

Study shows loss of control leads to paranormal beliefs

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(Medical Xpress) -- People who felt a lack of control in their lives were more likely to believe in the claimed “psychic abilities” of a famous octopus, a University of Queensland (UQ) study has found.

Paul the Octopus gained notoriety during the 2010 soccer World Cup for correctly “predicting” the winner of all games in the competition.

The eight-armed “psychic” was the subject of Dr Katharine Greenaway's experiment involving 40 participants.

Dr Greenaway said half of the participants were induced to feel a sense of high control and the other half to feel in low control.

“We did this by having half the people recall and write about an incident in their lives over which they had no control and having the other half recall and write about an incident over which they had control,” Dr Greenaway said.

Participants were then asked to indicate the extent to which they thought Paul would have made all those correct decisions based on chance alone.

She said 40 per cent of people in the low-control category believed the octopus had psychic abilities.

Only five per cent of people with a condition of high control were believers.

“The people with a low sense of control believed Paul must have precognitive ability – in other words, the ability to predict the future,” Dr Greenaway said.

“It seems that belief in precognition is one way that people can ‘trick’ themselves to feeling in control in situations they have no control over.”

Dr Greenaway said it had been known for a long time that control was important to people, but her research provided insights into the lengths people would go to maintain the feeling of control in their lives.

“The bottom line is that people don't like feeling out of control, so they go through a series of psychological ‘gymnastics’ to help maintain the perception that they are in control of their lives - and it seems to work,” she said.

Dr Greenaway also looked at how "in control" people felt when in a threatening situation – such as being exposed to terrorism or the global financial crisis.

She found that when people felt low in control in these threatening contexts they were more likely to become hostile and prejudiced towards other people — particularly foreigners.

“This research highlights how when people feel threatened and out of control they take it out on others in an effort to make themselves feel better,” she said.

The findings showed that loss of control had a profound psychological impact that caused people to change their individual beliefs and orientations towards others.

Provided by University of Queensland

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