

When seeing IS believing

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New research published in the journal *Science* explains why individuals seek to find and impose order on an unruly world through superstition, rituals and conspiratorial explanations by linking a loss of control to individual perceptions. The research finds that a quest for structure or understanding leads people to trick themselves into seeing and believing connections that simply don't exist.

The research was done by Adam Galinsky, the Morris and Alice Kaplan Professor of Ethics and Decision in Management at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., in collaboration with lead author Jennifer Whitson, an assistant professor at the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin. Through a series of six experiments, the researchers showed that individuals who lacked control were more likely to see images that did not exist, perceive conspiracies, and develop superstitions.

"The less control people have over their lives, the more likely they are to try and regain control through mental gymnastics," said Galinsky.

"Feelings of control are so important to people that a lack of control is inherently threatening. While some misperceptions can be bad or lead one astray, they're extremely common and most likely satisfy a deep and enduring psychological need."

The Need for Control

According to Whitson, that psychological need is for control, and the ability to minimize uncertainty and predict beneficial courses of action.

In situations where one has little control, the researchers proposed that an individual may believe that mysterious, unseen mechanisms are secretly at work. To test their theory, the researchers created a number of situations characterized by lack of control and then measured whether people saw a variety of illusory patterns.

For example, in one experiment individuals were asked to look at "snowy" pictures. Half of the pictures were grainy patterns of random dots, while the other half also contained images like a chair, a boat, or the planet Saturn, that were faintly visible against the grainy background. While all people correctly identified 95 percent of the hidden images, the group of people who had felt their control had been eroded in a previous part of the experiment also "saw" images in 43 percent of the pictures that were just random scatterings of dots.

"People see false patterns in all types of data, imagining trends in stock markets, seeing faces in static, and detecting conspiracies between acquaintances. This suggests that lacking control leads to a visceral need for order – even imaginary order," said Whitson.

Explaining Superstitions

To better understand superstitions, Whitson and Galinsky asked a group of individuals to write about situations they had experienced. Half of them recalled situations in which they had control, while the other half detailed paralyzing instances of a loss of control, like car accidents caused by others or illnesses to friends or family. Following the exercise, all participants read short stories in which significant outcomes, like getting an idea approved at a business meeting, were preceded by unrelated behaviors, such as stomping one's feet three times before entering a meeting. Participants who had initially written about a situation in which they had no control expressed greater belief in a superstitious connection to the story's outcome, and were more fearful of

what would happen if the superstitious behavior wasn't properly repeated in the future.

While foot stomping or lucky socks are quirky and usually harmless, the participants in the experiment whose feelings of control had been diminished were more likely to perceive more sinister conspiracies lurking beneath the surface of innocuous situations. For example, when reading about an employee who was passed over for a promotion, the powerless participants tended to believe that private conversations between co-workers and the boss were to blame.

Restoring a Sense of Control

To test whether individuals with diminished power can restore control and realign their perceptions, the researchers asked participants to rate how strongly they believed in certain values (like aesthetic beauty or valuing scientific theory and research). They then asked participants to write about situations in which they were helpless or lacked control. To restore feelings of control afterwards, some participants were asked to elaborate on the values they had rated as important. As a comparison, other participants were asked to elaborate on the value they held in lowest esteem.

The results were clear: participants who didn't have an opportunity to regain feelings of control were more likely to perceive visual images that didn't exist and to perceive conspiracies in innocent situations, while participants who regained feelings of control by focusing on important personal values were no different from people who never lost their feelings of self-control in the first place.

"It's exciting - restoring people's sense of control normalized their perceptions and behavior," said Galinsky.

Source: Manning Selvage & Lee

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