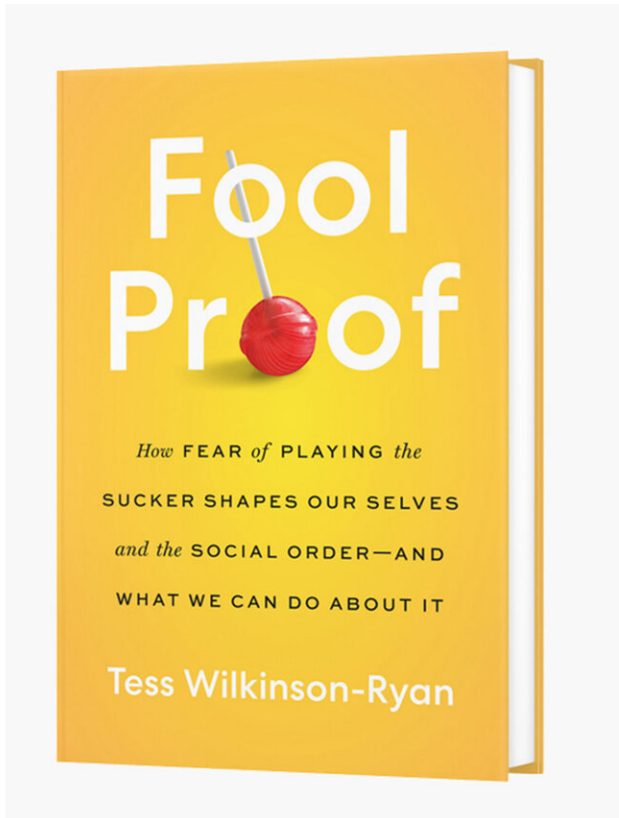


The psychology of playing the fool

February 3 2023, by Tina Rodia



Tess Wilkinson-Ryan is a professor of law and psychology at Penn Carey Law. Credit: Penn Law (left) and Harper Wave

Tess Wilkinson-Ryan almost didn't publish a book at all. But when the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School professor and moral psychologist saw an email in her inbox from a literary agent with the subject line, "Introduction and book project," Wilkinson-Ryan initially

deleted it, thinking it was some kind of marketing ploy.

Her book, "Fool Proof: How Fear of Playing the Sucker Shapes Ourselves and the Social Order—and What We Can Do About It" explores the psychology behind humanity's aversion to being fooled and how this plays out in ourselves, our communities, and the world at large.

Human beings make snap decisions to avoid being duped, or played a fool—and most people know an email scam when they see it. She second-guessed herself and her initial reaction to the email. Maybe an agent had read her research and genuinely wanted connect, she thought. Or, more importantly, she asked herself, "What do I care if I email back and it's a scam? What do I really have to lose?" She found the email in her trash folder and responded.

"Fool Proof" is set to publish on Feb. 7. In it, Wilkinson-Ryan introduces the universal psychology embedded in an aversion to being played the fool. As a professor of contract law with a graduate degree in psychology, Wilkinson-Ryan studies how people think about their transactions with one another. Fear of being duped, misled, or suckered is universal, but it's rarely discussed as a psychological construct, or something that drives our behaviors or decisions. In her book, Wilkinson-Ryan introduces the fear and unease of being duped, gives examples of our behavior individually and in cooperative settings, then pans out to cooperation on a societal level, exploring how this affects humanitarian aid and redistributive policies.

In a Q&A, she discusses the universal aversion to being duped, her background in moral psychology and contract law, and how individuals and communities toe the line between cooperation and self-preservation.

Why are you interested in exploring the idea of

playing the fool, or betrayal?

My primary research interest is in the psychology of contract law. There are a lot of "sucker" feelings when people are in [contracts](#) with each other, so this comes up a lot in my day-to-day research and teaching life.

But my interest in fools really started in graduate school. I went to Penn for law school and also got a Ph.D. in psychology. When I was getting my Ph.D., we learned about all these standard experimental economics studies that track how people transact with each other when their incentives are mixed. I was figuring out how to synthesize across studies, and started taking note of what I viewed as a persistently underexplained bunch of results in transactional games and studies—sometimes people were willing to be generous and cooperative, and sometimes they were quite guarded, and afraid they would lose out on some cooperative enterprise. It didn't seem to me that the decision to trust or not trust was easily explained just by saying, "well, this player is altruistic and this player is selfish."

To me, it seemed like some situations made people think they would look like a fool if they tried to cooperate, like "Am I a chump for wanting to share money if other people hold back?" Around this same time, there was an article published about the idea of people being afraid of being played the sucker. I thought I could marry the idea with other findings in psychology and behavioral economics that had been underexplained.

In your book you reference the word 'sugrophobia.' What is it?

The word "sugrophobia" is a word coined by three psychologists in the early 2000s, and I think it's really clever. It literally means "fear of

sucking," but the idea is that it's the fear of being a sucker. The motivating idea is that people get so worried about feeling or perceived of being duped that they go way out of their way to avoid it, almost to a level of a phobia.

The book gives several anecdotes and also highlights many studies. Is there one you like in particular?

One of my favorite studies that poses the sucker's dilemma perfectly is an experimental game called the public goods game. The way it works is you have four people playing this game in adjoining rooms, anonymously. They can't coordinate to make decisions. They are each given \$10 and told there is a communal pot, and whatever you donate will be redistributed to each player. Everyone decides how much to give, then the pot is multiplied by 1.5—so there is a benefit to cooperation. If everyone gives \$10, that is \$40, multiplied by 1.5 is \$60 that is redistributed evenly. If you think through the incentives, the best group outcome is that everyone donates their full allotment.

But for any individual, the best outcome is that everyone gives all their money and you give nothing. If you give nothing and everyone gives \$10, 30 multiplied by 1.5 is \$45—and when that is redistributed evenly among four players, the person who didn't donate anything at all makes the most money. Usually when people play multiple rounds of this game, contributions decline over time until everyone is just holding onto their money and the pot has nothing to divide—so there is no public good.

To me this is the perfect sucker's game, an example of people getting in the way of their own best interest. What everyone actually wants is to get the extra money that comes from donating. But if everyone is afraid of being played, nobody gives money and everybody loses.

The question for researchers is, "What incentivizes people who hold their money back?" One answer is they are greedy, obviously—but another answer is they are afraid of getting conned or scammed. But those are two different explanations for the same behavior, so it's hard to know which one is right.

But there is some good evidence out there that the fear of being a sucker is really playing a role. There was a great study by a psychologist named Robyn Dawes who asked players in the public goods game to indicate the amount of their personal donation and, crucially, to also report what their personal guess is about the donations of the other players, before they would find out. Then he just looked at players who believed that others were going to donate at a high level.

Now, if you are a player who believes everyone else will contribute, that's an opportunity to be selfish; you can take advantage of all the chumps. So if greed was the reason that people were holding back, then he should see that players who think everyone else will be big contributors will be the ones who hold onto their own money. But what he saw was that the people who thought everyone else would donate, donated too. It seemed like people wanted to cooperate, and it was their fear that others wouldn't reciprocate that got in the way.

You write that 'being suckered taps into two aversive human conditions: regret and alienation.' What about embarrassment?

Yes, for sure. Humiliation, which I'd think of as deep [embarrassment](#), is the emotional partner of alienation. Alienation is sort of the cognitive counterpart to the feeling of humiliation. And overall, one of my arguments about being suckered is that it's a social experience—to play the fool is to be put down socially, or knocked down a peg, or excluded.

One of the things that clued me in that there were real deep feelings about being a sucker came from researching contracts. When I'm doing research surveys about contracts, I often give people a paragraph about a contract and ask them about their reactions. When I was writing my dissertation I posed this question about how courts should compensate victims of breach of contract.

In response, people put in really high numbers for banal things, like refinishing a floor for example. The responses consistently demanded compensatory damages that were much higher sums than would ever be awarded legally. People submitted comments as well, like "This is what's wrong with this world," "People don't live up to their word," and "This is a betrayal"—with exclamation points and all caps. In my mind, the examples I had made up were mundane transactions; I was surprised they elicited such feelings in the subjects.

Later on, my colleague Dave Hoffman and I did a study that tried to show that the [driving force](#) behind that punitive response of breach of contract was disrespect and betrayal—people thought the breach of contract made the non-breaching party a sucker.

Some chapters in your book explore how fear of being played the fool inform racism and sexism.

The reason I included a chapter on sexism and a chapter on racism is because the psychology of stereotypes, and a lot of the study of the content of [stereotypes](#), suggests that one of the axes along which groups are stereotyped is whether they are likely to play the fool or likely to be a scammer. Or actually both. Often there's real ambivalence in stereotype content, a toggling between two caricatures, the fool on the one hand and the schemer on the other.

There is in fact a social psychological theory of gender stereotyping in particular called "ambivalent sexism," and one of the patterns in this theory is that sexist attitudes toward women seem to posit both that women are naïve and gullible (i.e., suckers) and that women too often pretend they want equal treatment when they actually want "special favors" (schemers). It's a pattern of prejudice that sort of creates a tightrope, where, in this case for example, you can only be taken seriously by being in a very narrow band—smart but not so savvy that you're seen as conniving, cooperative and friendly but not suffering fools gladly, etc.

Another chapter introduces the 'mom-con.'

I didn't intend to write about mothers—I don't study parenthood or motherhood in my normal research life—but I kept finding that examples about motherhood were popping up organically and deserved their own chapter. The point of the chapter is twofold. One is that American narratives of the role of mothers in society purport to be reverential—but actually the way mothers are treated in terms of both social status and material resources don't bear that out.

On the other side, mothers who do make claims for support are often accused themselves of trying to scam the system. There are a lot of pernicious tropes about women trying to use parenting status to get better shifts at work or to extract welfare benefits from the state or "trap" a partner into marriage. These are all stereotyped versions of motherhood that are ultimately intended, I think, to be arguments against social cooperation and support for families.

The psychological themes in your book—operators, marks, status, power, agency, and avoidance—are familiar. Aren't they arguably normal or rational?

Often when people, especially academics, ask me about writing a book on suckers, they ask, "Isn't it rational to be averse to being a sucker—isn't it a rational avoidance behavior?" And, just to be clear, sometimes the answer is definitely yes. I do not usually open the messages in my spam folder and usually that's a good decision. But one thing I argue is that people react viscerally to even the small possibility of being a sucker; they overreact to any threat to such an extent that they get diverted from their real goals.

Like in my case, I have always wanted to write a book. When I got an email from a stranger who was claiming to be a literary agent, my knee jerk suspicion almost warned me away from something I really wanted—something so important to me that, in terms of a rational calculation, it was absolutely worth the minimal risk of finding out it wasn't legit.

The same can be true when it's not that you're trying to profit but that you're trying to be generous. There are lots of cases where the fear of accidentally giving money to people who don't "deserve it"—and adding [skepticism](#) that that's even a legitimate evaluation in the first place—can swamp the actual goal. You see this kind of thing thwarting effective social policy, like antipoverty measures. Tons of money is spent just to verify things like income level and family status for various benefits, and it's often just a huge administrative waste for the applicants and for the state.

So in the end what I'm arguing for is to relegate the worry about being fooled to be, like, a regular worry. Just a normal risk that can be traded off against other priorities depending on how serious it is or what the real goals are. And I think, or I guess I hope, that a lot of the time the real goal is something deeper than just coming out on top, it's doing a good job, or having integrity, or connecting with other humans. Sometimes it's OK to be a sucker if it gets you where you want to go.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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