When Superstition Works, or Why a Golf Ball Is Lucky

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ABSTRACT

[...]for people under pressure to compete or perform, superstitious behavior can create a placebo effect that can improve the outcome. Since the age of 15, Maria Fabregat Farran, a 20-year-old student at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, has always worn a red bracelet while taking exams.

FULL TEXT

It starts when people try something different -- Pepsi instead of Coca-Cola, a blue tie instead of the old red one -- and find that something good happens.

Soon, without realizing it, someone who wouldn't think twice about, say, walking under a ladder or traveling on Friday the 13th begins to associate their new behavior with good luck -- and starts reaching for the Pepsi again and again.

Such "conditioned superstitions" can develop when people believe there is something they can do to control a situation, despite there being no rational reason to think so, says Gita Johar, a professor of business at Columbia University who recently co-wrote a paper on the phenomenon. Recent research shows that superstitions that increase the illusion of control can help people find meaning and psychological comfort -- and in some cases, even boost performance.

People who have both a high need for control and a sense of helplessness in a given situation -- such as the straight-A perfectionist who didn't have time to study for an exam -- are the most likely to succumb to conditioned superstition, researchers say.

And while such superstitions can be broken, says Dr. Johar, it often takes a lot of negative evidence before people are willing to part with their lucky rituals. That's because they "provide some sort of a hedge against uncertainty," says Eric Hamerman, an assistant professor of marketing at Tulane University's Freeman School of Business who, with Dr. Johar, co-wrote the study, published in October in the Journal of Consumer Research.

In their experiment, Drs. Johar and Hamerman had 275 participants play the game "rock, paper, scissors" against a computer -- 10 series with their right hand and 10 with their left. Unbeknownst to the participants, the computer program manipulated the results to make some people fare better with their left. When given the chance to choose which hand to use for the final matches, more than three-quarters of those playing the rigged game chose the hand that "caused" them to win more.

If asked, few participants would say they consciously decided to choose the left hand because they thought it would make them lucky. However, their behavior suggests they conditioned themselves to make the connection,

say the researchers.

The phenomenon of conditioned superstition is common enough that entire advertising campaigns have been built around it, says Dr. Hamerman. A recent Bud Light commercial, for example, has a fan forcing down a terrible-tasting veggie burger because his team won the last time he did so.

Mary Pfister, a 20-year-old sophomore at Saint Louis University, wears her Chicago Blackhawks shirt for each game. The hockey team won big the first time she wore it this season. She once made a 15-minute trip, out of her way, back home to get it for game time. The Blackhawks have lost once while she was wearing her shirt -- the only time she didn't watch the game. The connection may be "all in her head," she says, but it gives her peace of mind.

In their recently published experiment, Drs. Johar and Hamerman found they could reduce people's superstitious behavior by reminding them of their positive traits, a technique psychologists call "self-affirmation." In the study, people who were asked to write about times they had shown compassion later exhibited less superstitious behavior than those who had just been given a survey.

All participants in the study answered obscure trivia questions on both blue and green computer backgrounds and were told, regardless of their actual score, that they performed better when answering questions presented on the green screen. When asked to choose the screen color for the final task, those who had been primed to remember their virtuous acts were less likely to choose the "lucky" green background.

Reminding people of their good traits makes them more emotionally secure, says Claude Steele, an early researcher into the psychology of self-affirmation and now a dean in Stanford University's graduate school of education. "If I feel secure that I am a good person, I can be more open to threat in general, and that makes me less needful of being superstitious," he adds. It isn't that people no longer think their team will lose, or that they'll fail a test, he says. Instead, self-affirmation makes them more psychologically resilient, and helps them realize they can cope even if something bad happens.

Still, for people under pressure to compete or perform, superstitious behavior can create a placebo effect that can improve the outcome. Since the age of 15, Maria Fabregat Farran, a 20-year-old student at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, has always worn a red bracelet while taking exams. "My mom gave it to me and said it was lucky, and wearing it makes me more relaxed," she says. "I think it helps me on tests."

In a 2010 experiment published in Psychological Science, golfers sank 35% more putts when playing with a ball they were told was "lucky." Sports teams from Little League to the pros are rife with players who practice a ritual or carry a charm they believe will boost their performance. Michael Jordan, for one, was famous for wearing his lucky college basketball shorts under his NBA ones.

While conditioned superstitions affect personal behavior, cultural ones can impact the market at large. Some 10,000 fewer people fly on Friday the 13th, and U.S. businesses generate less revenue on those days compared with other Fridays, since some people don't want to travel, work or make purchases, says Thomas Kramer, an associate professor of marketing at the University of South Carolina's Moore School of Business.

In a study published in the Journal of Consumer Research in 2008, Dr. Kramer asked 95 students to write down their associations with either Friday the 13th or an innocuous day before answering questions about gambling decisions. His finding: After thinking about Friday the 13th, compared with a random day, participants became more risk-averse. "They were willing to forgo a gamble with a larger payoff in favor of a lower gamble with assured

value," he says.

Credit: By Angela Chen

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