



Superstitions and Mental Retardation

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ABSTRACT

Superstitions are widely prevalent across all societies worldwide. The aim of the following paper is to describe the concept of a superstition and then discuss the various common general superstitions prevalent along with those pertinent to autism and mental retardation. These superstitions often delay intervention in many cases leading to delays in recovery and a wide range of false beliefs. The paper gives us an overview of how superstitions and false beliefs exists in our minds with regard to mental retardation

KEYWORDS : superstitions, mental retardation.

INTRODUCTION

Definition of a Superstition

A Superstition is the irrational belief that future events are influenced by specific behaviors, without having a causal relationship.

Common superstitions from around the world

Examples of superstitions vary greatly from one country to another –

- An example of a superstition that is commonly believed by the public is astrology.
- A gambler may credit a winning streak in poker to a lucky rabbit's foot or to sitting in a certain chair, rather than to skill or to the law of averages.
- In Afghanistan it is said that if you see a magpie sitting on a wall, a message will be coming for you.
- In India it is considered bad luck if someone sneezes while you are leaving your house. The remedy is to come back into the house and wait for a few hours before leaving.
- In the Tampa, Florida area it has long been believed alligator sightings cause athlete's foot.
- In China people say that one should not sweep or dust on New Year's Day lest good fortune also be swept away.
- In Italy there is the fear of the 17 instead of the 13 or the 4. It comes from Ancient Rome, where 17 was written as XVII, which can be re-arranged as VIXI in the meaning of "I have lived", so "I'm dead".
- An accidental burn on the left ring finger means one is soon to be engaged.
- Brides on their wedding day often do not see their groom until the ceremony, believing that to do so causes bad luck.
- Some people turn back from a journey if a black cat crosses their path, although, some countries, such as Britain, believe it is lucky to see a black cat. An alleged cause for this would be that Emperor Napoleon saw a black cat just before a lost battle against the British. This would explain black cat being seen as a bad sign in France (and Continental Europe) and as a good one in Great Britain.
- Among African Americans it is considered unlucky to sweep someone with a broom while cleaning the house.
- Many believe that if you can blow out all of the candles on your birthday cake with one breath while making a silent wish, your wish will come true. In addition, many people believe that if you cause the knife to touch the bottom of your birthday cake while making the first cut in the cake, your wish will not come true.
- Tetraphobia (the fear of the number 4) is widespread in Japan, China, and Korea; the number's use is minimized or avoided where possible. This is because the word for 4, shi, is homophonous with the word for death. Mobile numbers with 4 in them sell for less and some buildings even skip the level four, labeling it the 5th floor instead. However, there is another word for four in Japan that does not also mean death: yon. In Korea, number '4' is pronounced as 'sa(사 四)' and is homonymous with 'death(사 死)'. Some, but not all, Korean buildings have the fourth floor written as 'F' floor.
- Triskaidekaphobia, the fear of the number 13, is common among

those of European descent.

- Baseball superstitions are numerous.
- Some believe that if you see a magpie, you must salute it with the words "Hello Mr. magpie, how's your wife and family?" or bad luck will follow, unless you see two magpies, which is good luck.
- It is also a common belief that breaking a mirror will bring seven years of ill fortune.
- Some believe that walking under a ladder will bring bad luck.
- Opening an umbrella inside the house is purported to bring bad luck.
- Entering a house left leg first is sometimes thought to bring bad luck.
- In Western America it is supposed that if one holds one's breath from the start of a tunnel to the end of it, one may make a silent wish.
- In some countries an owl is a bad omen; in others it is a good sign because owls make their sounds when a dangerous animal is near.
- Some people believe that if you give someone a handbag as a gift, you must place a coin in the handbag, otherwise the handbag will bring the recipient bad luck.
- Some people believe that it will bring bad luck if you give someone a knife as a gift, and to avoid the bad luck the recipient should exchange the knife for some money (even if it is just one coin), so that "technically" they "bought" the knife, rather than received it as a gift.
- In theatre and drama it is considered bad luck to say "Good luck" on opening night. "Break a leg" is substituted.
- When producing the play Macbeth, it is considered bad luck to say the title and main character's name. Whenever one needs to mention the play's title it is appropriate to refer to it as "The Scottish Play" instead.
- In the Middle East (notably Egypt), some people believe that cutting the air with scissors brings about animosity.
- In many parts of Europe, "Break a leg" is substituted with the regional colloquialism for excrement. This is a tradition that dates back to times when horses were the primary means of travel, either directly or by carriage. When a spectacle had been well reviewed or advertised, there would be many horses in front of the theatre, and thus copious amounts of horse excrement.
- It is a common superstition that using a red lighter is bad luck.

Academic and cultural viewpoints

In the academic discipline of folkloristics the term "superstition" is used to denote any folk belief expressed in if/then (with an optional "unless" clause) format. If you break a mirror, then you will have seven years of bad luck unless you throw all of the pieces into a body of running water. In this usage, the term is not pejorative. Superstitions are based on general, culturally variable beliefs in a supernatural "reality". Depending on a given culture's belief set, its superstitions may relate to things that are not fully understood or known, such as cemeteries, animals, demons, a devil, deceased ancestors, the weather, gambling, sports, food, holidays, occupations, excessive scrupulosity, death, luck, and/or Spirits. Urban legends are also sometimes classed as superstition, especially if the moral of the legend is to justify fears about

socially alien people or conditions.

Superstition and religion

Superstition, as of today's understanding, is thought to derive from the both meanings of Latin 'superstes' composed on super (over, beyond), -sto (to stand):

- one who attends, can witness
- one who survives

The 'superstitio' was the gift of narrating events as if one had attended and survived them. This capability of the 'superstitious' was associated with divination, which when not performed by a regular augur, was held in contempt as charlatanism. As a result, the superstitio became synonymous with "despicable religious beliefs", as antithetic with 'religio', the accepted official or traditional religion.

Thus, the English word "superstition" as understood from its original Latin meaning, implies a religion-like belief that stands outside the bounds of clerical religion. In modern English, the term "superstition" is also used to refer to folkloric belief systems, often with the intention of casting negative, derogatory, or belittling scorn upon another culture's concept of the spiritual world. In keeping with the Latin etymology of the word, religious believers have often seen other religions as superstition. Likewise, atheists, agnostics, deists, and skeptics regard religious belief as superstition. From the broadest perspective, all religion is a form of superstition. Religious practices are most likely to be labelled "superstitious" by outsiders when they include belief in extraordinary events, supernatural interventions, apparitions or the efficacy of charms, incantations, the meaningfulness of omens, and prognostications.

Greek and Roman pagans, who modeled their relations with the gods on political and social terms scorned the man who constantly trembled with fear at the thought of the gods, as a slave feared a cruel and capricious master. "Such fear of the gods was what the Romans meant by 'superstition'." For Christians just such fears might be worn proudly as a name: Desdemona. The Roman Catholic Church considers superstition to be sinful in the sense that it denotes a lack of trust in the divine providence of God and, as such, is a violation of the first of the Ten Commandments. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states superstition "in some sense represents a perverse excess of religion"

The Catechism clearly dispels commonly held preconceptions or misunderstandings about Catholic doctrine relating to superstitious practices: Superstition is a deviation of religious feeling and of the practices this feeling imposes. It can even affect the worship we offer the true God, e.g., when one attributes an importance in some way magical to certain practices otherwise lawful or necessary. To attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand is to fall into superstition.

Superstition and magic

Superstitions differ from magic spells in that the former are generally passive if/then constructs while the latter contain formulae, recipes, petitions, prayers, and enchantments for effecting future outcomes by means of supernatural, symbolic, and perhaps non-causal activities. People who otherwise accept scientific de-mystification of the supernatural world and do not consider themselves to be occultists or practitioners of magic, still may consider that it is "better to be safe than be sorry" and observe or transmit some or many of the superstitions endemic to their cultures.

The Concept of Belief

People have slaughtered each other in wars, inquisitions, and political actions for centuries and still kill each other over beliefs in religions, political ideologies, and philosophies. These belief-systems, when stated as propositions, may appear mystical, and genuine to the naive, but when confronted with a testable bases from reason and experiment, they fail miserably. It is maintained that beliefs create more social problems than they solve and that beliefs, and especially those elevated to faith, produce the most destructive potential to the future of humankind.

Throughout history, humankind has paid reverence to beliefs and

mystical thinking. Organized religion has played the most significant role in the support and propagation of beliefs and faith. This has resulted in an acceptance of beliefs in general. Regardless of how one may reject religion, religious support of supernatural events gives credence to other superstitions in general and the support of faith (belief without evidence), mysticism, and miracles. Most scientists, politicians, philosophers, and even atheists support the notion that some forms of belief provide a valuable means to establish "truth" as long as it contains the backing of data and facts. Belief has long become a socially acceptable form of thinking in science as well as religion. Indeed, once a proposition turns to belief, it automatically undermines opposition to itself. Dostoyevsky warned us that those who reject religion "will end by drenching the earth in blood." But this represents a belief in-itself. Our history has shown that the blood letting has occurred mostly as a result of religions or other belief-systems, not from the people who reject them.

Relative to the history of life, human languages have existed on the earth for only a few thousand years, a flash of an instant compared to the millions of years of evolution. (Estimates for the beginnings of language range from 40,000 to 200,000 years ago). It should come to no surprise that language takes time to develop into a useful means of communication. As in all information systems, errors can easily creep into the system, especially at the beginning of its development. It should not come to any wonder that our language and thought processes may contain errors, delusions and beliefs. It would behoove us to find and attempt to deal with these errors and become aware of their dangers.

The ability to predict the future successfully provides humans with the means to survive. No other animal species has a capacity to think, remember, imagine, and forecast to the degree of Homo sapiens. To replace our thoughts with intransigent beliefs belies the very nature of the very creative thinking process which keeps us alive.

Very little evidence has yet appeared about how belief arose in humans. As social animals, we probably have always held beliefs to some degree. Studies of our closest DNA relatives, the apes, have suggested that primate social animals require both followers and leaders. The followers must assume the codes of conduct of their leaders if they wish to live without social conflict. Since there always occur more followers than leaders, the property of accepting the leaders without challenge and the introduction of language may have led human primates towards the expression of beliefs.

Many early societies believed in spirits and animism, the belief that animals and inanimate objects possess a spirit. Indeed, the Latin word, anima, means soul. The word "spirit" also derives from the Latin word for breath. No doubt ignorance about the nature of wind, breath and movement of animals led them to construct an "explanation" about things in their world. How could they possibly know the difference between beliefs, facts, and evidence?

With language came the contemplation and study of thoughtful systems. Socrates and Plato introduced beliefs of "forms" of things existing independently of their physical examples. The measurements in the world represented superficial representations of an underlying and absolute "reality." Aristotle carried the concept further but placed these forms to physical objects as "essences." He posited the existence of a soul and introduced the concept of an immovable mover (God) to justify matter which moves through the "heavens." These ghostly concepts live today, not only in religion, but in our language. Many times we express essence ideas without thinking about them because they exist in the very structure of common communication derived from ancient philosophers. Since no one can see or measure these essences, the only way to comprehend them comes in the form of belief. Sadly, people still accept these essences as "real" based on nothing but faith without ever investigating whether they exist or not.

Unfortunately, the usual practice of thinking involves the combination of beliefs with theory and factual knowledge (see the right chart). Most people tend to believe in what they think of as facts and knowledge, including perhaps the most rational people of all-- scientists and philosophers. A hypothesis or a theory may lead a scientist to strongly believe their theories, the verification of test results may lead them to have faith in the results, and an established fact may lead some scien-

tists to dogmatically hold to its verification (even if later evidence contradicts it). Thus even a scientist can attach beliefs to theories, faith to verification and dogma to facts. Although scientists rarely approach intransigence (although some do), they usually believe in their data and theories and most philosophers believe in their philosophies. However, consider that every scientific fact can stand on the evidence alone. Nature occurs without human beliefs and so does reliable evidence. There simply exists no apparent necessity for attaching beliefs to knowledge.

Consider the following: regardless of how strongly one has attached beliefs to scientific facts, no matter how religious the disposition of a scientist, there has never appeared a single workable theory or scientific fact that required the concept of a god or superstitious idea. Not a single workable mathematical equation contains a symbol for a "creator." There occurs not the slightest evidence for ghosts in our machines or in our bodies. Even the most ardent non-believers can live their lives in complete accord with nature and live as long as the most fanatical believer.

Beliefs and faiths represent a type of mental activity that produces an unnecessary and dangerous false sense of trust and wrongful information (thinking coupled with the feeling of 'truth'). Faith rarely agrees with the world around us. History has shown that beliefs and faith, of the most intransigent kind, have served as the trigger for tragic violence and destruction and sustained the ignorance of people. Replacing beliefs with predictive thoughts based on experience and evidence provide a means to eliminate intransigence and dangerous superstitious thought.

Beliefs and faiths do not establish "truths" or facts. It does not matter how many people believe or for how many centuries they have believed it. It does not matter how reverent or important people think of them, if it does not agree with evidence, then it simply cannot have any validity to the outside world. All things we know about the world, we can express without referring to a belief. Even at its most benign level, beliefs can act as barriers to further understanding.

CULTURAL ORIENTATIONS TOWARDS MENTAL RETARDATION

Culture as a research tool has come under criticism in recent years. Post modernism has made it difficult for culture to remain uniform. Culture is a conceptual tool and it varies between place to place often even between home and school. It as a conceptual tool opens up possibilities, uncovers artifacts and predicts potential tensions (9). There are a number of cultural and religious attitudes towards mental retardation in India that are common across states. Some of these are described herewith –

Karma and Punarjanam

Many people believe that mentally retarded children are God's gift given as a result of the sins of a past life and reflect the core Hindu belief in reincarnation or rebirth. The person who is mentally retarded or someone in his family often believes that these are lessons from a previous life that must be learned in present life. They also believe that mental retardation in the family is a means of atonement for sins committed in past life. The person having mental retardation in the family is often thought of providing opportunities to others to learn those lessons. The views with regard to birth, sin and morality have been previously demonstrated in an anthropological research study across India (10). It is often regarded as a sign of prior sin to be ugly, deformed or handicapped.

'SUFFERING THROUGH' –

There is often an extensive Indian belief that mentions 'those that do wrong must suffer'. Suffering often does not have a negative connotation. It is often regarded by many as a learning opportunity. It gives one a chance to learn the lessons that could release oneself from rebirth. Release from rebirth is often a goal for many Hindus in India. This release means that one has learned life's lessons and that one's eternal spirit becomes forever united with the divine essence or God. There is a fair degree of fatalism in the Indian philosophical psyche. Disability for many people in India is often thought of as irrevocable as the cause is supernatural (10). This achievement of release of rebirth through suffering seen as an educational process is termed as 'moksha'.

'SLOW BRAIN' OR 'MUNDH BUDDHI' –

In Hindi the term mental retardation is often translated as 'mundh bud-

dhi'. There is often non consistent view about the meaning of the term though. Many believe that it refers to slow brain or slow intellect. Some people also perceive that as someone having bad desires. They feel that the person with mundh buddhi had wanted and pursued something that is unhealthy, sinful and dangerous. Thus there is often a wide variation the meaning attributed to the concept of mental retardation among Indian people.

In India the concept of intelligence involves philosophical questions and is not easily comprehensible within the framework of the pure empiricist approach of mainstream psychology and the concepts are just not easily translatable into the prevailing western categories.

Paranormal, superstitious and magical beliefs have been found in varying proportions across cultures for thousands of years now (11). These beliefs and superstitions exists nevertheless even in today's modern world (12). There has been long enough speculations over the origins of such beliefs with no detailed theories and proofs ensuing (13). A number of psychological correlates regarding the same have been noted including poor psychosocial adjustment, lack of self efficacy, high trait anxiety, field dependence and suggestibility along with dissociative experiences. Gender differences have also emerged with women showing a higher number of superstitious beliefs than men (14-18).

Many authors have suggested that paranormal and superstitious beliefs may arise in individuals who are anxious and with a strong need for control in a need to overcome perceived uncertainty in their surroundings. These beliefs may also arise as a coping mechanism to seek relief from childhood traumatic experiences (19-20). This theory has been supported by theoretical developments in the cognitive and emotional aspects of anxiety that suggest anxiety playing a central role in certain negative emotions. Childhood experiences of diminished control at the same time may lead to anxiety in individuals (21-22). Beliefs in certain superstitions may be more adaptive than mal-adaptive while the positive effects of such beliefs have been stressed by certain authors (23).

According to Vyse (1997), the fallibility of human reason is the greatest single source of superstitious belief. A working definition however within modern society has been that superstition is 'a belief that a given action can bring good luck or bad luck when there is no rational or generally acceptable grounds for such a belief' (24). As suggested before it is seen that most people have half beliefs. They are generally rational and do not believe in superstitions. In times of crisis and helplessness, however they use superstition as a means of gaining control over themselves and their surroundings (25).

The psychological dimensions of optimism and pessimism have been the topic of a substantial amount of research (26-27). Optimistic individuals are categorized as having positive expectations and perceptions on life. Optimists also believe the future holds desirable outcomes. In contrast, pessimistic individuals tend to represent a negative bias towards life because the future is undesirable. Optimism has been linked to both psychological and physical well-being. Of vital importance is the idea that activities are greatly affected by beliefs about the probable outcomes of those actions. This topic has had a long history of relevance in the psychological theories of motivation (28-29). It has been found optimism to be positively correlated with religiosity, while pessimism was negatively related to religiosity. Pessimism was found to be a predictor of superstitious belief (30).

Locus of control (LOC) is the degree to which people report a sense of personal control. Locus of control has been dichotomized as internal or external (31). An internal LOC believes an event occurs as a product of his/her own behavior. External LOC believes that an event is the product of chance, luck, or the influence of other people. In a related vein, personal control has been defined as an individual's belief that events and outcomes in one's life result from one's own actions (32). A study found the more psychology students believed their actions allowed them to take some control over chance events, the more likely they were to exhibit superstitious behavior. An earlier study found a positive relationship between an external locus of control and belief in self-oriented superstitions (33). In contrast, it was found in a study of undergraduate students than an internal locus of control was related to stronger beliefs in superstitions (34). Superstitious behaviors have been used to reduce anxiety, build confidence, and cope with uncertainty (35). Superstitions are utilized to give the illusion of control over

reinforcement in an uncontrollable situation (36). Superstitious behaviors and rituals are thought to reduce anxiety and create a sense of control in a high-stress, uncertain situation.

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