

The Impact of Control on Superstition in Adulthood

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If you were to imagine someone who believed in magical forces, they would most likely resemble a child. However, while magical thinking is overwhelmingly associated with childhood, it continues into adulthood in more covert ways. For example, is there really a difference between the act of a child wishing for something to not happen and an adult attempting for the same outcome by ‘knocking on wood’? Superstitious behaviors like knocking on wood or crossing one’s fingers are common and socially accepted adult behaviors, yet they involve seemingly illogical concepts like magic. This use of superstitions may not be accompanied by strong confidence in their power, but for some reason adults still feel compelled to follow through with them. Research has indicated that, while belief in superstition is positively related to their use, adults who feel a lessened sense of control will gravitate towards superstitious behaviors regardless of their belief in superstitions.

In 2002, Keinan conducted a study with the purpose of uncovering if having the personality trait of a high desire for control amplified participants’ tendencies to perform superstitions in conditions of high or low stress. The participants consisted of university students who were either coming into this study 30 minutes before an exam (high stress) or on a regular day with no exams (low stress). They were then given an interview that contained two types of questions: questions meant to elicit the behavioral superstition of knocking on wood (e.g., “Have you ever been involved in a fatal road accident?”) and questions meant to distract from the real purpose of the study (e.g., “What is your favorite TV program?”). They were also distributed a questionnaire that assessed their desires for control in everyday life and how stressed they were at the time of the study.

The results showed that participants with a high desire for control who were also in the stressful condition were significantly more likely to knock on wood in response to the eliciting

questions compared to those in the low-stress condition who also had a high desire for control. Additionally, this tendency towards superstition was not uncommon. Fifty percent of the participants knocked at least once, and eight percent of the participants who did not physically knock reported having at least a slight urge to do so (Keinan, 2002). These findings suggest that stress, which can threaten perceived levels of control, facilitates the use of superstitious strategies as a means of gaining back control. The prevalence of this behavior also highlights that gaining back control through superstition is not unusual in Western culture. While this research has been influential for future research, due to its conclusions about control being motivation for engaging in superstition, this study did not address how the belief in the superstition contributed into its use.

Case et al. (2004) tackled the goal of determining if the use of a provided superstitious strategy was motivated by belief in its power or a need for control. To do this, two separate studies were conducted. The first study attempted to lower feelings of control through a card-guessing computer game with five probabilities for success (e.g. “7 of the 8 cards are red. Pick a red card.”). The participants consisted of university students who were separated into three conditions. They were told that either a psychic, student, or academic had played the same exact game as they were about to play and that they could choose to use their helper’s previously selected cards instead of guessing themselves. Throughout the game, the participants were not given any feedback about whether or not their helper’s answers were correct. The psychic acted as a superstitious strategy, while the academic and student were incorporated to see if participants would prefer a non-superstitious strategy. They were also given post questionnaires that addressed their belief in magical forces and what they thought of their helper. The second study used a similar procedure and post-questionnaire but substituted the card game for a skill-

determined activity with six levels of difficulty. This time the participants had to estimate the number of asterisks that were randomly distributed on their screen for only .9 seconds.

The results of the first study showed that as the probability of guessing correctly decreased, the use of the psychic's guesses increased. Similarly, the second study found that as the activity's level of difficulty increased, the use of the psychic also increased. In both studies, the belief in the psychic was not related to how much their guesses were used, but the psychic was used significantly more than the student and academic. The psychic was also rated as having a significantly lower status than the student and academic (Case et al., 2004). These results show that belief in magic/superstition and the perceived lower status of it did not influence how often it was used. When the participants felt less control due to the increasing difficulty of the task, they were still more likely to engage with the superstitious strategy compared to the non-superstitious strategy. However, this research is an example of how lack of control in a low-risk activity could affect the use of superstition. Would this still be true if the consequences of the activity were more serious?

Rudski & Edwards (2007) hypothesized that the use of superstition would still increase as the difficulty of a task increased, level of preparation decreased, and perceived importance of the task increased. Their study used university students, who filled out some questionnaires. The main questionnaire listed 27 possible situations of varying type, importance, and difficulty that a university student could find themselves in. It asked how likely they would be to utilize a charm or ritual for each of these scenarios. The types of situations were an exam, dance performance, and athletics game, which can all have varying levels of preparation (e.g., well prepared, moderately prepared, poorly prepared) and importance (e.g., a pre-season scrimmage, a regular season game, and a championship game). They were also asked to indicate if they were an

athlete or dancer, if they had a special object that they used to give them luck, and if they were a superstitious person on a scale of one to ten.

This study's results confirmed the researchers' hypotheses: As difficulty level and importance increased and preparation level decreased, there were more reports that a charm/ritual would be used for all three types of scenarios. Participants who reported that they were athletes were more likely than non-athletes to say that they would use a charm/ritual in athletic events for all levels of importance. However, self-reported dancers were not more likely than non-dancers to say that they would use a charm/ritual in dance events for all levels of importance. This may have occurred because sports are more unpredictable than dance, which caused athletes to want to feel more control for all athletic events. In addition, 43.2 percent of participants reported having a lucky object, and they were more likely to report that they would use a charm/ritual than those who did not have a lucky object. The same was true for participants who reported that they were more superstitious. However, even though participants reported using superstitions, they did not tend to rate them as being effective and instead inferred that they were used more for comfort (Rudski & Edwards, 2007). While this research showed that participants said they would use superstitions for higher-stake events, it is difficult to infer if that would be true due to all the proposed events being hypotheticals in a questionnaire. While some of the participants were athletes and dancers, some did not identify with either label. More data about the superstitions of people who actually practice them would be useful in understanding how they are used.

In 2005, Burger & Lynn studied the use of superstitions for major league baseball players from America and Japan. In the MLB, the best team only wins about 60 percent of the time, so luck and chance make up a good part of the game. It was predicted by the researchers that the

more the players thought luck or chance influenced a game, the more they would use superstitious behavior. The players were given a short questionnaire that first defined a superstitious behavior as “anything you do that you feel might bring good luck during a game” and gave examples of common behaviors like wearing lucky clothes or entering the field in a specific way. It then asked players to list the superstitious behaviors they engaged in, how often they engaged in them, how consistent they believed their impact to be, and how much they believed luck impacted the game.

It was found that 74.3 percent of the players listed at least one superstitious behavior, and 53 percent of the players indicated they used those behaviors every game. The mean score of how much the players believed in their strategies was a 2.37/5, which translates to believing it had somewhat of an impact. The more a player believed that the baseball game was controlled by luck rather than personal control, the more likely they were to use a superstitious behavior and to believe it had an impact. It is suspected that, like suggested in Rudski & Edwards (2007), the players who did not strongly believe that their behavior worked and engaged in it anyway did so for the comfort of it.

The results of all these studies suggest that feeling less control in a given situation can cause adults to be drawn to superstitions in an attempt to gain back some sense of control. For example, in Keinan (2002) it was found that participants who were stressed about an upcoming exam and who had a high desire for control were more likely to knock on wood in response to serious questions about their health and family. Additionally, having a belief in superstition did positively relate to their usage, but it was not necessary. Baseball players in Burger & Lynn (2005) were more likely to believe that their superstition had an effect if they believed an outside, uncontrollable force influenced their games. Similarly, Rudski & Edwards (2005) found

that participants who reported having their own lucky objects were more likely to report they would use charms/rituals in given scenarios. However, there were participants in both of these studies who used superstitious behaviors or objects, yet they did not strongly believe in their power. Case et al. (2004) also found that belief in magical forces had nothing to do with the participants' use of a psychic's guesses for a computer game, and the psychic was the most popular strategy used.

The similar results of these studies suggest that magic in the form of superstition is more common in adults than one might think. In addition, lessening control is all it may take to encourage the use of superstitious behaviors in a person who generally does not believe them. These findings begin to unravel the notion that adults are naturally logical and skeptical about magic, which is more associated with childhood. Future research could investigate if people witnessing a superstitious behavior having a positive effect could convince them that superstitious strategies truly work. For example, what if Case et al. (2004) provided real-time feedback about the answer choices of the psychic? If the psychic was shown to be mostly correct throughout the game, would participant's ratings of their belief in magical forces change before and after the activity? Studies like Burger & Lynn (2005) could be extended through an entire baseball season. If a team won several games in a row, would a baseball player who consistently uses superstitious behaviors rate their behavior as more effective compared to before that string of wins? More research on athletes could also look at how having the comfort of a superstitious behavior might affect athletic performance. If a player does not follow through with their chosen behavior, they may feel less control and perform worse compared to past performance. There are many possible avenues for future research on this topic, given the overlapping evidence of control's effect on the use of behaviors, objects, and strategies relating to superstition.

References

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