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24 THE FORER EFFECT: GULLIBILITY IN ACTION

If all the thousands of clinical hours currently being expended in concocting clever and flowery personality sketches from test data could be devoted instead to scientific investigation (assuming we are still selecting and training clinicians to be scientists), it would probably mean a marked improvement in our net social contribution.

Professor Paul Meehl, psychologist (1956)

Bertram R. Forer was a US psychologist who was interested in personality testing. The story goes that one night he was in a nightclub, and he was accosted by a graphologist who wanted to do a 'reading' of Forer. Forer declined and offered to do a Rorschach (ink-blot) test on the graphologist. In their subsequent discussion, the graphologist claimed the 'scientific' proof of his methods was that his 'clients' affirmed the accuracy of his readings.

Forer suggested that any trained psychologist could easily replicate this result. Forer then conducted one of the most unusual experiments in the history of personality assessment, a study into 'gullibility'.

Published in 1949, Forer's paper was called *The Fallacy of Personal Validation: A Classroom Demonstration of Gullibility*. He explains the background to his research as his concern about methodological issues in personality assessment. He stated:

Personality evaluations can be, and often are, couched in such general terms that they are meaningless in terms of denotability in behaviour. Or they may have 'universal validity' and apply to everyone (Forer, 1949).

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Forer created a unique study where after his students had requested being 'personality tested' he gave 39 of them an existing personality test he was working on and had discussed in class. One week later he gave each of the students a typed personality assessment. He told them he needed secrecy regarding their results and got them to read the results while sitting two seats apart.

The reason Forer needed them not to see each other's paper was that they all received the same 'personality' assessment.

He wrote the assessment using some previous work by another psychologist D. G. Paterson, but also based on some excerpts from a horoscope book. He wrote out the assessment, not as a narrative, but in a list of 13 statements. So each student was told their assessment was:

1. You have a great need for other people to like and admire you.
2. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself.
3. You have a great deal of unused capacity which you have not turned to your advantage.
4. While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them.
5. Your sexual adjustment has presented problems for you.
6. Disciplined and self-controlled outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure inside.
7. At times you have serious doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing.
8. You prefer a certain amount of change and variety and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations.
9. You pride yourself as an independent thinker and do not accept others' statements without satisfactory proof.
10. You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others.
11. At times you are extroverted, affable, sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary, reserved.
12. Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic.
13. Security is one of your major goals in life.

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As soon as the students read 'their' 13-point assessment, they were instructed to turn over the page and rate the assessment on a scale of 0 (poor) to 5 (perfect) as to how effectively it was in revealing their personality. They then were to turn the page and rate each of the 13 statements as 'true' or 'false' about themselves.

The results showed the students had been gullible. Ratings of accuracy of the test found only one student scoring the test below 4. While there were a few students who were critical of the test, most were ready to accept that the test had revealed their personality. On average, the students rated its accuracy as 4.26/5.0 (84 per cent). No different results were found for gender, age or occupational background.

Forer concluded that the claims of 'pseudo-diagnosticians' can be replicated or even surpassed by a competent psychologist just writing out vague and general personality assessments. For example, the statement:

You have a great need for other people to like and admire you

It is easy to see how this could apply to almost everyone and also how you could read your own meaning into the statement. The statement appears 'personal' to you and seems to show some 'power' of the test, the psychologist or the psychic.

If the statements are sufficiently vague, they will receive high rates of reliability and validity. Consider Forer's statement no. 7:

At times you have serious doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing.

This is so general that no one could not apply it to themselves. Who has never, at least sometime in their life had a serious doubt as to whether they have made the right decision or not?

The Forer Effect and communication

The Forer Effect is also sometimes referred to as the Barnum Effect, after the American showman P. T. Barnum (Meehl,

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1956). The Forer Effect refers to pseudosciences that claim to analyse a person's personality using trivial tests or 'mysterious' methods. The Forer Effect is useful as it explains, at least in part, why people believe in things like astrology, tea-leaf reading and graphology.

The Forer Effect has been studied and verified by others since Forer's original study (see Dickson & Kelly, 1985; Dana & Fouke, 1979; Dmitruk, Collins & Clinger, 1973; Fichten & Sunerton, 1983; Tobacyk & Milford, 1988). The researchers always find the same result, people accept vague and general personality assessments as being unique to themselves.

In one later study, researchers found that subjects will give higher accuracy ratings if the subject believes that the analysis applies only to them. If the subject believes in the authority of the evaluator and the assessment lists mainly positive traits (Dickson & Kelly, 1985). This is why psychologists also call the Forer Effect the 'personal validation fallacy'.

The Forer Effect has also been found in complementary medicine. In one study 60 students gave samples of head hair and the following week were given a 'trichosis (hair) diagnosis', which consisted of 24 bland statements regarding their health (Furnham, 1994). The researcher reported 'discussions with the students afterwards showed that most had been "duped" by the procedure'. Furnham concludes that the Forer Effect could, in part, explain why patients often give positive personal testimonies for sham alternative medicine practices.

Unfortunately, there has been limited research on the cross-cultural consistency of the Forer Effect. However, one study conducted in 2009 found that Western and Chinese populations showed no notable variations (Rogers & Soule, 2009). In one German study researchers found that medical doctors were not duped by 'hair diagnoses' and they concluded that the doctors may have been too cynical to be misled (Ernst & Resch, 1995).

Derren Brown, the British magician and sceptic, on his TV programme, *Trick of the Mind*, replicated Forer's study on groups

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of volunteers from Hollywood, Barcelona and London. He had the volunteers sketch their hand print, write their birthdate (and time if known), and select a personal small object and put everything in a numbered envelope. After a wait, Brown gives each of the volunteers their 'personal personality assessments'. Most give them an 80 per cent to 99 per cent accuracy rating. Brown then reveals, to the volunteer's amazement, that they all have the same assessments (Brown, 2006).

The Forer Effect tells us a number of things about human communication. It tells us that we have a serious problem remaining impartial in our self-assessment when we read vague and general statements about ourselves. It also shows us how pseudoscientific frauds such as cold-readers, mediums, graphologists and psychics can deliver what appear to be accurate assessments of someone's personality.

The Forer Effect also advises caution in interpreting personality evaluations and psychometric tests given by psychologists and HR professionals. In particular, you should be careful when given overly simplistic 'personality tests' on training courses, delivered by keen, but unqualified trainers. The psychologist Professor Robert Spillane, from Macquarie University, cautions:

After rehearsing these arguments for 40 years, I conclude that personality tests are discriminatory, unreliable, invalid, and cannot predict work performance (Spillane, 2012).

Personality is very complex and not easily explained. The personality assessments we get from simplistic tests appear to be a reading of our personality, because in many respects they are. However, they are also a reading of everyone. They provide a crude estimate of 'what' we are, but they do not explain 'who' or 'why' we are.

So what are the big takeaways here?

- **The Forer Effect refers to the tendency of people to rate sets of statements as highly accurate for them personally, even though the statements could apply to almost anyone.**

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- **The Forer Effect, at least partially, explains why so many people think that pseudosciences work.**
- **Be very cautious when interpreting personality assessments, based on simplistic tests or evaluations.** Personality is very complex and not easily explained.

Source

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See also

Chapter 3 – Brainstorming: you may have been doing it incorrectly

Chapter 4 – Does everybody lie?

Chapter 5 – Can your handwriting reveal your personality

Chapter 8 – Subliminal communication: hidden messages

Chapter 10 – NLP and communication

Further reading

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