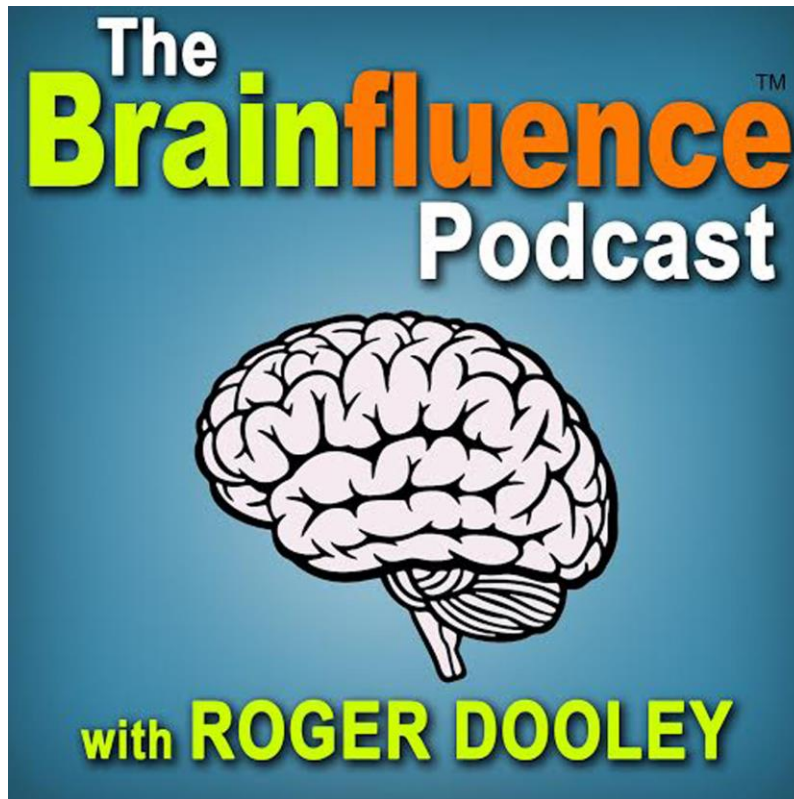


Ep #98: How to be a White Hat Con Artist, with
Maria Konnikova



Full Episode Transcript

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Roger Dooley

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Welcome to *The Brainfluence Podcast* with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to *The Brainfluence Podcast*. I'm Roger Dooley. My guest this week was born in Moscow, Russia and came to the U.S. when she was four years old. Her first ever book was written in Russian. It was five pages long and it was about trolls. I'm not sure if we'll get to discuss that one today but we do have some other interesting things to chat about.

Since then, she did her undergrad work at Harvard and earned a Ph.D. in psychology from Columbia. Now she's a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* on psychology topics and has written for publications like *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *Scientific American*, *Wired*, and many more.

Her first book, *Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes* was a *New York Times* bestseller. Her newest book is *The Confidence Game*. Welcome to the show, Maria Konnikova.

Maria Konnikova: Thank you so much for having me.

Roger Dooley: So Maria, congratulations on the new book. It's one of the most compelling psychology books I've ever read. What gave you the idea that studying con artists would be a great book project?

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Maria Konnikova: Well, thank you so much first of all. I'm really glad you enjoyed the book. I didn't know whether or not it would be a compelling book. I just knew that it was something that really fascinated me.

I'd seen a movie by David Mamet called the *House of Games*. I really identified with the protagonist who was a female psychologist who'd just written a bestselling book, who really kind of knew the ins and outs of human nature. And ended up falling for a very elaborate long con even though she thought she knew better. So she was the target of this really terrible scheme.

When I finished watching the movie, I started thinking about how different she is from the victims you normally see. She's smart, sophisticated, someone who really knows about how humans work and think. She's a clinician so she actually sees patients. And yet, she becomes the ideal victim. I was wondering how common that was and how that's possible. Because if she could be a victim, anyone can.

I realized that no one had ever really written anything about that. So I started researching it and I never stopped.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, that's a pretty obscure film reference but I enjoyed that movie too a long time ago when I saw it. It seems to be a characteristic that a con artist can really prey on anyone. You sort of think of the typical victim as being maybe elderly, or not very sophisticated, or otherwise just naïve. But in fact, it

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seems like smarter people are perhaps even better victims.

Maria Konnikova: Yes, I think there's definitely truth to that because with increased intelligence a few things happen. First, there's an increase in overconfidence. So if you actually are more sophisticated, do know a lot about this, then you don't think it applies to you at all. So you become prone to errors of overconfidence which means you're not learning from your environment as you should be.

The second thing that happens is that we know that trust is actually correlated with intelligence. So people who are smarter are more trusting. And end up by the way, having better life outcomes not just educationally and professionally, but they end up being healthier and happier, doing better, and that works on a social level, not just an individual level. So I think that those two things combine to make intelligent, sophisticated people, very very attractive victims for con artists.

Roger Dooley: For most of us trust is actually a good thing, it's a good human adaptation, right? We can prosper in general if we're trusting.

Maria Konnikova: Absolutely. I already mentioned the correlations that we see on an individual level. On a social level, you see that societies with higher levels of generalized trust end up doing better economically. They have better institutions. They're better developed.

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If you think about it, it makes so much sense from an evolutionary point of view because for society to advance, we need to form connections. We need to trust one another and that can actually be helpful.

Roger Dooley: Right. I'll give you credit, Maria, for employing at least one con technique yourself. A lot of the book is in the form of stories of con artists and victims and in fact stories are a key tool of con artists, aren't they?

Maria Konnikova: [Laughs] Absolutely. I realized as I was working on this that a lot of the things you see con artists employ end up being employed in legitimate realms as well. As a writer, I definitely see myself using a lot of the same methods.

So con artists, they need to engage your emotion. They need to tell good stories that will really draw you in. That is precisely what I do as a writer. I pick the best narratives. I really try to tell them in a compelling way that will get people to pay attention. I think the difference between us, or at least I hope that the difference between us, is intention. That's where I would draw the line between all legitimate professions and con artists.

What I mean by intention is, is your intent to deceive? Are you doing it with kind of a nefarious bent in mind? Are you doing it for your own private ends knowingly? Or are you trying to do a good thing? Are you believing in what you're saying? And are you doing that for a more benign kind of social purpose? If so, I don't think you're a con artist.

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That said, there are obviously con artists in all walks of life who are in business, who are in writing, who are in law.

Roger Dooley: Don't forget politics.

Maria Konnikova: And politics. There definitely are those individuals, yes, yes, who are con artists.

Roger Dooley: Our audience is composed of marketers, salespeople, entrepreneurs, so hopefully most of them will be using this knowledge for good rather than evil. I think this really sort of gets into the broader psychology of persuasion stuff.

That whenever I'm speaking or actually whenever you hear somebody like Bob Cialdini speak or write, the word "ethical" use is inserted frequently because any persuasion technique can be used for bad ends or evil ends. But if it's used properly to hopefully get the customer in the case of a sales process to a better place, then it's perfectly legitimate. But it's not just con artistry, really the whole field of persuasion psychology I think has to keep that part in mind.

Maria Konnikova: Absolutely, absolutely. I think we need to realize that a lot of this can be used for good or for evil. The fact that it's used by con artists doesn't mean that it can't be incredibly effective in very legitimate circumstances. And to get people to do really positive and good things.

I think that learning about the techniques and the approaches isn't just useful for someone who's trying to pull one over on you. I think it's useful for

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anyone who wants to be an effective communicator, someone who can actually get people to affect change for the better.

Roger Dooley: I found it fascinating that many of the con artists you describe use well-established principles of persuasion like Cialdini's six principles of course, and you've got things like the foot-in-the-door technique, the door-in-the-face technique, all these well-established tools.

I'm wondering, in your research, did you find any of these con artists who had actually studied these in any formal way? Read Cialdini or some of the other literature? Or did they arrive at them basically by either instinct or experience?

Maria Konnikova: Yeah, absolutely not. None of them actually read any of this. By the way, they've been around much longer than Cialdini.

Roger Dooley: Sure.

Maria Konnikova: They've known of these principles long before any psychologist formalized them. So many of the con artists that I read about were operating hundreds of years ago. They know all of these things by instinct.

I mean, it's very intuitive psychology if you're good at it. And they are incredibly good at it. So no, they're not formally trained. They have no, I don't think, need for formal training. I think people like Cialdini could learn a lot from the con artists and not the other way around.

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Roger Dooley: No doubt. Perhaps it goes both ways. I could just understand somebody who was already pretty good at conning people devouring all the latest techniques and research to try and hone their craft a little bit. But yeah obviously, it's been around for hundreds, probably thousands of years, so way before organized psychology.

Is there a difference between con artists who are trying to profit by swindling people and those who just seem to con people because they can? I mean like these great imposters who do all these crazy things of impersonating doctors and pilots and so on, typically there's not a real monetary motive there.

Maria Konnikova: Well I actually don't think that the monetary motive is foremost in any great con artist's mind. Let me tell you why. They are by and large incredibly talented and intelligent. What they do requires a lot of work and effort. Many of them could be incredibly successful in the real world.

Many of them had the chance to go straight many, many times, including the ones who actually make a lot of money doing this. In some ways I think they could have made a lot more money had they gone to Wall Street and employed their acumen there.

But what ends up happening is they don't want to go straight. When they're given that opportunity, they pass it by because I think for them it's not about any sort of financial gain. It's the sense of power over people. That's an incredibly addictive

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feeling, that rush of knowing that you're in control of people's lives. That you are actually the one that's crafting their reality.

I think that that is something that they can't resist. That's why you see very very very few of them ever becoming legitimate in their lifetimes, even when given every single tool to do so.

Roger Dooley:

So the people who are sort of actively conning people through financial scams and whatnot are perhaps typically perhaps not among the great con artists of all time, they're simply employing some of these techniques for profit. But the truly great ones are just sort of naturals and do it because they like it.

Getting back to stories, Maria, it seems like the stories that many of these con artists tell work because they are so fanciful almost, they're so rich in detail and so improbable that you can't help but believe them. I know there's the expression that you can't make this stuff up. I wonder if that increases the credibility of these stories.

Maria Konnikova:

Sure. I think that that along with other techniques definitely increases their probability because con artists are really, I mean they're incredibly talented at telling stories that you are going to believe. Because it's not in an incredible way, it's incredible in a way that just could be true.

If they've told it the right way, then if they've done their homework, then they've really done the put-up,

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which is the first part of the con incredibly well, that's where you really analyze your victim, figure out what makes the mark tick. The kind of weak points, the strengths, the motivations, all of these things. Then you tell the story accordingly.

So if the put-up was done well, then you really know how to draw this person into the story. What is this person going to relate to? What we know is that if a story is told the right way, then even if things in it don't quite make sense, you won't notice. When we're transformed into a story, when it becomes part of our lives, this feeling of transportation actually makes us less likely to spot red flags or inconsistencies or facts that don't quite make it seem like it's real.

So we fall for the narrative irrespective of the content in some ways as long as it's set up properly and as long as the story is told in the right way.

Roger Dooley:

Which of the stories you have—the book is chock full of stories—but I'm wondering which one you found to be the most fanciful or the most unbelievable when you read about it after the fact but clearly it was effective with the relationship between the con person and the mark.

Maria Konnikova:

Sure. So there are, it's hard to pick one. There are lots of them that when you take them out of context you think, "How in the world would anyone believe this?" But I think the one that really kind of struck my fancy was Oscar Hartzell's story of the Drake fortune. He basically told people that back in the

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day Sir Francis Drake when he died left a huge treasure, lots of money.

He couldn't give it to his heir because his heir was illegitimate because that illegitimate heir was actually the son of Queen Elizabeth. Because obviously, as everyone knows, they had an illicit, secret relationship. Obviously, that didn't actually happen historically but we'll let that slide.

So there's this illegitimate heir, the treasure is languishing and for centuries the British government has wanted to keep this treasure quiet because they want it for themselves. So there's this bureaucratic battle that's been raging forever.

But if you give a little bit of money to cut through the red tape because we're almost there, then you will get a multifold return on your investment because the treasure is just worth so many billions of dollars by this point. People believed this and they gave him lots of money for over a decade even though they didn't see a single penny in returns.

They believed it so much that when he was finally brought to trial, they paid his legal fees. So that just goes to show how good of a storyteller he actually was, how much he was able to really get these people to buy into what he said.

Roger Dooley: Right. Well his arrest was probably part of the cover up by the UK government that it's still trying to keep the treasure secret.

Maria Konnikova: Absolutely.

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Roger Dooley: I've written about research that shows that flattery increases liking. The weird thing is that even when people suspect the flattery is insincere, like if you're buying a car and the car salesman says something very positive about you. Even when you think it's probably insincere, you still like that person a little bit more. It seems like flattery and playing into people's conceits is a key strategy of con artists. Right?

Maria Konnikova: Yeah. I think flattery gets you everywhere and the con artist knows this incredibly well. You know, I actually experienced this personally when I interviewed some con artists and they would cite me back to me. They would do their homework.

They would say how much they liked a certain piece of writing. They were incredibly flattering. You know exactly what they're doing but it's still really nice to hear good things about yourself and you can't help but thinking, "Oh, you know, this can't be a bad person. I mean, they took the time to read my stuff and they liked it. Clearly they're very very discerning."

You find yourself thinking this and you know it's happening but you can't stop it. I think it's a very basic human impulse to be happy when someone says good things about you.

Roger Dooley: Right. That's actually in a legitimate sense a key approach in any kind of sales outreach, or influence or outreach, is to become familiar with the person that you want to connect with. Then perhaps explain

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something that they've done that you found particularly valuable or interesting. Assuming that you're not totally inventing it, it's a legitimate strategy but the con artists really know how to do that on steroids.

I think one other sort of extreme example of that is the difference in how we perceive something versus how we would perceive that same thing in others. Where if a friend of yours said that, "Gee, I've got a Russian swimsuit model who is in love with me" and perhaps your friend is an elderly male, you would say, "This probably isn't real. There's something wrong here. It's not adding up."

But if that same sort of situation happened to us, we would find a way to justify that, "Well she really likes me for my mind or for my intelligence." Why is that? Why do we translate things differently for ourselves than we would for other people?

Maria Konnikova: Well, we're much more objective about others than we are about ourselves. Let me rephrase that. We are not at all objective about ourselves but we can be pretty objective about other people. So when it comes to others, we actually see them pretty accurately. We can report how attractive they are. How nice they are. All these sorts of things.

When we do those same reports for ourselves, we always overestimate our positive characteristics and underestimate our negative characteristics. The only people in whom this doesn't happen is the

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clinically depressed. So that says something about how powerful this is and how protective it is.

So what ends up happening is we are perfectly able to apply the “if it seems too good to be true it probably is” to other people. But when it comes to us, nothing is too good for us because we have this positivity bias, this superiority bias, about ourselves and our life outcomes.

So suddenly it's not too good to be true. It's exactly what you would expect given how good you personally are. It's a very strong disconnect. Where the exact same event is evaluated differently when it happens to others as when it happens to yourself.

By the way, the same thing is true of very negative things. When someone else suffers a tragedy at some point you start saying, “Get over it.” When you suffer a tragedy and someone else tells you to “get over it already because it's been too long.” You get so mad because to you it's much more devastating and you say, “How could they possibly say that?” So we do it in both the positive and the other negative direction.

Roger Dooley:

That makes a lot of sense. So we talked about use of stories and use of flattery as potentially legitimate, ethical techniques to better connect with people. Are there some other positive takeaways that our listeners could learn from the con artists that you studied? That they could use in a positive way rather than to take advantage of people?

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Maria Konnikova: I think that the number one thing we can learn from con artists and here I'm going to quote a con artist. Victor Lustig was one of the great con artists of the twentieth century. He managed to sell the Eiffel Tower not once but twice to groups of investors, different groups of investors. Yes.

He said it was going to be used for scrap metal. He actually made it incredibly believable. He said, "We're in the middle of a war. There's a financial crisis. We need metal." All this stuff. So people actually bought into this. He was good. He even conned Al Capone, that's a story that I have in my book. That's a story for a different time.

But anyway, he had the ten commandments of the con artist. One of them is a con artist is not a good talker. A con artist is a good listener. I think that that is so incredibly true because con artists know how to hear you. They actually listen when you talk. When they ask you a question, they listen to the answer because they need that information. It helps them understand you. Then it helps them manipulate you.

But we never do that. We don't actually listen half the time whenever we ask someone a question because we're busy thinking about our own stuff and thinking about what we're going to say next and do next. So we tend to be really really bad listeners. We don't actually listen to other people. We like listening to ourselves much more.

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I think that that is something incredibly important that we can take away from con artists because it will make us better friends, better people. Yes, it will make us better able to persuade people but I think it will also deepen the extent of our connections. If you really listen to everyone when you ask them a question. Or just don't ask the question. That I think is one of the most positive things we can take away from the con artist's playbook.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, that's a great lesson both for business and for life in general. Something that we kind of all know we should do but we don't always do it.

Let me remind our listeners that we are speaking with Maria Konnikova, author of *The Confidence Game*. It's a book I highly recommend because it's compulsively readable and full of engaging stories but also it contains a lot of persuasion psychology. Maria, how can our listeners connect with you and your content online?

Maria Konnikova: I'm on Twitter @MKonnikova that's K-O-N-N-I-K-O-V-A. I tweet out all of my stories and links and things like that. I'm also on Facebook at Maria Konnikova but I'm a little bit worse at Facebook. And I have a website which is just MariaKonnikova.com. So as long as you remember how to spell my name, everything's pretty easy.

Roger Dooley: Right. We'll have links to those sites and social profiles as well as your books, Maria, and any other resources we talked about during the course of our conversation on the show notes page at

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RogerDooley.com/Podcast. We'll have a text version of our conversation there too.

Maria, thanks so much for being on the show. I really enjoyed your book. Good luck with it.

Maria Konnikova: Thank you so much, Roger.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of *The Brainfluence Podcast*. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at RogerDooley.com.