

# LINE ON LIFE

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## Psychology Is More Than "*Common Sense*" \*

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Whether or not we have taken courses in psychology, we all have our own implicit theories about human behavior. To most of us, it's just "*common sense*." If we already know about people, why bother to study psychology?

Unfortunately, our common sense doesn't allow us to predict behavior. It only seems able to explain behavior "*after the fact*." Most of us have many clichés or proverbs that appear to explain what has happened. However, for each proverb, there is an opposite one. Here are some examples.

- "*Look before you leap*." vs. "*He who hesitates is lost*."
- "*Absence makes the heart grow fonder*." vs. "*Out of sight, out of mind*."
- "*Haste makes waste*." vs. "*Time waits for no one*."
- "*Two heads are better than one*." vs. "*Too many cooks spoil the broth*."
- "*It's better to be safe than sorry*." vs. "*Nothing ventured, nothing gained*."
- "*Opposites attract*." vs. "*Birds of a feather flock together*."
- "*Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today*." vs. "*Cross that bridge when you come to it*."

The appeal of these clichés is that you can find one to cover almost any behavior. The problem is that they can only rarely be refuted. No matter what happens, you can use one of these proverbs as an "*explanation*."

In 1986, one psychologist, Karl Teigen, tested the belief in clichés like those listed above. Teigen confirmed that people tend to believe in completely contradictory proverbs. He found it interesting that the judged "*truth of one saying was absolutely unrelated to the truth of its opposite*."

When these beliefs can be empirically tested – most of the proverbs do not pass the test. When contradicted, they seem as silly as some "*folk tales*" we hear from some "*underdeveloped*" countries.

For example, don't people, who excel academically or are avid book readers, become socially or physically inept? "*Bookworms*" or "*nerds*" are viewed as social outcasts who have minimal physical coordination. In contrast, psychological studies have indicated the opposite. In reality, avid readers are more likely to play sports, jog, camp, hike and repair cars than people who do not read much. In contrast to low achievers, high scholastic achievers are more likely to be accepted by other students.

You used to hear the cliché, "*Early ripe, early rot*." This indicated that people, who exhibited outstanding talents in childhood, would become abnormal or retarded in adulthood. This has been repeatedly disproved by psychological research. Gradually, the contradictory evidence has crept into our culture. You rarely hear that saying anymore.

Many people believe that group homes for mentally handicapped people will "*reduce property values*" in their neighborhoods. In 1985, researchers Ryan and Coyne analyzed the sale prices of 525 homes at varying distances from 13 different group homes. They found that having a group home in the immediate neighborhood did not negatively effect property values. Another study in 1989 supported these findings.

We need to be wary about what "*everybody knows*" as "*common sense*." Many things that were uncritically accepted previously have been shown to be false. Many prejudices are fueled by the unjustified assumptions labeled as "*common sense*." "*Everybody knew*" that black Americans couldn't learn to read, women didn't have enough practical sense to deserve the vote, and handicapped people were supposed to be isolated from the rest of society. About 150 years ago, these were all accepted as "*common sense*." Because they have been repeatedly contradicted by empirical research data, now they are merely "*nonsense*."

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### **Many people find it hard to give up outdated clichés, even when the evidence against them is overwhelming.**

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Psychology is a science that challenges our "*folk wisdom*." Thus psychology comes into direct conflict with many widely held cultural beliefs. Psychology brings "*bad tidings*" to "*common sense*" that does not stand up to close scientific inspection. Even when evidence contradicts them, many people are unwilling to give up old prejudices. In fact, they may also reject psychology and psychologists along with evidence that is found.

Of course, as psychologists, we can understand that. We know that "*you can't teach an old dog new tricks*." (Or is it, "*You're never too old to learn*" ?)

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\* Keith E. Stanovich, *How to Think Straight About Psychology*, Addison Wesley Longman, 1998, pages 16-19.