"ADVANCED JOURNAL OF UNIVERSITY SCIENCE AND CREATIVE INNOVATIONS"

SUPERSTITION: THREAT AND FEAR

Gulshoda Rashidova
Senior teacher, Uzbekistan state world languages university
rashidovagulshoda@gmail.com
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17907825

Abstract. *Superstition is a pervasive aspect of human cognition that arises from attempts to interpret uncertain or threatening events. This paper explores the relationship between superstition, threat perception, and fear responses. Using a review of empirical studies and theoretical models, we analyze how perceived risks influence the formation of superstitious beliefs and how fear amplifies their persistence. The findings indicate that superstition often serves as a coping mechanism to manage uncertainty and perceived threats, although it may lead to maladaptive outcomes. Understanding the mechanisms behind superstition and fear may provide insights into human decision-making and risk assessment.*
Key words: *corporate governance, governance theories, agency theory, stakeholder theory, institutional theory, resource dependence theory, Uzbekistan business environment.*

Annotatsiya. *Irim inson tafakkurining keng tarqalgan jihati bo'lib, noaniq yoki tahdidli voqealarni tushuntirishga bo'lgan urinishlardan kelib chiqadi. Ushbu maqola irimlarning tahdidni qabul qilish va qo'rquv javoblari bilan bog'liqligini o'rganadi. Empirik tadqiqotlar va nazariy modellarga tayanib, biz tahdidni qabul qilish qanday qilib irimga xos e'tiqodlarning shakllanishiga ta'sir qilishini va qo'rquv ularning davomiyligini qanday kuchaytirishini tahlil qilamiz. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, irimlar ko'pincha noaniqlik va sezilgan tahdidni boshqarish uchun moslashuv mexanizmi sifatida xizmat qiladi, garchi bu ba'zan zararli natijalarga olib kelishi mumkin. Irim va qo'rquv mexanizmlarni tushunish inson qaror qabul qilish va xavfni baholash jarayonlariga oid tushunchalarni beradi.*
Kalit so'zlar: *irim, qo'rquv, tahdidni qabul qilish, kognitiv psixologiya, inson xulq-atvori.*

Introduction. The everyday lives of individuals are shaped by numerous unwritten norms, and in many cases, their belief in supernatural forces unconsciously governs their behaviour. Among these phenomena, **superstition** is one of the most widespread, yet it lacks a universally accepted definition. Because such beliefs differ greatly across communities, people are often culturally grouped according to the types of superstitions they hold. In English-speaking societies, these beliefs are deeply embedded in daily routines and have gradually become an integral component of cultural identity. Although superstitions are rarely supported by empirical evidence, they may appear to coincide with real-life events, leading individuals to attribute meaning or causation to them.

Many superstitions found in English culture have been transmitted across generations and preserved through tradition. Historically, early humans sought ways to understand, control and interpret the unknown world around them, which laid the foundation for various belief systems (Astafurova, 2019). Contemporary research and real-life observations indicate that superstitions are especially prevalent in rural or suburban areas of English communities, where ancient customs still remain influential. Psychologists examining the correlation between superstition, personality traits and moral attitudes argue that individuals tend to rely on supernatural beliefs as a way to cope with anxiety and regain a sense of control over negative or unpredictable events. As a result, they often experience increased confidence, emotional comfort and an illusion of fearlessness (Damisch, 2010).

It is also noteworthy that even those who publicly deny believing in superstitions may still unconsciously adopt certain practices, especially in stressful or uncertain situations. The study of superstitions and their cultural manifestations continue to be a contested academic field. In particular, the intersection between religious beliefs and superstitious practices has long been at the centre of scholarly debates. In approaching this subject from a linguacultural perspective, we identified several authentic and insightful examples. Our analysis revealed substantial differences, as well as limited similarities, in how various cultures interpret and apply superstitions. Given their cognitive value, historical depth and cultural significance, superstitions constitute a rich area for deeper academic inquiry. Accordingly, our research aims to explore previous studies, theoretical frameworks and empirical findings in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of this multifaceted phenomenon.

Background of the Study.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, people gradually began to recognize that not all events were determined by unverified beliefs, which led to increased scholarly debate about the connection between religion and superstition during that period. McCartney examines human fear toward objects and events, focusing closely on the origins of superstitions that individuals may experience either collectively or personally (Frost, 1993). According to him and other researchers, individuals often resort to superstitious thinking when they feel a loss of control over circumstances or when ambiguous situations create anxiety. In such moments, belief in superstition provides emotional relief and a sense of temporary stability. For many people — regardless of their level of scientific knowledge — “magic” and “superstition” are mistakenly perceived as interchangeable concepts.

Prominent psychologist Gustav Jahoda, who investigated the psychological dimensions of superstition, distinguishes between *“causal superstitions”* and *“coincidental superstitions”* (Jahoda, 1969). The former reflects a consciously held belief linking two events—for instance, the notion that finding a horseshoe brings luck and prosperity. The latter refers to perceived correlations between behaviour and outcome, such as the ancient Roman belief that natural phenomena were directly influenced by the actions of the gods.

Analyses of various superstitions reveal that strong belief in such phenomena can even lead to significant economic consequences. A widely cited example is *Friday the 13th*, a superstition believed to trigger misfortune. Studies have shown that the fear surrounding this date results in an estimated financial loss of approximately $800 million to $900 million annually in the United States, as individuals avoid travelling, making purchases or engaging in business activities due to anxiety related to this belief.

McCartney further emphasizes that when individuals cannot predict or influence outcomes, they are more likely to adopt superstitious practices as coping mechanisms. Many people—irrespective of educational background—do not clearly differentiate between magic and superstition. While magic is generally associated with uncertainty, ritual practices and individuals known as magicians, superstition stems from ordinary human behaviour and everyday interpretations of events. Although people may not fully understand the consequences of their beliefs, they continue to follow them in an attempt to experience a sense of protection or security.

Scholarly findings demonstrate contradictory conclusions regarding the link between religiosity and superstition. For example, Buhrman and Zaugg’s research suggests a direct correlation between the degree of religious commitment and the likelihood of believing in superstitions. Conversely, Bleak and Frederick found no significant relationship between the two. Other studies indicate that religious and non-religious individuals display similar overall levels of superstitious thinking; however, those raised in religious environments tend to show a greater inclination toward metaphysical or supernatural beliefs (Gallup 1990).

Methods.

A qualitative, integrative review methodology was adopted to systematically examine the relationship between superstition, fear, and threat perception in human behaviour. This approach allowed for the inclusion of diverse academic perspectives and facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how superstitious beliefs emerge, persist and influence individuals across different cultural and psychological contexts.

The review incorporated a wide range of **peer-reviewed scholarly sources**, including empirical experiments, cross-cultural observational studies, longitudinal investigations, and theoretical models derived from **cognitive psychology, social psychology, anthropology, behavioral ecology, and evolutionary psychology**. Databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and ResearchGate were used to identify relevant publications from the last three decades, though historically significant works published earlier were also included for conceptual depth.

A systematic search strategy was followed, using key terms such as *superstition*, *fear response*, *threat perception*, *magical thinking*, *risk aversion*, *cognitive bias*, and *cultural belief systems*. Studies were selected based on inclusion criteria that required:

(1) direct relevance to superstition or fear-related behaviours,

(2) clear methodological rigor, and

(3) contributions to theoretical or conceptual understanding.

Research lacking empirical grounding or failing to meet academic standards was excluded to maintain analytical reliability.

After collecting the sources, a thematic synthesis process was conducted. The literature was coded to identify **recurring psychological mechanisms**, including *illusion of control, uncertainty reduction, pattern-seeking cognition, anxiety regulation, and attribution errors*. Cultural and sociological dimensions—such as communal rituals, inherited belief systems and social conformity—were also examined to understand the broader context in which superstition develops and is transmitted.

The data were then integrated to construct an analytical framework that highlights:

• the psychological triggers that activate superstitious thinking,

• evolutionary explanations for fear-based responses,

• sociocultural factors that reinforce or normalize superstitions, and
• the functional and dysfunctional outcomes of such beliefs.

This qualitative review method ensured a holistic and interdisciplinary interpretation of superstition as a fear- and threat-related phenomenon, grounded in both scientific evidence and cultural narratives.

Results.

The findings of the qualitative review reveal a strong interconnection between superstition, fear and perceived threat across psychological and cultural contexts. Analysis of the selected literature highlights several consistent patterns regarding how individuals and communities develop, maintain and transmit superstitious beliefs.

First, the review demonstrates that **superstitious thinking becomes more prevalent in conditions characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity or heightened risk**. Situations involving unpredictable outcomes—such as illness, financial instability, examinations, travel or natural disasters—significantly increase individuals’ reliance on symbolic acts or supernatural explanations. This suggests that superstition functions most strongly when objective information is limited or when individuals lack direct control over events.

Second, the evidence indicates that **fear intensifies cognitive tendencies toward pattern recognition**, even in circumstances where no meaningful patterns exist. Numerous psychological studies confirm that anxious individuals are more likely to perceive causal connections between unrelated events, which in turn strengthens belief in omens, signs or rituals. This “false pattern detection” is especially common during threatening situations, where rapid interpretation of environmental cues becomes a survival-oriented cognitive bias.

Third, the literature shows that **superstition operates as a psychologically comforting coping mechanism**. People frequently adopt ritualistic or belief-based behaviours to reduce anxiety, regulate emotions and create an illusion of control. Even when individuals rationally acknowledge that these beliefs lack empirical support, the emotional relief they experience reinforces repeated use of superstitious actions.

Fourth, the findings emphasize the role of **cultural transmission**. Superstitions are not merely individual cognitive errors, but socially embedded practices passed from one generation to another through family traditions, folklore, religious customs and community narratives. This collective reinforcement ensures the persistence of certain superstitions even in highly educated or scientifically oriented societies.

Finally, the review identifies several **maladaptive consequences of excessive or rigid superstitious thinking**. These include avoidance of opportunities perceived as “risky” due to irrational beliefs, reluctance to make decisions on specific days (e.g., Friday the 13th), reduced participation in productive activities, and financial losses on both individual and societal levels. In extreme cases, strong superstitious fear may interfere with daily functioning, decision-making and mental well-being.

Overall, the synthesized evidence indicates that superstition is deeply intertwined with emotional, cognitive and cultural processes, and its outcomes range from adaptive coping benefits to significant behavioral and economic drawbacks.

Discussion.

The results of this review suggest that superstition is not a random or irrational phenomenon, but rather a psychologically grounded response to uncertainty and perceived threat. This aligns with theoretical frameworks in cognitive and evolutionary psychology, which argue

that humans are biologically predisposed to err on the side of caution when facing ambiguous cues (Haselton & Buss, 2000). The tendency to detect patterns—even when none objectively exist—may have offered evolutionary advantages in ancestral environments, where failing to identify a real threat could have resulted in severe consequences. In this regard, superstition can be interpreted as an extension of adaptive threat-detection mechanisms activated under fear or stress.

The findings also reinforce Skinner’s (1948) behavioral research, which demonstrates that humans often develop “illusory associations” between actions and outcomes during periods of unpredictability. Similarly, Rudski et al. (1999) argue that superstitious rituals become self-reinforcing because they reduce anxiety and create a subjective sense of control. The present review confirms that such mechanisms remain relevant today and are observable across various cultural, occupational and social contexts.

A significant aspect highlighted in the review is the role of cultural transmission. Superstitious beliefs are not solely individual cognitive errors but socially shared narratives reinforced through families, traditions, folklore, and community practices. Jahoda’s (1969) distinction between causal and coincidental superstitions is particularly relevant here, suggesting that the social environment not only shapes what individuals believe but also how they interpret the meaning of everyday events. This cultural reinforcement helps explain why some superstitions persist even among highly educated populations with access to scientific knowledge.

Despite their adaptive emotional function, superstitions can also produce negative behavioural and social outcomes. Excessive reliance on rituals or irrational beliefs may limit decision-making, promote avoidance behaviour, or lead to financial losses—such as those documented around Friday the 13th in the United States. These maladaptive patterns are consistent with the findings of modern behavioural economics, which highlight the impact of cognitive biases on risk assessment and economic choices.

However, the review also reveals inconsistencies in the relationship between superstition and religiosity. While some studies (e.g., Buhrman & Zaugg) suggest a strong correlation, others (e.g., Bleak & Frederick) report no significant relationship. This discrepancy indicates that superstition is a multidimensional construct influenced by a complex interplay of cultural background, emotional regulation, personal upbringing, and cognitive style rather than a single variable such as religious identity.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that superstition persists because it satisfies both psychological needs (reducing fear and uncertainty) and cultural functions (maintaining shared norms and identity). Although modern environments differ significantly from ancestral conditions, the underlying cognitive mechanisms that support superstitious thinking remain active. Therefore, understanding superstition through an interdisciplinary lens—combining cognitive, cultural and evolutionary perspectives—provides a more comprehensive explanation of why these beliefs endure and how they shape human behaviour in daily life.

Conclusion.

The findings of the study demonstrate that superstition is fundamentally linked to human responses to fear, uncertainty and perceived threats. Throughout the literature, superstitious beliefs consistently emerge as psychological tools used to create a sense of stability when individuals feel unable to predict or control events in their environment. Such beliefs may temporarily reduce stress, regulate emotional tension and provide a symbolic framework through

which people interpret ambiguous situations. In this sense, superstition functions as an adaptive coping mechanism, particularly in contexts where reliable information is limited or outcomes are unpredictable.

Despite these adaptive benefits, the review also highlights the potential negative consequences of excessive reliance on superstitious thinking. Over-dependence on rituals or irrational beliefs can distort decision-making, reinforce false patterns, and limit individual agency by discouraging engagement in beneficial or necessary activities. In modern, information-rich societies, such patterns can lead to inefficiency, avoidant behaviour and unnecessary psychological distress.

A deeper understanding of the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying superstition—such as fear-induced pattern detection, attribution biases and perceived lack of control—can contribute to more effective educational, psychological and social interventions. Recognizing why individuals turn to superstition allows researchers, educators and policymakers to develop strategies that encourage critical thinking, emotional resilience and informed decision-making in uncertain situations. Ultimately, the study reaffirms that superstition is not merely a cultural artifact but a complex psychological phenomenon rooted in human attempts to cope with threat, fear and the unknown.

REFERENCES

1. Anderson, J. R. (1990). Cognitive psychology and its implications. New York: Freeman.
2. Astafurova, T. N., & Olyanich, A. V. (2019). Semiolinguistics of Protective Communication
3. Boyer, P. (1994). The naturalness of religious ideas: A cognitive theory of religion. Berkeley: University of California Press.
4. Damisch, L., Stoberock, B., & Mussweiler, T. (2010), “Keep your fingers crossed!” How superstition improves performance. Psychological Science, 21(7), 1014-1020.https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610372631
5. Dawkins, R. (1998). Unweaving the rainbow: Science, delusion and the appetite for wonder. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
6. Frost, R. O., Krause, M. S., McMahon, M. J., Peppe, J., Evans, M., McPhee, A. E., & Holden, M. (1993). Compulsivity and Superstitiousness. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 31, 423-425.
7. Fugelsang, J., & Dunbar, K. (2004). Inferring the causes of events: Causal reasoning in humans. Psychonomic Bulletin & Review, 11(4), 787-806.
8. Gallup, G. H., & Newport, F. (1990). Belief in the psychic and paranormal widespread among Americans. Gallup New Service, 55, 1-7.
9. Gigerenzer, G., et al. (1999). Simple heuristics that make us smart. New York: Oxford University Press.
10. Jahoda, G. (1969). The psychology of superstition. London: Allan Lane, the Penguin Press.
11. Killeen, P. R. (1978). Superstitious key pecking in pigeons. Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior, 30(2), 261-274.
12. Rashidova, G. (2025, October). SUPERSTITIONS AS A REFLECTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY. In *CONFERENCE OF INNOVATIVE HORIZONS IN SCIENCE & ENGINERING* (Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 123-124).
13. Skinner, B. F. (1948). 'Superstition' in the pigeon. Journal of Experimental Psychology, 38, 168-172.