

Current view of the traditional superstitions in general population of Podlaskie province. Preliminary study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Superstition is a form of fear. It is also a sign of ignorance. People who succeed keep open minds and are not afraid of anything.

Purpose: The assessment of the current view to traditional superstitions

Material and methods: The study group included 350 persons age 20-80 years. Participants were randomly selected among residents of Podlaskie province. Data were collected on a questionnaire that was developed by researchers.

Results: Most of the respondents (83.2%) agreed with the statement that the great importance for the development of human nature is the zodiac sign. Almost all (91.2%) read their horoscopes in newspapers. According to 81.6% of the respondents,

they believe that some dates, specific days of the week, and certain numbers bring bad luck. Half of the respondents believed in telepathy, 33.4% in possession by the devil, 74.8% in astrology, and 28% in magic.

Conclusions: Among the respondents, believing in superstitions is quite common and diverse. The majority of respondents believe that the zodiac sign influences human nature. Most of the respondents believe that some dates, specific days of the week, and certain numbers bring bad luck. Interestingly, the respondents rarely use the advice of fortune-tellers.

Key words: adults, superstitions, zodiac sign

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INTRODUCTION

Superstition is a belief in a non-physical (i.e., supernatural) causality – that one event causes another without any physical process linking the two events. It is also commonly applied to beliefs and practices surrounding luck, prophecy, and spiritual beings, particularly the belief that future events can be foretold by specific, unrelated prior events [1].

There are many superstitions in the world based on religion, old stories, legends, and personal experience. Such superstitions may influence people's behavior in various social situations. Currently, superstition is applied to conceptions without foundation in, or in contravention of, scientific reasoning and knowledge [2].

In the past superstitions referred to religion and legends. Moreover, modern superstitions usually seek a rational basis using the interpretation of the current state of knowledge.

There are four species of superstitions: 1) Improper worship of the true God; 2) Idolatry; 3) Divination; and 4) Vain observances, which include magic and occult arts [3].

In many cultures, there are amulets that have the power to protect from disease and evil [4]. Presently, many people believe that precious stones and plants, especially root of mandrake, can bring happiness [5].

Superstitious behavior that arises through the incorrect assignment of cause and effect receives considerable attention in psychology [2,6] and medicine [7,8], which typically frame superstitions as irrational mistakes in cognition.

Superstitions play a central role in many small-scale societies, and indeed remain prevalent in the popular culture of all societies [9].

There are three kinds of superstitious behavior. The first kind of superstitious behavior was demonstrated in situations in which frequent reinforcer deliveries were independent of behavior [10]. In these studies, a single response-independent schedule was rarely used from the start of the experiment. The second kind of superstitious behavior was demonstrated using concurrent schedules of reinforcement, in which two or more spatially distinct responses were maintained by independent schedules. The third kind of superstition involves stimulus control. When the availability of response-dependent reinforcement is differentially correlated with selected stimuli, organisms respond differentially in the presence of those stimuli. Differential responding also occurs when a reinforcer does not depend on the stimulus even though it depends on responses [11].

Ono investigated the superstitious behavior of humans, and, in particular, idiosyncratic and

stereotyped superstitious behavior in twenty undergraduate students. They were exposed to single response-independent schedules of reinforce presentation, fixed-time or variable-time, each with values of 30 and 60s. The results were positive, in that idiosyncratic and stereotyped superstitious behavior was produced in human subjects by response-independent schedules.

To our knowledge, no study about superstitions has been conducted in Podlaskie province. The aim of the present study is to assess the attitudes of residents of Podlaskie province towards superstitions.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present study included 350 persons. The participants of the study were random people selected from the general Podlaskie province population. For the purpose of this study, a questionnaire was constructed. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part consisted of questions regarding age, gender, place of residence, and religion. The second part was composed of 13 questions relating to the following items: importance of the zodiac signs, significance of the special objects and talismans; dates and days of the week; horoscope reading in newspapers, SMS, and online; taking advice from fortune-tellers and clairvoyants; taking into account the indications of horoscopes; belief in telepathy; possession by the devil; astrology; impact of the position of stars and planets on human life; magic and Tarot. They were also asked about the use of witch doctor's advice and knowledge of the places where these witch doctors perform cures. Respondents were asked to list the known superstitions for high school graduates or students, Christmas Eve, marriage, pregnancy, and infant or baby. From 480 respondents, 350 (72.9%) questionnaires were returned. The descriptive research approach was employed in this study. This investigation was conducted in the period between January 2010 and November 2010.

RESULTS

Of the respondents, 36.8% lived in the country and 63.2% lived in the city. Ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 80 years. Mean age was 48.85 ± 11.39 . Eighty-four percent were women and 16% were men.

The vast majorities of the respondents were Catholic (83.2%). Only 11.2% were Orthodox Christian, Muslim (1.2%), Judaism (0.4%), Lutheran (0.4%) or identified as Jehovah (0.4%), and 3.2% were atheists.

Most of the respondents (83.2%) did not have an opinion that the zodiac sign has an influence on the development of human nature. Only 6.4% agreed with the above statement and 10.4% did not agree. Similarly, the majority of participants (82%) did not have an opinion that some objects and talismans bring happiness. Only 7.2% agreed with the above statement and 10.8% did not agree.

Of the respondents, 81.6% were convinced that there are certain dates and days of the week that bring bad luck. Twelve percent had an opposite opinion and 6.4% did not have an opinion on this matter.

The majority of the respondents (91.2%) read their horoscopes in newspapers and 4.8% do not read them. Almost all, 99.6%, do not read SMS advices. The majority of respondents, 94.4%, have never experienced fairies, divination, and clairvoyant. Very few participants (1.6%) experienced them several times; and 4% only experienced them once.

The same percentage of people (50%) believed and did not believe in telepathy. More than half, 66.4%, of the respondents doubted possession by the devil and 33.4% expressed an opposite opinion. Only 28% of participants believed in magic. Thirty-two percent of respondents were convinced about the accuracy of Tarot predictions, and 68% had an opposite opinion.

Respondents mentioned most often known superstitions were "breaking a mirror portends seven-year woes" (93.3%); "a four-leaf clover brings good luck" (98%); and "possession of a horseshoe brings good luck" (95%).

Very few respondents knew of the superstition, "Raising flowers lying on the road, it takes disease of their previous owners." Respondents showed knowledge of many superstitions. Details are shown in Table 1.

Participants reported most often known superstitions were "cross your fingers" (90%); and "you must have something red at graduate" (83.4%). More details are presented in Table 2.

Respondents provided eight superstitions about Christmas Eve. The most famous (83.4%) and respected Christmas Eve superstition (66.6%) was "you must eat or taste all the Christmas foods." Most of the respondents (73.4%) believed that on Christmas Eve, no one should borrow anything from another person, or the person will suffer shortages next year. During Christmas Eve, you must be smiling and kind to others. It is considered to guarantee good relationships with your family next year. Details are shown in Table 3.

Respondents reported thirteen superstitions about weddings and the wedding ceremony. The majority of the respondents (86.7%) were convinced that the month of the wedding ceremony is very important. Stumbling during the wedding

ceremony is considered bad luck. Most of the participants (73.4%) reported that the bride's wedding outfit should include something new, which is a symbol of prosperity in marriage; something old, a symbol of support from family and old friends; something white, the symbol of purity and innocence; something blue, a symbol of faithfulness; and something borrowed, the symbol of kindness. Details are shown in Table 4.

More than half of the participants (63.4%) reported that touching the abdomen of a pregnant woman brings happiness. Similarly, 63.4% of the respondents believed that pregnant women should not walk under a rope. Half of the participants were convinced that "if a pregnant woman seeks something from you, give it to her." Details are presented in Table 5.

Respondents indicated five superstitions associated with newborns or babies. The majority of the respondents (60%) believed that if the baby stroller is not red, then a red ribbon should be tied to it. Details are shown in Table 6.

DISCUSSION

Superstitions and myths have been and are still present in daily life since they are part of our culture. They are often uncritically accepted automatically without much thought for their authenticity. In the present study, the participants reported many different wedding, Christmas, and baby superstitions and myths. In Poland many people are superstitious about the number 13, especially of Friday the 13th, black cats, or breaking mirrors. There are many wedding myths and superstitions, and most are based on events or omens that are said to foretell either good luck or bad luck. Some myths have both positive and negative connotations. Like all superstitions, wedding myths have no scientific basis; however, it never hurts to keep them in mind just in case. New research shows that believing in, say, the power of a good luck charm can actually help improve performance in certain situations, even though the charm and event are not logically linked [7,9].

The superstitions influence people's behaviour in various social situations. For example, in Japan the mean number of discharged patients was highest on Taian (a lucky day) and lowest on Butsumetsu (an unlucky day) [7].

A belief in Friday the 13th as an ill-fated day is deeply rooted in the population [8,9]. Furthermore, within Britain itself there are regional superstitions [12]. In Somerset, whoever turns a bed on Friday turns ships at sea. In various regions, to call a doctor on a Friday is held to be a certain omen of death for the patient. Hair and nails should never be cut on a Friday. Being superstitious correlates significantly with obsessive thoughts and

Table 1. General superstitions reported the respondents.

General superstitions	Percentage of persons			
	known		respected	
	yes	no	yes	no
If you pick up flowers lying on the road, you will get any diseases of their previous owners.	38.7%	61.3%	29%	71%
Do not pour boiling water into an empty glass or cup. It might bring bad luck.	46.9%	53.1%	40.6%	59.4%
When you see a chimney sweep, you have to grab one of your buttons.	86.7%	13.3%	73.4%	26.6%
Knocking on wood.	90%	10%	83.3%	16.7%
Do not give your hand to someone across a threshold.	86.7%	13.3%	74.2%	25.8%
Do not pass under a ladder or between the “legs” of road signs and billboards.	80%	20%	66.6%	33.4%
Breaking a mirror portends seven years of woes.	93.3%	6.7%	90%	10%
It’s bad luck if a black cat crosses one’s path.	88.6%	13.4%	80%	20%
If you stumble while going through a doorway, you should turn around because your journey is doomed.	56.2%	43.8%	53.2%	46.8%
Appendicitis may be caused by the ingestion of seeds of fruits.	37.5%	62.5%	10%	90%
Friday the 13 th is a day for bad luck.	90%	10%	70%	30%
In the home of someone who is deceased, the stools should be tipped over and the mirrors must be covered.	76.6%	23.4%	60%	40%
Do not get married in May.	60%	40%	50%	50%
Unmarried woman should not sit on the corner of the table.	90%	10%	80%	20%
Possession of a horseshoe brings good luck.	95%	5%	95%	5%
A four-leaf clover brings good luck.	98%	2%	95%	5%

Table 2. Exam superstitions.

Exam Superstitions	Percentage of persons			
	known		respected	
	yes	no	yes	no
It is considered to be bad luck to cut your hair before an exam.	80%	20%	60%	40%
You must wear red on an exam day. It is considered good luck.	83.4%	16.6%	70%	30%
Wearing the same shirt every day for all the days of an exam is considered good luck.	42%	58%	36.6%	63.4%
You must bend the last card in the student grade book . If you do not do it, you have not completed the study.	46.6%	53.4%	33.4%	66.6%
You must set up the cover of the student grade book after the first year of study. If you do not do it, you do not complete the study.	36.6%	63.4%	33.4%	66.6%
Kicking ass. It is considered good luck.	80%	20%	60%	40%
Cross your fingers.	90%	10%	90%	10%

Table 3. Christmas Eve superstitions reported by the respondents.

Christmas Eve Superstitions	Percentage of persons			
	known		respected	
	yes	yes	yes	yes
During Christmas Eve, you must be smiling and kind to others, so that you will have good relationships with your family in the coming year.	70%	30%	66.6%	33.4%
Do not sew anything or repair anything; otherwise, you will perform many repairs during the next year.	40%	60%	36.6%	63.4%
During Christmas Eve dinner, you should eat all the foods or try them; otherwise, you won't have any of those foods in the coming year.	83.4%	16.6%	66.6%	33.4%
You cannot get sick; otherwise, you will suffer next year.	53.4%	46.6%	40%	60%
Do not cry on this day or you will be upset and unhappy in the coming year.	46.6%	53.4%	30%	70%
Under each plate, you should place a coin. This will guarantee your financial prosperity.	56.6%	43.4%	43.4%	56.6%
You should not talk too much and interrupt others, or you will be very argumentative.	26.6%	73.4%	26.6%	73.4%
At a Christmas Eve dinner, the number of people at the table should be even; otherwise, you invite bad luck.	30%	70%	20%	80%

Table 4. Wedding superstitions reported by the respondents.

Wedding superstitions	Percentage of persons			
	known		respected	
	yes	yes	yes	no
The month in which the wedding ceremony will take place should contain the letter 'r.'	86.7%	13.3%	66.6%	33.4%
The happiest wedding date is Christmas.	40%	60%	40%	60%
The bride's wedding outfit should include something new (a symbol of prosperity in marriage), something old (a symbol of support from family and old friends), something white (the symbol of purity and innocence), something blue (a symbol of faithfulness), and something borrowed (the symbol of the kindness of a new family).	73.4%	26.6%	73.4%	26.6%
The shoes of the bride should cover her feet. Visible toes or heels bring bad luck.	40%	60%	36.6%	63.4%
Wearing pearls: This superstition holds that pearls represent future tears; thus, wearing them will bring many tears and much heartache in the marriage.	60%	40%	56.7%	43.3%
Rain on the wedding day means that a bride will cry throughout her marriage.	76.6%	23.4%	73.4%	26.6%
It is bad luck to see the bride in her wedding gown before the wedding ceremony.	63.3%	36.6%	60%	40%
The couple should not try on their wedding rings prior to the wedding ceremony. It is considered bad luck.	50%	50%	50%	50%
A bride should put a penny in her shoe. It is considered good luck.	50%	50%	46.3%	53.7
If a groom hides a paper bill in his pocket, it will bring future prosperity.	53.4%	46.6%	53.4%	46.6%
Stumbling during the wedding ceremony is considered bad luck.	86.7%	13.3%	50%	50%
One year after the wedding, a wedding flowers should be burned.	40%	60%	36.6%	63.4%
Dropping the wedding ring: whoever drops the ring will be the first to die.	53.4%	46.6%	50%	50%

Table 5. Pregnancy superstitions reported by the respondents.

Pregnancy Superstitions	Percentage of persons			
	known		respected	
	yes	yes	yes	yes
For the first three months of pregnancy, a pregnant woman should not reveal to anyone that she is pregnant.	36.7%	63.3%	33.3%	66.6%
Pregnant women should not walk under a rope since it could pose the risk of umbilical cord entanglement around the baby's neck	63.4%	36.6%	53.3%	46.7%
A pregnant woman should not look at sick people or else her child will be born sick.	40%	60%	36.7%	63.3%
A pregnant woman should not look through a keyhole or else her child will be born with strabismus.	46.6%	53.4%	40%	60%
A pregnant woman must not eat pickles or else her milk will be sour.	30%	70%	23.4%	76.6%
A pregnant woman cannot look at the moon or else her child will be born hairless.	33.4%	66.6%	23.4%	76.6%
A pregnant woman should not look at the sun or else her child will be born crying.	43.4%	56.6%	36.6%	63.4%
If a pregnant woman seeks something from you, give it to her. If you do not, your eye will be sick or mice will bite your clothes.	56.7%	43.3%	50%	50%
Auburn hair coloring during pregnancy means that the baby will be born a redhead.	46.7%	53.3%	33.4%	66.6%
If a pregnant woman craves spicy food then she will have a boy. If she craves sweet food then she will have a girl.	43.4%	56.6%	33.4%	66.6%
Do not cut hair during pregnancy or else it shortens the life of the child.	40%	60%	30%	70%
A pregnant woman should not share food with anyone because then she will not have milk for her baby.	33.3%	66.6%	26.6%	73.3%
A pregnant woman should not sit cross-legged or else her child will be born with crooked legs.	33.3%	66.6%	26.6%	73.3%
Touching the abdomen of a pregnant woman brings happiness.	63.4%	36.6%	63.4%	36.6%
Heartburn during pregnancy means that the baby will be born with lots of hair.	53.4%	46.6%	50%	50%

Table 6. Newborn and baby superstitions.

Newborns and babies	Percentage of persons			
	known		respected	
	yes	yes	yes	yes
If the baby stroller is not red, then a red ribbon should be tied to it, which aims to drive away evil spirits and the charms (such as bad eyesight and bad luck).	60%	40%	53.4%	46.6%
Do not go out with baby for a walk until he/she has been christened.	36.6%	63.4%	26.6%	73.4%
Do not dangle the stroller or crib baby because your baby will have stomachache.	30%	70%	20%	80%
Do not look at a sleeping child because you take a dream.	23.4%	76.6%	23.4%	76.6%
To ensure happiness of your baby, you need to keep his/hers christening handkerchief.	23.4%	76.6%	23.4%	76.6%

compulsive checking experienced by people with obsessive-compulsive disorder [12,13].

People often become superstitious when faced with unknown and stressful situations, possibly explaining why athletes and students are often superstitious.

Sculd et al. [8] analyzed the extent to which moon phases, zodiac signs, and Friday the 13th influence blood loss, emergency frequency, and intestinal perforations by evaluating the operation records of all 27,914 consecutive patients between August 2001 and August 2010. Dates of surgery were allocated to lunar phases and to zodiac signs, as well as to Friday the 13th. Scientific analysis did not support the belief that moon phases, zodiac signs, or Friday 13th influenced surgical blood loss and emergency frequency.

In the present study, 70% of the respondents respected Friday the 13th. More than 10% of the German population believes in a relationship between lunar phase and diseases [14]. Furthermore, nearly half, 43%, of health professionals believe that lunar effects can affect human individual behavior [15,16]. In our study, people also believed in lunar effects on human health.

People who are superstitious see a causal relation between their own thoughts or actions and events in the world. People cannot tolerate uncertainty or believe that they have no control over events; they lead us to believe that we can influence outcomes [14].

Optimism is positively and pessimism is negatively related to religiosity, and pessimism is also positively related to superstitious belief [17]. We did not analyze incidence pessimism and optimism among the respondents. In our report, most of the respondents were religious persons. However, we did not analyze this factor.

Despite progress in the practice of modern medicine and science, prescientific opinions continue to intrude into contemporary thought. Superstition may be one of these vestigial organs whose incongruous presence has continued well beyond its time. Cultural anthropology suggests that such irrationalities tend to cluster around the uncontrollable elements that jeopardize our well-being. These beliefs provide us with a sense of understanding and control that otherwise may not exist [18].

Many drivers share deep rooted mystical and superstitious attitudes that may lead to systematic errors in the appraisal of risks and possible causes of road traffic accidents. Superstition was positively correlated with the number of self-reported accidents the drivers had been involved in and the number of accidents they had witnessed [19].

Many people rely on superstitious thoughts and practices in their daily routines in order to gain

good luck. Little is known about the consequences and potential benefits of such superstitions. Damisch et al. [20] demonstrated benefits of superstitions and identifying their underlying psychological mechanisms. Experiments showed that activating good-luck-related superstitions via a common saying or action (e.g., "break a leg" or keeping one's fingers crossed) improved subsequent performance in golfing, motor dexterity, memory, and anagram games.

In a Chinese's report, [21] postgraduate education students completed a questionnaire measuring superstitious beliefs and self-efficacy (General Perceived Self-efficacy Scale). Higher scores on the belief in superstition were associated with lower rated self-efficacy.

It has been suggested that superstitious beliefs may develop in anxious individuals with a strong need for control, in an attempt to overcome perceived uncertainty in their surroundings [22] or as a coping mechanism following traumatic childhood experiences [23].

In our study, the majority of the participants respected the importance of the zodiac sign in their life. The CBOS report from 2006 showed that 58% of the poles do read horoscopes. Our findings are comparable with the CBOS report that some objects, talismans bring happiness. Almost one-fourth of the CBOS respondents believed in talismans.

The present study has several limitations that will be reviewed in future studies. The greatest limit of the research is the small size of the sample – the validity of the conclusions drawn up to this point would certainly be increased with a larger sample. A second limitation is the lack of psychometric scales, i.e., Personality Questionnaire and Self-Rating Anxiety Scale. A third limitation is the lack of age, gender, education, and job.

CONCLUSIONS

1. In the studied population, belief in superstitions is quite common and diverse.
2. Most respondents believed that the zodiac sign has influence on human nature and that certain dates, days of the week, and numbers bring bad luck.
3. The respondents rarely used any advice from fortune tellers.

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