum clock stops	

powers—was already appearing as a consistent hypothesis by a considerable number of the viewers.

For the persuasion to be effective, however, the spectators had to feel motivated to participate in the experiment—and what better motivation than the possibility of personally living an extraordinary experience and coming face-to-face with the supernatural? This persuasion was especially effective because I was constantly repeating that these phenomena didn't happen all the time and didn't happen to just anyone: only the few "chosen" ones could live this wonderful experience. This is the shortage principle: an experience appears more attractive if its availability appears to be limited.

Also, the fact that I had an unassuming attitude (and that I apologized various times in case the demonstration failed) helped to make me more likeable: without acknowledging it, the spectators were wishing for everything to go well and were ready to act their part toward achieving this aim.

At this point, the spectators were ready to interpret anything happening in their houses (no matter how prosaic) as proof of the reality of my psychic powers. There was still one more very important persuasive factor that played a role as soon as the phone calls started arriving: the social confirmation principle. "If so many people call to say that their cat is behaving strangely or that their watches are working again," some spectators may have wondered, "maybe I should call in to say that the light went off for a few seconds!"

The illusion created by the number of phone calls coming in was that *all* the spectators tuned into that same channel were personally experiencing some spectacular demonstration of psychic phenomena—a fact that inevitably nourished further phone calls and could have very well resulted in headlines on the following day's newspapers had we not revealed the experiment. In reality, the small percentage of spectators calling was enough to quickly jam the switchboard of the TV station for a few hours.

## Conclusion

Considering the complexity of the world in which we live, it is natural that people, in making their decisions, do not take advantage of all the available data but rely only on some isolated and representative item. This "economy" strategy to proceed by shortcuts inevitably leads us to make inferences on the basis of incomplete data; consequently, wrong decisions are often made. As Cialdini (1984) wrote: "We need simple, reliable, and effective rules of conduct. But if the tricks of the sharks undermine their functionality, we lose faith in these rules; we then use them less, and we find ourselves ill equipped in facing the burden of decisions that today's life places upon us. We

can't surrender to this without fighting. The stakes are too high" (217). ■

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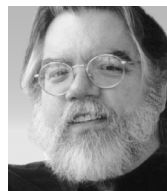
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