

No, I Can't Fix Your Dysfunctional Family

September 01, 2006

It is a scene that has occurred repeatedly since I began studying for my PhD in cognitive psychology: I am talking to a friend of my parents or a high school friend I haven't seen in years, and the person finds out that I am a graduate student. I involuntarily cringe as they ask me, "What are you studying?" When I answer, a slightly uneasy look crosses their face and they take a step back while laughingly nervously and saying something about not wanting to be analyzed so they should stop talking to me. And once again, I explain that I do not analyze people, I cannot help them or their strange relatives, and I am not opening a practice. Undeterred, strangers and acquaintances alike will offer a friend or family member as a case study, or they will ask if it would be necessary for them to lie on a couch while they talk.

This seems to be a common experience among research psychologists.

Sometimes it's wait staff at restaurants or fellow airline passengers who begin these conversations. After the initial polite "What do you do?" comes a comment about the strange dream they had recently. One waitress recently asked a table of several graduate school colleagues what we were studying, and when we answered "psychology" she began talking about how much fun it would be to be able to analyze people all the time. Air travel has turned into an exercise in patience. When asked, I tell people that I am a graduate student in cognitive psychology, and if the conversation continues I explain that I study memory and learning in large groups of people, not in individuals. That usually works, although occasionally it leads to a conversation about that person's own failing memory and how he or she should participate in a study. But the conversations do not always end that well. One colleague, after telling the woman next to him that he was a graduate student in psychology, spent the better part of a three hour flight listening to her talk about her daughter's bipolar disorder. She finally admitted that she also has bipolar disorder, and then asked what kind of clinical practice he would start. She was quite confused when he explained that he was a research scientist and would not be opening a clinical practice.

This behavior is not confined to strangers or casual acquaintances. Our good friends and family members also commit these sins. One human factors psychologist I know has family members who ask when she will open her therapy practice every time they see her, despite having been told repeatedly what human factors is. Another human factors psychologist was told by his uncle that he should do his dissertation on his family, a not-very-veiled reference to perceived dysfunction. A personality psychologist friend was toasted at his wedding by his wife's sister, who said that the relationship was great because he would be able to spend his life studying someone with a strange personality. When I finished my degree, I received congratulatory emails from friends asking me to write them a prescription or come figure out their students. One friend, with whom I have had multiple conversations about my research interests, told me I should move and start practicing where she lives, because there are a lot of interesting people around.

So why the confusion? Part of the problem is the public perception of psychology, which in general

doesn't seem to be accurate for either researchers or clinicians. People who have not taken any classes in psychology only know about therapists or talk show hosts in the media, hardly a representative sample of psychologists. Even those who have taken a general psychology class that exposed them to different areas of study in psychology probably only remember small portions of that class at best, and that narrow recollection is reinforced by the images presented in the media. For many people, psychology still equals Freud which equals dreams and cigars and "tell me about your mother." The entertainment media generally show psychologists as therapists only, often with no distinction made between clinical psychologists and psychiatrists. Thus, people with no experience with other areas of psychology learn only about therapists and psychological disorders. A research psychologist studying memory, learning, perception, prejudice, or personality is not a character on any television show.

To complicate the picture, fictional psychologist characters offer advice or analyze people as part of a story line. In fact, psychologists in the entertainment media are frequently shown violating several ethical principles by discussing patients outside of sessions or by having inappropriate relationships with them, which makes for good drama or comedy but not a realistic picture of psychologists. Although these situations are rare in the real world, these pervasive images may explain why non-psychologists think we are constantly analyzing them.

Theoretically, there are ways to avoid the dreaded conversation. Unfortunately, most options involve ignoring people or lying to them – not very realistic or polite. So I'm resigned to the fact that those of us who are lucky enough to have a career in research psychology also have the obligation to assert our identity as scientists and chip away at the public's misunderstandings, even if it's just one person at a time. However, I'm tempted sometimes to go with the flow, and let people think I can read their mind or fix their quirky siblings with a few common sense platitudes – wouldn't it be nice to have such super powers! With any luck, an upcoming movie will feature a research psychologist who spends no time analyzing people or acting unethically, making all of my family reunions and airplane trips a little easier.

Got a story like this to tell? Have some helpful hints for dealing with these situations? Email us at apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org. We'll publish the best entries in upcoming issues of the Observer.