

A LINE ON LIFE

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*Pseudo-Psychologies – From Planets to Palms **

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Pseudo-psychologies ("pseudo-" means false) are dubious and unfounded systems of predicting behavior that superficially resemble psychology. What are some of these pseudo-psychologies? Why do some people accept them as valid?

Probably the most popular pseudo-psychology is **astrology**. It is based on the assumption that the position of the planets and stars at the time of a person's birth determines personality characteristics and affects behavior. **Palmistry**, another pseudo-psychology, claims that the lines in the hand are indicators of personality and the person's future.

Graphology, a third pseudo-psychology, indicates that personality is revealed by a person's handwriting. Although graphology is only moderately popular in the United States, some companies in this country use handwriting analysis to evaluate job applicants. Even though graphology is definitely valuable in detecting forgeries, careful test of accuracy in psychological studies have shown that graphologists score close to zero in rating personality.

Another pseudo-psychology, **phrenology**, was started in the nineteenth century by a German anatomy teacher, Franz Gall. His theory was that personality was revealed by bumps on the skull. Phrenologists assumed that parts of the brain governed different personality characteristics. It was thought that – like muscles – parts of the brain that were used more often tended to get bigger. In turn, these enlarged areas pushed on the skull causing bumps. With advances in neurology, this was shown to be impossible, and phrenology declined. Although some brain areas do have specific functions, they are not directly related to specific personality traits.

Why do these pseudo-psychologies survive and retain their popularity? One factor is the **P. T. Barnum effect**. P. T. Barnum, a famous circus showman, had a formula for success – "Always have a little something for everybody." Read the following personality description.

You have a strong need for other people to like you and for them to admire you. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself. You have a great deal of unused energy, which you have not turned to your advantage. While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them. Your sexual adjustment has presented some problems for you. Disciplined and controlled on the outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure inside. At times you have some doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing. You prefer a certain amount of change and variety and become dissatisfied when hemmed-in by restrictions and limitations. You pride yourself on being an independent thinker and do not accept others opinions without satisfactory proof. You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times, you are extroverted, affable, sociable, while at other times, you are introverted, wary and reserved. Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic.

Does this describe you? A psychologist read this summary individually to 79 students, who had taken a personality test. Of the students, 29 said the description was "excellent." 30 said it was "good," 15 said it was "average," but only 5 said it was "poor." Thus only 5 of the 79 thought the description – supposedly determined from the personality test – was inadequate.

Barnum's method works because of the **fallacy of positive instances**. Because people tend to remember whatever confirms their expectations and forget the rest, an illusion of accuracy is created. If you still doubt this, read all 12 of the daily horoscopes in the newspaper for several days. You will find that the predictions of the other signs will fit you as well as your own. Although astrology has a highly developed system that makes it look like a science, studies have repeatedly shown it to have no scientific validity. In addition, astrologists still can't explain why the moment of birth should be more important than the moment of conception in determining personality. (It is most likely because the exact time of birth can be determined, but the moment of conception cannot.)

Uncritical acceptance of any ideology can cause problems.

For most people, astrology is a harmless and entertaining pastime. However, **uncritical acceptance** of any system leads to problems. Rather than trying to "put down" those who believe in these pseudo-psychologies, this article is trying to make you a more critical observer of human behavior and to clarify what is – and what is not – psychology.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's Introduction to Psychology: Gateways to Mind and Behavior, 2001, West Publishers, pages 23-25.