

Some people think astrology is a science – here's why

July 2 2014, by Nick Allum



Your lottery is due, say the zodiac signs on the tarot card. Credit: kvijesh, CC BY-NC-SA

Most people reading this article will have also read their horoscope at least once. Even though scientific studies have never found evidence for the claims astrologers make, some people still think astrology is scientific. We are now beginning to understand why, and people's personalities might have something to do with it.

Astrology columns are widespread and have been around for a surprisingly long time. One of the earliest recorded columnists was 17th century astrologer William Lilly, who was reputed to have [predicted the Great Fire of London](#), albeit 14 years too early.

The idea behind astrology is that stars and planets have some influence on human affairs and terrestrial events. And horoscopes are an astrologer's foretelling of a person's life based on the relative positions of [stars](#) and [planets](#).

These forecasts are regularly read around the world. According to the [Wellcome Trust Monitor Survey](#), 21% of adults in Britain read their horoscopes "often" or "fairly often".

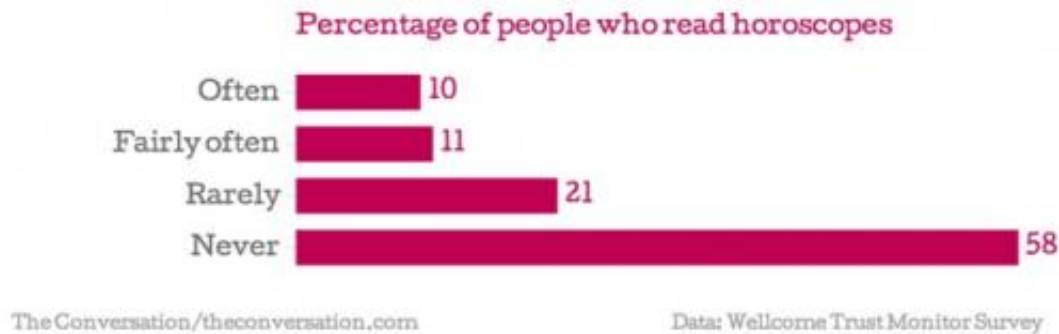
Undoubtedly many people read their horoscopes just for entertainment value, or as a topic for conversation. But some people attach scientific credence to astrological predictions and regard astrology as a valid way of understanding human behaviour. A [surprisingly](#) large [quantity](#) of [scientific research](#) has been carried out to evaluate the claims of astrology over the past 40 years. There is no evidence to support such claims.

It should then be a cause for concern if citizens make important life decisions based on entirely unreliable astrological predictions. For instance, people may decide for or against a potential marriage partner based on astrological sign. This happens [quite often](#) in India. Some may make [rash financial decisions](#) based on predicted good fortune.

Reassuringly, it turns out that the number of people in Britain who think that horoscopes are scientific is small. From the Wellcome Trust Monitor survey, we know that less than 10% think horoscopes are "very" or "quite" scientific. And a [similar proportion](#) thinks the same across the European Union as a whole.

However, if we ask people whether they think astrology is scientific, we see a different picture. In a [Eurobarometer survey](#) of attitudes towards science and technology, a randomly selected half of respondents were asked how scientific they thought astrology was. The other half were asked the same question about horoscopes.

The results shows a surprising disparity in opinion. More than 25% think that astrology is "very scientific" compared to only 7% for horoscopes.



In [research](#) I carried out a few years ago, I tested the hypothesis that people get confused between astrology and astronomy, and it is this that could account for widespread apparent belief in the scientific status of astrology. Even well-respected national newspapers have been known to make [this mistake](#).

My survey also asked people how scientific they believed various activities to be. One of these was astronomy. Using a statistical technique known as regression analysis, I discovered, after adjusting for age, gender and education, that people who were particularly likely to think that astronomy was very scientific were also very likely to think

the same about astrology. This points to semantic confusion about these terms among the general public.

In the same study, I was interested to look at other explanations for why some Europeans think astrology is scientific and others do not. The first explanation I looked at was people's level of education and their knowledge about science.

If one does not have an adequate understanding, it might be difficult to distinguish between science and pseudoscience. So it turns out to be. When taking a wide range of other factors into account, those who have a university degree and who score highly on a quiz tapping scientific knowledge are less likely to think that astrology is scientific.

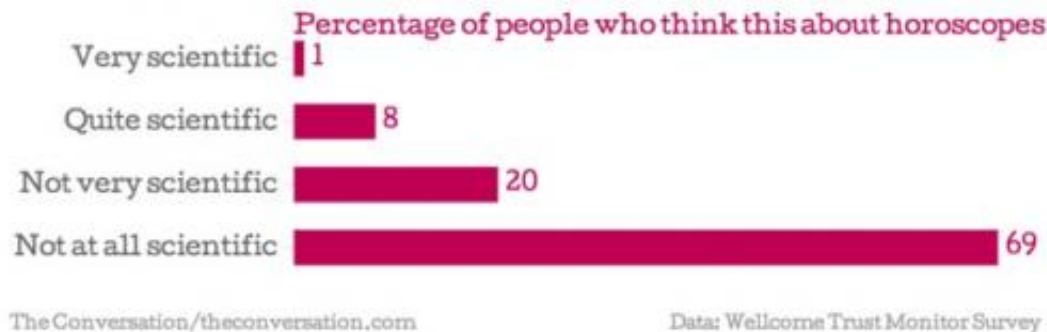
In line with previous studies, women are more likely than men to think astrology is scientific, regardless of their level of education and knowledge about science. Those who believe in God or a "spirit of some kind" are also more likely to find astrology a scientifically credible activity.

Take things as they are

The most interesting result, however, is based on an idea proposed more than 50 years ago by the German sociologist Theodore Adorno. In 1952, Adorno carried out a [study](#) of a Los Angeles Times astrology column. He is witheringly critical of astrology, dubbing it, with the rest of occultism, a "metaphysic of dunces", [suggesting](#) "a climate of semi-erudition is the fertile breeding ground for astrology".

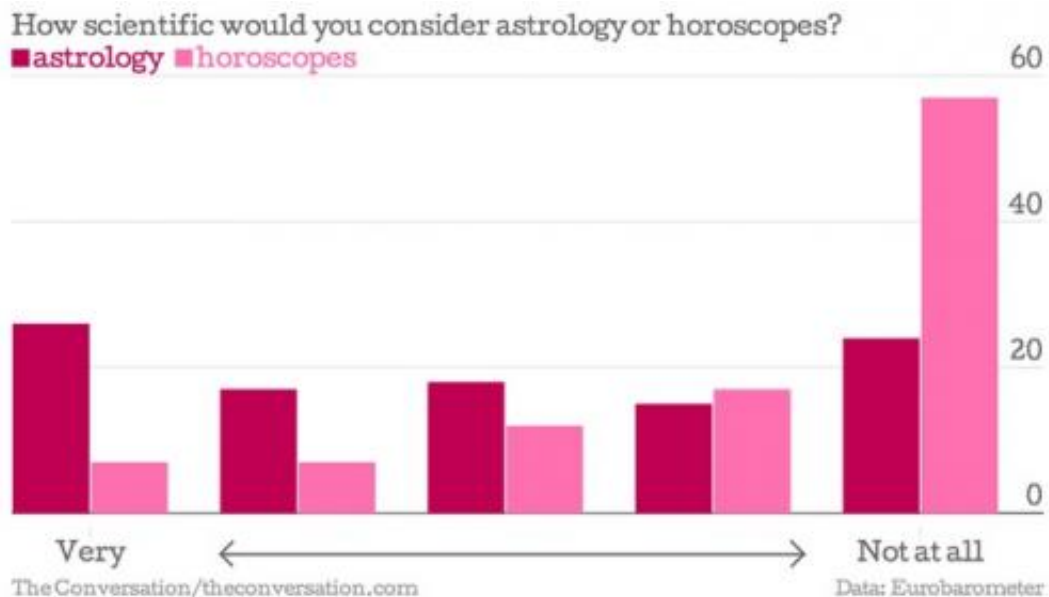
What is particularly interesting, though, is the connection drawn between astrology with authoritarianism, fascism and modern capitalism (remember that this was in the aftermath of WWII and the Holocaust). For Adorno, astrology emphasised conformity and deference to higher

authority of some kind. As some researchers [put it](#): "Take things as they are, since you are fated for them anyway". In short, [Adorno believed](#) that "astrological ideology" resembles "the mentality of the authoritarian personality".



People high on authoritarianism tend to have blind allegiance to conventional beliefs about right and wrong and have high respect for acknowledged authorities. They are also those who are more favourable towards punishing those who do not subscribe to conventional thinking and aggressive towards those who think differently.

If this hypothesis is correct, then we should see that people who value conformity and obedience will be more likely to give credence to the claims of astrology. In the Eurobarometer survey, there was (by chance) a question that asked people how important they thought "obedience" was as a value that children should learn.



I used this question as a rough and ready indicator of whether a survey respondent was more or less authoritarian in their outlook. And, again, I used regression analysis to see if there was a link between people's answers to this question and what they thought about astrology. In line with Adorno's prediction made in 1953, people who attach high importance to obedience as a value (more authoritarian) are indeed more likely to think that astrology is scientific. This is true regardless of people's age, education, science knowledge, gender and political and religious orientations.

So, on one hand, it seems that horoscopes and astrological predictions are, for most people, just a bit of harmless entertainment. On the other, the tendency to be credulous towards astrology is at least partially explained by what people know about science – but also what kind of personality traits they have. And these factors might prove useful in understanding beliefs about a whole range of pseudoscientific fields.

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