

THE 'BARNUM EFFECT' IN PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT:
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE^{1,2}

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Summary.—This review summarizes to date the research on the Barnum effect, the tendency for people to accept vague, ambiguous, and general statements as descriptive of their unique personalities. Studies examined address interpretation variables of the Barnum profiles in regard to generality and supposed relevance of the interpretation, favorability of interpretation, type of assessment procedure, and origin and format of interpretation. Also the role of personal factors such as characteristics of the subject and test administrator are examined. It is concluded that the level of acceptance of Barnum profiles depends on the relevance and favorability of the profile and to some extent on the type of assessment utilized. Directions for research on the Barnum effect are provided.

The psychological phenomenon whereby people accept general personality interpretations (Barnum profiles) as accurate descriptions of their own unique personalities has been given the name "the Barnum effect" after P. T. Barnum, a famous circus owner whose formula for success was always to have a little something for everybody (Snyder & Shenkel, 1976). Barnum profiles consist of a variety of statements: "Vague, e.g., 'you enjoy a certain amount of change and variety in life'; Double-headed, e.g., 'you are generally cheerful and optimistic but get depressed at times'; Modal characteristics of the subject's group, e.g., 'you find that study is not always easy'; favorable, e.g., 'you are forceful and well-liked by others'" (Sundberg, 1955).

What is of interest to the psychologist is that when Barnum profiles are perceived as accurate, subjects increase their faith in the validity of the assessment device (Snyder & Shenkel, 1977; Weisberg, 1970). Furthermore, clinicians may be reinforced by clients' praise for producing vague and general interpretations and reinforced even more for these than for more accurate and specific statements (Marks & Kammann, 1980; Merrens & Richards, 1970). Hence, the importance of the phenomenon lies in that the extent that genuine (or bogus) profiles incorporate Barnum statements, they will be perceived as accurate, giving an illusion of validity.

Forer (1949) initiated empirical research targeted at discovering the extent to which individuals accept general personality descriptions as true of themselves. Forer administered the Diagnostic Interest Blank to 39 students

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