

A Correlational Study Between Neuroticism Trait and Superstition

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between superstitions and the personality traits of an individual in the city of Mumbai, Maharashtra population. 300 individuals completed two tests, one based on common superstitions found in the city and the other Big Five Personality Test. The samples were collected between the age group of 18-50 years. Out of 300 samples collected, 232 samples showed high correlation between neuroticism and the level of superstitions. This research was conducted in order to provide support to the case studies where the relation between superstitions and neuroticism was observed. It is observed that beliefs in superstitions is a byproduct of the over emotionality and irrationality inherent in neuroticism. Superstitions are also related with magic, black magic parapsychology, religious beliefs, and spirituality. In this sense the present study offers a bridge between neuroticism and the social marginality hypothesis of superstitious beliefs.

Keywords: *Superstitions, Neuroticism, Beliefs*

Superstition is a behaviour which does not have a transparent technical function within the execution of skill, yet it is believed to regulate luck and other external factors. Superstitions are not only inconsistent with the known laws of nature but they are also in opposition to the rational thoughts. There is a very fine line between superstitions and religious beliefs of the individuals. Superstitions are followed by individuals due to their internal fear whereas religion is believed by individuals because of their faith in God. Superstitious individuals have faith in luck, ghosts, evil spirits, omens, supernatural powers etc. and they have a perception that these powers govern their success and failures. Most of the ancient beliefs are argued nowadays as being superstitious which individuals follow blindly for the fear of being cursed or harmed by powers or God. Therefore, it's hard to form out the boundaries of superstition and it's a belief which is irrational and mysterious or a bent to realize privilege from the supernatural powers. Various researchers have put forth their theories about the development of superstitious behaviour. Skinner in 1953 suggested that a causal relationship between behaviour and the "consequences" is a possible

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explanation for the occurrence and superstition in humans. Another explanation could also be derived from Langer's work on illusion of control. Langer stated that, people are inclined to see themselves as a cause, even in situations in which they are not influencing the situation. This explanation holds that people carry out superstitious behaviour in order to influence situations in which, in reality, they have no control.

Superstitions are also part of various cultures, such as in Chinese culture it is the number four that is considered to be unlucky. Whereas in Mexico and Latin America, it isn't Friday the 13th that's unlucky, but Tuesday the 13th. In Western cultures, three is the magic number — everything from the Holy Trinity to three little pigs, tends to be organized in threes. Even though global structures and motifs of superstitions can be very similar, cultural meanings and resonances can be very different. Sometimes superstitions are also related with the term magic. Magic is a concept that uses charms or spells to have supernatural control over natural forces. The definition of magic within the western tradition is distinct from religious or scientific modes; however, such distinctions of magic are subject to wide controversy. Magic includes Practices such as divination, astrology, incantations, alchemy, sorcery, spirit mediation, and necromancy. Magic helps to acquire knowledge, power, love, or wealth; to heal or ward off illness or danger; to guarantee productivity or success; to cause harm to an enemy; to reveal information; to induce spiritual transformation; or to entertain. A distinction is also made between "black" magic, used for wicked purposes, and "white" magic, used for beneficial purposes. People tend to relate superstitions with parapsychology. Parapsychology can be defined as the scientific and comprehensive study of out of the ordinary events linked with human experience that indicate the strict subjective/objective antagonism that may not be quite so clear as once thought. Phenomenon like astrology, alchemy, vampire, witchcraft, aliens, paganism, etc. are not encompassed in the field of parapsychology.

People with lowered capacity for critical thinking, less skilled logical reasoning and lower IQ's tend to believe in superstitions and irrational ideas. It is also seen that higher the level of superstition, higher the trait of conservatism and trait anxiety and lower the level of self-efficacy and external locus of control in the individual. In athletic population, superstitions proved to be fruitful as it is found to increase performance at both the physical as well as cognitive level of the sportsperson.

The big five personality traits are often abbreviated as OCEAN namely: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism. The broad domain of human behaviour is represented by these five traits which are responsible for differences that we see in humans in both decision making and personality. The statements in the test help to determine where the individual sits on a particular domain of the personality.

Openness to experience: People with this trait are known for their willingness to try out new things and always think out of the box. They are known for their wild imagination, insightfulness, curiosity and originality.

Conscientiousness: It is concerned with the aspiration to be careful, meticulous, and to regulate immediate gratification with self-discipline. Traits include commitment, determination, constancy and reliability.

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Extraversion: People with this trait have the capacity to initiate conversations with others and make social interactions easily and pleasantly. They prefer being with other individuals unlike the introverts. Traits include being approachable, lively, dynamic and confident.

Agreeableness: This trait measures the degree to which an individual interacts with others with compassion and cooperation. Traits include delicacy, tenderness, empathy and fidelity.

Neuroticism: Neuroticism, one of the traits of the Big Five Personality has been found to correlate with superstitions. Lower degree of neuroticism corresponds to emotional stability whereas higher degree of neuroticism is related to emotional instability. Disproportionate worrying and anxiety are exhibited by a neurotic personality. Neurotic people experience jealousy and become envious of other individuals when they feel that the other individual might exceed their level of excellence. Robert McCrae and Paul Costa described how individuals with high level of neuroticism subsist themselves during stressful situations: they tend to use inappropriate coping responses like hostile reactions because they are forced to deal more often with uncontrollable emotion. They may adopt irrational beliefs like self-blame because these beliefs are cognitively consistent with negative feelings they experience. Neuroticism appears to include not only negative affect, but also the disturbed thoughts and behaviour that accompany emotional distress.

METHODOLOGY

Aim: This is a pilot research which hypothesizes that individuals with high neuroticism personality trait are more superstitious. Since the prevalence of superstitions in India is increasing day by day there is a need to study the cause of it.

Methods: This pilot research consists of two tests namely The Big Five Personality Test and Beliefs in Extreme Superstitions Test (BEST). BEST is a 30-item questionnaire on superstitions that measures the extent and level of superstitions existent in the city of Mumbai, Maharashtra population. A total of 30 statements expressing various superstitions underlying in the common public, were collected through reviewing relevant literature/survey/ interview method. Along with this, The Big Five Personality Test which consists of 50 items that measure the five different personality traits of the individual was also administered. These two tests were administered on total 300 individuals belonging to the age group of 18-50 years.

Questionnaire: Beliefs in Extreme Superstitions Test (BEST) In the statements given below, for each statement, mark how much you agree on a scale of 0-3, where:
3=HIGH 2=MEDIUM 1=LOW 0=NOT AT ALL.

1. Teen tigada, kaam bigada.
2. The birth of a handicap child is a consequence of parent's sin.
3. For the father, daughter as his first child is considered good luck.
4. Stepping on lemon and chilies on road is considered bad luck.
5. Stop or turn back if a cat crosses your road.
6. When a crow shits on you, it's a sign of good luck.
7. Women on her periods must not enter the temple.
8. Hiccups symbolize that someone is remembering you.
9. One must not sweep the floor after sunset.
10. Friday the 13th brings bad luck.
11. Bathe when you come from funeral or hospital.
12. Knives under your bed drives away nightmares.
13. Spot of kohl on baby's forehead or in eyes, avoids evil eye.

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14. Don't leave slippers inverted.
15. Wishing on a falling star makes it true.
16. Never question a person where he is heading to.
17. It is a sin to eat meat on certain days.
18. Bathing in Ganges or holy water washes away your sins.
19. If Kumkum gets spilled, it will bring bad luck.
20. Plastering floor with cow dung is auspicious.
21. After a haircut, always have a bath.
22. Right palm itch will make you rich.
23. Owls are considered bad omen
24. One must throw coins in river to fulfil their wishes.
25. If an eyelash falls out, always make a wish.
26. Crows are referred to as our ancestors.
27. Entering new house with left leg first is inauspicious.
28. If a dog whines piteously at night, danger is ahead.
29. Frisking of left eye is a sign of getting sick soon.
30. Spilling of milk is considered as inauspicious.

RESULT

Significant correlation has been found between neuroticism and superstitions. As per Fig.no.1, Out of 300, 232 individuals were found to possess high score in neuroticism as well as in the superstitions, in which 67 individuals were males and 165 individuals were females. This indicates that individuals with neuroticism tend to have more depressed moods and suffer from feelings of guilt, envy, anger, and anxiety which gradually leads to their beliefs in superstitions. This instability in their minds makes them to believe blindly that certain events bring good luck or bad luck for them. It has been observed through this survey that beliefs in superstitions is a by- product of the over emotionality and irrationality inherent in neuroticism.

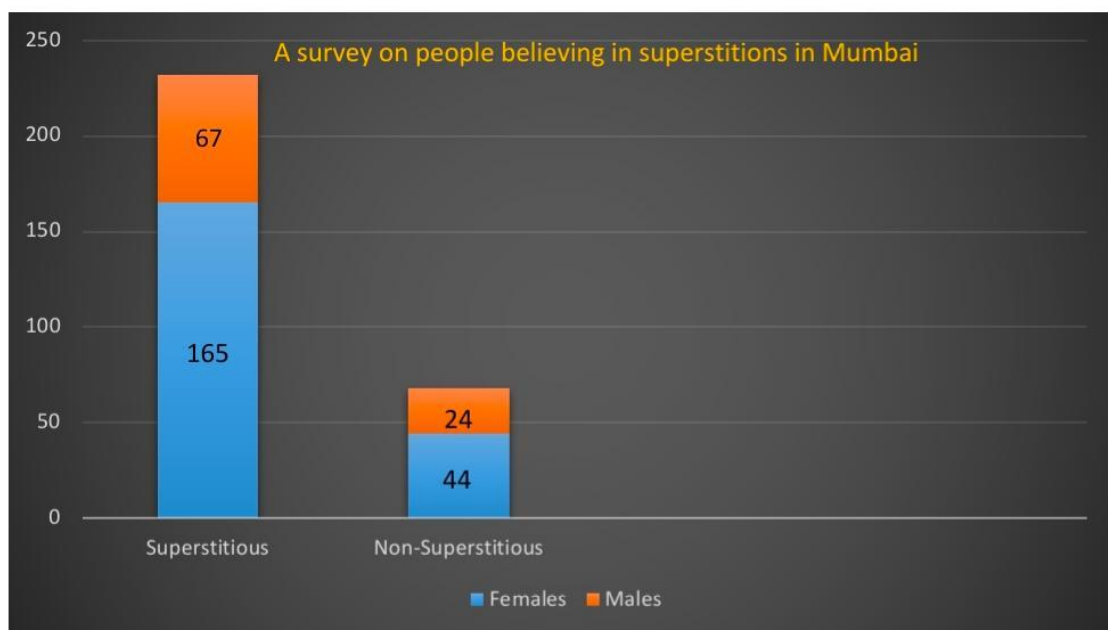


Fig.no.1: A Survey on people believing in Superstitions in Mumbai.

DISCUSSION

Superstition is a belief in the existence of forces or entities or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation that do not conform to the laws of nature or a scientific understanding of the universe. Many believe that the origin of superstitious beliefs was during the earliest days of humanity. Faced with natural occurrences like thunderstorms and earthquakes, also the unpredictability of illness and food supply, humans attempted to form an understandable world of powers that would be influenced by action. The earliest superstitions were created as a possible way to deal with the ignorance and fear of the unknown.

India – a realm under spiritual influence, where families consult astrologers before making big changes, and where the expression 'holy cow' takes on new meaning. We have seen instances of this 'spirituality' everywhere, including many occurrences where it may border on superstition. In front of many buildings and vehicles, cotton threads run through a small lemon and a handful of chilies before reaching up to hang from a doorway. Hindus believe this ornament repels the goddess of misfortune, Alakshmi, by stopping her from entering the household. This mythology is backed by science though, for the thread within the ornament diffuses an acidic scent that keeps away bugs and pests (which may bring misfortune). Indians (and many other cultural groups) believe in Drishti. It is caused when others think negatively or have envious thoughts about someone. This negative energy can supposedly bring physical or mental illness to whomever it is directed at. To protect themselves from this negative energy, people hang pictures of fierce and scary ogres in their homes or vehicles. Parents draw black “beauty marks” with kohl on their baby's forehead, or tie black thread around their hips because babies and children are seen as particularly at greater risk to attract jealousy and negative thoughts.

Spirituality is the process of searching the connection to divine mind within oneself. It has nothing to do with beliefs. Spirituality celebrates the innate self-authority we are each born with, to seek after one's own perception of divine truth and one's connection to it in a way that distinguishes our own timing and unique appearance as a soul. Superstition is an unverified belief handed down culturally that draws upon fear. It is born of unfounded 'what ifs' that play upon the power of human belief and the tendencies of unenlightened human beings to give up their own power of self-authority, and follow the herd.

The “deprivation theory” states that, in developing countries, people use superstitions to cope with the psychological and physical strain of their disadvantaged socioeconomic status. The “age theory” ventures that younger generations – being uncertain about their future, acquire superstitious thinking to form a means of stability in fast developing societies. Income is another factor in determining an individual's beliefs: lower socio-economic individuals visit fortune teller frequently and read horoscopes more often than higher socio-economic individuals. Widowed, divorced, and separated individuals also believe more in superstitions than their single counterparts.

Superstitious behaviour of an individual can be further explained with the help of motivation cycle. Motivation cycle is a transition of states within an individual that propels the individual towards a particular need, where motivation itself is considered hypothesized state. Superstitious beliefs are first initiated because of a particular need. This need drives the individual into taking actions. Positive results, caused due to the actions, further acts as an incentive motivating an individual towards believing in superstitions more. This phenomenon continues on and on as the individual can never stop believing in superstitions

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once he /she has started believing in superstitions. This phenomenon is termed as motivation cycle (Refer Fig.no.2).



Fig.no. 2: - Motivation Cycle.

CASE STUDY

Burari deaths not suicide but accident

New Delhi: On Sunday morning, Corpses of 11 members of the Bhatia family were found at a house in Delhi's Burari area. Ten bodies were found hanging and blindfolded, while the eldest family member Narayani Bhatia, 77, was found strangled in a separate room. The rest, including two 15-year-old boys, supposedly used chunnis (scarves) with religious designs on it and cables to hang themselves. They were gagged and blindfolded, with hands tied. The post mortem examination of six of the 11 dead revealed no signs of struggle. The Psychological autopsy study suggested that the members did not commit suicide, but it was an accident that occurred during the course of performing a ritual. The handwritten notes found on the spot indicated that none of the deceased had an intention to put an end to his/her life.

Disabled kids buried in garbage during solar eclipse in Karnataka

Bengaluru: In an incident of superstition which can be called an example of inhumanity, eight children were buried neck-deep in garbage and mud during the solar eclipse on 26th December, 2019. In some villages in Kalaburgi district of north Karnataka. These children were buried as the locals believed that such a ritual could cure their physical and skin ailments. The physically challenged kids and other kids with skin ailments belonging to the 4-11 age bracket were buried at 8 am, minutes before the eclipse started. Eventually, after an hour, unable to move and bear the heat and torture, the children began to cry. Showing some sympathy, two parents took their kids out of the muck. But others had to stay put till officials came to the spot and 'dug' them out.

CONCLUSION

The outcome of this research is, neuroticism is one of the reason responsible for superstitious behaviour of individuals. Concluded that individuals with high emotional instability believe more in superstitions. By this, it is found that superstitious individuals have faith in luck, ghosts 'evil spirits, omen, supernatural powers etc. They think that these powers govern their success and failure. Because individuals have strong need of control and are easily affected by even the smallest events and circumstances, they behave in unstable

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ways which eventually leads them to believe in superstitions since it provides them with a sense of control over these unpredictable events. This correlation between neuroticism and superstition has been confirmed.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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