

SCIENCE NEWS®

The Weekly Newsmagazine of Science

A Science Service Publication
Volume 138, No. 7, August 18, 1990

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SCIENCE NEWS (ISSN 0036-8423) is published weekly on Saturday, except the last week in December, for \$34.50 for 1 year or \$58.00 for 2 years (foreign postage \$6.00 additional per year) by Science Service, Inc., 1719 N Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. Second-class postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing office. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to SCIENCE NEWS, 231 West Center Street, Marion, OH 43305. Change of address: Four to six weeks' notice is required — old and new addresses, including zip codes, must be provided.

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Editorial and Business Offices:
1719 N St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036
(202-785-2255)

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Subscription Department:
231 West Center St., Marion, OH 43305
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Letters

Deciphering defensiveness

"Defensiveness reaps psychiatric benefits" (SN: 5/19/90, p.309) is, in my view, potentially misleading. Many psychologists now believe that most questionnaire measures of "defensiveness" (including the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Inventory used by Richard Lane and his colleagues) actually measure a personality dimension of neuroticism or negative emotionality characterized by traits such as anxiety, guilt, self-criticality, moodiness, anger, irritability and feelings of alienation from others. These traits also happen to be common symptoms of depression, anxiety disorders and many substance-abuse disorders — the very syndromes found by Lane and colleagues to be more frequent among individuals low in "defensiveness."

According to this alternative explanation, individuals low in self-reported "defensiveness" are accurately reporting symptoms of neuroticism, whereas individuals high in self-reported "defensiveness" are accurately re-

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Cover: A unique collection of chimpanzee skeletons, gathered over the past 30 years by Jane Goodall at Tanzania's Gombe National Park, provides fresh insight into what bones can reveal about a long-dead individual and his or her species. (Photo: Uli Goldschmidt/ courtesy of The Jane Goodall Institute)



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porting the absence of such symptoms. Thus, a more plausible interpretation of Lane's results is that individuals who report that they have little or no psychopathology on a questionnaire in fact have little or no psychopathology — a rather different (and far less interesting) finding than that implied by the title of your article.

Scott Lilienfeld
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Lane found a correlation between a low defensiveness score (indicating a tendency to deny unpleasant personal attributes) on a questionnaire and a history of having been diagnosed for a psychiatric disorder such as depression, anxiety or substance abuse. He interprets this as evidence that defensiveness protects against psychiatric disorders.

Those who have been diagnosed with depression, anxiety or substance abuse are much more likely than the general public to have undergone some form of psychotherapy or

counseling, which usually involves facing one's faults and trying to overcome them. The results of the study are as likely to reflect this training as to indicate the value of defensiveness.

I wonder if the results would still hold if those who had undergone some form of counseling had been omitted from the study.

Steve Premo
Santa Cruz, Calif

Hydrogen hypothesis

In "Interstellar graphite in meteorites" (SN: 5/26/90, p.335), you state, "It remains unclear . . . why graphite is much less abundant than diamond, which should be less stable, in the same meteorite." It occurs to me that the presence of hot, atomic hydrogen during carbon deposition might be the cause, since that tends to etch graphite while stabilizing the growth surface of diamond.

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AUGUST 18, 1990

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