

You are a unique individual - just like everyone else

 By [John Laurence](#)

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Here's a quick assessment of your personality:

You are a hardworking person. Others don't always appreciate that about you because you're not able to meet everyone's expectations. But when something really matters to you, you put forth your best effort. No, you're not always successful by conventional measures, but that's okay because you're not someone who sets too much store by what the average person thinks.

You believe certain rules and standard exists for good reason, so you don't go out of your way to defy them, but what you really rely on to guide you is your strong inner compass. You enjoy learning new things, but you don't think all education has to take place in a formal environment or have specific purpose. You would like to do more for the less fortunate but even when you can't, you are caring and considerate in your own way.

Life has dealt you a few harsh blows, but you've pulled through and you intend to keep up your spirits. You know if you stay focused and confident, your efforts will bear fruit.

Sound pretty close?

Parts of this passage are borrowed from Columbia Business School professor, Sheen Inyengar's book, *The Art of Choosing*, where she makes her point that although everyone believes they are unique, we are actually more alike than we think.

The psychologist, Bertram Forer conducted a similar experiment in 1948, where he administered a personality test on students. A week later he deviously provided all of the students with the exact same profile and asked them to rate it on its accuracy. Over the years the test has been replicated many times, and the average rating of how well it applied to each individual hovers around 4.2 out of a maximum of 5.

The Barnum Effect

These statements are called the Barnum Effect after PT Barnum's maxim, "we've got something for everyone." They are often used by mentalists, fortune tellers and clairvoyants to make "accurate" predictions about their subjects. And I've seen them used in marketing research.

Psychographic segmentation is often based on a personality construct with statements such as 'I like a lot of variety in my

life', 'I have more ability than most people' or 'I like trying new things'. These are actual statements from a research questionnaire and they look suspiciously like Barnum Effect statements to me.

Likewise, focus groups (which in my opinion still have value in certain areas if used correctly), can often involve a string of Barnum statements where the respondents eagerly agree with assertions made by the invigilator and marketers walk away satisfied that their presumptions have been validated.

Is your research free of Barnum Effect statements? Sometimes it's better to phrase a question in a way that doesn't result in a self-fulfilling prophecy, and sometimes it's better not to ask a question at all.

ABOUT JOHN LAURENCE

John is MD of HeadSpace Neuromarketing and is an experienced marketer with over 15 years in the marketing and advertising industry. As well as having worked in marketing research, he has headed the marketing divisions of two blue-chip global brands in South Africa and has developed strategy for several well-known brands. Contact him on tel +27(0)83 230 8764 or email john@head-space.biz.

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