"Cold Reading": How to Convince Strangers that You Know All About Them

Ray Hyman

Over twenty years ago I taught a course at Harvard University called "Applications of Social Psychology." The sort of applications that I covered were the various ways in which people were manipulated. I invited various manipulators to demonstrate their techniques—pitchmen, encyclopedia salesmen, hypnotists, advertising experts, evangelists, confidence men, and a variety of individuals who dealt with personal problems. The techniques which we discussed, especially those concerned with helping people with their personal problems, seem to involve the client's tendency to find more meaning in any situation than is actually there. Students readily accepted this explanation when it was pointed out to them. But I did not feel that they fully realized just how pervasive and powerful this human tendency to make sense out of nonsense really is.

Consequently, in 1955 I wrote a paper entitled "The Psychological Reading: An Infallible Technique For Winning Admiration and Popularity." Over the years I have distributed copies of this paper to my students. The paper begins as follows:

> So you want to be admired? You want people to seek your company, to talk about you, to praise your talents? This manuscript tells you how to satisfy that want. Herein you will find a "sure-fire" gimmick for the achievement of fame and popularity. Just follow the advice that I give you, and, even if you are the most incompetent social bungler, you cannot fail to become the life of the party. What is the secret that underlies this infallible system? The secret, my friend, is a simple and obvious one. It has been tried and proven by practitioners since the beginnings of mankind. Here is the gist of the secret: To be popular with your fellow man, tell him what he wants to hear. He wants to hear about himself. So tell him about himself. But not what you know to be true about him. Oh, no! Never tell him the truth. Rather, tell him *what he would like to be true about himself!* And there you have it. Simple

and obvious, but yet so powerful. This manuscript details the way in which you can exploit this golden rule by assuming the role of a character reader.

I will include essentially the same recipe for character reading in this paper that I give to my students. In addition I will bring the material up to date, describe some relevant research, and indicate some theoretical reasons why the technique "works." My purpose is not to enable you to enhance your personal magnetism, nor is it to increase the number of character readers. I give you these rules for reading character because I want you to experience how the method works. I want you to see what a powerful technique the psychological reading is, how convincing it is to the psychologist and layman alike.

When you see how easy it is to convince a person that you can read his character on sight, you will better appreciate why fortune tellers and psychologists are frequently lulled into placing credence in techniques which have not been validated by acceptable scientific methods. The recent controversy in *The Humanist* magazine and *THE ZETETIC* over the scientific status of astrology probably is irrelevant to the reasons that individuals believe in astrology. Almost without exception the defenders of astrology with whom I have contact do not refer to the evidence relating to the underlying theory. They are convinced of astrology's value because it "works." By this they mean that it supplies them with feedback that "feels right"—that convinces them that the horoscope provides a basis for understanding themselves and ordering their lives. It has personal meaning for them.

Some philosophers distinguish between "persuasion" and "conviction." The distinction is subtle. But for our purposes we can think of subjective experiences that persuade us that something is so and of logical and scientific procedures that convince, or ought to convince, us that something is or is not so. Quite frequently a scientist commits time and resources toward generating scientific evidence for a proposition because he has already been persuaded, on nonscientific grounds, that the proposition is true. Such intuitive persuasion plays an important motivational role in science as well as in the arts. Pathological science and false beliefs come about when such intuitive persuasion overrides or colors the evidence from objective procedures for establishing conviction.

The field of personality assessment has always been plagued by this confusion between persuasion and conviction. In contrast to intelligence and aptitude tests, the scientific validation of personality tests, even under

ideal conditions, rarely results in unequivocal or satisfactory results. In fact some of the most widely used personality inventories have repeatedly failed to pass validity checks. One of the reasons for this messy state of affairs is the lack of reliable and objective criteria against which to check the results of an assessment.

But the lack of adequate validation has not prevented the use of, and reliance on, such instruments. Assessment psychologists have always placed more reliance on their instruments than is warranted by the scientific evidence. Both psychologist and client are invariably persuaded by the results that the assessment "works."

This state of affairs, of course, is even more true when we consider divination systems beyond those of the academic and professional psychologist. Every system—be it based on the position of the stars, the pattern of lines in the hand, the shape of the face or skull, the fall of the cards or the dice, the accidents of nature, or the intuitions of a "psychic"—claims its quota of satisfied customers. The client invariably feels satisfied with the results. He is convinced that the reader and the system have penetrated to the core of his "true" self. Such satisfaction on the part of the client also feeds back upon the reader. Even if the reader began his career with little belief in his method, the inevitable reinforcement of persuaded clients increases his confidence in himself and his system. In this way a "vicious circle" is established. The reader and his clients become more and more persuaded that they have hold of a direct pipeline to the "truth."

The state of affairs in which the evaluation of an assessment instrument depends upon the satisfaction of the client is known as "personal validation." Personal validation is, for all practical purposes, the major reason for the persistence of divinatory and assessment procedures. If the client is not persuaded, then the system will not survive. Personal validation, of course, is the basis for the acceptance of more than just assessment instruments. The widespread acceptance of myths about Bigfoot, the Bermuda Triangle, ancient astronauts, ghosts, the validity of meditation and consciousness-raising schemes, and a host of other beliefs is based on persuasion through personal validation rather than scientific conviction.

Cold reading

"Cold reading" is a procedure by which a "reader" is able to persuade a client whom he has never before met that he knows all about the client's personality and problems. At one extreme this can be accomplished

by delivering a stock spiel, or "psychological reading," that consists of highly general statements that can fit any individual. A reader who relies on psychological readings will usually have memorized a set of stock spiels. He then can select a reading to deliver that is relatively more appropriate to the general category that the client fits—a young unmarried girl, a senior citizen, and so on. Such an attempt to fit the reading to the client makes the psychological reading a closer approximation to the true cold reading.

The cold reading, at its best, provides the client with a character assessment that is uniquely tailored to fit him or her. The reader begins with the same assumptions that guide the psychological reader who relies on the stock spiel. These assumptions are (1) that we all are basically more alike than different; (2) that our problems are generated by the same major transitions of birth, puberty, work, marriage, children, old age, and death; (3) that, with the exception of curiosity seekers and troublemakers, people come to a character reader because they need someone to listen to their conflicts involving love, money, and health. The cold reader goes beyond these common denominators by gathering as much additional information about the client as possible. Sometimes such information is obtained in advance of the reading. If the reading is through appointment, the reader can use directories and other sources to gather information. When the client enters the consulting room, an assistant can examine the coat left behind (and often the purse as well) for papers, notes, labels, and other such cues about socioeconomic status, and so on. Most cold readers, however, do not need such advance information.

The cold reader basically relies on a good memory and acute observation. The client is carefully studied. The clothing—for example, style, neatness, cost, age—provides a host of cues for helping the reader make shrewd guesses about socioeconomic level, conservatism or extroversion, and other characteristics. The client's physical features—weight, posture, looks, eyes, and hands provide further cues. The hands are especially revealing to the good reader. The manner of speech, use of grammar, gestures, and eye contact are also good sources. To the good reader the huge amount of information coming from an initial sizing-up of the client greatly narrows the possible categories into which he classifies clients. His knowledge of actuarial and statistical data about various subcultures in the population already provides him the basis for making an uncanny and strikingly accurate assessment of the client.

But the skilled reader can go much further in particularizing his

reading. He wants to zero in as quickly as possible on the precise problem that is bothering the client. On the basis of his initial assessment he makes some tentative hypotheses. He tests these out by beginning his assessment in general terms, touching upon general categories of problems and watching the reaction of the client. If he is on the wrong track the client's reactions—eye movements, pupillary dilation, other bodily mannerisms—will warn him. When he is on the right track other reactions will tell him so. By watching the client's reactions as he tests out different hypotheses during his spiel, the good reader quickly hits upon what is bothering the customer and begins to adjust the reading to the situation. By this time, the client has usually been persuaded that the reader, by some uncanny means, has gained insights into the client's innermost thoughts. His guard is now down. Often he opens up and actually tells the reader, who is also a good listener, the details of his situation. The reader, after a suitable interval, will usually feed back the information that the client has given him in such a way that the client will be further amazed at how much the reader "knows" about him. Invariably the client leaves the reader without realizing that everything he has been told is simply what he himself has unwittingly revealed to the reader.

The stock spiel

The preceding paragraphs indicate that the cold reader is a highly skilled and talented individual. And this is true. But what is amazing about this area of human assessment is how successfully even an unskilled and incompetent reader can persuade a client that he has fathomed the client's true nature. It is probably a tribute to the creativeness of the human mind that a client can, under the right circumstances, make sense out of almost any reading and manage to fit it to his own unique situation. All that is necessary is that the reader make out a plausible case for why the reading ought to fit. The client will do the rest.

You can achieve a surprisingly high degree of success as a character reader even if you merely use a stock spiel which you give to every client. Sundberg (1955), for example, found that if you deliver the following character sketch to a college male, he will usually accept it as a reasonably accurate description of himself: "You are a person who is very normal in his attitudes, behavior and relationships with people. You get along well without effort. People naturally like you and you are not overly critical of them or yourself. You are neither overly conventional nor overly individu-

alistic. Your prevailing mood is one of optimism and constructive effort, and you are not troubled by periods of depression, psychosomatic illness or nervous symptoms."

Sundberg found that the college female will respond with even more pleasure to the following sketch: "You appear to be a cheerful, well-balanced person. You may have some alternation of happy and unhappy moods, but they are not extreme now. You have few or no problems with your health. You are sociable and mix well with others. You are adaptable to social situations. You tend to be adventurous. Your interests are wide. You are fairly self-confident and usually think clearly."

Sundberg conducted his study over 20 years ago. But the sketches still work well today. Either will tend to work well with both sexes. More recently, several laboratory studies have had excellent success with the following stock spiel (Snyder and Shenkel 1975):

> 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.
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> 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.

Interestingly enough the statements in this stock spiel were first used in 1948 by Bertram Forer (1949) in a classroom demonstration of personal validation. He obtained most of them from a newsstand astrology book. Forer's students, who thought the sketch was uniquely intended for them as a result of a personality test, gave the sketch an average rating of 4.26 on a scale of 0 (poor) to 5 (perfect). As many as 16 out of his 39 students (41 percent) rated it as a perfect fit to their personality. Only five gave it a rating below 4 (the worst being a rating of 2, meaning "average"). Almost 30 years later students give the same sketch an almost identical rating as a unique description of themselves.

The technique in action

The acceptability of the stock spiel depends upon the method and circumstances of its delivery. As we shall later see, laboratory studies have isolated many of the factors that contribute to persuading clients that the sketch is a unique description of themselves. A great deal of the success of the spiel depends upon "setting the stage." The reader tries to persuade the client that the sketch is tailored especially for him or her. The reader also creates the impression that it is based on a reliable and proven

Fortune Cookies

Philip J. Klass

Those who enjoy Chinese food cannot resist reading the contents of the fortune cookie delivered with the check, and I'm no exception. For many years I put no more stock in the predictions of fortune cookies than I put in astrological charts. But circumstances have now forced me to revise this earlier erroneous appraisal.

My conversion started during the time that I was writing my first book while simultaneously holding down a full-time position; I had begun to despair that I had undertaken too much. Then my spirits were buoyed by a fortune cookie that said: "Cheer up, the end is in sight." *Soon the manuscript was completed and a tremendous load had been lifted.*

A few months later my fortune cookie predicted: "You will soon be invited to a party." *Because I abhor parties like Nature abhors a vacuum, I probably receive no more than two such invitations a year. Certainly this fortune cookie forecast would turn out to be a "bummer."*

Yet that very evening as I walked into my apartment, the telephone was ringing. When I answered I found that the caller was a woman I had met only briefly more than a year earlier. She was calling to invite me to a party!

A few months later, while lunching in my favorite Chinese restaurant, I found myself seated next to an attractive Chinese

assessment procedure. The way the sketch is delivered and dramatized also helps. And many of the rules that I give for the cold reading also apply to the delivery of the stock spiel.

The stock spiel, when properly delivered, can be quite effective. In fact, with the right combination of circumstances the stock spiel is often accepted as a perfect and unique description by the client. But, in general, one can achieve even greater success as a character analyst if one uses the more flexible technique of the cold reader. In this method one plays a sort of detective role in which one takes on the role of a Sherlock Holmes. (See

woman, also eating alone. When she chanced to compliment me on my use of chopsticks, a conversation ensued. It matured rapidly when I learned she was a divorcée.

When our fortune cookies arrived I opened mine first. It read: "A rewarding friendship will soon develop." *Hers read:* "Look forward to many pleasures ahead." *My prediction proved quite accurate. It would be indelicate for me to comment on the accuracy of hers.*

More recently, less than ten days before I was scheduled to depart for a ski vacation in Colorado, I opened my fortune cookie to find the following message: "You will have a trip, but see that you keep on your feet." *That is precisely what a skier tries to do.*

I must admit that I once received a fortune cookie prediction stating that "Your mate will have a surprise for you tonight." *My initial reaction was that I might meet and marry my "dream girl" before the day was out. When that did not materialize, it did not shake my faith in fortune cookies. Instead, I attribute this to a simple human error on the part of my waiter—who goofed in his selection process.*

Eventually the scientific community will awaken to the remarkable prescience of Chinese fortune cookies and will launch an investigation into the underlying principles. When this occurs it may be found that this remarkable property is the result of a heretofore unknown reaction between the subatomic particles of the flour used in the cookies and the ink used to print the message. But I admit this is a speculative hypothesis.

the "Case of the Cardboard Box" for an excellent example of cold reading.) One observes the jewelry, prices the clothing, evaluates the speech mannerisms, and studies the reactions of the subject. Then whatever information these observations provide is pieced together into a character reading which is aimed more specifically at the particular client.

A good illustration of the cold reader in action occurs in a story told by the well-known magician John Mulholland. The incident took place in the 1930s. A young lady in her late twenties or early thirties visited a character reader. She was wearing expensive jewelry, a wedding band, and a black dress of cheap material. The observant reader noted that she was wearing shoes which were currently being advertised for people with foot trouble. (Pause at this point and imagine that you are the reader; see what you would make of these clues.)

By means of just these observations the reader proceeded to amaze his client with his insights. He assumed that this client came to see him, as did most of his female customers, because of a love or financial problem. The black dress and the wedding band led him to reason that her husband had died recently. The expensive jewelry suggested that she had been financially comfortable during marriage, but the cheap dress indicated that her husband's death had left her penniless. The therapeutic shoes signified that she was now standing on her feet more than she was used to, implying that she was working to support herself since her husband's death.

The reader's shrewdness led him to the following conclusion—which turned out to be correct: The lady had met a man who had proposed to her. She wanted to marry the man to end her economic hardship. But she felt guilty about marrying so soon after her husband's death. The reader told her what she had come to hear—that it was all right to marry without further delay.

The rules of the game

Whether you prefer to use the formula reading or to employ the more flexible technique of the cold reader, the following bits of advice will help to contribute to your success as a character reader.

1. *Remember that the key ingredient of a successful character reading is confidence.* If you *look* and *act* as if you believe in what you are doing, you will be able to sell even a bad reading to most of your subjects.

The laboratory studies support this rule. Many readings are accepted

as accurate because the statements do fit most people. But even readings that would ordinarily be rejected as inaccurate will be accepted if the reader is viewed as a person with prestige or as someone who knows what he is doing.

One danger of playing the role of reader is that you will persuade yourself that you really are divining true character. This happened to me. I started reading palms when I was in my teens as a way to supplement my income from doing magic and mental shows. When I started I did not believe in palmistry. But I knew that to "sell" it I had to act as if I did. After a few years I became a firm believer in palmistry. One day the late Dr. Stanley Jaks, who was a professional mentalist and a man I respected, tactfully suggested that it would make an interesting experiment if I deliberately gave readings opposite to what the lines indicated. I tried this out with a few clients. To my surprise and horror my readings were just as successful as ever. Ever since then I have been interested in the powerful forces that convince us, reader and client alike, that something is so when it really isn't.

2. *Make creative use of the latest statistical abstracts, polls, and surveys.* This can provide you with a wealth of material about what various subclasses of our society believe, do, want, worry about, and so on. For example if you can ascertain about a client such things as the part of the country he comes from, the size of the city he was brought up in, his parents' religion and vocations, his educational level and age, you already are in possession of information that should enable you to predict with high probability his voting preferences, his beliefs on many issues, and other traits.

3. *Set the stage for your reading.* Profess a modesty about your talents. Make no excessive claims. This catches your subject off guard. You are not challenging him to a battle of wits. You can read his character; whether he cares to believe you or not is his concern.

4. *Gain his cooperation in advance.* Emphasize that the success of the reading depends as much upon his sincere cooperation as upon your efforts. (After all, you imply, you already have a successful career at reading characters. You are not on trial—he is.) State that due to difficulties of language and communication, *you may not always convey the exact meaning which you intend.* In these cases he is to strive to reinterpret the message in terms of his own vocabulary and life.

You accomplish two invaluable ends with this dodge. You have an alibi in case the reading doesn't click; it's his fault, not yours! And your

subject will strive to fit your generalities to his specific life occurrences. Later, when he recalls the reading he will recall it in terms of specifics; thus you gain credit for much more than you actually said.

Of all the pieces of advice this is the most crucial. To the extent that the client is made an active participant in the reading the reading will succeed. The good reader, deliberately or unwittingly, is the one who forces the client to actively search his memory to make sense of the reader's statements.

5. *Use a gimmick such as a crystal ball, tarot cards, or palm reading.* The use of palmistry, say, serves two useful purposes. It lends an air of novelty to the reading; but, more important, it serves as a cover for you to stall and to formulate your next statement. While you are trying to think of something to say next, you are apparently carefully studying a new wrinkle or line in the hand. Holding hands, in addition to any emotional thrills you may give or receive thereby, is another good way of detecting the reactions of the subject to what you are saying (the principle is the same as "muscle reading").

It helps, in the case of palmistry or other gimmicks, to study some manuals so that you know roughly what the various diagnostic signs are supposed to mean. A clever way of using such gimmicks to pin down a client's problem is to use a variant of "Twenty Questions," somewhat like this: Tell the client you have only a limited amount of time for the reading. You could focus on the heart line, which deals with emotional entanglements; on the fate line, which deals with vocational pursuits and money matters; the head line, which deals with personal problems; the health line, and so on. Ask him or her which one to focus on first. This quickly pins down the major category of problem on the client's mind.

6. *Have a list of stock phrases at the tip of your tongue.* Even if you are doing a cold reading, the liberal sprinkling of stock phrases amidst your regular reading will add body to the reading and will fill in time as you try to formulate more precise characterizations. You can use the statements in the preceding stock spiels as a start. Memorize a few of them before undertaking your initial ventures into character reading. Palmisty, tarot, and other fortune-telling manuals also are rich sources for good phrases.

7. *Keep your eyes open.* Also use your other senses. We have seen how to size up the client on the basis of clothing, jewelry, mannerisms, and speech. Even a crude classification on such a basis can provide sufficient information for a good reading. Watch the impact of your statements upon the subject. Very quickly you will learn when you are "hitting home"

and when you are "missing the boat."

8. *Use the technique of "fishing."* This is simply a device for getting the subject to tell you about himself. Then you rephrase what he has told you into a coherent sketch and feed it back to him. One version of fishing is to phrase each statement in the form of a question. Then wait for the subject to reply (or react). If the reaction is positive, then the reader turns the statement into a positive assertion. Often the subject will respond by answering the implied question and then some. Later he will tend to forget that he was the source of your information. By making your statements into questions you also force the subject to search through his memory to retrieve specific instances to fit your general statement.

9. *Learn to be a good listener.* During the course of a reading your client will be bursting to talk about incidents that are brought up. The good reader allows the client to talk at will. On one occasion I observed a tea-leaf reader. The client actually spent 75 percent of the total time talking. Afterward when I questioned the client about the reading she vehemently insisted that she had not uttered a single word during the course of the reading. The client praised the reader for having so astutely told her what in fact she herself had spoken.

Another value of listening is that most clients who seek the services of a reader actually want someone to listen to their problems. In addition many clients have already made up their minds about what choices they are going to make. They merely want support to carry out their decision.

10. *Dramatize your reading.* Give back what little information you do have or pick up a little bit at a time. Make it seem more than it is. Build word pictures around each divulgence. Don't be afraid of hamming it up.

11. *Always give the impression that you know more than you are saying.* The successful reader, like the family doctor, always acts as if he knows much more. Once you persuade the client that you know one item of information about him that you could not possibly have obtained through normal channels, the client will automatically assume you know all. At this point he will typically open up and confide in you.

12. *Don't be afraid to flatter your subject every chance you get.* An occasional subject will protest such flattery, but will still cherish it. In such cases you can further flatter him by saying, "You are always suspicious of people who flatter you. You just can't believe that someone will say good of you unless he is trying to achieve some ulterior goal."

13. Finally, remember the golden rule: *Tell the client what he wants to hear.*

Sigmund Freud once made an astute observation. He had a client who had been to a fortune-teller many years previously. The fortune-teller had predicted that she would have twins. Actually she never had children. Yet, despite the fact that the reader had been wrong, the client still spoke of her in glowing terms. Freud tried to figure out why this was so. He finally concluded that at the time of the original reading the client wanted desperately to have children. The fortune-teller sensed this and told her what she wanted to hear. From this Freud inferred that the successful fortune-teller is one who predicts what the client secretly wishes to happen rather than what actually will happen (Freud 1933).

The fallacy of personal validation

As we have seen, clients will readily accept stock spiels such as those I have presented as unique descriptions of themselves. Many laboratory experiments have demonstrated this effect. Forer (1949) called the tendency to accept as valid a personality sketch on the basis of the client's willingness to accept it "the fallacy of personal validation."

The early studies on personal validation were simply demonstrations to show that students, personnel directors, and others can readily be persuaded to accept a fake sketch as a valid description of themselves. A few studies tried to go beyond the demonstration and tease out factors that influence the acceptability of the fake sketch. Sundberg (1955), for example, gave the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (known as the MMPI) to 44 students. The MMPI is the most carefully standardized personality inventory in the psychologist's tool kit. Two psychologists, highly experienced in interpreting the outcome of the MMPI, wrote a personality sketch for each student on the basis of his or her test results. Each student then received two personality sketches—the one actually written for him or her and a fake sketch. When asked to pick which sketch described him or her better, 26 of the 44 students (59 percent) picked the fake sketch!

Sundberg's study highlights one of the difficulties in this area. A fake, universal sketch can be seen as a better description of oneself than can a uniquely tailored description by trained psychologists based upon one of the best assessment devices we have. This makes personal validation a completely useless procedure. But it makes the life of the character reader and the pseudopsychologist all the easier. His general and universal statements have more persuasive appeal than do the best and most appropriate

descriptions that the trained psychologist can come up with.

Some experiments that my students and I conducted during the 1950s also supplied some more information about the acceptability of such sketches. In one experiment we gave some students a fake sketch (the third stock spiel previously discussed) and told half of them that it was the result of an astrological reading and the other half that it was the result of a new test, the Harvard Basic Personality Profile. In those days, unlike today, students had a low opinion of astrology. All the students rated each of the individual statements as generally true of themselves. The groups did not differ in their ratings of the acceptability of the individual statements. But when asked to rate the sketch as a whole, the group that thought it came from an accepted personality test rated the acceptability significantly higher than did the group that thought it came from an astrologer. From talking to individual students it was clear that those who were in the personality-test group believed that they had received a highly accurate and unique characterization of themselves. Those in the astrology group admitted that the individual statements were applicable to themselves but dismissed the apparent success of the astrologer as due to the fact that the statements were so general that they would fit anyone. In other words, by changing the context in which they got the statements we were able to manipulate the subjects' perceptions as to whether the statements were generalities that applied to everyone or were specific characterizations of themselves.

In a further experiment we obtained a pool of items that 80 percent or more of Harvard students endorsed as true of themselves. We then had another group of Harvard students rate these items as "desirable" or "undesirable" and as "general" or "particular" (true of only a few students). Thus we had a set of items that we knew almost all our subjects would endorse as true of themselves, but which varied on desirability and on perceived generality. We were then able to compose fake sketches which varied in their proportion of desirable and specific items. We found that the best recipe for creating acceptable stock spiels was to include about 75 percent desirable items, but ones which were seen as specific, and about 25 percent undesirable items, but ones which were seen as general. The undesirable items had the apparent effect of making the spiel plausible. The fact that the items were seen as being generally true of other students made them more acceptable.

The most extensive program of research to study the factors making for acceptability of fake sketches is that by C. R. Snyder and his associates

at the University of Kansas. A brief summary of many of his findings was given in an article in *Psychology Today* (Snyder and Shenkel 1975). In most of his studies Snyder uses a control condition in which the subject is given the fake sketch and told that this sketch is generally true for all people. On a rating scale from 1 to 5 (1, very poor; 2, poor; 3, average; 4, good; 5, excellent) the subject rates how well the interpretation fits his personality. A typical result for this control condition is a rating of around 3 to 4, or between average and good. But when the sketch is presented to the subject as one which was written "for you, personally," the acceptability tends to go up to around 4.5, or between good and excellent.

In a related experiment the subjects were given the fake sketch under the pretense that it was based on an astrological reading. The control group, given the sketch as "generally true for all people," rated it about 3.2, or just about average. A second group was asked to supply the astrologer with information on the year and month of their birth. When they received their sketches they rated them on the average at 3.76, or just below good. A third group supplied the mythical astrologer with information on year, month, and day of birth. These subjects gave a mean rating of 4.38.

From experiments such as those we have learned the following. The acceptability of a general sketch is enhanced when (1) the reader or source is believed to know what he is doing, (2) the instrument or assessment device is plausible, (3) a lot of mumbo jumbo is associated with the procedure (such as giving month, day, hour, and minute of birth along with a lot of complicated calculations), and (4) the client is led to believe that the sketch has been tailored to his personality. When these conditions are met, the client, and possibly the reader as well, have a strong "illusion of uniqueness"—that is, the client is persuaded that the sketch describes himself or herself and no one else.

Why does it work?

But why does it work? And why does it work so well? It does not help to say that people are gullible or suggestible. Nor can we dismiss it by implying that some individuals are just not sufficiently discriminating or lack sufficient intelligence to see through it. Indeed one can argue that it requires a certain degree of intelligence on the part of a client for the reading to work well. Once the client is actively engaged in trying to make sense of the series of sometimes contradictory statements issuing from the

reader, he becomes a creative problem-solver trying to find coherence and meaning in the total set of statements. The task is not unlike that of trying to make sense of a work of art, a poem, or, for that matter, a sentence. The work of art, the poem, or the sentence serve as a blueprint or plan from which we can construct a meaningful experience by bringing to bear our own past experiences and memories.

In other words the reading succeeds just because it calls upon the normal processes of comprehension that we ordinarily bring to bear in making sense out of any form of communication. The raw information in a communication is rarely, if ever, sufficient in itself for comprehension. A shared context and background is assumed. Much has to be filled in by inference. The good reader, like anyone who manipulates our perceptions, is merely exploiting the normal processes by which we make sense out of the disorderly array of inputs that constantly bombard us.

A variety of examples and experiments could be drawn upon to illustrate this point. Let us look at a couple of instructive cases. Dr. Joseph Weizenbaum, of M.I.T., developed a computer program that would enable a human to apparently carry on a conversation with a computer. One version of his program is called "Doctor." The program is designed to "talk" like a Rogerian psychotherapist. Such a therapist is relatively easy to imitate because the basis of Rogers' technique is simply to feed the patient's statements back to him in a paraphrased form. The human, playing the role of the patient, types in questions and answers on a teletype machine. The computer, under control of the program, types replies and questions on the same teletype paper. A typical example (Weizenbaum 1976) of a conversation between a young lady and Doctor follows. (The lady speaks first. The computer's responses are printed in italics.)

Men are all alike.
In what way?
They're always bugging us about something or other.
Can you think of a specific example?
Well, my boyfriend made me come here.
Your boyfriend made you come here?
He says I'm depressed much of the time.
I am sorry to hear you are depressed.
It's true. I am unhappy.
Do you think coming here will help you not to be unhappy?
I need some help, that much seems certain.
What would it mean to you if you got some help?

Perhaps I could learn to get along with my mother.
Tell me more about your family.
My mother takes care of me.
Who else in your family takes care of you?
My father.
Your father?
You are like my father in some ways.
What resemblance do you see?
You are not very aggressive, but I think you don't want me to notice that.
What makes you think I am not very aggressive?
You don't argue with me.
Why do you think I don't argue with you?
You are afraid of me.
Does it please you to believe I am afraid of you?
My father is afraid of everybody.
What else comes to mind when you think of your father?
Bullies.
Does that have anything to do with the fact that your boyfriend made you come here?

Doctor is a quite primitive program as natural-language programs go. It employs a lot of tricks and stock phrases. It has no mechanisms for actually understanding sentences. Instead it seeks out key words that are typed and does some simple syntactical transformations. For example, if the program sees a sentence of the form "Do you X" it automatically prints out the response "What makes you think I X?" When Doctor cannot match the syntax of a given sentence it can cover up in two ways. It can say something noncommittal, such as *"Please go on"* or *"What does that suggest to you?"* Or it can recall an earlier match and refer back to it, as for example, *"How does this relate to your depression?"* where depression was an earlier topic of conversation.

In essence Doctor is a primitive cold reader. It uses stock phrases to cover up when it cannot deal with a given question or input. And it uses the patient's own input to feed back information and create the illusion that it understands and even sympathizes with the patient. This illusion is so powerful that patients, even when told they are dealing with a relatively simple-minded program, become emotionally involved in the interaction. Many refuse to believe that they are dealing with a program and insist that a sympathetic human must be at the controls at the other end of the teletype.

Sociologist Harold Garfinkel has supplied another instructive example (1967). He conducted the following experiment. The subjects were told

that the Department of Psychiatry was exploring alternative means to therapy "as a way of giving persons advice about their personal problems." Each subject was then asked to discuss the background of some serious problem on which he would like advice. After having done this the subject was to address some questions which could be answered "yes" or "no" to the "counselor" (actually an experimenter). The experimenter-counselor heard the questions from an adjoining room and supplied a "yes" or "no" answer to each question after a suitable pause. Unknown to the subject, the series of yes-no answers had been preprogrammed according to a table of random numbers and was not related to his questions. Yet the typical subject was sure that the counselor fully understood the subject's problem and was giving him sound and helpful advice.

Let me emphasize again that statements as such have no meaning. They convey meaning only in context and only when the listener or reader can bring to bear his large store of worldly knowledge. Clients are not necessarily acting irrationally when they find meaning in the stock spiels or cold readings. Meaning is an interaction of expectations, context, memory, and given statements. An experiment by the Gestalt psychologist Solomon Asch (1948) will help make this point. Subjects were given the following passage and asked to think about it: "I hold it that a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms are in the physical." One group of subjects was told that the author of the passage was Thomas Jefferson (which happens to be true). The subjects were asked if they agreed with the passage and what it meant to them. These subjects generally approved of it and interpreted the word *rebellion* to mean minor agitation. But when subjects were given the same passage and told that its author was Lenin, they disagreed with it and interpreted *rebellion* to mean a violent revolution.

According to some social psychologists the different reactions show the irrationality of prejudice. But Asch points out that the subjects could be acting quite rationally. Given what they know about Thomas Jefferson and Lenin, or what they believe about them, it makes sense to attribute different meanings to the same words spoken by each of them. If one thinks that Jefferson believed in orderly government and peaceful processes, then it would not make sense to interpret his statement to actually mean a bloody or physical revolution. If one thinks that Lenin favors war and bloodshed, then it makes sense, when the statement is attributed to him, to interpret *rebellion* in its more extreme form.

Some recent research that my colleagues and I conducted might also be relevant here. Our subjects were given the task of forming an impression of a hypothetical individual on the basis of a brief personality sketch. In one condition the subjects were given a sketch that generally led to an impression of a nice, personable, friendly sort of fellow. In a second condition the subjects were given a sketch that created an impression of a withdrawn, niggardly individual. Both groups of subjects were then given a new sketch that supposedly contained more information about the hypothetical individual. In both cases the subjects were given an identical sketch. This sketch contained some descriptors that were consistent with the friendly image and some that were consistent with the niggardly image. The subjects were later tested to see how well they recognized the actual adjectives that were used in the second sketch. One of the adjectives, for example, was *charitable*. The test contained foils for each adjective. For example, the word *generous* also appeared on the test but did not appear in the sketch. Yet subjects who had been given the friendly impression checked *generous* just as frequently as they checked *charitable*. But subjects in the other condition did not confuse *charitable* with *generous*. Why? Because, we theorize, the two different contexts into which *charitable* had to be integrated produced quite different meanings. When subjects who have already built up an impression of a "friendly" individual encounter the additional descriptor *charitable*, it is treated as merely further confirmation of their general impression. In that context *charitable* is simply further confirmation of the nice-guy image. Consequently when these subjects are asked to remember what was actually said, they can remember only that the individual was further described in some way to enhance the good-guy image, and *generous* is just as good a candidate for the description as is *charitable* in that context.

But when the subjects who have an image of the person as a withdrawn, niggardly individual encounter *charitable*, the last thing that comes to mind is generosity. Instead, they probably interpret *charitable* as implying that he donates money to charities as a way of gaining tax deductions. In this latter condition the subjects have no subsequent tendency to confuse *charitable* with *generous*.

The cold reading works so well, then, because it taps a fundamental and necessary human process. We have to bring our knowledge and expectations to bear in order to comprehend anything in our world. In most ordinary situations this use of context and memory enables us to correctly interpret statements and supply the necessary inferences to do

this. But this powerful mechanism can go astray in situations where there is no actual message being conveyed. Instead of picking up random noise we still manage to find meaning in the situation. So the same system that enables us to creatively find meanings and make new discoveries also makes us extremely vulnerable to exploitation by all sorts of manipulators. In the case of the cold reading the manipulator may be conscious of his deception; but often he, too, is a victim of personal validation.

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