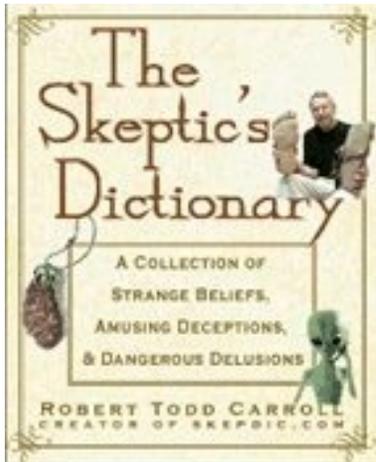


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## cold reading

*"In the course of a successful reading, the psychic may provide most of the words, but it is the client that provides most of the meaning and all of the significance." --Ian Rowland (2000: 60)*

*Cold reading* refers to a set of techniques used by professional manipulators to get a subject to behave in a certain way or to think that the cold reader has some sort of special ability that allows him to "mysteriously" know things about the subject. Cold reading goes beyond the usual tools of manipulation: suggestion and flattery. In cold reading, salespersons, hypnotists, advertising pros, faith healers, con men, and some therapists bank upon their subject's inclination to find more meaning in a situation than there actually is. The desire to make sense out of our experience has led us to many wonderful discoveries, but it has also led some of us to many follies. The manipulator knows that his mark will be inclined to try to make sense out of whatever he is told, no matter how farfetched or improbable. He knows, too, that people are generally self-centered, that we tend to have unrealistic views of ourselves and that we will generally accept claims about us that reflect not how we are or even how we really think we are but how we wish we were or think we should be. He also knows that for every several claims he makes about you which you reject as being inaccurate, he will make one that meets with your approval; and he knows that you will remember the hits he makes and forget the misses.

Thus, a good manipulator can provide a *reading* of a total stranger, which will make the stranger feel that the manipulator possesses some special power. For example, [Bertram Forer](#) has never met you, the reader, yet he offers the following cold reading of you:

**Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic. At times you are extroverted, affable, sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary and reserved. You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. You pride yourself on being an independent thinker and do not accept others' opinions without satisfactory proof. You prefer a certain amount of change and variety,**

**and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations. At times you have serious doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing. Disciplined and controlled on the outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure on the inside.**

**Your sexual adjustment has presented some problems for you. While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them. You have a great deal of unused capacity which you have not turned to your advantage. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself. You have a strong need for other people to like you and for them to admire you.**

Here's another reading:

**People close to you have been taking advantage of you. Your basic honesty has been getting in your way. Many opportunities that you have had offered to you in the past have had to be surrendered because you refuse to take advantage of others. You like to read books and articles to improve your mind. In fact, if you're not already in some sort of personal service business, you should be. You have an infinite capacity for understanding people's problems and you can sympathize with them. But you are firm when confronted with obstinacy or outright stupidity. Law enforcement would be another field you understand. Your sense of justice is quite strong.**

The last one was from astrologer Sidney Omarr. He's never even met you and yet he knows so much about you (*Flim-Flam!*, 61). The first one was taken by Forer from a newsstand astrology book.

The selectivity of the human mind is always at work. We pick and choose what data we will remember and what we will give significance to. In part, we do so because of what we already believe or want to believe. In part, we do so in order to make sense out of what we are experiencing. We are not manipulated simply because we are gullible or suggestible, or just because the signs and symbols of the manipulator are vague or ambiguous. Even when the signs are clear

and we are skeptical, we can still be manipulated. In fact, it may even be the case that particularly bright persons are more likely to be manipulated when the language is clear and they are thinking logically. To make the connections that the manipulator wants you to make, you must be thinking logically.

Not all cold readings are done by malicious manipulators. Some readings are done by astrologers, graphologists, tarot readers, and psychics who genuinely believe they have paranormal powers. They are as impressed by their correct predictions or "insights" as are their clients. We should remember, however, that just as scientists can be wrong in their predictions, so pseudoscientists and quacks can sometimes be right in theirs.

There seem to be three common factors in these kinds of readings. One factor involves *fishing for details*. The psychic says something at once vague and suggestive, e.g., "I'm getting a strong feeling about January here." If the subject responds, positively or negatively, the psychic's next move is to play off the response. E.g., if the subject says, "I was born in January" or "my mother died in January" then the psychic says something like "Yes, I can see that," anything to reinforce the idea that the psychic was more precise than he or she really was. If the subject responds negatively, e.g., "I can't think of anything particularly special about January," the psychic might reply, "Yes, I see that you've suppressed a memory about it. You don't want to be reminded of it. Something painful in January. Yes, I feel it. It's in the lower back [fishing]...oh, now it's in the heart [fishing]...umm, there seems to be a sharp pain in the head [fishing]...or the neck [fishing]." If the subject gives no response, the psychic can leave the area, having firmly implanted in everybody's mind that the psychic really did 'see' something but the subject's suppression of the event hinders both the psychic and the subject from realizing the specifics of it. If the subject gives a positive response to any of the fishing expeditions, the psychic follows up with more of "I see that very clearly, now. Yes, the feeling in the heart is getting stronger."

Fishing is a real art and a good mentalist carries a variety of bait in his memory. For example, professional mentalist and author of one of the best books on cold reading, Ian Rowland (2002), says that he has committed to memory such things as the most common male and female names and a list of items likely to be lying about the house such as an old calendar, a photo album, newspaper clippings, and so on. Rowland also works on certain themes that are likely to resonate with

most people who consult psychics: love, money, career, health, and travel. Since cold reading can occur in many contexts, there are several tactics Rowland covers. But whether one is working with [astrology](#), [graphology](#), [palmistry](#), [psychometry](#), or [Tarot cards](#), or whether one is [channeling](#) messages from the dead à la [James Van Praagh](#), there are specific techniques one can use to impress clients with one's ability to know things that seem to require paranormal powers.

Another characteristic of these readings is that *many claims are put in either vague statement form* ("I'm getting a warm feeling in the crotch area") *or in the form of a question* ("I sense that you have strong feelings about someone in this room. Am I right?") Most of the specific claims are provided by the subject himself.

Some experts on cold reading emphasize paying attention to body language and such things as the dress of the client.

**The reader begins with generalities which are applicable to large segments of the population. He or she pays careful attention to reactions: words, body language, skin color, breathing patterns, dilation or contraction of the pupils of the eye, and more. The subject of the reading will usually convey important information to the reader: sometimes in words, and sometimes in bodily reactions to the reading.**

**From observation, the reader will feed back to the subject what the latter wants to hear. That is the overwhelming guiding principle of the mystics: Tell 'em what they want to hear. That will keep them coming back for more (Steiner 1989: 21).**

*Also, those occasions where the psychic has guessed wrongly about the subject will be forgotten* by the subject and the audience. What will be remembered are the seeming hits, giving the overall impression of "wow, how else could she have known all this stuff unless she is psychic." This same phenomenon of suppression of contrary evidence and [selective thinking](#) is so predominant in every form of psychic demonstration that it seems to be related to the old psychological principle: a man sees what he wants to see and disregards the rest.

**cold reading and contacting the dead**

Many cold readings do not involve fishing, vagueness, or wild guessing. The key to a successful cold reading is the willingness, ability, and effort of the client to find meaning and significance in the words of the psychic, astrologer, palm reader, medium, or the like. A medium claiming to get messages from the dead might throw out a string of ambiguous images to the client. *Father figure, the month of May, the Big-H, and H with an N sound, Henna, Henry, M, maybe Michael, teaching, books, maybe something published.* This list could mean different things to different people. To some people it probably has no meaning. The client will either connect these dots or she won't. Clients of mediums who claim to get messages from the dead are very highly motivated clients. Not only do they have an implicit desire for immortality, they have an explicit desire to contact a dear loved one who has died. The odds are in favor of the medium that the client will find meaning in many different sets of ambiguous words and phrases. If she connects just a couple of them, she may be satisfied that the medium has made a connection to a dead relative. If she doesn't find any meaning or significance in the string, the medium still wins. He can try another string. He can insist that there's meaning here but the client just isn't trying hard enough to figure it out. He can suggest that some uninvited spirit guests are confusing the issue. It's a win-win situation for the medium because the burden is not on him but on the client to find the meaning and significance of the words.

Successful cold readings are sometimes a testament to the skills of the reader, but they are *always* a testament to the ability of human beings to make sense out of the most disparate of data. The skill of cold reading can be honed and turned into an art, as it is by professionals who work as mediums, palm readers, astrologers, and the like. Many of these professionals may not even realize what they are doing and attribute their high rate of client satisfaction to the truth of astrology or palmistry. They may come to believe in the reality of the spirit world by becoming convinced that meaningful signals from beyond sometimes rise above the noise of daily life and are detected by skilled mediums. Some of these professionals know what they are doing and they deceive the public, if not themselves. Other professionals know what they are doing but they tell their clients or audiences after their performances that they need no paranormal or supernatural powers to accomplish their feats.

In evaluating cold reading, it is a common mistake to focus mainly on the reader. Gary Schwartz seems to have done this in his book [\*The Afterlife Experiments: Breakthrough Scientific Evidence of Life After\*](#)

[Death](#). He seems to think that if he can eliminate trickery and deceit (cold reading), and fraud ([hot reading](#)) on the part of the mediums in his experiments, that he has eliminated cold reading as a viable explanation for the validation of readings by sitters (those who sit for a reading). He makes this point throughout his book and emphasizes it in a paper he and others published in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*:

Because the sitter-silent condition provides no verbal/semantic feedback to the mediums as well as minimal non-verbal feedback (save for possible sighs or breathing information from the sitters), the sitter-silent condition eliminates the plausibility of 'cold reading' as a probable explanation for the findings. For this reason, the paper reports the data from the sitter-silent condition. These form the most compelling evidence for anomalous information retrieval.\*

The sitter-silent condition (a.k.a. the Russek Protocol) lets the medium do a reading within hearing distance of the sitter but does not permit the medium to ask any questions or the sitter to make any responses during the reading.

It is evident from tests done on college students who are given personality or astrological readings, that it is not necessary to interrogate the client to get him or her to find meaning and significance in complete sentences that were not generated on the basis of any personal knowledge. It also seems evident that many people should be able to find meaning and significance in various strings of initials, names, descriptions of places, and so on. And, while it is true that some mediums use trickery, such as having accomplices in the audience or having detective work done on the sitter, it is not necessary. What many saw Rosemary Althea do in a Penn & Teller [Bullshit!](#) episode, for example, is not required for a successful reading. Her agent brought a couple whose child had committed suicide to a reading (guess what came through in the reading) and she chatted up a young man before the reading began who told her that he wanted to connect with his mother (guess who she connected to during the reading). In the same [Bullshit!](#) episode, Mark Edward (no relation to [John Edward](#)) did a successful reading with a woman without using any hot reading tricks. But even his method of fishing around for something the sitter can connect to isn't necessary for a successful reading. The *sitter* is the key to the success of a reading by a medium and different mediums use

different methods.

Successful readings that involve contact with dead loved ones are a testament to the wonderful capacity of our species to find meaning in just about any image, word, phrase, or string of such items. We can find Jesus in a burnt tortilla, Mother Teresa in a cinnamon bun, the Virgin Mary in a water stain or in the discoloration on the bark of a tree, or Vladimir [Lenin in the soap scum](#) on a shower curtain ([pareidolia](#)). We can see the devil in a puddle of water and hear him tempting us ([apophenia](#)). It is the same complex human brain that makes it possible for us to find these illusory meanings that allows us to write and appreciate multifaceted poetry and to discover real patterns in nature. This wonderful brain of ours, the product of tens of thousands of years of evolution, also makes it possible for us to deceive ourselves and others. Even more wonderful is the fact that this brain of ours can be used to try to understand the many ways we go right and wrong in our attempts to make sense out of life and death.

**See related entries** on [apophenia](#), [communal reinforcement](#), [confirmation bias](#), [hot reading](#), [medium](#), [pareidolia](#), [psychic](#), [selective thinking](#), [self-deception](#), [subjective validation](#), [James Van Praagh](#), and [wishful thinking](#).

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### further reading

- [Guide to Cold Reading](#) by Ray Hyman
- [Cold Reading](#) by Robert Novella
- [Cold Reading: Confessions of a "Psychic"](#)
- [What is Cold Reading? Skeptical Perspectives](#) - Austin Cline
- [The Cold Reading Technique](#) by Denis Dutton
- [How come TV psychics seem so convincing?](#) The Straight Dope

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**Note: If you really want to learn about cold reading do *not* buy Basil Hoffman's *Cold Reading and How to Be Good at It*. As one disappointed buyer at Amazon.com notes: "this book is an instructional for actors who are going to auditions." Read Hyman, Rowland, or Steiner.**

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[cognitive dissonance](#)

[collective hallucinations](#)



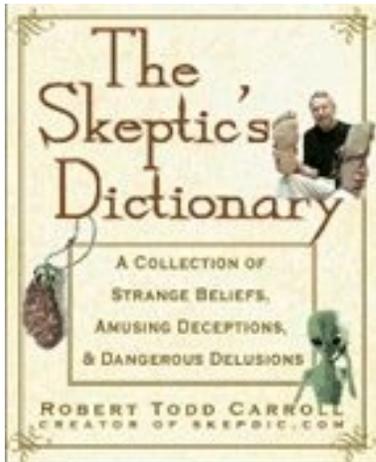
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## the Forer effect (a.k.a. the *P.T. Barnum effect* and *subjective validation*)

**"We have something for everyone." --P.T. Barnum**

The Forer or Barnum effect is also known as the *subjective validation effect* or the *personal validation effect*. (The expression, "the Barnum effect," seems to have originated with psychologist Paul Meehl, in deference to circus man P.T. Barnum's reputation as a master psychological manipulator.)

Psychologist B.R. Forer found that people tend to accept vague and general personality descriptions as uniquely applicable to themselves without realizing that the same description could be applied to just about anyone. Consider the following as if it were given to you as an evaluation of your personality.

**You have a need for other people to like and admire you, and yet you tend to be critical of yourself. While you have some personality weaknesses you are generally able to compensate for them. You have considerable unused capacity that you have not turned to your advantage. Disciplined and self-controlled on the outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure on the inside. At times you have serious doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing. You prefer a certain amount of change and variety and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations. You also pride yourself as an independent thinker; and do not accept others' statements without satisfactory proof. But you have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times you are extroverted, affable, and sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary, and reserved. Some of your aspirations tend to be rather unrealistic.**

Forer gave a personality test to his students, ignored their answers, and gave each student the above evaluation. He asked them to evaluate the evaluation from 0 to 5, with "5" meaning the recipient felt the

evaluation was an "excellent" assessment and "4" meaning the assessment was "good." The class average evaluation was 4.26. That was in 1948. The test has been repeated hundreds of times with psychology students and the average is still around 4.2.

In short, Forer convinced people he could successfully read their character. His accuracy amazed his subjects, though his personality analysis was taken from a newsstand astrology column and was presented to people without regard to their sun sign. The Forer effect seems to explain, in part at least, why so many people think that [pseudosciences](#) "work". [Astrology](#), [astrotherapy](#), [biorhythms](#), [cartomancy](#), [chiromancy](#), the [enneagram](#), [fortune telling](#), [graphology](#), etc., seem to work because they seem to provide accurate personality analyses. Scientific studies of these pseudosciences demonstrate that they are not valid personality assessment tools, yet each has many satisfied customers who are convinced they are accurate.

The most common explanations given to account for the Forer effect are in terms of hope, wishful thinking, vanity and the tendency to try to make sense out of experience, though Forer's own explanation was in terms of human gullibility. People tend to accept claims about themselves in proportion to their *desire* that the claims be true rather than in proportion to the empirical accuracy of the claims as measured by some non-subjective standard. We tend to accept questionable, even false statements about ourselves, if we deem them positive or flattering enough. We will often give very liberal interpretations to vague or inconsistent claims about ourselves in order to make sense out of the claims. Subjects who seek counseling from psychics, mediums, fortune tellers, mind readers, graphologists, etc., will often *ignore* false or questionable claims and, in many cases, by their own words or actions, will provide most of the information they erroneously attribute to a pseudoscientific counselor. Many such subjects often feel their counselors have provided them with profound and personal information. Such subjective validation, however, is of little scientific value.

Psychologist Barry Beyerstein believes that "hope and uncertainty evoke powerful psychological processes that keep all occult and pseudoscientific character readers in business." We are constantly trying "to make sense out of the barrage of disconnected information we face daily" and "we become so good at filling in to make a reasonable scenario out of disjointed input that we sometimes make sense out of nonsense." We will often fill in the blanks and provide a

coherent picture of what we hear and see, even though a careful examination of the evidence would reveal that the data is vague, confusing, obscure, inconsistent and even unintelligible. Psychic mediums, for example, will often ask so many disconnected and ambiguous questions in rapid succession that they give the impression of having access to personal knowledge about their subjects. In fact, the psychic need not have any insights into the subject's personal life; for, the subject will willingly and unknowingly provide all the associations and validations needed. Psychics are aided in this process by using [cold reading](#) techniques.

David Marks and Richard Kamman argue that

**once a belief or expectation is found, especially one that resolves uncomfortable uncertainty, it biases the observer to notice new information that confirms the belief, and to discount evidence to the contrary. This self-perpetuating mechanism consolidates the original error and builds up an overconfidence in which the arguments of opponents are seen as too fragmentary to undo the adopted belief.**

Having a pseudoscientific counselor go over a character assessment with a client is wrought with snares that can easily lead the most well intentioned of persons into error and delusion.

Barry Beyerstein suggests the following test to determine whether the apparent validity of the pseudosciences mentioned above might not be due to the Forer effect, [confirmation bias](#), or other psychological factors. (Note: the proposed test also uses subjective or personal validation and is not intended to test the accuracy of any personality assessment tool, but rather is intended to counteract the tendency to self-deception about such matters.)

**...a proper test would first have readings done for a large number of clients and then remove the names from the profiles (coding them so they could later be matched to their rightful owners). After all clients had read all of**

**the anonymous personality sketches, each would be asked to pick the one that described him or her best. If the reader has actually included enough uniquely pertinent material, members of the group, on average, should be able to exceed chance in choosing their own from the pile.**

Beyerstein notes that "no occult or pseudoscientific character reading method...has successfully passed such a test."

The Forer effect, however, only partially explains why so many people accept as accurate occult and pseudoscientific character assessment procedures. [Cold reading](#), [communal reinforcement](#), and [selective thinking](#) also underlie these delusions. Also, it should be admitted that while many of the assessment claims in a pseudoscientific reading are vague and general, some are specific. Some of those that are specific actually apply to large numbers of people and some, by chance, will be accurate descriptions of a select few. A certain number of specific assessment claims should be expected by chance.

There have been numerous studies done on the Forer effect. Dickson and Kelly have examined many of these studies and concluded that overall there is significant support for the general claim that Forer profiles are generally perceived to be accurate by subjects in the studies. Furthermore, there is an increased acceptance of the profile if it is labeled "for you". Favorable assessments are "more readily accepted as accurate descriptions of subjects' personalities than unfavorable" ones. But unfavorable claims are "more readily accepted when delivered by people with high perceived status than low perceived status." It has also been found that subjects can generally distinguish between statements that are accurate (but would be so for large numbers of people) and those that are unique (accurate for them but not applicable to most people). There is also some evidence that personality variables such as *neuroticism*, *need for approval*, and *authoritarianism* are positively related to belief in Forer-like profiles. Unfortunately, most Forer studies have been done only on college students.

**See related entries** on [ad hoc hypotheses](#), [cold reading](#), [communal reinforcement](#), [confirmation bias](#), [control study](#), [the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator](#), [Occam's razor](#), [the placebo effect](#), [the post hoc fallacy](#),

[selective thinking](#), [self-deception](#), [testimonials](#), [James Van Praagh](#), and [wishful thinking](#).

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### **further reading**

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[flying saucers](#)



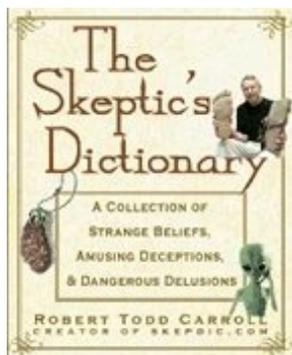
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## confirmation bias

*"It is the peculiar and perpetual error of the human understanding to be more moved and excited by affirmatives than by negatives." -- Francis Bacon*

Confirmation bias refers to a type of [selective thinking](#) whereby one tends to notice and to look for what confirms one's beliefs, and to ignore, not look for, or undervalue the relevance of what contradicts one's beliefs. For example, if you believe that during a full moon there is an increase in admissions to the emergency room where you work, you will take notice of admissions during a full moon, but be inattentive to the moon when admissions occur during other nights of the month. A tendency to do this over time unjustifiably strengthens your belief in the relationship between the full moon and accidents and other [lunar effects](#).

This tendency to give more attention and weight to data that support our beliefs than we do to contrary data is especially pernicious when our beliefs are little more than prejudices. If our beliefs are firmly established upon solid evidence and valid confirmatory experiments, the tendency to give more attention and weight to data that fit with our beliefs should not lead us astray as a rule. Of course, if we become blinded to evidence truly refuting a favored hypothesis, we have crossed the line from reasonableness to closed-mindedness.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that people generally give an excessive amount of value to confirmatory information, that is, to positive or supportive data. The "most likely reason for the excessive influence of confirmatory information is that it is easier to deal with cognitively" (Gilovich 1993). It is much easier to see how a piece of data supports a position than it is to see how it might count against the position. Consider a typical [ESP](#) experiment or a seemingly [clairvoyant dream](#): Successes are often unambiguous or data are easily massaged to count as successes, while negative instances require intellectual effort to even see them as negative or to consider them as significant. The tendency to give more attention and weight to the positive and the confirmatory has been shown to influence [memory](#). When digging into our memories for data relevant to a position, we are more likely to recall data that confirms the position (ibid.).

Researchers are sometimes guilty of confirmation bias by setting up experiments or framing their data in ways that will tend to confirm their hypotheses. They compound the problem by proceeding in ways that avoid dealing with data that would contradict their hypotheses. For example, [parapsychologists](#) are notorious for using [optional starting and stopping](#) in their [ESP](#) research. Experimenters might avoid or reduce confirmation bias by collaborating in experimental design with colleagues who hold contrary hypotheses. Individuals have to constantly remind themselves of this tendency and actively seek out data contrary to their beliefs. Since this is unnatural, it appears that the ordinary person is doomed to bias.

**See related entries** on [ad hoc hypothesis](#), [cognitive dissonance](#), [communal reinforcement](#), [control study](#), [selective thinking](#), and [self-deception](#).

**For examples of confirmation bias in action, see entries** on ["alternative" health practices](#), [curses](#), [ESP](#), [intuitives](#), [lunar effects](#), [personology](#), [plant perception](#), [the Sokal hoax](#), [therapeutic touch](#) and [thought field therapy](#).

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### **further reading**

- [Coincidences: Remarkable or Random?](#) by Bruce Martin
- [Baloney Detection: How to draw boundaries between science and pseudoscience](#) by Michael Shermer
- [Smart People Believe Weird Things: Rarely does anyone weigh facts before deciding what to believe](#) by Michael Shermer

To see confirmation bias at work, review the [conspiracy theories offered for the JFK assassination](#). It is a good lesson to observe how easily intelligent people can see intricate connections and patterns that support their viewpoint and how easily they can see the faults in viewpoints contrary to their own. As long as one ignores certain facts and accepts speculation as fact, one can prove just about anything to one's own satisfaction.

### **reader comments**

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[confabulation](#)

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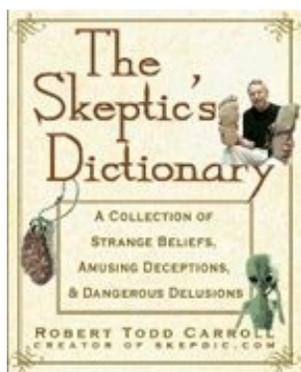
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[←selection bias](#)

## selective thinking

*Selective thinking* is the process whereby one selects out favorable evidence for remembrance and focus, while ignoring unfavorable evidence for a belief. This kind of thinking is the basis for most beliefs in the [psychic](#) powers of so-called [mind readers](#) and [mediums](#). It is also the basis for many, if not most, [occult](#) and [pseudoscientific](#) beliefs.

It should be noted that selective thinking works independently of [wishful thinking](#) and should not be confused with [biased thinking](#), whereby one seriously *considers* data contrary to one's belief, but one is much more critical of such data than one is of supportive data.

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### further reading

- [Coincidences: Remarkable or Random?](#) by Bruce Martin

### [reader comments](#)

[Gilovich, Thomas. \*How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life\* \(New York: The Free Press, 1993\).](#)

[Randi, James. \*Flim-Flam!\* \(Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1982\).](#)

[self-deception →](#)

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## **Cold Reading: Confessions of a "Psychic"**

*This article, based on an interview with OSSCI executive member Timothy Campbell, was written by Ryerson University journalism student Colin Hunter.*

A diligent channel surfer should notice a new trend in TV talk shows: psychic guests supposedly channeling the dead relatives of audience members, often conveying information they could not possibly have known in advance. Can psychics really divine the future by speaking to the dead, or do they, as skeptics insist, just use an old magician's parlour trick called "cold reading"?

The undisputed king of talk show psychics is John Edward, who has his own hit syndicated show on CBS, "Crossing Over." Edward allegedly delivers messages from the spirit world to members of the studio audience, who are often shocked and moved to tears.

Timothy Campbell, an executive of the Ontario Skeptics Society for Critical Inquiry, doesn't buy it.

"The thing with John Edward is, not only is he not psychic, but he's not even very good faking it," Campbell says. "You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out how these people are doing these things."

Campbell says that Edward and all other so-called psychics use the technique of cold reading, not clairvoyance, to wow their audiences.

Cold reading, Campbell explains, is no single feat, but rather the use of several tricks and skills to subtly coax information from a person - information which can later be fed back to the subject, repackaged as a new and amazing insight. It involves deductive reasoning, quick thinking, a sense of psychology, a reasonable grasp of statistics and demographics, and a healthy dose of modest charm. With a little practice, skeptics say, anyone can be a "psychic."

And Campbell knows that of which he speaks: he was once a "psychic" himself.

"A year or two ago I decided I wanted to try to do some cold reading, just to see how hard it would be, because I had seen TV psychics do it on the air."

Campbell signed into to an Internet chat room and declared himself to be a psychic who channeled the fortune-telling spirit of an Eighteenth Century French soldier named Gaston. In no time he received e-mails from people asking for readings.

"I was extremely successful with the readings I did there. No one ever suspected I was anything but the real thing."

The way to start a reading, Campbell says, is first to feign modesty about your psychic ability: "John Edward doesn't claim to be that good. I always told people I didn't do readings very often, and might make mistakes." Revelations seem more impressive when they catch a subject off guard.

Campbell's readings always began with what he calls "hot button topics":

"They are relationships, money, spirituality, loss and honesty. They're universal. I'd say something vague like 'you're seeking to hide your pain behind a façade.' Now, there is no person on Earth who doesn't hide from pain."

It's a phenomenon skeptics call the fallacy of personal validation: people will often believe a very general statement to be specifically applicable to them.

"Pick up the horoscope section of any paper, choose any sign at random and start reading. It will apply to you," Campbell says.

Campbell's hot button topics were vague enough that he was sure to score a "hit" - a positive response that suggests the supposed psychic is barking up the right tree.

He would then "go fishing" for more hits, using subtle clues and feedback from his subject to gradually move his line of questioning from the vague to the specific.

During one voice chat, for example, Campbell noticed that the woman he was "reading" spoke with a drawl typical of a person who would live out in the country.

"I guessed that she lived in the country, and probably near some horses. I said to her, 'my spirit guide Gaston is telling me about something to do with horses, and something to do with your mother.' She told me that she had a dream the night before about her mother driving a pickup truck into some water. I said, 'ah, that's what Gaston must be talking about - a horseless vehicle. Remember, he died during the Napoleonic War and doesn't know what a truck is.'"

"Luckily, the word mere is French for mother, mare also means horse, and mer also

means sea." Campbell milked the coincidence for all it was worth - a necessary evil in cold reading.

"When that woman looks back on that reading, she'll think that I told her exactly what she dreamt the night before. That's how she'll remember it. All I did was mention horses and her mother. She did the rest. Cold readers keep things nice and ambiguous and let the person do all the work."

Of course, not all educated guesses are as lucky as Campbell's one about the horse.

For every solid "hit" a cold reader must be prepared for several outright "misses."

"I had stock phrases to use as dodges - subterfuges to use for getting out of mistakes," Campbell says. "For example, I'd say, 'Gaston just used a French word I don't know. Hang on while I look it up.' It gave me a chance to think of the next thing to do."

Cold readers capitalize on the human tendency to remember remarkable or strange thing (i.e. hits), and to quickly forget that which is ordinary and unimpressive (misses).

Campbell moved his way through his readings as if moving along a computer flowchart, veering away from dead ends and constantly honing in on specific information.

Because his subjects could not see him during the online or readings, Campbell would sometimes look up information about the subject on the Internet, or find their address in the phone book (which, in the reading, would come out as a number Gaston had been repeating).

Campbell says that even psychics who do readings in person employ similar techniques. "In [John Edward's] studio there are microphones hanging over the audience, to pick up their applause and whatnot. What else do you suppose those microphones are used for? People sit there before the show and say 'Oh, I hope John contacts my Uncle Bob' and then John Edward comes out and says, 'I sense someone has lost an uncle named Bob.'"

And psychics who don't have the luxury of a wired TV studio? "If you go to one of these psychic parlours in Toronto, I would note, for example, if they ask you to hang your coat in another room. If they do, there's a good chance their confederate will be going through your pockets [looking for clues]. There are any number of tricks they can use."

Cold readers often study statistics, polls and surveys on which they base educated

guesses about their subjects based on their race, hometown, religion or financial status. They will also capitalize on traits common to most people: many women who wear black clothes are conscious of their weight; most red haired people suffer hay fever in spring and summer; many people who have lost a loved one keep a picture of that person at their bedside, and so on.

When such generalities are expressed as insights from the spirit world, Campbell says very few people question them: "If you're not suspicious, this stuff can seem just absolutely miraculous."

Armed with this new knowledge of psychic trickery, but also with a nagging desire to believe that some psychics could be the real deal, I went to Mystical Vision Psychics on Toronto's Yonge Street for my very own reading.

After being given the run-down of prices, which ranged from \$20 to just under \$100 (depending on the depth and style of the reading), I checked my wallet and opted for "twenty dollar special."

I was told in advance that this reading would not provide the kind of insights that could be gleaned from one of the more expensive treatments. I recalled Campbell's assertion that a good cold reader feigns modesty right off the bat.

The psychic, a twenty-something South Asian woman, led me to a small, round table behind a black curtain, and handed me a tarot deck to shuffle.

"Shuffle it and concentrate on what you want to know about. Then divide it into three piles, choose one pile, and hand me any five cards you like from that pile."

I did so, and as she laid out my five chosen cards, she asked me about which three broad topics I would like to know about. Rather than fishing for "hot button topics" as Campbell did, she just asked for them.

I obliged, telling her I'd like to know what the future held for me in terms of money, love, and family relationships.

"Have you made any investments lately?" she asked. "I'm seeing something about an investment or a big purchase."

I answered, truthfully: "no." A miss.

"You will be making an investment in the future or the near future. You'll buy a car, or a house, or property. It won't just be given to you, it will be yours."

That's good news, I thought. But it is also quite universally applicable. I could hear Campbell repeating the principles of cold reading in the back of my mind: "Use things that can apply to anyone."

We moved on to my love life. My psychic reader said she sensed a recent split in a relationship. I told her I have been with my girlfriend for almost five years. Another miss?

"I'm still seeing a kind of split," she persisted. "Maybe in your family? Maybe your mother and your father?"

I told her my parents are divorced. "That's it," she said. "I feel that there was jealousy and anger there, but things are better now?"

This could be construed as a hit, but she didn't actually say my parents were divorced; I did. And it happened 15 years ago, not recently.

At another point, she told me I should finish my schooling, but only after outright asking whether I was working or in school.

Again, Campbell seemed to be shouting in my head: "Cold readers keep things nice and ambiguous, and let the person do all the work."

My reading continued as such. She had a few more outright misses, like when she told me she saw a brother or an uncle in my life who often gives me advice. I'm brotherless, and don't speak to any of my uncles more than once or twice a year.

She made other statements about my future, which, by sheer probability alone, will likely come true:

"You will move to a place near water, or travel over water."

"You will work in a firm, or a business or a company."

"You're not going to be poor. You'll have money."

She told me I should eat right and get lots of sleep.

Within 15 minutes I left, unimpressed and relieved of 20 dollars. Judging by all of Campbell's criteria, I seemed to have been shystered by a cold reader.

But, I asked him, isn't it possible that there are some real psychics out there? Could cold reading simply be a natural means of simulating a supernatural feat?

"I don't think there are any real psychics," he replied. "Absolutely I don't. For the simple reason that, if a person had such abilities, we would know about it. They could do an enormous amount of good with it."

Campbell mentioned stage magician and renowned skeptic James Randi, who for six years has offered one million dollars to any psychic who can prove, in controlled scientific conditions, that he or she has supernatural powers. So far, no one has been able to claim the prize.

So all so-called psychics are just deceitful con artists?

No, not quite all, Campbell insists. "Skeptics distinguish between what we call 'eyes-open' psychics and 'eyes-shut' psychics. Eyes-open psychics are deliberately conning people. Eyes shut psychics are intuitive people who believe they actually have some powers. All they've really done is learned how to do cold reading without realizing it. I have no idea what proportions they're in, but my feeling is that 99 per cent of them are eyes-open."

Campbell's days as an eyes-open psychic are behind him now. He quit doing his free cold readings when his conscience began to nag: "I stopped after I did a reading for a woman and uncovered a secret in her life that she had never revealed to anyone, ever."

Through his subtle prying, Campbell realized the woman had been sexually abused as a child by an adult close to her. "I got her to say what happened. In a way it was good because it meant she had shared this secret with somebody. But in another way I just felt horrible because now this woman is convinced that I am a real psychic. At that point I couldn't possibly tell her I was just fooling her, because that would have been horrible."

As a member of the Ontario Skeptics Society, Campbell feels it was his duty to inform people about psychics, but not dupe them.

"I felt bad because I was lying to people. That's not what I want to do with my life - to convince people psychics are real."

"My personal belief is that a lot of people who go to psychics, in some level of their brain, are aware that it's not real. But they don't let that awareness surface to their consciousness."

Campbell and the Ontario Skeptics Society hope that with a little coaxing they can help people see the light - not the light from the afterlife, but the light of reason.

