

ДИНТАНУ

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**PSYCHOSOCIAL FOUNDATIONS AND SOCIAL MANIFESTATIONS OF
SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEFS**

Abstract. This article examines superstitious beliefs and behaviors from a psychosociological perspective, focusing on their development, functions, and persistence in modern societies. Drawing on theoretical explanations and examples from Turkey and other countries, it discusses how these beliefs arise through mistaken causal connections, conditioning, social learning, and the transmission of cultural traditions. It also considers how fear, helplessness, uncertainty, limited knowledge, and the desire to predict the future encourage people to adopt superstitious practices. Particular attention is given to the psychological benefits attributed to these practices, including a sense of security, perceived control, and relief from anxiety. Some practices follow an existing belief, while others become habitual and gradually give rise to beliefs. The article further explores the relationship between superstition and personal characteristics such as gender, age, education, and intelligence. Examples involving astrology, lucky numbers, protective objects, and rituals illustrate how superstitious beliefs take different forms across social and cultural contexts. The discussion suggests that scientific knowledge and modernization do not necessarily eliminate superstition. Instead, these beliefs may change form while continuing to meet emotional and social needs. Their persistence is therefore understood in relation to both individual experiences and the wider cultural environment.

Keywords: superstition, uncertainty, fear, helplessness, conditioning, astrology, ritual.

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Ырымшыл сенімдердің психоәлеуметтік негіздері мен қоғамдық көріністері

Аңдатпа. Мақалада ырымшыл сенімдер мен әрекеттердің қалыптасуы, атқаратын қызметтері және қазіргі қоғамда сақталу себептері психоәлеуметтік тұрғыдан қарастырылады. Теориялық түсіндірулер мен Түркиядағы және басқа елдердегі мысалдар негізінде мұндай сенімдердің жеке адам өміріндегі және қоғамдық ортадағы орны талданады. Ырымшылдықтың пайда болуы оқиғалар арасындағы себеп пен салдар байланысын қате түсіндірумен, шарттанумен, әлеуметтік үйренумен және мәдени дәстүрлердің ұрпақтан ұрпаққа берілуімен байланыстырылады. Сонымен бірге қорқыныш, дәрменсіздік, белгісіздік, білімнің жеткіліксіздігі және болашақты білуге ұмтылу сияқты факторлардың ықпалы ашылады. Адамдардың ырымшыл әрекеттерден күтетін

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психологиялық пайдасына, әсіресе қауіпсіздік сезіміне, жағдайды бақылауда ұстайтындай әсерге және мазасыздықтың бәсеңдеуіне назар аударылады. Мұндай әрекеттер кейде нақты сенімнің нәтижесінде орындалса, кейде әдетке айналып, кейін тиісті сенімнің қалыптасуына ықпал етеді. Ырымшылдықтың жыныс, жас, білім деңгейі және зияткерлік қабілет сияқты жеке ерекшеліктермен байланысы да қарастырылады. Астрология, сәтті сандар, қорғаныш заттары мен түрлі рәсімдер туралы мысалдар бұл құбылыстың мәдени ортаға қарай өзгеретінін көрсетеді. Ғылыми білімнің кеңеюі мен қоғамның жаңғыруы ырымшылдықты міндетті түрде жоймайтыны тұжырымдалады. Ол жаңа сипаттарға ие болып, адамның эмоциялық және әлеуметтік қажеттіліктерін өтеуді жалғастырады. Сондықтан ырымшыл сенімдердің тұрақтылығын түсіндіруде адамның жеке тәжірибесін де, кең әлеуметтік және мәдени ортаны да ескеру қажет.

Кілт сөздер: ырымшылдық, белгісіздік, қорқыныш, дәрменсіздік, шарттану, астрология, рәсім.

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Психосоциальные основы и общественные проявления суеверных верований

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются суеверные убеждения и практики с психосоциологической точки зрения, раскрываются их формирование, функции и причины сохранения в современном обществе. На основе теоретических объяснений и примеров из Турции и других стран анализируются механизмы возникновения суеверий, включая ошибочное установление причинных связей, обусловливание, социальное научение и передачу культурных традиций. Особое внимание уделяется страху, беспомощности, неопределённости, недостатку знаний и стремлению предвидеть будущее как факторам, способствующим обращению к суеверным практикам. Рассматриваются также психологические преимущества, которые люди связывают с такими практиками: чувство безопасности, ощущение контроля над обстоятельствами и ослабление тревоги. Одни практики возникают на основе определённого убеждения, тогда как другие сначала становятся привычными и постепенно способствуют формированию соответствующего убеждения. Обсуждается связь суеверий с индивидуальными характеристиками, в том числе полом, возрастом, образованием и интеллектом. Примеры астрологии, счастливых чисел, защитных предметов и ритуалов показывают разнообразие проявлений суеверий в различных социальных и культурных условиях. Делается вывод, что развитие научного знания и модернизация не обязательно приводят к исчезновению суеверий. Изменяя свои формы, они продолжают удовлетворять эмоциональные и социальные потребности. Поэтому их устойчивость следует рассматривать во взаимосвязи личного опыта человека и окружающей его культурной среды.

Ключевые слова: суеверие, неопределённость, страх, беспомощность, обусловливание, астрология, ритуал.

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Bâtıl İnançların Psikososyal Temelleri ve Toplumsal Görünümleri

Özet. Bu makale, bâtıl inanç ve davranışların oluşumunu, işlevlerini ve modern toplumlarda varlığını sürdürme nedenlerini psikososyolojik açıdan incelemektedir. Kuramsal

açıklamalar ile Türkiye’den ve farklı ülkelerden örnekler aracılığıyla bu inançların bireysel ve toplumsal yaşam içindeki yeri ele alınmaktadır. Bâtıl inançların ortaya çıkışında yanlış neden ve sonuç ilişkileri kurmanın, koşullanmanın, sosyal öğrenmenin ve kültürel geleneklerin kuşaklar arasında aktarılmasının etkisi tartışılmaktadır. Korku, çaresizlik, belirsizlik, bilgi yetersizliği ve geleceği bilme arzusunun bireyleri bu inançlara yöneltmedeki rolü açıklanmaktadır. Özellikle bâtıl uygulamalara atfedilen psikolojik yararlar üzerinde durulmakta; güvenlik hissi, olayları kontrol edebilme algısı ve kaygının hafiflemesi değerlendirilmektedir. Bazı davranışların belirli bir inançtan kaynaklandığı, bazılarının ise alışkanlık yoluyla sürdürülerek zamanla bir inanca dönüşebildiği belirtilmektedir. Ayrıca bâtıl inançların cinsiyet, yaş, eğitim ve zekâ gibi bireysel özelliklerle ilişkisi ele alınmaktadır. Astroloji, uğurlu sayılar, koruyucu nesneler ve ritüeller üzerinden bu olgunun farklı toplumsal ve kültürel ortamlarda aldığı biçimler gösterilmektedir. Makale, bilimsel bilginin gelişmesi ve modernleşmenin bâtıl inançları zorunlu olarak ortadan kaldırmadığı sonucuna ulaşmaktadır. Bu inançlar, biçim değiştirerek bireylerin duygusal ve toplumsal ihtiyaçlarını karşılamayı sürdürmektedir. Dolayısıyla kalıcılıklarının anlaşılması, bireysel deneyimlerle birlikte toplumsal ve kültürel çevrenin de dikkate alınmasını gerektirmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: bâtıl inanç, belirsizlik, korku, çaresizlik, koşullanma, astroloji, ritüel.

Introduction

Galatasaray had won the football championship. We were at the Galatasaray Store to buy a gift for a friend who supported the team. We were a little tired and distracted. But when we reached one of the shelves, our distraction turned into surprise. There were bricks in front of us. These bricks had been removed during the renovation of the Eski Açık (Old Open) Stand at Ali Sami Yen Stadium.

We were surprised because we had not expected to find objects treated as sacred in this modern shop. We were Galatasaray supporters too. We had visited the stands at Ali Sami Yen Stadium many times. Perhaps these bricks even carried our footprints. Yet we could never have imagined that one day we would encounter them as sacred objects for sale in the modern Galatasaray Store at Capitol Shopping Centre.

Football, perhaps the most popular cultural phenomenon of the modern world, had created its own sacred object. Before us stood football’s very own Karbala stone.

We attach various meanings to objects, colours, and even numbers, often without realising it. Some of us have a lucky number; others have a lucky colour. You may remember İnce İnce Yasemince, the popular television comedy show starring actress Yasemin Yalçın. Gülazer was one of its unforgettable characters. She is a charming, quick-talking travelling saleswoman who is also a swindler. She frequently ends up at the local police station, but each time she easily escapes Inspector Tarumar and his bumbling police officer.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine superstitious beliefs and behaviors from a psychosociological perspective. Descriptive, comparative, and analytical methods are used to evaluate relevant literature in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and the psychology of religion. The study analyzes the formation, development, and persistence of superstitious beliefs by considering their psychological, social, cultural, and historical dimensions. Particular attention is given to factors such as fear, uncertainty, helplessness, conditioning, and the desire to know the future. Various cultural examples are also examined to demonstrate how superstitious beliefs emerge and function in different social contexts. The findings are interpreted within an interdisciplinary framework to explain the continuing presence of superstition in modern societies.

Discussion and Results

One day, she is back at the station, this time under the pretence of selling handcuffs. Showing them to Inspector Tarumar, she says, “Inspector, these are lucky handcuffs!” Tarumar immediately objects: “Don’t be ridiculous, Gülazer! How can handcuffs be lucky?” The following conversation takes place:

Gülazer: “Inspector, what’s your lucky number?”

Inspector: “Eight.”

Gülazer: “And what’s your lucky colour?”

Inspector: “Blue.”

Gülazer: “Well, Inspector! If numbers and colours can be lucky, why can’t handcuffs?”

With these words, Gülazer shows us how deeply superstitious beliefs are woven into our lives. Of course, she also makes sure she gains something herself. She puts the “lucky” handcuffs on the inspector and the bumbling officer, then steals their wallets in the blink of an eye.

Some beliefs known as superstitions are, in fact, beliefs that were not originally considered superstitious but changed over time. The popular belief that standing on a threshold brings bad luck is rooted in a very different teaching: the idea that the threshold is sacred in Sufi tradition.

Members of Sufi orders regarded the threshold as sacred because it marks the meeting point of the outer and inner worlds, where one passes from outside to inside. It provides access to the spiritual guide, who represents the inner, spiritual dimension. This is why people would kiss the threshold when entering a Sufi lodge, the spiritual guide’s room, or a tomb. The threshold also symbolises the dervish way of life, self-effacement, and humility.

As this Sufi understanding spread among the public, people adopted the belief that one should not sit on a threshold because it was sacred. Over time, however, the origins of this belief were forgotten, and it became the belief that sitting on a threshold brings bad luck and misfortune.

Today, 52% of people in Western countries regard astrology as a science. Seventy million Americans start their day by reading their horoscopes. There are more than three million astrology websites, attracting around 120 million visitors a year. Similar trends are spreading rapidly in Turkey, where a growing number of people believe in birth charts. Some take these beliefs so seriously that they say, “I wouldn’t even go for coffee with someone without first analysing their personality!” (Arslan, 2004: 34).

Astrology claims that people’s personality traits are linked to the day and time of their birth, and that the positions of the Sun, Earth, and planets influence the zodiac signs. But is this claim true? According to a large-scale study conducted at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada, the answer is “No!”³ The study followed 2,000 people born on the same day in 1958, within a few minutes of one another, over many years. It examined how their personalities and character developed. Meanwhile, 700 astrologers drew up birth charts based on the personality profiles of participants randomly selected from this group. When the results were compared, the astrologers’ predictions proved unsuccessful. According to this study, therefore, the belief that personality traits are linked to one’s birth date and that the positions of the Sun, Earth, and planets influence the zodiac signs is simply a myth.

Yet people develop their own explanations for the unknown and draw their own conclusions. When the truth is uncertain, people want something to hold on to. To meet this need, they create their own version of reality. If there is a group they can identify with in this respect, they construct this reality together with others. This reflects a desire to escape uncertainty and believe in something definite. Religion comes into play at this point, offering people certain knowledge in which they can believe.

The French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* asked French philosopher and sociologist of religion Frédéric Lenoir how “esotericism” could coexist with modern societies. He replied by quoting Edgar Morin: “*Human beings are both wise and strange. To live a human life, they need emotion as much as reason, and myth as much as science.*” (Atay, 2004: 79).

We can consider Morin's observation in terms of the functions of beliefs. William James, regarded as the founder of the psychology of religion, states: "Beliefs are not useful because they are true; they are true because they are useful." According to James, what matters to us is not our beliefs and ideas themselves, but their effects.⁵ This is a pragmatist approach, and it also applies to superstitious beliefs, which serve to meet psychosocial needs. This explains why they have existed in every culture for thousands of years. Modern culture is no exception. Moreover, it produces new forms of superstition.

This article examines superstitious beliefs and behaviors that persist in the modern era. It aims to explore, from a psychosociological perspective, the factors that lead people to adopt these beliefs. It also seeks to answer the following questions:

- (a) *What is superstition, and what forms does it take?*
- (b) *How do superstitious beliefs and behaviors develop and persist?*
- (c) *What are their psychosocial causes?*
- (d) *What benefits do they offer individuals?*
- (e) *Are superstitious beliefs and behaviors related to variables such as gender, age, and education?*
- (f) *What is the place of superstitious beliefs and behaviors in today's world?*

1. What Are Superstitious Beliefs and Behaviors?

There is no generally accepted definition of superstitious beliefs and behaviors. What some people consider strange or superstitious, others may see as normal and familiar. Moreover, something that only a few people believe today may become widely accepted in the future (Ayverdi, 2006: 82). For example, very few people once believed in meteors, whereas today everyone accepts "meteor theory."

An example of the opposite situation is belief in alchemy. In twenty-first-century America, this may be considered highly irrational because it contradicts current laws of physics and chemistry. In tenth-century Iran, however, this belief was consistent with the scientific knowledge of the time. People believed that metals could be turned into gold or silver (Çıblak, 2004: 125).

Therefore, what is considered a superstitious belief or behavior may vary across time and place. For this reason, social, cultural, and historical contexts must be taken into account when defining superstitious beliefs and behaviors.

The first social scientists to study superstitious beliefs and behaviors defined superstition as the tendency to explain an event with a natural cause through supernatural, mysterious, or scientifically disproven causes (Dean, & Kelly, 2003: 198). For example, Alfred Lehmann defines superstition as "a general assumption that is incompatible with a particular religion, has no factual basis, or contradicts the level of knowledge a society has reached." Wuttke defines it as "attributing supernatural qualities to objects and superhuman qualities to people."

The behavioral psychologist Skinner considers superstition in terms of conditioned reflexes. According to him, a child whose finger has been burned by boiling water may develop a conditioned fear of a pot of boiling water. Similarly, a child bitten by a dog may become afraid of all dogs. Skinner draws a parallel between these irrational fears and superstitious beliefs, placing them in the same category. He also argues that if a person happens to avoid danger after performing an action, this outcome reinforces the behavior, encouraging its repetition and continuation. In Skinner's view, superstitious beliefs therefore arise from a mistaken understanding of cause and effect (Eysenck, 1970: 93).

Superstitious behaviors usually follow a superstitious belief or assumption. For example, a person who believes that knocking on wood will protect them from possible harm performs this action because of that belief. In other words, the behavior follows the belief. However, this cognitive process does not always work in this way. Sometimes people perform behaviors considered superstitious unconsciously and out of habit, without holding a specific superstitious belief. When we consider superstitious beliefs and behaviors as a whole, we see that they combine emotional, cognitive, and behavioral elements (Frankl, 1985: 46):

- The emotional dimension includes emotional states and processes involving fear, anxiety, anger, excitement, joy, surprise, and curiosity.
- The cognitive dimension includes processes such as perception, thinking, imagination, memory, and attention.
- The behavioral dimension involves rituals and symbolic actions.

These definitions suggest that superstitious beliefs and behaviors have several characteristics: they lack a factual basis, are irrational, vary across time and place, and provide benefits to individuals. Within this framework, they can be defined as follows: “Superstitious beliefs and behaviors are beliefs and practices that conflict with common sense and a scriptural understanding of religion and therefore appear meaningless, yet provide psychological benefits to individuals and are passed down from generation to generation.” This definition will guide the discussion of superstitious beliefs and behaviors throughout this article (Lévi-Bruhl, 2006: 81).

2. Classification of Superstitious Beliefs and Behaviors

Superstitious beliefs and behaviors can be classified according to three criteria: their origin, content, and purpose. For example, Gustav Jahoda divides them into four groups according to their origin:

- (a) Beliefs arising from a particular understanding of the universe or a coherent worldview. Beliefs associated with jinn or the devil can be included in this group.
- (b) Socially shared superstitious beliefs. Examples include associating black cats with bad luck or making predictions based on numbers.
- (c) Personal supernatural experiences. These include out-of-body experiences involving extrasensory perception.
- (d) Individual superstitious beliefs. Examples include having a lucky number or a lucky hat (Gölpınarlı, 1977: 19).

Superstitious beliefs and behaviors can also be divided into four groups according to their content:

- (a) Beliefs related to major life events, such as birth, marriage, and death. One example is the belief that a person will live where their umbilical cord is buried.
- (b) Beliefs related to everyday activities. These include the belief that performing certain activities on particular days brings good or bad luck. For example, some believe that getting married between the two Eid festivals brings bad luck.
- (c) Beliefs related to animals. Examples include the belief that an owl’s call signals a death or that seeing a black cat brings misfortune.
- (d) Superstitious beliefs in the religious sphere. This group includes beliefs about divinity, knowledge of the unseen, seeking help from the dead, and beliefs about jinn.

Superstitious behaviors can be divided into two groups according to their purpose:

- (a) Behaviors intended to protect against anticipated harm or danger.
- (b) Behaviors intended to bring about a desired outcome.

Behaviors in the first group are understood as actions directed against an adversary believed to be causing harm. In many cultures, this adversary takes the form of evil spirits, the devil, or people with harmful intentions. Those who perform these behaviors see themselves as being in a passive position because they feel a need to defend themselves against harm and danger directed at them.

By contrast, those who perform behaviors in the second group see themselves as being in an active position. They seek a material or spiritual benefit without feeling that they face a specific threat or danger.

3. How Do Superstitious Beliefs Develop?

Human beings sometimes tend to act irrationally. When interpreting events, they may draw incorrect conclusions because of prejudice or a lack of knowledge. This tendency contributes to the development of superstitious beliefs and behaviors.

People interact with stimuli in their surroundings and, in doing so, make connections between events. Sometimes these connections reflect reality, but at other times they result from mistaken interpretations. Such errors underlie almost all superstitious beliefs. These beliefs are therefore often based on a mistaken understanding of cause and effect (Kuşat, 2004: 66).

Our minds make sense of the world by forming connections between events or objects. However, we sometimes make incorrect connections. These may become stronger over time and develop into superstitious beliefs. Two basic patterns are involved in this process: the law of similarity and the law of contact.

In superstitious beliefs based on the law of similarity, people believe that they can produce a desired effect on a living being by acting on a representation of it. In other words, these beliefs rest on the mistaken assumption that things resembling one another are the same. For example, someone may make a cloth or wooden doll representing a person they dislike. They then believe that harming the doll—by piercing it with needles or twisting its foot—will also harm that person.

In superstitious beliefs based on the law of contact, people believe that an action performed on an object that has been in contact with a living being will also affect that being, even after the contact has ended. Examples include trying to harm someone by using their hair or clothing, or the belief once held in Germany that rubbing a fingernail over someone's footprint would cause that person to become lame.

Some superstitious beliefs are learned through conditioning. A student who passes an exam while using an eraser with a teddy bear on it may believe that the same eraser will bring good luck in future exams. They may also watch for the same sequence of events that occurred during the exam they passed. For example, they might think, "In the previous exam, I sat in the front row, and the teacher said hello when entering the classroom..." Certain fixed assumptions can also lead people to misunderstand cause and effect. The "just-world belief" is one example. People may believe that others deserve the bad things that happen to them and that justice has therefore been served.

According to cognitive dissonance theory, people experience an internal conflict when they realise that their superstitious behaviors, such as wearing an evil-eye amulet or knocking on wood, are irrational. However, because changing their behavior is difficult, they change their attitude instead. Over time, they develop the belief that wearing the amulet or knocking on wood is beneficial. In other words, if a superstitious behavior becomes habitual, it will inevitably develop into a belief.

According to the anthropologist L. Lévy-Bruhl, superstitious beliefs are transformed versions of a society's shared beliefs. They are passed down from generation to generation through suggestion, imitation, and advice. Most superstitious beliefs are learned in childhood and maintained throughout life without much questioning.

Superstitious beliefs develop in different ways and may eventually give way to other superstitious beliefs. Beliefs that have been forgotten may also reappear after some time. The main factor behind their persistence is the benefit they are believed to provide. As long as people think that superstitious beliefs and behaviors benefit them, they continue to follow them, even when they know they are irrational. Superstitious beliefs will therefore continue to exist as long as people wish to know the future, seek security, and experience helplessness and fear (Artun, 1998: 85-107).

4. Psychosociological Causes of Superstitious Beliefs

Superstitious beliefs and behaviors may have many causes, including cultural, economic, sociological, psychological, and possibly biological factors. Here, however, we will focus mainly on psychosociological causes. Different types of superstition may arise for different reasons. Therefore, an explanation that applies to one belief may not apply to another. A single superstitious belief may also have several causes. The main causes can be classified as follows.

a. Not Understanding the Nature of Objects and Events

According to anthropologists such as Malinowski and Lévy-Bruhl, when primitive people could not control events or understand their actual causes, they attributed mysterious powers to inanimate objects in nature and turned to superstitious practices such as magic and sorcery (Malinowski, 2000: 108).

They assigned various powers to everyday objects, such as axes and ropes, believing that only by giving them these powers could they use them as intended. They also believed, for example, that rocks were immortal and deserved respect. Striking rocks was therefore thought to bring bad luck and outbreaks of disease. Modern people continue to follow the same pattern of thinking. When faced with events they cannot explain, they still feel the need to look for causes in the metaphysical world.

Examples of superstitious beliefs arising from a lack of understanding of objects and events can also be found in present-day Turkey. In the Sivas region, a frog is hung from a tree branch to cure warts. People believe that as the frog dries out, the wart will also dry up. In the Giresun region, weak and frail children are taken under a walnut tree, which is considered a symbol of strength and power. This is believed to make the children stronger. In Trabzon and the surrounding area, women who have no children follow the same practice.

In Adana and the surrounding area, dogs howling at unusual times are believed to signal that someone in the village will die. An overturned slipper or shoe is also thought to indicate an approaching death, so it is immediately turned upright. People do not give milk or yogurt to others in the evening because they believe this will lead to a death in the household. An owl landing on a house is likewise believed to signal a death in that household, and owls are therefore considered unlucky (James, 2000: 87).

b. The Desire to Know the Future

Superstitious beliefs satisfy the desire to foresee the future and anticipate possible difficulties. Behind this desire lies people's curiosity about the future and their wish to understand what will happen in their lives, recognise symbolic signs about their fate, and prepare themselves for positive or negative events. The desire for certainty about the future and for reassurance when information is unavailable may lead people to adopt superstitious beliefs and behaviors.

For example, in Konya and the surrounding area, if a praying mantis grasps a small stick held out to it, this is taken as a positive answer to the person's question. In the Tekirdağ region, milk is dropped into a glass of water to predict a baby's sex. If the milk stays on the surface, the baby is believed to be a girl; if it sinks, a boy. In the same region, scissors are placed beneath one chair and a knife beneath another without the pregnant woman's knowledge. If she sits on the chair with the knife underneath, the baby is expected to be a boy; if she chooses the chair with the scissors, a girl. Believing in horoscopes published in newspapers and using numerical codes to make predictions about the future are further examples.

c. Fear and Stress

According to Spinoza, superstitious beliefs are spread, maintained, and strengthened by fear. He states, "If people could manage everything they faced according to known rules, or if fortune always favoured them, they would not turn to superstition."

Some people are overwhelmed by the feeling that a fatal illness or disaster could strike them at any moment. This makes them fearful and undermines their courage. As a result, they feel the need to perform irrational, even absurd, rituals that they believe will protect them. Examples include knocking on wood or seeking protection from a coin with a hole in its centre.

d. Helplessness

When people face a disaster and believe that practical solutions are difficult to achieve, they may turn to artificial solutions and believe these will help them. Many examples of superstitious beliefs and behaviors arising from helplessness can be found at shrines. For instance, some women who have no children believe that leaving a cradle made of cloth at the Zuhurat Baba Shrine in Istanbul will enable them to have a child. At the Telli Baba Shrine, also in Istanbul,

people cut a separate strand of wire for each wish and take these strands with them when they leave. When their wishes come true, they return the strands to the shrine.

In his book *The American Soldier*, Samuel Stouffer notes that superstitious practices, such as carrying amulets, talismans, and rabbits' feet, became widespread among soldiers who experienced helplessness and constant fear during the Second World War.

e. A Shift in What Is Considered Sacred

When the tendency to regard things as sacred is not expressed within religion, it shifts to other areas, taking similar forms but involving different content. In other words, beliefs that are suppressed and cannot find fulfilment in their original form may emerge in other ways.

According to psychologist Viktor Frankl, superstitious beliefs replace genuine beliefs when the latter are suppressed. The human desire to believe cannot remain unfulfilled. People who cannot accept widely recognised beliefs may therefore turn to superstition, however modern and rational they may be. An example is the shaping of belief in fate through horoscopes.

7. The Modern World and Superstitious Beliefs

Superstitious beliefs and behaviors are a psychosocial phenomenon found throughout history in every part of the world, from the most primitive tribes to the most modern societies. Looking at history, it is impossible to draw a clear distinction between people who are superstitious and those who are not. Everyone holds superstitious beliefs to some degree, and this remains true today. Modern people also turn to superstition from time to time and seek help through superstitious practices. Some do so occasionally, while others make these practices a regular part of their lives.

The expectation that a modern way of life would eliminate superstitious beliefs has not been fulfilled. Scholars studying the subject now acknowledge that these beliefs persist in the modern age. In fact, the number of people who hold superstitious beliefs is greater than it appears. Some hide their beliefs for fear of being ridiculed or perform the associated practices only when they are alone.

Today, superstitious beliefs and behaviors may become more common during periods of cultural disruption and economic crisis.⁷⁷ These problems of modern life help sustain such beliefs. In the past, people turned to superstition because they felt helpless in the face of natural events. Today, economic crises or family problems may lead them in the same direction. People who feel helpless look for a source of support. When they cannot find one, they may turn to superstitious beliefs.

There are therefore many reasons to suggest that superstitious practices remain widespread in modern Western societies, despite expectations that these societies would move away from them. For example, a Gallup opinion poll conducted in the United States in 1990 found that 14% of Americans believed that seeing a black cat brought bad luck, 12% believed the same about walking under a ladder, and 5% about breaking a mirror.

In Italy, the Italian Association for the Protection of Animals and the Environment claimed in 2007 that around 60,000 black cats were killed in the country each year because they were believed to bring bad luck. According to the association, these killings occurred most often at Halloween. In England, by contrast, black cats are believed to bring good luck.

Today, throughout the Christian world, particularly in the United States, one of the most widespread superstitions associated with bad luck concerns the number 13. This belief is based on a historical event involving Jesus and his disciples. While being pursued by Roman soldiers, Jesus was accompanied by his twelve disciples, making thirteen people in total. One of the disciples, Judas Iscariot, made an agreement with the Romans and betrayed Jesus. Thus, the thirteenth person became associated with betrayal. The belief that the number 13 brings bad luck is based on this event (Ayhan, & Yazar, 2005: 15-20).

According to the 1990 Gallup poll, 9% of Americans considered it a sign of bad luck when the thirteenth day of the month fell on a Friday. This is linked to the biblical account that Jesus died on a Friday. Beliefs about the unlucky nature of the number 13 can be found in many areas

of everyday life. For example, some flight attendants are reluctant to serve passengers in seat number 13, while some passengers ask to change seats if they are assigned that number. Similarly, some high-rise buildings in the United States have no floor numbered 13. Fear of this number has become so widespread in the Western world that it even appears in psychological literature under the name *triskaidekaphobia*. A similar fear concerns the number four. Known as *tetraphobia*, it is found in East Asian countries such as China, Japan, and Korea. This belief arises because the words for “death” and “four” are pronounced the same way.

Other Gallup polls conducted in the United States show that superstitious beliefs and beliefs in paranormal phenomena persist. Between 1990 and 2000, these surveys found a marked increase in the number of people who reported seeing ghosts or claimed to see or know things beyond ordinary perception. In a study conducted in England, 22% of participants said they believed in lucky numbers, 18% in magic, and 75% that knocking on wood brought good luck.

In Turkey, various superstitious practices can be observed at saints’ graves and shrines, which serve a psychological function in helping people cope with everyday difficulties. These practices include seeking help from the dead, lighting candles, tying strips of cloth, making cloth dolls and leaving them at shrines, stretching strings, winding thread onto spools, and leaving sugar on the grass around shrines.

It was expected that superstitious beliefs would decline as scientific knowledge increased in the modern era. However, this expectation was not fulfilled. These beliefs may have changed form, but they have continued to exist. In the past, for example, people avoided saying the words “devil” or “jinn” because they believed that mentioning their names would cause these beings to trouble them. Although such beliefs still exist to some extent, some people today also avoid saying words such as “cancer” and “AIDS” for the same reason (Jahoda, 1970: 32).

Conclusion

Superstitious beliefs and behaviors, defined as “beliefs and practices that conflict with a society’s level of knowledge and dominant religious understanding, and therefore appear meaningless, yet provide psychological benefits to individuals,” have become part of popular culture in the modern world. Horoscopes and the attribution of good or bad luck to particular numbers and days are familiar examples that are becoming increasingly widespread in modern societies.

Superstitious beliefs, also called “unfounded beliefs” are generally assumptions created by our imagination under the influence of fears and desires. They can be found, to varying degrees, across all sociocultural groups. These beliefs have a universal dimension: similar ways of thinking and similar practices can be observed in different societies.

Superstitious beliefs and behaviors may have various causes, including a lack of knowledge, fear, helplessness, uncertainty, the desire to know the future, and the need to feel secure. Their main purpose is generally to avoid failure and misfortune rather than to achieve success. They give individuals a sense that they can plan, change, and control their behavior, make sense of experiences such as bad luck and failure, and protect themselves against negative feelings such as anxiety and pessimism.

Superstitious beliefs and behaviors vary according to factors such as gender, education, and age. Research has shown that women are more inclined towards superstition than men, and older people more than younger people. Education and intelligence are negatively related to superstition: higher levels of education and intelligence are associated with lower levels of superstitious belief. It can therefore be said that educated and intelligent people are less inclined towards superstition than others. However, this does not mean that they never adopt superstitious beliefs. Superstitious beliefs and behaviors are likely to remain part of human life across time and place, even as their forms change.

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