

# Social and Psychological factors for Superstition: A Brief Literature Review

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## Abstract:

*The present literature review focused on social and psychological factors associated with superstition. The literature included conceptual definition of superstition, prevalence and its probable underlying factors. It also sheds light upon the pros and cons for adherence with superstitious beliefs. Number of online articles published in peer reviewed journals, book reviews, abstracts, conference proceedings and dissertations were reviewed with a specific focus for psychosocial effects of superstition. The findings revealed that superstitious beliefs are widely spread and there are socio- learning predispositions which lie at backdrop of superstition. Superstition casts negative and positive influences on psychological health of individuals. Overall the paper is a worthy contribution for articulated understanding of phenomenon of superstition and its associated factors which opens horizons for further related and in depth inquiries.*

**Keywords:** Superstition concept, Prevalence, Underlying factors, Pros, Cons.

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## Introduction:

Traces of superstitions can be detected in the fibers of every society. The prevalence of superstitious beliefs can be stretched from old primitive cultures in the form of paranormal, magical and superstitious activities (Jahoda, 1969) to present modern days (Newport & Strausberg, 2001). Superstitions present in different forms which subject to unique set of cultural beliefs and ideals (Ouédraogo & Mullet, 2001). Superstition is an extensively explored topic in psychological research (Malinowski, 1954; Jahoda, 1969; Johnston, de Groot, & Spanos, 1995; Vyse, 1997; Rudski, 2003). The significance of superstition beliefs and its impact on behaviors are wide spread, researches indicated that consumers exhibited superstitious beliefs as mental short cuts which impact upon their purchase behaviors (Carlson, Mowen, & Fang, 2009).

The effects of superstitious beliefs can be witnessed in debit in business in United States which shows loss of \$800 and \$900 millions on 13<sup>th</sup> Friday every year 13th (Ng, Chong, & Du, 2010). Also numerous studies have found that road accidents raised extensively on Friday the 13th (Hughes, 2002; Lewis & Gallagher, 2001; Nayha, 2002). In Taiwan people pay 15 percent more than actual rate for product when it shows number 8 which perceived as lucky digit (Kramer & Block, 2008). Surprisingly in China the association of good luck with number eight can be witnessed; Beijing Olympic Games were held on 8/8/08 (Carlson *et al.*, 2009).

## Statement of the Problem:

To identify the social forces and psychological factors linked with superstition.

## Objectives:

The aims of study were to explore the sociological and psychological factors for prevalence of superstition. To furnish the goals of study several online empirical articles, qualitative surveys published in peer reviewed journals, book reviews, abstracts, conference proceedings, dissertations were reviewed with a specific focus for psychosocial effects of superstition.

## Literature Review:

### Superstition: A Conceptual Framework

Superstitious beliefs noticed in behaviors exhibited by individuals in different life situations hence an articulated concept of superstition is a necessary aspect. Superstition conceptualized as "Any thought or irrational act and illogical fear or dread of something mysterious and fantasy and a doubt or habit that its basis is ignorance or fear, is called superstition." (Jahuda, 1371, p. 5). Other explanations included superstition as behaviors which are perceived to have controlling power for luck and other external forces but they lack operational clarity to perform certain acts (Foster, Weigand, & Baines (2006). Superstition referred as groundless beliefs with lack of justified rationale (Amid, 1365). In American Heritage Dictionary, concept of superstition cited by Kramer and Block (2008) as Incongruence beliefs with are against natural phenomenon but overall considered as logical by the members of particular society. Giner-Sorolla in 1999, defined superstitious acts as superstitions are appraisals for behaviors which involve lack of careful cognitive functions.).

superstition as an attitude which can be understood from affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects. The emotional aspects includes arrays of feelings that ranged from fear, apprehension, to joy and delight towards superstitious laden objects. The cognitive aspect encompasses conceptualization, assimilation and strategic planning of behavior and predicting future outcomes where as the behavioral component comprised of different rituals people engaged to avoid accidents or facilitate their desired outcomes for their own selves or their loved ones (Saenko, 2005).

Levitt (1952) diagnosed some fundamental components of superstition as irrationality, widely acclaimed, exhibited in the acts of person holds superstitious beliefs, faith in extraordinary phenomenon; lack of validity to justify particular superstitious activities and possess a thriving popularity among individuals without control and order. This was affirmed by the study carried out by Foster and Kokkoin 2009, which denoted superstition as errors in cognitive functions.

### Superstition: Prevalence

Superstition prevails in different culture (Carlson *et al.*, 2009) however there is disparity exists for different beliefs in different culture according to its morals, values and religious backgrounds. Lesser (1931) proposed that there exists individual differences for superstitious beliefs and practices also it is subjected to different circumstances.

Pertaining to this notion the prevalence of superstitious beliefs demands careful investigations. Substantial number of scientific inquiries supported the view that females tend to be higher superstitious as compared to males (Blum & Blum, 1974; Buhrmann & Zaugg, 1981; Conklin, 1919). Contrastingly another study proved that male hockey players tend to be more superstitious and be highly engaged in superstitious activities as compare to female hockey players (Neil, Anderson, & Sheppard, 1981). Prior findings showed positive linkage with age and superstitious beliefs (Epstein, 1993) here also disparity exists for age and superstitious beliefs which showed younger individuals tend to be greater superstitious than older adults (Corrigan, Pattison, & Lester, 1980; Gallup & Newport, 1990). Research showed an inverse relationship between education qualification and superstitious beliefs (Blum & Blum, 1974; Otis & Alcock, 1982) where as some inquiries proved no relationship between paranormal beliefs and education (Jahoda, 1968; Salter & Routledge, 1971).

Religiosity is another variable of interest has been investigated with superstitious beliefs. Different findings affirmed relationship among superstitious, paranormal beliefs and religiosity (Beck & Miller, 2001; MacDonald, 1995; Orenstein, 2002; Tobacyk & Milford, 1983). In investigation carried out by Beck and Miller (2001) revealed positive relationship between religiosity and supernatural beliefs however highly religious individuals with emotionally traumatic encounters in their previous years showed a decline in superstitious beliefs. However findings of study carried out by Orenstein (2002) showed no linkages for religious involvements and paranormal beliefs.

Numerous studies resonate that religiosity has been correlated with the occurrence of superstitious and paranormal beliefs (Beck & Miller, 2001; MacDonald, 1995; Orenstein, 2002; Tobacyk & Milford, 1983). Various superstitious beliefs are strongly associated with religious rituals. Castro (1995) found that during a solar eclipse, pregnant women were believed to be in danger of having a baby with a craniofacial cleft. It is stated that during an eclipse, all temples should be closed, and once the eclipse has passed, purification prayers should be administered.

Besides demographic factors of age, gender, educational levels and religiosity, findings proved that superstitious beliefs showed higher linkages with emotional problems Orenstein (2002); diminished cognitive abilities (Musch & Ehrenberg, 2002) and irrational beliefs of individuals (Tobacyk & Milford, 1983). Study showed greater level of superstition among individuals with low I.Q levels, lower rate of incomes and higher suggestibility (Zapf, 1945).

### **Superstition: Underlying Factors**

In order to inquire the major cause for involvement in superstition, a careful attention is needed to unleash the psychosocial factors involved in sustaining and maintaining the superstitious beliefs among the members of society. Humans are active participants of society and they learn the beliefs and attitudes from society (Bord and Faulkner, 1975). Electronic, print and social media lie at heart of molding superstitious beliefs in any society. An earlier research showed that beliefs systems involved subjective culture in which human awareness influenced by mass media, cultural scripts and educational institutes (Kelly and Ronan, 1987).

In society superstitions flowed via social contacts (Swanson, 1971). Learning plays an important role for superstition. Research suggests that intermittent rewards plays an important role to stabilize superstitious activities among individuals (Sjoberg & Wahlberg, 2002). The operant condition holds a view that causal linkages of behaviors with rewarding or punishing factors responsible for display of superstitious behaviors (Skinner, 1948; Wagner & Morris, 1987); The cognitive learning model proposed that superstitious behaviors resulting from desire to understand the world around us. We tend to engage in superstitious acts and adopt such beliefs in order to understand the complex and unfamiliar events around us (Keinan, 2002; Carlson *et al.*, 2009). Another underlying facets for superstition explained by Jahoda (1969) which asserted that individuals adopt superstition in order to mitigate the anxiety levels which sprout from uncertain situations. Superstitious acts provide a sense of mastery and serve as a defense strategy to control uncertainty of situations.

### **Superstition: Pros and Cons**

The positive and negative aspects of superstition have been documented in literature. Findings suggested that it is hard to determine superstitious behaviors because people feel embarrassment to endorse such behaviors (Van Raalte, Brewer, Nemeroff, & Linder, 1991; Vyse, 1997). It was also found that people don't admit the superstitions and engage in private because of apprehension for negative social evaluations (Vyse, 1997). Study conducted by James & Wells (2002) concluded that Superstitious beliefs can produce detrimental effects on immune system and level of stress and a greater level of health anxiety.

Research showed that we tend to engage in superstition under circumstances which are represented by stress, uncertainty and lack of control (Case, Fitness, Cairns, & Stevenson, 2004; Malinowski, 1954; Keinan, 1994; Rudski & Edwards, 2007; Vyse, 1997). It was investigated that people are aware that superstitious thoughts lack rationality (Pronin, Wegner, McCarthy, & Rodriguez, 2006; Risen & Gilovich, 2007). They tend to engage in such behaviors out of the perception that it might be beneficial (Jahoda, 2007; Killeen, 1977).

In games, athletes players showed a greater adherence to superstitious beliefs prior to the game when they perceive play is important but lack certainty. Schippers & Van Lange, 2006). An earlier finding by Padgett and Jorgenson (1982) showed that positive linkages between magical thinking and economic threats among individuals of Germany between two world wars. On the other side of coin Keinan (1994/ 2002) noted positive effects of superstition as engagement in superstition and magical thinking assist individuals in stress reduction, an inflated optimism and self-fulfilling prophecy this likely to contribute in task performance. Like wise (Matute, 1994) concluded the superstition prevent people to engage in learned helplessness in situations that signal lack of control and aids in control for decline in level of performances. Other positive effects of Superstition noted by researchers included as superstition serve as anti anxiety and mitigate stress in situations that involve lack of clarity (Irwin, 2000; Jahoda, 1969).

Numerous researchers affirmed that superstition act as a coping strategy for the Victims with childhood traumatic encounters (French & Kerman, 1996; Irwin, 1992; Lawrence, Edwards, Barraclough, Church, & Hetherington, 1995; Ross & Joshi, 1992). Similarly engagement in superstition results into boost in confidence levels, overcome anxiety and ambiguity among athlete players (Dunleavy & Miracle, 1979; Neil, 1980; Neil *et al.*, 1981; Womack, 1979). Also (Day & Maltby, 2003) declared that the superstition is linked with lowered depression and anxiety levels and an affirmative linkage was achieved for belief in good luck and hope (Scheier & Carver, 1985; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Similarly another earlier finding prescribed the notion that superstition provides a way for illusions that one possesses mastery to control situation and this illusionary control is linked with psychological benefits (Langer, 1975).

Theoretical underpinning of Stanovich and West (2002) suggested two decision-making systems provide gravity to aforementioned findings for psychological effects of superstition among individuals. The cognitive decision making system comprised of rational system and experiential system. Rational system based upon logical and systematic processing of information whereas experiential system based upon intuition and emotional processing of information. Superstition believed to be influenced by intuitive thought processes and individuals involved in actions without endorsement of rational justifications, As indicated by the findings which showed that people engage in superstitious acts to minimize anxiety, boost self-esteem and to gain other positive psychological gains (Neil 1980; Womack 1979).

### Conclusion:

The present paper aspired a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of superstition. It explored different scientific and conceptual definition of superstition. Superstitions are appraisals for behaviors which involve lack of careful cognitive functions (Giner- Sorolla, 1999). Game theory supposed the idea that Superstition are not erroneous acts rather some superstitious behaviors influence by rational suppositions (Fudenberg & Levine ,2006) significance of Friday 13<sup>th</sup> for stock marketing (Kolb & Rodriguez 1987; Lucey 2001. Demographic correlates, psychological and social factors linked with superstition behaviors explored in research articles were also analyzed. Findings suggested that Superstition contributes to overall improved psychological health of individuals (Scheier & Carver, 1985; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

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