

Popular Psychology and the Public Image

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How Freud still manages to give us a bad name 100 years later

“The real impact of psychology will be felt through its effects on the public at large, through a new and different public conception of what is humanly possible and what is humanly desirable.”

—George Armitage Miller, 1969

You are sitting on an airplane, settling in for a long flight, when the person next to you turns and asks you your least favorite question:

“So what do you do for a living?”

You don’t want to share but you also don’t want to be rude and the CIA fib is a lot harder to pull off. So with a sigh you respond, “I’m a psychologist.”

Chances are you won’t be met with any kind of impressed response. No one exclaims, “Wow psychology! I hear that’s a really tough field!” like they would for most other sciences. Instead, they will smile blankly and nod. They may even cheekily ask, “So what am I thinking about?” to which you generally know the answer; they’re thinking about a petite balding man smoking a cigar and peering over his tiny glasses at a patient lying on a chaise lounge talking about their childhood.

This is a common image that comes to mind when discussing psychology. Most people who know very little about the subject tend to think about Freud, Rorschach tests, mind-reading, telekinesis, hypnosis – the list goes on. Although these are frequently associated with psychology and are even still studied by some, they couldn’t be farther from what the field truly represents. Often thought of as a soft science, psychology has to fight hard to be taken seriously in the realm of research and scientific study, losing out to other fields like chemistry and biology in terms of importance and credibility. There are many reasons for this perceptual distinction between science fields, but much of the bad name that psychology gets is due to common lingering misconceptions about psychological practices and aims.

There seem to be two competing fields when it comes to psychology: psychology and popular psychology. Topics of popular psychology tend to include anything that will capture the public’s attention while actual psychology focuses on ways to study and apply concepts and ideas, either with the goal of furthering science or creating help-

ful new techniques for assessing, diagnosing, and treating disorders. The line can become somewhat blurred, as many of the punchy news headlines build off of real evidence. However, they generalize, exaggerate, misinterpret, and often only focus on high-impact results. This creates an oversimplified depiction of psychology that focuses on irrelevant topics that are often studied by peripheral experimenters or are side projects to the main work of many respected researchers.

One way this is done is through the use of misleading headlines that help news outlets gain more readers, but fail to actually deliver any corresponding results. Studies have shown that headlines can influence how a news article is processed and lead to misinformation about the actual content of the article.¹ One example of this was a recent article that had the title “REVEALED: How these colors affect your mood” and a sub-header that stated that yellow makes people happy.² The article described a “study” that supposedly provided insight into the “psychology of color” by interviewing people about how they felt about certain colors. There was no indication that any color affected mood or elicited a particular emotion, but this wasn’t clear from the headline. They also didn’t include any information about methodology, participants, or where the original study could be found. Instead they provided vague references to the milk company that conducted the study to determine what color to make the lids of their milk containers. By using misleading headlines and describing the presented information as “psychology”, the article was able to make readers jump to false conclusions. Articles like this pop up a lot on social media websites. They take the term psychology and apply it to fluffy topics that loosely fit into the public perception of what psychology is and further damage the already fragile scientific image that psychology has.

However, the largest contributor to common misperceptions surrounding psychology is one of its most talked about figures: Sigmund Freud. Although he helped provide

direction in psychotherapy and proposed some reputable theories, Freud also created a flawed image of psychology that still lingers. Freud’s work began in the 1880s, but this doesn’t mean that everyone has abandoned his expired ideas.³ His debunked theories and ideas – such as the Oedipus complex, unconscious sexual drives, the id, dream analysis, and many more – are still discussed and taken seriously today due to his lasting legacy. His theories are taught in most basic psychology courses, often having a whole class period devoted to them, and they tend to be what people talk about the most.⁴ It’s not unusual to hear someone refer to a verbal blunder as a Freudian slip and many phrases such as “being anal” or having “penis envy” are still commonly used.

Freud’s ideas have contributed to the popularity of many questionable topics of psychology. Much of this is based off of Freud’s obsession with the unconscious, as he liked to analyze everything for a deeper meaning. While unconscious processing and the idea of a “hidden mind” are both valid ideas that have scientific backing, Freud’s application of the unconscious was dubious.⁵ From our feelings about our parents to verbal slipups and dreams, everything was fair game for having a darker, murkier backstory submerged in our unconscious mind. Dream analysis has become especially popular. Freud’s book *The Interpretation of Dreams* resulted in many other “interpretation guides”, such as *Dream Interpretations for Beginners*, *Dream Decoder*, *The Dream Book: Symbols for Self-Understanding*, *The Meanings of Dreams*, *Llewellyn’s Complete Dictionary of Dreams*, and many, many more. These started becoming popular in the 1970s as a do-it-yourself way to get to know yourself better and use your dreams to interpret the world you live in. However, dreams serve no function in revealing anything about future events or deeper feelings.⁶ There are no underlying sexual meanings to every scenario that you mentally experience while sleeping. Instead, dreams serve a more important function in

memory and learning. Research has shown that dreams are a method of memory consolidation and integration that occur during sleep.⁷ While this may not be as exciting as looking for the deeper meaning of phallic shapes in your dreams, it's certainly more practical.

From the obsession with what lies beneath our own mental messages a new obsession with what lies beneath the messages of others began to surface. The spillover of Freud's "fixation" on the unconscious can be seen in the research done on subliminal advertising and how it targets our subconscious. This has yielded some valid results, such as the effect of subliminal messaging on participants in a controlled laboratory environment.⁸ However, it has also served to cause panic, induce fear of "mind control", and to—once again—muddy the public image of psychology. Subliminal advertising is a commonly discussed topic, but the very foundation of its effectiveness has been proven wrong. It first surfaced in the 1950s with Vance Packard's book *The Hidden Persuaders* and persisted with the increasing number of publications on the topic. However, most of these books were based off of the work of James Vicary, who claimed that he could increase popcorn and Coca-Cola sales by using subliminal messages during movies.⁹ He later admitted to fabricating his work but this did not stop the belief in the effectiveness of subliminal messages from spreading and becoming a widely accepted phenomenon today.^{10,11}

Some incorrect experiments pertaining to subliminal processing are still taught in classrooms today. Social psychology courses often describe the experiment in which participants are primed with either neutral words or words pertaining to old age, and then, as they are leaving and under the impression that the experiment is finished, timed on how long it takes them to walk from one point to another.¹² The researchers found that those who were primed with "elderly words" took considerably longer when leaving.¹³ However, the results of this experiment are questionable, as replication studies have failed to get the same results unless the person who measures walking speed is aware of which word group the participant receives. This suggests that there was no difference in walking speed, just in perceived walking speed. When the experimenter was unaware of which condition the participant had received, the walking times were comparable.¹⁴

Another major misconception—and often the subject of many newspaper comics and cartoons—is the use of the Rorschach Inkblot test by psychologists. Projective tests—or tests that use an ambiguous stimuli and

require the patient to "project" their feelings and personality onto it—include the Rorschach test, word association tasks, many picture drawing activities, and the Thematic Apperception Test in which subjects interpret a scene.¹⁵ The Rorschach test was created by a Freudian psychoanalyst named Hermann Rorschach.¹⁶ While this test was not directly produced by Freud, it was loosely based off of projection, one of his proposed defense mechanisms in which we impart our feelings or emotions onto others in order to shift blame.¹⁶ Projection, along with the other defense mechanisms that he discussed, have been found to be fairly valid observations about human behavior and have been expanded on greatly by modern psychologists.^{17,18} However, this does not mean that projective tests are also valid. While they may be good tools for getting a patient to open up and talk about their problems, there is no evidence to support the idea that the patient is revealing anything about their individual issues that would help a clinician in assessing, diagnosing, or treating problems.¹⁹ In a meta-analysis of Rorschach Inkblot scores, a group of researchers found that there is an alarmingly high false positive rate for psychopathology and that it is a weak tool at best.²⁰ However, the popularity of projective tests persists despite our inability to tell anything about a person from what they might see in a smudgy grouping of ink blobs.

Freud has not only influenced what ideas people associate with psychology, but also what images. The "typical psychologist" tends to look an awful lot like Freud, and the mental depictions of therapy sessions often involve the classic Freudian structure of a patient lying down talking to a therapist. This Freud-infused image has become so pervasive in comics, television, and movies that many now associate psychologists, and therapists in particular, with men. This image made more sense in the 1970s, when women only made up about 20% of doctorate recipients in psychology, but this number has since flipped.²¹ According to APA's Center for Workforce Studies, the gender gap is widening and men now make up less than 20% of Master's degrees in psychology. As of 2013, 68.3% of active psychologists were women.²² Despite this drastic change in demographics, psychologists are still generally thought of as male. There is also an overemphasis on therapists, when in reality there are many different branches and classifications within the broad overarching title of "psychologist". While this is not a myth so much as an incorrect depiction, it also owes much of its basis to Freud and his inexplicably lasting hold on psychology.

There are still plenty of other myths about psychology that are floating around

and that remain popular with the public: self-help books, Baby Einstein, polygraph tests, parapsychology, manifestations of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and many pieces of "folk wisdom". Psychology is not without its problems, such as replication failures and previous unethical practices, but the public obsession with popular psychology is detrimental to the field as a whole. It contributes to the stigmatization of those who have mental disorders, degrades the credibility of psychology in the research community, and tells a story of psychology that is incomplete and incorrect. This strengthens our status as an unethical bunch of pseudoscientists and results in a strange desire to lie to strangers on airplanes.

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