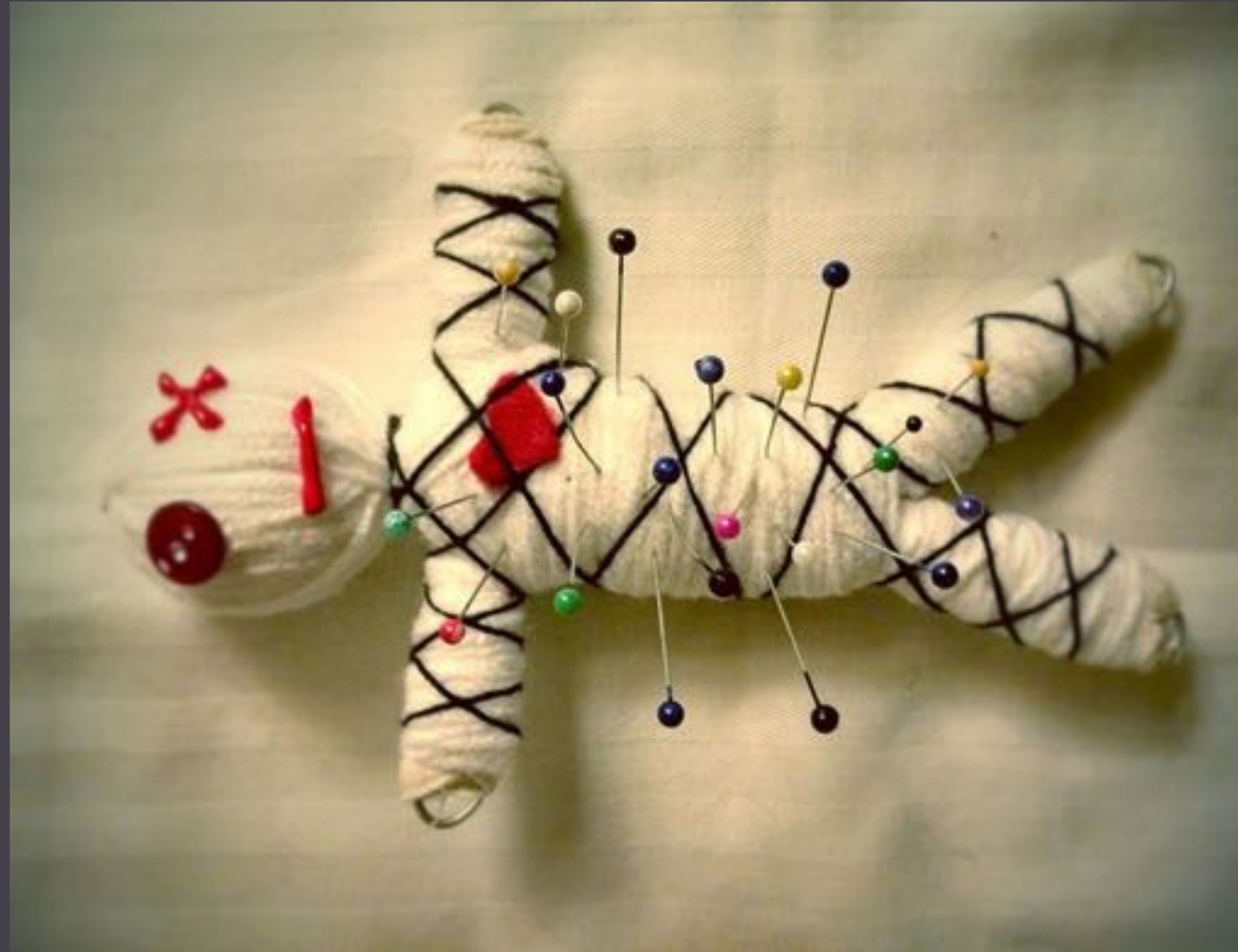


Superstition And Supernatural Beliefs (Pt. 2)



PSYCH 1101: DAY 34

PROF. DAVID PIZARRO
[CORNELLPSYCH.NET](http://cornellpsych.net)

Summary

- The human mind is built to detect patterns (even when none exist)
- We see “signal” in noise (the face of Jesus in toast, a meaningful message in random numbers)
- We interpret these patterns with elaborate causal theories
- Superstitious behaviors/beliefs (e.g. in sports)

But Why Do We Persist In Believing Them
Despite Evidence To The Contrary?

Confirmation Bias

- Favoring information consistent with your belief
- We attend to and remember information that proves us right

Belief In The Sports Illustrated 'Cover Jinx'

“The Sports Illustrated Cover Jinx is one of the biggest curses in the sports world. Some athletes were lucky enough to break the curse, but most athletes have been victims to it. These 10 cases are proof that the SI Cover Jinx strikes and strikes hard.”

2. Tom Brady



Robert Hanshaw-USA TODAY Sports

Release Date: September 1, 2008

New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady appeared on the cover of the 2008 NFL season preview issue. In his first game that season, Brady tore the ACL and MCL in his left knee minutes into the contest against the Kansas City Chiefs.

Belief In The Sports Illustrated 'Cover Jinx'

Notable incidences	[edit]
August 16, 1954: Braves third baseman Eddie Mathews is the first person to appear on the cover of <i>Sports Illustrated</i> . The Braves snapped a nine-game winning streak, and a broken hand later caused Mathews to miss seven games.	
January 21, 1955: Skier Jill Kinmont suffered a near-fatal crash at Alta, Utah the same week that she appeared on the cover, and was left paralyzed from the chest down.	
May 26, 1956 - Indy 500 winner Sam Swickert was featured on the cover. Less than three weeks later he died in a sprint car crash.	
November 18, 1957: Oklahoma Sooner Dendon Thomas appeared on the cover, along with others on the Sooner sideline, with the headline "Why Oklahoma is Unbeatable." The next game of that season Oklahoma lost to Notre Dame, ending their NCAA Division I record 47-game winning streak.	
May 26, 1958: Race car driver Pat O'Connor appeared on the cover. He died four days later on the first lap of the Indianapolis 500.	
October 31, 1960: Formula One world champion Jack Brabham appears on the cover. For the following season, Brabham found himself outclassed by a newer generation of cars, ^[4] as well retiring from a number of races. ^[5]	
February 13, 1961: 18-year-old Laurence Owen, the 1961 U.S. National and North American Figure Skating Champion appeared on the cover as "America's Most Exciting Girl Skater". On February 15, she and the rest of the U.S. figure skating team were in a plane crash near Brussels, Belgium while en route to the World Figure Skating Championships in Prague, Czechoslovakia.	
May 29, 1961: Johnny Boyd appears credited driving in preparation for the Indianapolis 500, he retired during the race with clutch problems. ^[6]	
May 1, 1967: Chaparral's Jim Hall, who appeared along with his Chaparral 2F on the cover, would go on to suffer from a number of mishaps for the rest of the decade. At the end of the season, that car found itself ineligible for competition through controversial rule changes. ^[7] For the following year, Hall collided with another car at the Stardust Grand Prix, ending his racing career effectively. In 1969, his Chaparral 2M suffered from a poor season and in 1970, the innovative ZJ fan-car, despite its performance, proved to be unreliable and following protests from competitors, was banned from competition at the end of the season. Hall and his team had to wait until the end of the decade for any success.	
May 13, 1968: Graham Hill appears driving the turbine-powered and four-wheel drive Lotus 55 in preparation for the Indianapolis 500. He crashed out during the race, his teammates retired the race with fuel shaft failure. ^[8] Turbine power and four-wheel was banned at the end of the season.	
June 8, 1969: Lee Trevino appeared on the cover as part of a preview to the U.S. Open. The defending champion failed to make the cut.	
June 7, 1971: Al Unser and Peter Revson appeared on the cover celebrating their 1st and 2nd titles. Shortly after this publication, Unser began his string of retirements for the rest of that season. ^[9]	
September 11, 1972: Two-time defending national champion Nebraska is featured on the cover of the college football preview edition with the headline "Nebraska Goes For Three Straight". The Huskers are upset in the very first game of the 1972 season UCLA, and finish 9-2-1. A similar occurrence takes place in 1996.	
June 27, 1976: Ken Norton appeared on the cover just prior to his third fight with Muhammad Ali, and lost a highly disputed decision.	
December 8, 1977: Earl Campbell and the 11-0 Texas Longhorns appeared on the cover. They lost their next game, the Cotton Bowl, to Notre Dame.	
June 5, 1978: Al Unser appeared on the cover celebrating his third win, for the next two races, he crashed out ^[10] and ran out of fuel. ^[11] However this jinx was short lived as he scored a win for the next round. ^[12]	
June 5, 1978: Ken Norton again appeared on the cover, this time before his first title defense against Larry Holmes, who beat him in a split decision by one single point.	
June 26, 1978: Andy North appears on the cover after winning the 1978 U.S. Open. He would not win another PGA Tour event for seven years, which was the 1985 U.S. Open (June 24, 1985). The second U.S. Open win would be his last PGA Tour win.	
August 7, 1978: Felix Rose appeared on the cover the same week that his 44-game hitting streak ended.	
November 20, 1978: Nebraska running back Rick Barnes is featured after the Cornhuskers defeat #1 ranked Oklahoma and appear headed towards a showdown with Penn State for the national championship. But they lose at home to unranked Missouri very next week, and are knocked out of the title picture. They are then forced to play a controversial rematch with Oklahoma in the Orange Bowl, which the revenge-minded Sooners win 31-24.	
June 7, 1982: Bower Derry Cooney appeared on the cover before his fight with Larry Holmes, who dispatched him in 13 rounds four days later.	
May 29, 1981: A. J. Foyt appeared on the cover with the headline "Foyt Goes for a Fifth 500". Despite starting third, he ended up finishing 13th. ^[13]	
September 14, 1981: Thomas Hearns was featured on the cover the week before his fight with Sugar Ray Leonard, who knocks him out in the 14th round.	
July 30, 1984: Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker Jack Lambert appeared on the cover with an interview with the headline "The Man of Steel." Lambert would miss most of the 1984 season with a full leg injury and subsequently retired.	
October 1, 1984: Nebraska running back Jeff Smith appears on the cover with the headline "The Big Red Machine" after the #1 ranked Huskers routed 8th-ranked UCLA 42-0 at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena. They lose the following week to an unranked Syracuse squad that finishes the season 8-5. Smith's senior season is eventually derailed by a re-injured ankle.	
June 3, 1985: Denny Sullivan earned his cover appearance following his remarkable "Sun and Win" victory at the Indy 500. A day prior to this appearance, he had already begun a string of retirements for another two months. ^{[14][15][16]}	
April 8, 1987: The Cleveland Indians, with Joe Carter and Gary Snyder, were featured in the cover with the headline "Indian Uprising", and being predicted as the best team in the American League. While both men would have a good season, the Indians themselves would have a dismal 61-101 season, the worst of any team that season.	
June 20, 1988: Michael Spinks appeared on the cover before his fight with Mike Tyson with the quote, "Don't count me out." Tyson promptly knocked him out, and into retirement, in just 31 seconds.	
September 28, 1988: Dwight Gooden appeared on the cover and went 6-for-30 in a two-week span.	
April 24, 1989: In the preview issue for the 1989 NFL Draft, football player Tony Mendenich was featured on the cover, with the label of "best offensive line prospect ever." ^[17] Mendenich has been widely regarded as a bust in the NFL. In fact, he would not appear on the cover again three years later under the headline "Incredible Bust." ^[18]	
May 8, 1989: Jon Peters of Brenham High School in Texas set the national high school record for games won by a pitcher, with a 51-0 record. The next game after the cover, he lost for the first (and only) time in his high school career. ^[19]	
June 5, 1989: After the Los Angeles Lakers swept the Phoenix Suns in the NBA Western Conference Finals to go undefeated to that point in the playoffs, that week's cover featured Lakers forward James Worthy with the word "BREEZY" in large letters, smaller letters, the caption: "James Worthy and the Lakers beat the Suns to go 11-0 in the playoffs." The Lakers would go on to lose in the 1989 NBA Finals, being swept 4-0 by the Detroit Pistons. ^[20]	
September 14, 1996: As they had been in 1972, Nebraska is the two-time defending national champion and is heavily favored to win a third. This time, running back Ahman Green is pictured with the headline: "Red Alert: Ahman Green and Nebraska Set Sights on a Third Straight National Title." The following week, the Huskers are shut out for the first time since 1973, 19-0 by Arizona State. Despite this early loss, the Huskers were still in position to play for the national title late in the season before a humiliating upset in the inaugural Big XII championship game to a four-loss Texas team.	
January 13, 1997: Mark Brunell of the Jacksonville Jaguars and Kerry Collins of the Carolina Panthers appeared on the cover as their respective teams advance to the AFC and NFC Championship Games. Both teams lost.	
March 3, 1997: Sugar Ray Leonard appears on the cover days before his comeback fight against Hector Camacho. Leonard would lose by TKO in the 8th round, ending his career.	
September 4, 2000: Ryan Leaf appeared on the cover with the headline "Back from the Brink" after a 24-20 win by his San Diego Chargers over the Arizona Cardinals characterizing his comeback as "an ascent from parish to possible standout pro	

One Explanation For The “Jinx”: Regression To The Mean

“It does not take much statistical sophistication to see how regression effects may be responsible for the belief in the Sports Illustrated jinx. Athletes’ performances at different times are imperfectly correlated. Thus, due to regression alone, we can expect an extraordinary good performance to be followed, on the average, by a somewhat less extraordinary performance. Athletes appear on the cover of Sports Illustrated when they are newsworthy—i.e., when their performance is extraordinary. Thus, an athlete’s superior performance in the weeks preceding a cover story is very likely to be followed by somewhat poorer performance in the weeks after.”

Gilovich, T. (1991). *How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason In Everyday Life*. New York: Free Press.

Doing It Right: Feynman's Phone Call



This Keeps Rituals From Dying

"A flurry of deaths by natural causes in the northern part of the country led to speculation about some new and unusual threat. It was not determined whether the increase...was within the normal fluctuation in the death rate that one can expect by chance. Instead, remedies for the problem were quickly put in place. In particular, a group of rabbis attributed the problem to the sacrilege of allowing women to attend funerals, formerly a forbidden practice. The remedy was a decree that subsequently barred women from funerals in the area. The decree was quickly enforced, and the rash of unusual deaths subsided" (Gilovich, 1991, pg. 28.)

What About The Supernatural?

One Explanation: We Are Motivated To Believe

THE PROBLEM:

- Life is hard
- There is evil all around and often evil people prosper and good people suffer
- We will die, and so will everyone we love
- There is no clear meaning to life

Motivational: Religion As Opiate

THE SOLUTION:

Believe in a hidden supernatural order that will make things right.

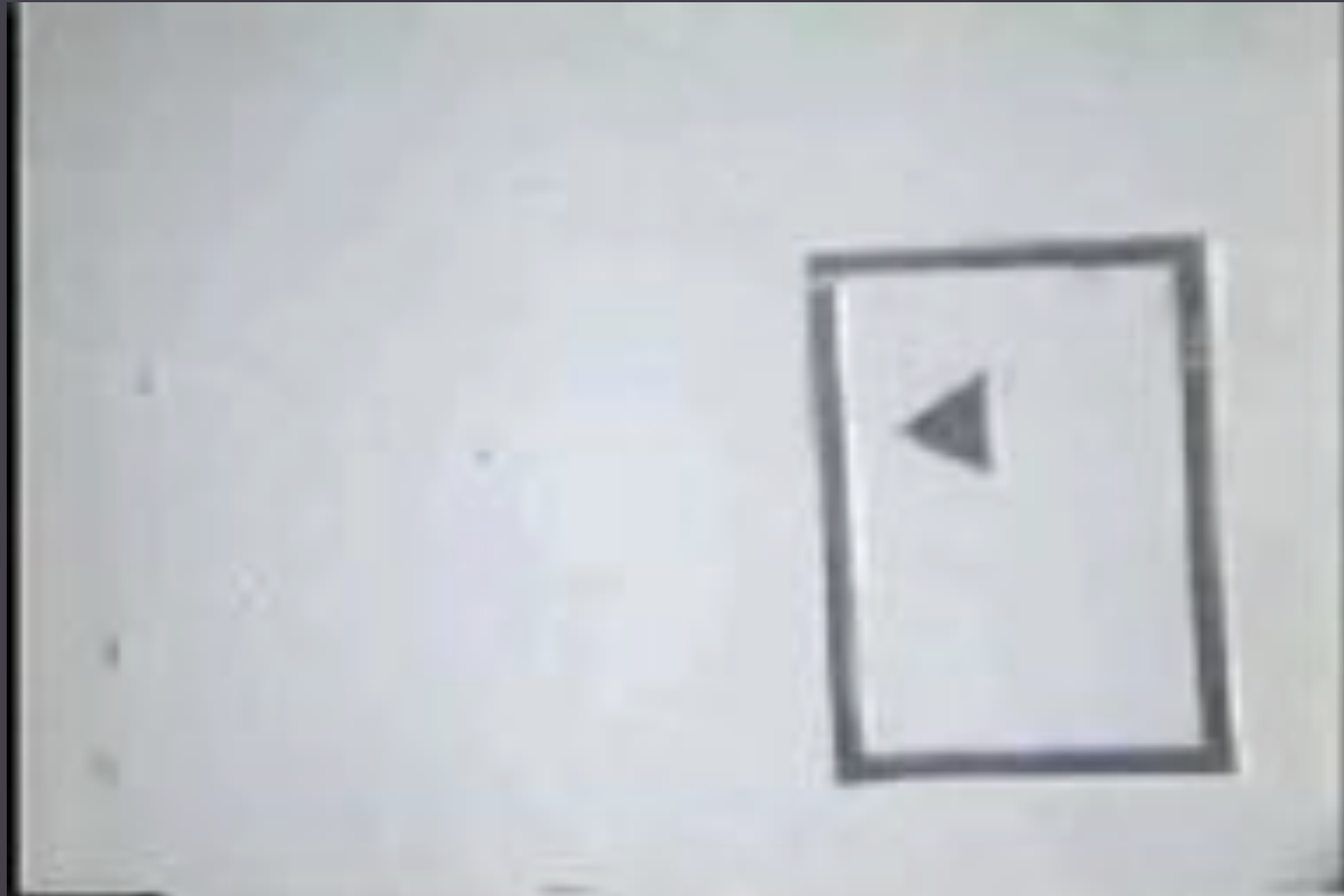
“They exorcise the terrors of nature, they .. reconcile men to the cruelty of Fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and they .. compensate them for the suffering and privations that a civilized life in common has imposed on them.”

-Sigmund Freud

A Second Explanation: Supernatural Beliefs As A Cognitive By-Product

- Combine our tendency to *see patterns* (even when there are none), *develop causal theories*, and *selectively attend to confirmatory evidence*
- AND
- Tendency to see *agency and intentionality* (even when there is none)
- ...

Heider & Simmel (1944)





“We See Faces In Clouds... Not Clouds In Faces”



Ultrasound of patient's testicles reveals startling image of a man in agony

Tumor stared right back at doctors

BY [DAVID BOROFF](#)

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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Belief In Supernatural Agents

- Tendency to over-see patterns, combined with
- Tendency to over-see agency/intentionality
- Perfect recipe for belief in supernatural agents
 - They “explain” causal patterns
 - Confirmation bias kicks-in and helps the belief persist
- Combined with naive dualism, easy belief in things like dead ancestors

**Belief In Supernatural Agents
Also Helps Maintain Moral Order**

Invisible Agents Maintain Moral Behavior

J Exp Child Psychol. 2011 Jul;109(3):311-20. doi: 10.1016/j.jecp.2011.02.003. Epub 2011 Mar 5.

"Princess Alice is watching you": children's belief in an invisible person inhibits cheating.

Piazza J¹, Bering JM, Ingram G.

⊕ Author information

Abstract

Two child groups (5-6 and 8-9 years of age) participated in a challenging rule-following task while they were (a) told that they were in the presence of a watchful invisible person ("Princess Alice"), (b) observed by a real adult, or (c) unsupervised. Children were covertly videotaped performing the task in the experimenter's absence. Older children had an easier time at following the rules but engaged in equal levels of purposeful cheating as the younger children. Importantly, children's expressed belief in the invisible person significantly determined their cheating latency, and this was true even after controlling for individual differences in temperament. When "skeptical" children were omitted from the analysis, the inhibitory effects of being told about Princess Alice were equivalent to having a real adult present. Furthermore, skeptical children cheated only after having first behaviorally disconfirmed the "presence" of Princess Alice. The findings suggest that children's belief in a watchful invisible person tends to deter cheating.

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[Indexed for MEDLINE]



Conclusion

- We are likely to over-attribute intentionality and causality in the natural world
 - This gives rise to superstitions
 - And to attributions of “persons” or “agents” whom we cannot see
 - These agents enhance cooperation, and promise to punish evildoers
- These basic features of our cognition...
- Combined with basic motivational processes (keep evildoers in line, reward good people, desire to live after death)...
- Give us a recipe for creatures who are likely to hold a wide variety of supernatural concepts and superstitions