

Repetitious, time-intensive magical rituals considered more effective, study shows

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Even in this modern age of science, people are likely to find logic in supernatural rituals that require a high degree of time and effort, according to new research from The University of Texas at Austin.

The study, published in the June issue of *Cognition*, is the first psychological analysis of how people of various [cultures](#) evaluate the efficacy of ritual beliefs. The findings provide new insight into [cognitive](#) reasoning processes — and how people intuitively make sense out of the unknown.

"One of the most remarkable characteristics of human cognition is the capacity to use supernatural reasoning to explain the world around us," said Cristine Legare, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at The University of Texas at Austin. "We argue that the characteristics of ritual are the product of an evolved cognitive system."

Cause-and-effect thinking is critical to human survival, Legare said. So it's natural for people to find [logic](#) in supernatural rituals that emphasize repetition and procedural steps. If doing something once has some effect, then repeating it must have a greater effect. For example, if a mechanic says he inspected something five times, the frequency of his actions leads the customer to overestimate the effectiveness of his work.

To find out how people rate the effectiveness of magical rituals, Legare and graduate student André Souza conducted a study in Brazil, a country suffused with rituals called *simpatias*. Used for solving problems as

varied as quitting smoking, curing asthma and warding off bad luck, simpatias are formulaic rituals that involve various steps and repetition.

The psychologists presented 162 Brazilian respondents several versions of these rituals. Each was modified with different characteristics, such as repetition of procedures, number of steps, number of items used, and the presence of religious icons.

As part of the study, Legare asked the respondents to rate the effectiveness of each ritual. According to the findings, three elements of the simpatias had the biggest influence: number of steps, repetition of procedures and a specified time.

To see how magical rituals are perceived across cultures, the researchers conducted the same study with 68 U.S. respondents of various religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. As the researchers expected, the majority of respondents didn't believe in simpatias. Yet similar to the Brazilians, they were more inclined to believe in rituals involving numerous repetitions and steps. For example, they gave a higher rating for this sadness-curing ritual, which involves numerous steps and repetitions.

In a metal container, put the leaves of a white rose. After that, set fire to the leaves. Get the remaining ash from the leaves and put it in a small plastic bag. Take the small plastic bag and leave it at a crossroad. Repeat the procedure for seven days in a row.

Though simpatias are primarily practiced in Brazil, magical rituals and other superstitions are widely accepted in the United States. Findings from the study provide further insight into how people find logic in the supernatural, regardless of concrete evidence.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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