

New research project offers insight into superstitious behavior

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People who believe that fate and chance control their lives are more likely to be superstitious -- but when faced with death they are likely to abandon superstition altogether, according to a recent Kansas State University undergraduate research project.

The project, led by Scott Fluke, a May 2010 K-State bachelor's graduate in psychology, Olathe, focuses on [personality traits](#) that lead to superstition. Fluke received a \$500 Doreen Shanteau Undergraduate Research Fellowship in 2009 to work with the team of Russell Webster, graduate student in psychology, Shorewood, Ill., and Donald Saucier, K-State associate professor of psychology.

For the project, "Re-Examining the Form and Function of Superstition," the team defined superstition as the belief in a casual relationship between an action, object, or ritual and an unrelated outcome. Such superstitious behavior can include actions like wearing a lucky jersey or using good luck charms.

After performing two studies, the researchers developed three reasons for superstitious behavior: individuals use superstitions to gain control over uncertainty; to decrease feelings of [helplessness](#); and because it is easier to rely on superstition instead of [coping strategies](#).

"People sometimes fall back on their superstitions as a handicap," Saucier said. "It's a parachute they think will help them out."

In the first study, the researchers conducted questionnaires with 200 undergraduates, asking about how pessimistic they were, whether they believed in chance or fate, if they liked to be in control and other questions. One of the major discoveries was that people who believe that chance and fate control their lives are more likely to be superstitious.

In the second study the researchers wanted to know how participants reacted to death, and asked them to write about how they felt about their own death. The team was surprised to find that participants' levels of superstition went down when they thought about their own death, which the researchers attributed to death being a situation of extreme uncertainty.

"We theorized that when people thought about death, they would behave more superstitiously in an effort to gain a sense of control over it," Fluke said. "What we didn't expect was that thinking about death would make people feel helpless -- like they cannot control it -- and that this would actually reduce their superstitious belief."

Fluke got the idea for his research in an undergraduate methods research course his first semester at K-State, when he realized there were many unanswered questions about psychology and superstition. He decided to pursue the topic further as a research project.

"I was interested in superstition because it frustrates me when people do things that don't make sense," Fluke said. "It boggled me that people would use a good luck charm to do well on a test rather than studying for it. We wanted to know why people would go about almost actively hurting themselves."

The research is part of Saucier's overall research program, and the team is now preparing results of their study for publication.

Saucier offers some tips to avoid superstitious behavior:

- Don't believe in bad luck and take some ownership over what control you do have in situations. Sometimes we use bad luck to let ourselves off the hook, Saucier said, but we should instead focus on what we can do to avoid difficult situations in the first place.
- Be decisive and proactive. People who are less decisive believe in [superstition](#) more, Saucier said, and those who are proactive are less superstitious.
- Don't be in a situation where you have to rely on bad luck. Bad luck would never occur if only good things happened. If something bad happens and you call it bad luck, do it as a coping mechanism after the fact rather than before the event, Saucier said.

Provided by Kansas State University

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