



PSYCHO-SOCIAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUPERSTITIOUS BEHAVIOR: LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract:

Most superstition from the past have been proven by science as unnecessary, ineffective or just plain silly but are still practiced by normal intelligent people today. Around the world, there are many reappearing themes for superstition. Every country has its own localized take on each theme. In this article researcher reviews on previous researches. There is much different kind of researches in the field of superstition and there are different theories related to the origin of superstition. Superstition is influenced by different social and psychological factors. In this article those researches have been discussed which through light on social and psychological factors of superstition. Psychological factors like fear, locus of control, confidence level etc. and social factors such as locale, socio-economic status etc.

Keywords:

superstition, superstitious behaviour, superstitious belief, psychological factors, social factors.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Superstitions are normal for our society. Most of the people follow different kind of superstitions. People of different age, different education, different socio-economic status and different culture, caste, creed etc. follow different superstitious rituals. Superstitions rooted deeply in our society. There are many researches have been conducted in this field. In this research paper, researcher try to focus light on some researches related to superstitions.

Different books on superstition have been studied from library and some have been purchased if not available in library.

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

The Serbian word *sujeverje* (*superstition*) originates from the Old-Slavic words: *vsue* – "in vain" and *verje* – "belief". The English word *superstition* is derived from Latin: *super* – "over, above, upon" and *sisto* – "stop, check, cause to stand, set up". The Latin etymology of *superstition* is



difficult to disentangle, however some have claimed the meaning is "the one who over-stands" or "the one who is not progressive." Dictionary definitions of superstition mainly point out the irrationality of this phenomenon, superstitious people's ignorance, and a fear of unknown. There are several definitions on superstition, but researchers agree on the fact that superstitions are beliefs or behaviour that is contrary to rational norms within a specific society. In American Heritage Dictionary definition cited by Kramer and Block (2008), Superstition is defined as "beliefs that are inconsistent with known laws of nature or with – what is generally considered rational in a society."

Superstitions are different for different countries and society. For example, Simmons and Schindler (2002) demonstrate that, in China prices ending with the digit 8 are very common because there is a local belief that number 8 brings luck, prosperity and happiness.

Another definition given by Womack, 1992 is "unusual, repetitive, rigid behaviour that is perceived to have a positive effect by the actor, where as in reality there is no causal link between the behaviour and the outcome of an event." Superstitious rituals differ from a normal routine in that the person gives the action a special magical significance.

There are different theories about the development of superstitious behaviour, given by researchers. But, first reasoning derived by classic work of Skinner (1948, 1953), who discovered that superstitious behaviour can arise through conditioning. Skinner (1948) put pigeons in the so-called Skinner box and gave food at irregular intervals. Hence, it was left to chance as to what kind of behaviour was being reinforced. The results were astonishing. The pigeons kept doing what they did at the moment when the food was administered. For example, a pigeon that had just turned its head continued turning its head; and a pigeon that happened to walk around continued walking around. The behaviour was difficult to unlearn because the reinforcement (i.e., food) was administered at irregular intervals. Skinner (1948) labelled this curious behaviour superstition, arguing that "the bird behaves as if there were a causal relation between its behaviour and the presentation of food" (p. 171). In a later article (Skinner, 1953), he suggested that seeing a causal relationship between behaviour and the "consequences" also could explain the occurrence and maintenance of superstition in humans.

A second, explanation may be derived from Langer and colleagues' (Langer, 1975, 1977; Langer & Roth, 1975) work on illusion of control. Langer stated that, in general, people are inclined to see themselves as a cause, even in situations in which they are not influencing the situation. This explanation holds that people carry out superstitious behaviours in order to influence situations in which, in reality, they have no control. According to Langer, this is especially true in situations in which chances as well as skill play a role. In competitive sports, there is always a mixture of chance as well as skill that determines the outcome of a match. Therefore, in these situations, people will probably be more prone to the illusion of control and superstition.

Research also suggests that people are motivated to rely on superstitious beliefs when their control over an event is undetermined or threatened. Case and colleagues (2004) conducted a



series of studies investigating the relationship between the use of superstitious strategies and perceived control. The consistent finding across these studies was that as the likelihood of failure increased, so did use of superstitious beliefs. Case et al concluded that the more salient feature is, the more people use superstitious strategies to explain the failed outcome.

There are certain studies that regard superstition as an attitude (Saenko, 2005). These authors point out tripartite nature of attitude: like attitude superstition could also be decomposed into its affective, cognitive and behavioural component. The affective component would include diverse emotional states towards objects of superstition such as fear, anxiety, anger, joy, surprise, rapture, etc. The cognitive component would comprise understanding, categorization and anticipating outcomes of events, as well as planning a strategy of how to behave. The behavioural component would consist of different rituals and symbolic activities people perform in order to protect themselves and their loved ones from potentially hazardous incidents, preventing these incidents or facilitating wish fulfilments.

When we look at the progression that normal mental development takes, as individuals mature, we see a gradual trend towards greater accuracy, as well as a greater dependency upon logical principles (Markovits & Vachon, 1989). However, there is one great mystery in our journey of cognitive development which violates an otherwise stable pattern of growth, and that is the advent and application of magical thinking. Magical thinking is a method of thinking, in which one believes that their thoughts words or actions will be able to influence reality in a way that fails to be supported by scientific evidence or causal reasoning. We typically see it employed in the form of superstitions and magical thinking.

Research has suggested that magical thinking developed in children from a very young age and is the primarily mode of thinking about the world for at least the early stages of development (Piaget 1928). Then as children mature and become more cognitively advanced either magical thinking is usurped by more formal logical structure or becomes dormant as more logical methods to thinking are developed.

According to psychoanalytic theory, superstition is a form of magical thinking that is characteristic of the anal stage in Freud's psychosexual stages theory. During that stage (from 18 months to 3 ½ years), the child learns to control his sphincters and suddenly becomes conscious that his mind is powerful: thanks to his willpower, the child can either retain or reject his faeces and as a result, satisfy or disappoint his mother. At this stage of his development, the child feels his mind is very powerful. In adulthood, superstition might reappear in periods of distress through regression as a defence mechanism (Piaget, 1974). The unconscious benefit of this regression is the illusion of an overpowered mind that can control the world.

According to Malinowski (1948), superstitions are used to fight anxiety and distress by filling the psychological gap caused by uncertainty. Superstitious thoughts or behaviours are used as a substitution to instrumental acts that people would have liked to achieve in order to influence the situation. In highly uncertain and uncontrollable situations, such instrumental acts do not exist



and the best thing to do is precisely do nothing, because nothing can be done to control the situation. Modern societies are characterised by their orientation toward action. Our culture enhances the value of actions more than the value of inactions and we have a tendency to think that every problem has a solution as long as we dedicate enough efforts in that situation. Thus, it is very difficult for modern men to remain passive in the face of a stressful situation, because passivity goes against the core values of the society in which we live. Superstitious rituals bring emotional reassurance because they allow us to feel active rather than passive, and because they protect this fundamental need in modern culture: orientation toward action.

In a research paper by C. Sica, C. Novara, E. Sanavio (2002) entitled “Culture and psychopathology: superstition and obsessive-compulsive cognitions and symptoms in a non-clinical Italian sample”, concluded that superstitious behaviour may be a predisposing factor for general instead of specific psychopathology, but that cultural factors may moderate the relation between superstitious behaviour and psychopathology.

In research paper entitled as “It is about believing: superstition and religiosity” by Benno Torgler (2003) the results indicate that socio-demographic and socio-economic variables matter. The results also indicate that there is a certain concurrence between churches and superstitious beliefs. In most of the cases we observe a negative correlation between superstition and attendance of church and other religious activities. Closeness to the churches goes in line with lower superstition. On the other hand, a generally higher perceived religiosity increases superstition. Furthermore there is the tendency that people without a religious denomination have the lowest belief in superstition. Finally, the results indicate that there is a strong variety in superstition among countries.

The research paper “The psychological benefits of superstitious rituals in topsport: A study among top sportspersons” by Michaela C. Scippers and Paul A.M. Van Lange (2006), examining the circumstances under which top-class sportspersons are especially committed to enacting rituals prior to a game (ritual commitment). Consistent with the hypotheses, findings revealed that ritual commitment is greater when (a) uncertainty is high rather than low; and (b) importance of the game is high rather than low. Complementary analyses revealed that the state of psychological tension mediated both effect of importance and uncertainty on ritual commitment. Moreover, players with an external locus of control exhibited greater levels of ritual commitment than did players with an internal locus of control.

Eva Delacroix and Valarie Guillard (2008) in their research paper “Understanding, defining and measuring the trait of superstition” noticed that a superstitious person doesn’t want to think within the bounds of reason. They found that superstition relies on a mistaken causal link between two independent facts. It was an exploratory qualitative study allowed us to define superstition as “beliefs and/or practices that have no religious nor scientific foundations and which lead people to think that certain facts (external events or one’s own actions), or objects can bring good or bad luck, or be signs announcing positive or negative consequences.”



Barbara Stoberock, Lysann Damisch and Thomas Mussweiler , University of Cologne (2010) decided to research the effect of superstitions after watching athletes, including famous athletes, perform meaningless behavior or rituals as part of their athletic routine. They found that it brings positive effect on them by improving their self-confidence. The research was published in “Association of Psychological Science” in as Keep your fingers crossed! How Superstition Improves Performance.

In research paper by Jeffrey M. Rudsky, Ashleigh Edwards (2010) entitled as “Malinowski goes to college: factors influencing student’s use of ritual and superstition” found that college students rated the likelihood of their using charms or rituals for various scenarios involving academic, artistic, and athletic performances. Reports of use of ritual increased as the stakes of the event increased and decreased with perceived expertise or level of preparation. Additional findings included participant’s reporting frequent use of ritual while denying any causal effectiveness.

Kevin R. Abbott and Thomas N. Sherratt of Dept. of Biology of Carleton University in research paper “The evolution of superstition through optimal use of incomplete information”(2011), concluded that while superstitions appear maladaptive, they may be the inevitable result of an adaptive causal learning mechanism that simultaneously reduces the risk of two types of errors: the error of failing to exploit an existing causal relationship and the error of trying to exploit a non-existent causal relationship. Furthermore, we find that both the total number of learning trials available, and the nature of the individual’s uncertainty affect the probability of superstition, but that the nature of these effects depends on the individual’s prior beliefs.

John C. Mowen and Brad Carlson, (2003) studied on “Exploring the antecedents and consumer behavior consequences of the trait of superstition” one of the interesting findings was that the antecedents of superstition include a lower need for learning among older adults, higher levels of sports interest, a belief in fate, and a decreased belief in heaven and hell. In addition the result suggested that the consequences of superstition might include beliefs in astrology, magic, psychokinesis, and existence of fictitious creatures.

3. CONCLUSION

There are several researches in the field of psychology, which study the positive and negative causes and effects of superstition on people. There are several theories proposed by different researchers about the development of superstition. Through this review of researches we can understand how superstitious grows in our behaviour affect us at cognitive level and conative level.

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