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Readers' Forum: Belief in Testing

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Peter Glick and Mark Snyder's article [“Self-fulfilling Prophecy: The Psychology of Belief in Astrology,” May/June 1986] provides an important account of a deep-seated irrational tendency in human reasoning. They describe how people tend to test hypotheses using a *verification strategy*—that is, by seeking information that would support the hypothesis. Such a strategy does not really test the hypothesis since it does not look for—and is thus unlikely to find—disconfirming evidence. This may account for the failure to reject not only astrology but a variety of myths, superstitions, and stereotypes.

The situation may not be quite as bleak as the authors suggest, however. Research shows that under favorable circumstances people do apply a *falsification strategy*—that is, they put hypotheses to a genuine test by trying to falsify them. . . . Moreover, there is evidence that, between grades seven and college, students increasingly understand the limits of the verification strategy and become more likely to use a falsification strategy. . . .

Research does, nevertheless, strongly support Glick and Snyder's conclusion that the inadequate verification strategy is all too common in intelligent adults—even though they are capable of better reasoning. Educators aware of this research are in a better position to facilitate the development of more mature hypothesis testing. And all of us should remind ourselves to actively seek discontinuing evidence—especially when we are testing ideas to which we are emotionally committed. Only thus can we put our own myths and stereotypes to a genuine test.

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