

A LINE ON LIFE

3/6/85, Updated 7/16/02

Making Sense of Psychology *

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Psychology has become tremendously popular in magazine and newspapers. One of my readers wanted to know how to separate facts from fallacies in these articles. Here are some suggestions.

The number one suggestion is to **be skeptical**. Psychological reports in the popular press tend to be made uncritically and with a definite bias toward reporting "*sensational*" findings. Here is an example.

Psychologist Philip Zimbardo tells with amusement about mentioning that — in the back wards of two mental hospitals in which he had worked — women patients seemed to use a greater number of obscenities than male patients. Zimbardo emphasizes that this was nothing more than a casual statement, and it was not based on data of any kind. When it was reported in the *New York Times*, it became an "*observation*" that he had "*noted*" over a long period of time. When *Newsweek* reported the *Times* article to its readers, the "*noted*" relationship became one that had been "*found*." Ultimately, a version in *Playboy* read, "*a number of psychologists, the New York Times reports, have found that women of every social level have become increasingly uninhibited in their use of obscene language*" (*Playboy*, 1969). Zimbardo notes that the only authority mentioned to confirm this "*fact*" was himself.

**Where scientists see a possibility,
too many lay people see certainty.**

Similarly, many readers tend to **over-simplify** what they read. If a publication reports that "*some evidence indicated that saccharin **may** be a cause of cancer,*" too many people interpret this as "*saccharin **causes** cancer.*" The article indicates uncertainty, but the reader does not.

When judging information, **consider the source, especially if it is one motivated by gain**. This is found with many advertisements. For example, "*Government tests have proven that no pain reliever is more effective than _____.*" When an advertisement states this — or indicates that a product is "*unsurpassed*" — this typically means that there is no difference between their products. The other products were not better — but neither was their product! If it really were better, they would not hesitate to say so.

Remember also that psychological services may be promoted in the same way. Expensive courses promise *instant* mental health and happiness, increased efficiency, memory, ESP or psychic abilities, control of the unconscious mind, an *easy* end to smoking or eating habits, and so on. They are usually only supported by a few testimonials and many unverified claims.

Distinguish between correlation and causation. It is dangerous to presume that, if two events occur together, one *caused* the other. In spite of this, you will notice numerous claims based on questionable correlations. Law enforcement agencies used to point out that most heroin addicts have used marijuana. This interesting observation does not justify the conclusion that marijuana "*causes*" addiction to hard drugs. (This is not an endorsement of marijuana use, but it does point out how muddled thinking on important issues can become.)

Distinguish between observation and inference. If someone is crying, does it necessarily mean that person is sad? The crying person is an observed fact, but to assume sadness might be an error. The person could have been peeling onions, have an allergy, be trying out contact lenses for the first time or crying for joy. In the same way, psychologists, politicians, scientists and other experts often go beyond the available

facts in their claims. This does not mean that their inferences or opinions have no value, but it helps to understand which is *fact* and which is *opinion*.

Currently, we are in the middle of an "*information explosion*." We are bombarded with so much new information, it is difficult to absorb. Even in a relatively limited area like psychology, the available knowledge is so vast that no one person can completely comprehend it. Because of this, it is important to become critical and selective in what you read — and what you believe about what you read.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Gateways to Mind and Behavior*, 2001, West Publishers, pages 43-45.