

## letters

# Scientist denies astrology break- through!

or  
*Beware the press*

Dear Editor:

Community beliefs about our field are influenced not by research papers in professional journals, but by the reports on these in the popular press. I have had two "enlightening" experiences with the popular press which illustrate some of the hazards.

A few years ago in a quest for volunteer subjects, we issued a press release specifying that we were studying communication in "average" and distressed marriages. We were therefore quite surprised when an article entitled "Psychologist Seeks Happy Couples" appeared in our largest daily newspaper. Here, while the popular press version of our work was clearly erroneous, there was no harm done. Many happy cou-

ples volunteered and we ran two additional studies which yielded interesting results.

The second experience was much more disturbing. To teach methodology to our introductory psychology students, Betty Sunerton and I designed and ran a classroom lab exercise on the reliability and validity of popular horoscopes. After replication, we submitted the results to one of the mainstream psychology journals, where it appeared last year. A few months later, a student approached me, excitedly waving a wide circulation tabloid. "This article [entitled 'Horoscopes Really True, Says Psychologist] about you says you found that horoscopes are accurate. I didn't know you were into astrology! How exciting." Exciting indeed!

The phrase "Dr. Fichten said," was frequently used, even though I spoke to no one from the popular press. Furthermore, while giving a truly *excellent* synopsis of the method, the tabloid writer repeatedly dropped the word "not" from sentences in the journal article. Thus the meaning of statements such as, "These results suggest that daily forecasts were *not* valid" were miraculously transformed to mean the opposite of what was found.

Lawyers advised that while the tabloid article "contains misinformation, it is not libelous." They recommended writing a letter to the publisher or editor of the tabloid to request a correction. As this particular tabloid is devoted primarily to movie

stars, horoscopes and diets, there seemed little point.

But this was not the end. Late last year, a horoscope magazine ran an article entitled "Science and Horoscopes": the entire article consisted of the magazine quoting the tabloid quoting me. Since that time, as my mail testifies, I am well regarded in the astrology field.

Some colleagues remarked, "Well, if you are going to do this sort of research, you deserve it." Surely, this type of remark misses the larger point. The issue at stake is not merely the researcher's credibility but the consequences of such reporting for the community as a whole. Non-professionals, students and even colleagues who read such an account of research will probably never read the journal article and will remain misinformed or skeptical about our field.

Experiences such as those I have described are certainly not unique. The work of psychologists, especially that of clinical, social and child psychologists, is of potential interest to a non-professional readership. When popular press renditions of our work misrepresent and misinform, either inadvertently or deliberately, there is no effective mechanism to correct erroneous impressions.

The ray of hope at the end of the tunnel is the APA-owned *Psychology Today*. We finally have our own forum and contact with the non-professional community. Let us use it well!

Catherine Fichten  
Montreal, Quebec