The Influence of Astrological Knowledge on Self-Concept and Autobiographical Memory

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Intro to Memory Studies 2018
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STARS IN YOUR EYES
ABSTRACT
Existing literature shows that an individual’s self-concept is malleable, and that perceived changes in one’s self can affect perspective on autobiographical memories accordingly. This paper seeks to discover, through an examination of past research, whether or not a person’s knowledge of astrology-related personality information can be a factor in mediating these effects. A review of a multitude of studies suggests that yes, indeed, simply knowing one’s sun sign can have lasting effects on a self-concept. The acceptance of personality feedback based on this knowledge is negotiated by a myriad of qualities, such as the generality of statements, perceived specificity of results, positivity/likability of the feedback.
INTRODUCTION

Try to imagine this: You are in the fifth grade. You and all of your classmates are in the school library. Your peers are buzzing back and forth between rows of bookshelves like pinballs, trying to select an item to check out for the day. Maybe you are the type of kid with a penchant for scientific books about animals, or perhaps you would rather be reading fantasy. Regardless, today you find yourself in one of the library seating areas. There are racks of lighter reading material, and you pick out a nondescript pre-teen magazine and begin flipping through the semigloss pages.

Towards the end of the magazine, there is a page emblazoned ‘Monthly Horoscopes’. There are twelve sections on the page, each with a different symbol, name, and range of birthdays that qualify you for that group. Your birthday is June 1st, which makes you a ‘Gemini’ apparently. The page goes on to say that being a Gemini makes you outgoing, talkative, and something called adaptive. Now that you think about it, your mom does say that you talk an awful lot. Your friends come over to see what their horoscope is, and you find out that your best friend is a ‘Sagittarius’, the kid you carpool home with is a ‘Libra’, and the girl you sit next to at lunch because she shares her homemade snacks with you is a ‘Taurus’. The class period is over, and it’s time for everyone to get in line to check out their books and go back to class. You forget all about being a Gemini by the time you go to recess.

Except you don’t. As you get older you continue to periodically see horoscopes in magazines, on websites, in the form of keychains. You do not think that you take horoscopes seriously, yet always find yourself looking for the Gemini section when these things present themselves. In high school, you start joining plays and musicals and people say, “Of course you got the lead, you’re such a Gemini” . Or maybe you get into a fight with your college best friend and you see later that she posts a picture on Twitter that says “Geminis are two-faced liars”. You never thought before to take horoscopes seriously. Looking back, you consider the possibility that there is some truth to them.

It may be hard to believe that something as seemingly inconsequential as a knowledge of astrology (the study of celestial bodies which horoscopes derive from), can have such a lasting impact on one’s idea of themselves. However, current research suggests that it is more likely than not. Markus and Wurf (1987) describe a person’s self-concept as “dynamic”, and “active, forceful, and capable of change”. Furthermore, they assert that not only is a self-concept influenced by one’s previous actions, but that it can also mediates one’s current and future actions. Self-concept can even go so far as to change an individual’s perspective of their autobiographical memories (Libby & Eibach 2002). If this social psychological perspective is correct, then it is no stretch of the imagination to conceive that a person who accepts astrology-based personality information as true can find their past and present self-concept affected accordingly. This paper will examine relevant existing literature and attempt to make a claim as to whether or not astrological knowledge can truly impact one’s long-term self-concept, and how that in turn may affect autobiographical memory.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Impact on Self-Concept

Research conducted by Margaret Hamilton (1995), a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Washington, suggests that a person simply knowing their astrological sign can affect perception of their own personality. In this particular study, college students who knew their sign were asked to choose which profile of personality traits was most accurate to themselves. The majority of participants judged the personality profile associated with their astrological sign to be most true for them, as opposed to profiles of other signs. This result was found regardless of whether or not participants reported a belief in astrology, or had previous knowledge of what their sign’s general personality description is. Similarly, a larger study conducted by Van Rooji (1999) found that participants described themselves in terms of personality traits commonly associated with their astrological sign (or their sun sign, as this study specifies). However, unlike results from the previous study, this effect was only found in subjects who had previous knowledge of astrology.

Strangely enough, market research also seems to support this paper’s theory that knowledge of astrology can influence self-concept; a study conducted by Vincent-Wayne Mitchell at University of Manchester’s Institute of Science and Technology shows that subjects’ sun signs were a significant predictor in their market behavior in the categories of leisure, tobacco, and drink products (1997). Another psychological study suggests that certainty of one’s self-concept can be benefited by a belief in and/or knowledge of astrology (Lillqvist, Outi, Lingeman & Marjaana 1998). Students in a number of different beginner’s courses (either astrology, psychology, and German language) were asked to rate how certain they were about 20 self-describing attributes. Students’ ages ranged from 16-59 years old. Participants in the astrology course were found to have higher feelings of certainty in regards to the given attributes when compared to students in the other classes. Those same students were also found to feel more certain about matters of self-control and perceived luck.

The Self-Serving Attribution Problem

A limitation faced by many studies on the impact of astrology on self-concept is the self-serving attribution bias; this bias is well-illustrated in research done by Adrian Furnham and Caroline Varian (1988), in which participants of one study were given personality tests to complete with either positive or negative results. These participants were much more likely to accept positive results as accurate to their personality than the negative feedback. Another study on personality test interpretations by Donald E. Jackson, Jerry W. O’Dell, and Deborah Olson (1982) also found a positive correlation between the likability of test results and how accurate participants rated them.

A study by Edgar Wunder states that “self-attribution is an important factor in the development of beliefs in the validity of presented personality descriptions” (2003). The goal of his study was to attempt to replicate those of a
previous Hamilton (2001) study that suggested self-attribution mediates a person’s belief in astrology, based on how favorable the traits associated with their sun sign were. However, in contrast to Hamilton’s study, Wunder found that levels of belief were almost exactly equal between different sun sign groups.

Accuracy & Acceptance of Personality Feedback
Another important factor in many empirical studies on astrology and personality is the Barnum Effect, which describes the tendency of people to accept bogus personality feedback as being true to themselves (Furnham 1989). A study by Snyder, Larsen & Bloom (1976) gave participants one of three different personality assessments: one psychological, one graphological (based on their handwriting), and one astrological. Results showed no difference in the degree of acceptance between the different tests. However, if participants were told that their results were tailored specifically to their personality rather than being true of people in general, they would accept the results even more readily. In that same vein, a 1974 study by C.R. Snyder evaluated participants based on their horoscope with varying levels of specificity. Participants in all conditions rated general horoscope descriptions as being fairly accurate of their personalities; if they were told that their astrological interpretation was based off of their specific birth time, then they found the results even more accurate. These studies suggest that the more specific a personality test result present itself as, the more likely test-takers are to accept that information as accurate.

Adrian Furnham’s 1989 study shows that this effect may be independent of whether or not the personality feedback is true or simply a Barnum (bogus) result. This is supported by research done by Thomas Stachnik and Barry Stachnik (1980), in which a group of high school students were told that an astrology expert would develop unique personality profiles for each of them based on the time and date of their births. However, participants were actually all unknowingly given identical profiles and then asked to rate the validity of the results to their personality. There was a very high level of acceptance despite the generic quality of the profiles. Work done by G.A. Tyson (1982) supports all of the above studies’ results in that acceptance of astrological personality tests is mediated by perceived specificity, favorability, but also by additional factors of generality (A feature noted in Furnham & Varian 1988 as well), beliefs in the procedure, and skill of the source.

On Memory
Research by Lisa K. Libby and Richard P. Eibach at Cornell University (2002) describe the phenomena of people referring to their past selves as seemingly “different people”. They propose that this is caused by a true mismatch in a person’s past and present self, rather than a mere linguistic device. In their first study, participants were asked to list aspects of themselves that had changed greatly and then to recall past memories that related to those qualities. Results showed that participants tended to take on a third-person perspective when describing these memories. Further studies showed that this effect was indeed limited to recollections of memories incongruent with the individual’s current self-
concept. These results suggest that when an individual experiences a shift in self-concept, it can profoundly affect the way they look back on past autobiographical memories.

**CONCLUSION**

Based on existing research, it is more than plausible to conclude that astrology-based knowledge and personality feedback has significant effects on an individual’s self-concept and perceptions of autobiographical memories. It is unfortunate, though that this effect seems to be independent of the actual accuracy of feedback. It is therefore imperative for disseminating sources of personality test results to be mindful of the impact that they may yield, or rather, that individuals learn to be more weary of personality test feedback. On the other hand, people may benefit from the boost in confidence and positive perspective of their self-concept that astrology may provide, since multiple studies suggest that the beneficial feedback is much more readily accepted than the malignant.

The bulk of the relevant research concerning astrology was conducted in the late 20th century, so future studies may produce new and innovative outcomes. Furthermore, most studies involved observation of participants’ perceptions of their sun sign alone rather than their entire natal chart. Based on this researcher’s personal knowledge of astrology, this method of ascribing personality details seems insufficient. A sun sign is widely considered the most significant aspect of a natal chart, but it is only one weighted placement out of a possible twenty-four. Though existing literature shows that the perceived specificity can mediate an individual’s acceptance of feedback, it may also affect the accuracy and validity of the study’s claims. Measures should be controlled carefully to account for this effect.


Oh, can't you see, yeah That you're so much a part of me I could never ever lead you wrong With my arms wide open I wanna, I wanna, I wanna make you strong Baby, I'll give you all I've got to give And if you'll just open up your heart, and live.

You've got stars in your eyes There's a whole world out there for you You've got stars in your eyes What are you gonna do You've got stars in your eyes And the whole world is waiting for you.

[Outro] Stars love Stars in your eyes Stars at night Stars in your eyes Stars in your eyes And the whole world is waiting for you.

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"Stars In Your Eyes" is one of the very, very few films that my colleague, F. Maurice Speed, who prided himself on reviewing (or noticing) every new film trade-shown in London, missed. However, perhaps it could be argued that "Stars In Your Eyes" is not so much a movie but a filmed variety show. It's certainly a "must" for Nat Jackley fans. 1 of 2 people found this review helpful.