

WHY HOROSCOPES ARE TRUE: THE EFFECTS OF SPECIFICITY ON ACCEPTANCE OF ASTROLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS

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PROBLEM

Astrology has fascinated people for thousands of years, as they look to the skies for "accurate" information about themselves. Historically, support for astrology decreased because of the disfavor of the Christian church and the growth of scientific explanation of phenomena. Recently, however, a rebirth of interest in the field of astrology has occurred in western culture⁽¹⁾. Horoscopes appear in our daily newspapers; astrological books abound. Major universities have included astrology in their curricula^(1, p. 48), and even clinical psychologists and psychiatrists have begun to contribute to the resurgence of astrology. Jung⁽¹²⁾ utilized astrology with his patients, and popular magazines give reference to other clinical uses of astrology^(3; 4, p. 78). Although it is likely that most proponents of the clinical use of astrology do not identify themselves publicly, some professionals have been noted for their use of astrology in treatment^(1, p. 48; 20). In fact, Dobyns has gone so far as to state, "It is my firm conviction that the psychotherapy or counseling of the future will use the horoscope as routinely as we now use the interview and background data on the subject^(5, p. 1)."

The increased interest in astrology on the part of both laymen and professionals could reflect the fact that astrological information actually does relate to individuals' personalities and behaviors. The type of astrology involved in making judgments about an individual's personality is called natal astrology. A review of the relevant findings, however, generally shows *no* support for the contention that natal astrology relates to an individual's personality^(2, 6, 9, 11, 14). Therefore, at the level of relating an individual's birth datum to behavioral observations made about that individual by others, there is no present support for the "accuracy" of natal astrological interpretations. Verification (or acceptance) of horoscopes therefore may come at a second level, in which the individual relates how accurately the natal astrological personality description fits his or her self-conceptualization and perception. The present study seeks to explore this second line of verification, in which the individual subjectively matches his or her self-perception with the natal astrological interpretation.

Part of the accuracy of natal astrological statements probably stems from the fact that these interpretations are general in nature. Gauquelin⁽⁹⁾ has reported that 30% to 60% of the population admit to the belief that there is *some truth in general astrology statements*. In a related study, Couderc advertised himself as an astrologer in the newspapers, and in response to hundreds of inquiries he sent each person an identical mimeographed general and ambiguous natal horoscope. He received over 200 "thank-yous" that praised his accuracy and perceptiveness^(8, p. 56). Additionally, it has been documented consistently that individuals readily accept general personality interpretations supposedly based upon information derived from psychological tests as accurate descriptions of their personalities^(7, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21). All of these studies taken together suggest that it is the general nature of the personality statements that usually are utilized in horoscope descriptions that in part increases the "accuracy" of these descriptions. In the present study, it was hypothesized further that an individual's acceptance of the accuracy of a horoscope description would increase when the individual believed the interpretation was based on specific birth information—the more specific birth time available for the astrological interpretation, the more the interpretation would be accepted as accurate. Some support is given to this theorization from a related area: it has been found that the accuracy or acceptance of a psychological interpretation is increased when the

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individual believes that the interpretation "is specifically derived for him" rather than "generally true for people" (16, 17). In the present study, therefore, three separate groups of *Ss* were given an identical general horoscope interpretation. One group was told that the interpretation is "generally true for people," a second group was told that the interpretation is based on the year and month in which they were born, and a third group was told that the interpretation is based on the year, month and day in which they were born. It was predicted that acceptance of the interpretation, from lowest to highest, would be directly related to specificity in the following order: "generally true of people" condition, year and month condition, and year, month, and day condition.

METHOD

Twenty-one female students from an undergraduate psychology course volunteered to serve as "experimenter-astrologists" in the present study.² These pseudo-astrologers were instructed to select three female acquaintances and randomly assign each *S* to one of the three specificity conditions³ (21 *Ss* per condition). In the first condition, the astrologer told the *S* that the purpose of the study was to examine peoples' feelings about horoscopes. The *S* was instructed to leave the room for 10 minutes, after which time the *S* would return and receive a horoscope. The *S* returned and the astrologer gave the *S* a horoscope description that was "*generally true of people.*" In a second condition, the astrologer asked the *S* the year and month in which she was born and then instructed the *S* to leave the room for 10 minutes, after which time the *S* would return and receive a horoscope that the astrologer had derived for her. The *S* returned and the astrologer gave the *S* a horoscope supposedly based on the *year and month* in which she was born. In a third condition, the astrologer asked the *S* the year, month, and day in which she was born, and then instructed the *S* to leave the room for 10 minutes. The *S* returned and the astrologer gave the *S* a horoscope supposedly based on the *year, month, and day* in which she was born. In all three conditions the *S* received an identical handwritten horoscope. In actuality the following horoscope was taken directly from *general* statements that appear in Linda Goodman's⁽¹⁰⁾ *Sun Signs*:

You have a very practical bent and enjoy earning money, but sometimes your deep desire to be a creative person triumphs over your practicality. You lead other people with your innovative ideas, or could do this if you felt more sure of yourself. Insecurity is your greatest weakness, and you would be wise to try to overcome this. Your deep sense of humor and warm, understanding nature wins you true friends, and although they may not be numerous, you share a rather intense loyalty to each other. With your innovative mind, you rebel against authority, either inwardly or openly. Even though you could make a stable businessman, you would be a very idealistic one, finding it hard not to defend the underdog or try to settle arguments that arise. You like to think of yourself as unprejudiced, but periodically examine yourself to make sure you aren't overlooking some harmful judgments. You will live a long, full life if you take care of yourself. You love to have freedom in whatever you're doing, and this makes you dislike monotonous tasks and being in large crowds where you can't seem to move freely. If someone pays you a well-deserved complement, you enjoy hearing it, but you may not show that you do. Sometimes you find that the actions you take do not accomplish as much as you'd like them to, especially in dealing with people. You have a real grasp on how people are feeling or what they are thinking without their necessarily telling you.

²Students were used as the astrologists because it was felt that if the specificity effect could be obtained in spite of all the potential variance between novice student astrologers (and settings in which they performed their astrology), a stringent test of the hypothesis would be made.

³Previous research has shown that acceptance of general personality interpretations does not differ as a function of sex (7, 16, 19), and therefore only females were employed as *Ss* in the present study.

After the Ss had read the horoscope, they rated the degree to which the horoscope fit them on a 5-point scale: (1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = good, 5 = excellent). The astrologers then debriefed the Ss with regard to the nature of the study.

RESULTS

S acceptance of the general horoscope interpretation (1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = good, 5 = very good) was analyzed as the dependent variable in a one-way analysis of variance with the between-subject independent variable of specificity condition ("generally true of people," year-month, and year-month-day). The between-subject effect of specificity was significant ($F = 7.56$, $df = 2/60$, $p < .0002$). The mean acceptance ratings for the three specificity conditions were as follows: "generally true of people" $\bar{X} = 3.24$; year-month $\bar{X} = 3.76$; year-month-day $\bar{X} = 4.38$. In order to test the relationship between specificity conditions that was predicted on an *a priori* basis, the sum of squares for specificity condition was partitioned into two components. The first component reflects the predicted relationship between specificity condition means⁽²²⁾. More specifically, it was predicted that acceptance of the horoscope interpretation would be highest in the year-month-day condition, second highest for the year-month condition, and lowest for the "generally true of people" condition. The second component was the residual sum of squares that reflected the amount of the specificity condition sum of squares that was not accounted for by the predicted ordering of specificity means. Results showed that the special comparison for order effects was highly significant ($F = 15.05$, $df = 1/60$, $p < .0001$), while the residual sum of squares was not significant ($F = .01$, $df = 2/60$, $p > .10$).

DISCUSSION

Overall, Ss in all specificity conditions rated the general horoscope interpretation as a fairly accurate description of their personalities. These results support the notion that people find some validity in general horoscope descriptions. The very ambiguity of horoscope statements may insure partially an individual's validation of the accuracy of a horoscope. The present results relative to the acceptance of a general horoscope description are consistent with previous research that utilized general personality interpretations and psychological tests^(7, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21). These findings highlight the consistency of individuals' acceptance of general personality interpretations whether they are based on psychological tests or astrological data.

Although the acceptance of the astrological interpretation may result in part from the general nature of the statements, the present results show that the more specific birth time referent a person ascribes to an astrological interpretation, the more the interpretation is accepted as an accurate description of oneself. The predicted order of acceptance ratings (year-month-day highest, year-month second highest, and "generally true of people" lowest) was highly significant in the special comparison for order effects ($p < .0001$), while the residual variance not predicted by the order effect was not significant. Thus, the predicted order of acceptance for specificity conditions accounted for virtually all of the treatment variance in the present study.

The present results suggest that the way to elicit maximal acceptance of a horoscope is to tell the individual that the interpretation is derived specifically for that person on the basis of the year, month, and day of birth. In actual practice, serious astrologers require the year, month, day, *hour* and *minute* at which a person is born. To judge from the present data, this highly specific time referent employed by more professional astrologers may result in even greater acceptance of the horoscope on the part of an individual. For most of us, contact with astrology consists of the newspaper horoscope that utilizes the month in which a person was born. Even this minor degree of birth time specificity, however, may serve to heighten the accuracy of the interpretation for the daily newspaper reader.

Given previous research that shows no relationship between natal astrology and one's actual observed personality^(2, 6, 9, 11, 14), the present results may shed some light on the continuing belief in horoscope interpretations. High acceptance of horoscope interpretations partially stems from the general nature of the statements, but also appears to stem from the individual's belief that the horoscope is derived specifically on the basis of his or her birth datum. Precaution therefore is warranted on the part of laymen and professionals who may use horoscope data. It should be remembered that present research indicates that the validity (acceptance) of such information stems from situational factors such as the ambiguous nature of horoscope statements and their presentation as specifically derived on the basis of birth data, rather than any actual relationship between birth data (natal astrology) and one's observed personality. At the very least, the astrologer should not translate the client's acceptance of the horoscopic information as validation of the accuracy of either astrology or the astrologer. For, as Shakespeare has put it in *Julius Caesar*, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings (Act I, Scene II, lines 140-141)^(15, p. 774)."

SUMMARY

All Ss were given an identical general horoscope interpretation, but were assigned randomly to one of three specificity conditions (N = 21 per condition) in which they were told the interpretation was (1) "generally true of people," (2) derived for them on the basis of the year and month of their birth, or (3) derived for them on the basis of the year, month, and day of their birth. Results significantly showed that the more specific birth time referent the S ascribed to the astrological interpretation, the more the interpretation was accepted as an accurate description of the S's personality. A discussion is made of how horoscopes may achieve "verification" or acceptance because of situation factors alone, rather than any actual relationship between astrological interpretations and one's observed personality.

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