Observational Study: Crowns versus Rotundas

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Superstitious beliefs have been around for over a thousand years and have been found in most cultures and usually have a tendency to vary between cultures. There are many surveys and polls that show that magical and superstitious beliefs still continue to thrive in today’s society (Wiseman & Watt, 2004, p. 291). A common superstition in the United Sates is the belief that knocking on wood prevents bad luck or that lucky charms increase good luck. These are demonstrations of two types of superstitions, which are negative and positive superstitions. Negative superstitions are avoided and are associated with superstitious beliefs that bring about harmful consequences, such as stepping on a crack. Positive superstitions are performed to increase someone’s luck, such as carrying around a lucky charm. Most of the time superstitions are harmless, but could be the result of irrational decisions, such as college students carrying around lucky charms instead of studying for exams. Also, people have a tendency to “differ in levels of superstitious beliefs, and these differences predict superstitious behavior” (Fluke, Webster, & Saucier, p. 101). Superstitions seem to reflect individual’s current circumstances and seem to change over time.

This observational study was conducted at a small, rural liberal arts university in a Mid-Atlantic state. The study was done on campus of this older liberal arts university that is predominantly female. At this particular liberal arts university stepping on the black crowns that are scattered on the campus was considered to bring someone good luck. However, stepping on the rotundas that are scattered on the campus was considered to have the opposite affect and apparently prevents students from graduating on time. The study investigated two different observations taking place on a Tuesday and a Wednesday of the same week at the same time. The first observations that were made were to investigate who went out of their way to step on the crown. These observations were made at 11 o’clock on a Tuesday and a Wednesday. The second observations that were made were who went out of their way to avoid one of the rotunda’s on campus. These observations were made at 12 o’clock on the same Tuesday and Wednesday.

During the first observation session, the researcher sat outside on a bench behind the university’s student union, where students go to eat, study, and attend class inside. The researcher had a view of the seating area behind the student union and to the right of the student union was a brick library. Behind the bench was a large building and this was one of the university’s dormitories. The researcher observed students, faculty, and staff walk up and down the steep stairs that are to the left of the student union. This spot was selected because right before the stairs was a crown and it was an ideal spot to watch and observe who stepped on the crown and who did not step on the crown. The researcher chose roughly 11 O’clock, because massive groups of individuals were scattered throughout the campus trying to make it to their class and some were getting out of class.

The researcher found that the Tuesday and Wednesday observations had the same results for who stepped and did not step on the crown. On Tuesday it was overcast, grey, and misting and on Wednesday there were blue skies and it was warm and sunny. The researcher observed groups walk up to the crown and noticed if it was a group of female students the majority would all step on the crown. They would approach the crown and get into a jumbled line and step on it. Also, if one individual in that group didn’t step on the crown after all the members in the group, that individual would go back and step on the crown. However, if there was a crowd or group behind them or they looked like they were in a rush this was not found to be the case. The researcher found that when a group of male students approached the crown they would not go out of their way to step on it. This was shown to be the case whether there was a group behind them or not or whether they looked like they were in a time crunch. A few in that group would step on it, but those who did not step on it in that group did not go back to that crown. Also, when a group of older individuals both male and female approached the crown they did not go out of their way to step on it. Then the researcher observed the individuals who were walking alone and noticed that more young females then young males stepped on the crown. Although, the researcher noticed there was only a slight difference between young males and females that stepped on the crown and those that did not step on the crown overall. However, when the researcher observed an older individual they only stepped on the crown if it was in their pathway, but did not go out of their way to step on it. There was no difference between older males and females that did and did not step on the crown. There was a significant difference between older individuals and younger individuals that stepped on the crown.

Then on that same misty Tuesday and sunny Wednesday the researcher stood in front of an admissions building and across from a large empty lot that use to contain one of the university’s dormitories. Also, to the researcher left was a fountain that was in front of two buildings where classes are held. The researcher found that the Tuesday and Wednesday observations results were identical for who avoided the rotundas. It was observed that individual walking alone had a tendency to avoid the rotunda. However, it was observed that more females than males were less likely to avoid the rotundas. Also, females would walk closer to the rotunda than males. Males would usually walk closer to one side of the walkway. Faculty and staff did not go out of their way to avoid the Rotunda and this was the same for both males and females. However, the researcher did observe two older gentlemen in a golf cart that seemed to swerve to avoid the rotunda, this was when there were no students and the walkway was clear. Also, the researcher found that when students were in groups they were less likely to avoid the rotunda compared to when they were alone and this was the same for both female and male students.
 The researcher’s theory is that having a low self-efficacy and little confidence in one’s abilities leads someone to be more superstitious. According to the observations when it comes to negative superstations young females were more likely to step on the rotunda and have a higher self-efficacy and were less likely to be superstitious. However, males seem to have a lower self-efficacy when it came to negative superstitions and were found to be more likely to avoid the rotunda. However, when it came to positive superstitions instead females seemed to have a lower self-efficacy and were more likely to step on the crown than males. Moreover, older individuals seemed to have a higher self-efficacy and were less likely to go out of their way to step on the crowns and less likely to go out of their way to avoid the rotundas.

Prior research has found that poor psychological adjustment, such as low self-efficacy correlates with superstitious beliefs. It has been found that individuals, who are more anxious and have a need for control, are more likely to have superstitious or paranormal beliefs. Self-report surveys on superstitious beliefs that cause good luck were assessed by participants rating statement, such as I cross my fingers. Also, negative outcomes or bad luck was assessed by participants rating statements such as “I would be anxious about breaking a mirror because it is thought to cause bad luck” (Wiseman & Watt (2004), pg.292). It has been found that individuals who believe in positive superstitions more than negative superstitions have reported experiencing more life satisfaction. It is assumed that superstitions will change an individual’s destiny for the better and the more superstitious someone is the more someone believes that they will have a better chance at avoiding bad luck and increasing good luck. Therefore, negative and positive superstitions are shown to be positively correlated with the notion that luck can eventually change and help one feel a greater sense of control over the uncertainties in their life. Those with a more internal locus of control (LOC) believe that they have control over their own lives, while those with a more external LOC believe that external forces have greater control of their lives. Those with a higher desire show an increase in superstitious behavior during stressful situations, such as an upcoming exam (Fluke, Webster, & Saucier, 2014, p. 105).

Moreover, gender usually has a significant main effect, which is females have a tendency to partake in more superstitious behavior than males. Research has found that females are more likely to have positive superstitious beliefs than males. There is typically not a significant difference in negative beliefs between males and females. Moreover, neuroticism plays a part in how superstitious an individual is, the more neurotic one is the more superstitious beliefs that individuals holds (Wiseman & Watt, 2004, p. 296). Age seems to fluctuate in whether or not superstition increases or decreases, research has found that it may depend on the individual’s situation. Even though past research has found that superstitions increases with age, it could vary depending on certain traditions that specific communities hold near to them (Safaei & Khodabakhsh, 2012, p. 246).

Also in explaining positive superstitions groups are usually more superstitious then individuals. It is not the case for negative superstitions that groups are more superstitious, and there is not a whole lot of research that focuses on this. However, when in groups and faced with an obstacle such as a negative superstition members might experience deindividuation. This is “a psychological state in which inner restraints are lost when individuals are not seen or paid attention to as individuals” (Silke 2003, p. 493). Research has shown that a main factor of deindividuation is group presence and anonymity and it is possible that when it comes to negative superstitions walking in large groups contributes to individuals not caring if they partake in the negative superstition. This could be because individuals may believe that the effects of the negative superstitions do not affect groups as much as they affect individuals (Silke 2003, p. 494).

In conclusion, it was shown that young males and females differ in the level of superstitious behavior and the types of superstitions, such as positive and negative superstitions. The researcher saw that young males have a lower self-efficacy for negative superstitions as an anomaly because in past research there was not a significant difference in young males and females when it came to negative superstitions. However, the results showed that young females were more superstitious when it came to positive superstitions and this was similar to the results in other research studies. Moreover, the observations showed superstitions decreased with age, but past research studies have shown the opposite effect. However, even though the majority of older individuals at this liberal arts university were not superstitious there was an anomaly that occurred with two older gentlemen in a golf cart who seemed to serve out of the rotunda’s way.

**References**

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