

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE BARNUM EFFECT: SOCIAL DESIRABILITY,
BASE RATES AND PERSONALIZATION

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2007

Dedication

The following Master's thesis is dedicated to William F. Nolan Jr., who passed before witnessing its completion.

PREVIEW

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by

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PREVIEW

Abstract

Forer (1949) was the first researcher to demonstrate the “Barnum Effect”: People are highly impressed by bogus personality feedback that consists of Barnum statements (high social desirability, high endorsement rate). The present thesis included two studies related to the Barnum Effect. Study 1 aimed to create a pool of statements (Barnum, Rare Virtues and Common Faults) that varied in their levels of social desirability and endorsement rates. In Study 1, Group A, 120 participants rated 185 items for True of Self or Social Desirability. In Study 1, Group B, 70 participants rated the same items for True of Others or Social Desirability. Contrary to expectation, no statement in the two parts of Study 1 met the criteria of a Rare Virtue item (high social desirability, low endorsement rate), suggesting that Rare Virtue items are difficult if not impossible to create. Ten Barnum items were identified in Study 1, as were 10 Common Fault items (high endorsement rate, with lower social desirability than other statements with similar endorsement rates). In Study 2, Barnum and Common Fault items from Study 1 were used to create and test three types of reports: 1) Barnum, 2) Mixed, 3) Common Fault, that came in Personalized and non-Personalized forms. Participants completed a personality test and were given one generalized personality report. Reports were rated using a 13-question Satisfaction Survey. Results showed a main effect of type of report ($F(2, 169) = 17.05, p < .001$), with Barnum and Mixed reports receiving significantly higher ratings than the Common Fault report. A main effect of Personalization ($F(2, 169) = 44.29, p < .001$) was also found, with Personalized reports receiving higher ratings than non-Personalized reports. The implications of both studies are discussed.

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PREVIEW

Chapter 1: Introduction

A large body of research has shown that when people receive personality feedback, they tend to accept and be impressed by statements that apply to almost everyone (“generalized personality feedback”). Paul Meehl (1956) saw a connection between this tendency and circus pioneer P.T. Barnum’s famous aphorisms that “a sucker is born every minute,” and “a circus should have a little something for everyone.” People’s tendency to be impressed by generalized personality feedback has come to be known as the Barnum Effect.

1.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF BARNUM STATEMENTS

A Barnum statement has often been defined as a generalized personality statement that is vague and has a high base rate frequency in the population (Snyder, Shenkel & Lowery, 1977). Barnum statements are so general that they are accepted by just about everybody.

Sundberg (1955) classified Barnum statements into four categories of vague, double-headed, modal and favorable. A vague statement is one that lacks any specific information applying to the individual directly. Double-headed statements contain opposite ends of a continuum in the same statement. An example of a double-headed statement is “At times you are extroverted, affable, sociable, while at other times you are inverted, wary, reserved” (Forer, 1949). A modal statement is one that describes a characteristic normally associated with a group. Favorable statements reflect a characteristic that is generally seen as positive in nature.

Merrens and Richards (1970) have incorporated the idea of “favorability” or “social desirability” into their definition of a Barnum statement. That is, they defined Barnum statements as being both “general” and “socially desirable.” For example, the statement “Security is one of your major goals in life” (Forer, 1949) would be considered a Barnum statement according to the definition of Merrens and Richards because it (a) applies to nearly everyone and (b) is socially desirable.

1.2 WHAT IS THE BARNUM EFFECT?

Bertram Forer (1949) is the first known researcher to examine the phenomenon now known as the Barnum Effect. In his classic study, a class of 39 Introductory Psychology students were administered the Diagnostic Interest Blank (DIB). They were told that the measure would provide them with an accurate measure of their personality. One week later the students were given a personality report that was supposedly based on their responses to the DIB and asked to rate its accuracy. In actuality, all of the students had received the same personality report containing 13 statements that had been pulled from a dime-store astrology book. All of the students were very enthusiastic regarding their (fake) personality reports and rated their accuracy as “good” or “perfect.” On a scale of 0 to 5 (0 being poor and 5 being perfect) the students gave the personality reports a mean rating of 4.2. Thus, Forer established that the students were highly impressed by personality feedback that consisted of what he called “universal statements.” Since Forer’s original experiment, many researchers have replicated his original findings (for reviews, see Dickson & Kelly, 1985; Furnham & Schofield, 1987).

1.3 FACTORS INFLUENCING THE BARNUM EFFECT: PRESTIGE, GULLIBILITY AND GENERALITY

There is no definitive explanation for why the Barnum Effect happens. Several explanatory hypotheses have been proposed. This section will discuss three hypotheses concerning the prestige of the administrator, gullibility of the test taker, and the generality of Barnum statements.

Prestige. One theory regarding the Barnum Effect concerns the perceived prestige of the person administering the test. Studies by Dmitruk, Collins & Clinger (1973) and Rosen (1975) have found that when a test administrator is assumed to have more prestige (for example, a psychologist versus a student) feedback will be accepted with a higher endorsement rate. There is also evidence that this phenomenon occurs in a group setting, where feedback from a group leader is rated as more accurate than feedback from a group member (Snyder & Newberg, 1981).

Gullibility. A second theory for the Barnum Effect is referred to as “gullibility” in the literature. The idea behind gullibility is that people really cannot tell the difference between real and fake personality feedback. Perhaps they are just gullible in accepting the interpretations as true. This theory came about as a result of a study wherein students could not reliably distinguish “bona fide” MMPI