

Anecdotes versus data in public discourse

By Jacques Rousseau July 28, 2017
<https://www.synapses.co.za/anecdotes-data>

“The plural of anecdote is not data” is a phrase well-loved by scientific sceptics. Often attributed to Dr Ben Goldacre, but probably originating with [Raymond Wolfinger](#), the phrase cautions us against the mistake of thinking that what you experience – or what you and your granny or friends experience – might not actually be representative of any significant trend or give you valuable evidence regarding the causal efficacy or role of something you might regard as significant.

In short, we think we spot patterns where there might be no pattern at all, and we ascribe causality quite casually, based on things like temporal proximity (“I took *this* drug yesterday, and *today* I feel better”) and confirmation bias (if you are already sympathetic to a hypothesis, you’ll over-value confirming evidence, and discount contradictory evidence, even if you’re doing so in a biased manner).

So, in contrast to statistical thinking, we often make the mistake of over-valuing intuition, anecdote, and personal experience, because we’re taking intuition, anecdote, and personal experience as evidence of something more *general* -- and for evidence of something more general, we need statistical thinking.

NOTE: This article has been edited for use in PSY 210.