Children's Superstitions: British and Canadian

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A 100-item test covering nine areas of superstitious belief was devised and administered along with ten control items to 1,749 children in Britain and Canada. On the average, British children agreed with six more (in total of 90) superstitions than the Canadian group. Younger children were markedly more superstitious than older; girls were slightly more superstitious than boys; academically inclined children were less superstitious than others. A science-based education has little effect on superstition in this sample. The implications for Canadian education are discussed.

On a conçu et fait subir à 1,749 élèves du Canada et de l'Angleterre un test de 100 affirmations ayant trait à 9 "champs" de superstitions populaires. Les enfants anglais croyaient, en moyenne, "à six superstitions de plus (sur un total de 90?)" que les canadiens. Les plus jeunes enfants étaient plus superstitieux que les plus vieux et cela de façon significative; les filles légèrement plus superstitieuses que les garçons; les enfants qui réussissent bien en classe étaient moins superstitieux que les autres. Pourtant, les cours de sciences n'ont aucune influence sur les croyances superstitieuses de cette population "échantillon." On y traite de ce que ces études impliquent pour les systèmes d'éducation au Canada.

In their classic study of "The Lore and Language of School Children" the Opies (1959) point out that street games, rhymes, riddles, rituals and beliefs are found at the most widely separated places. Juvenile folk lore is invented and travels great distances with lightning speed. The process of diffusion in amplitude and velocity is little short of miraculous – so say the Opies. Many jingles and beliefs survive over centuries, even millenia, and appear in areas far removed from their place of origin.

The present study seeks to discover common beliefs of children in Britain and Canada, beliefs regarded by educated adults as popular superstitions. The test instrument used was originally devised for Scottish children. The hypothesis under test is that there is a basic similarity of children's beliefs in different societies, especially in the area referred to as "popular wisdom."

In lieu of a definition three defining characteristics may be mentioned concerning superstitious beliefs that possess a certain "primitive" quality pointing to a once coherent system of thought: (1) as a common element, they assume a ubiquitous confrontation of the forces of good and evil, which can be controlled and made use of by magic and witchcraft; (2) superstitious beliefs posit a non-existent causal connection between events, the connection being a mental association based on analogy or on some accidental acausal synchronicity in a historical event; (3) the

superstitious belief survives by virtue of the misconceived notion of action-at-a-distance or a wish, an idea, an intention, or by the acceptance of some fictitious teleological principle.

The functional significance of these unfounded beliefs, and the reason for their continued survival long after the disappearance of the system of thought from which they are derived, is that they contain, or otherwise cope with, individual and group anxieties. Long after belief in an invisible realm of malevolent, anti-human forces or entities has disappeared from the rational thought of educated adults, we can observe elements of unreason controlling human behaviour in such evasive rituals as knocking on wood or refusing to sit thirteen at a table. Incoherent and heterogeneous omens, rituals, avoidances, spells and counter-spells, divinations etc. are universal even amongst educated people. They concede, when challenged, that the beliefs are "silly" and "childish" and claim they are only "half-believed." In fact, although readily transmitted from child-to-child, the survival of superstitions is due more to adults (parents, and teachers too perhaps).

RATIONALE OF THE SUPERSTITION TEST

Using existing tests (especially Zapf's 1938a, 1938b, 1945) and other collections as sources, a new test was devised. This took the form of 100 short simple statements couched in the form "This person thinks ... " and sampled 10 dimensions of belief. The statements were so organized that every tenth assertion belonged to the same dimension. To help conceal the real nature of the test, it was called simply an "Information Test" and every tenth statement was factual, for example: "This person thinks that it usually clouds over before it rains." As a check, two forms (AB and BA) were devised, the two halves being presented in a different sequence. In testing complete class groups these forms were handed to alternate children. The procedure was intended to discover whether some subjects might see through the test disguise, recognize that the beliefs were actually superstitions, and change their answers. This did not happen. The answer sheet was made up so that 10 scores could be easily generated for each respondent. Adding the nine dimensions of superstitious beliefs provided the total score. Each respondent was asked to give his or her name, sex and age.

Thus, a number of checks were built in to ensure that we are not sampling merely random responses. First, the neutral and impersonal form of the questions, inviting agreement or disagreement with some hypothetical individual, was intended to exclude a critical attitude about the belief on the grounds that it was "superstitious." The fact that this device was successful is shown by the fact that even adult students, where their answers might be checked by the instructor, often accepted large numbers of items as representing their views. Second, the every-tenth or

factual items revealed whether the respondent was actually doing the test in a responsible manner – these 10 items should all be accepted if the subject understood the test and answered conscientiously. The existence of this "lie" scale enabled us to test quite young children (nine years old), as well as educationally sub-normal children, using a group method. Fewer than 20 answer sheets had to be discarded because the factual items (or the split halves) revealed some discrepancy. Third, the use of matched versions (AB and BA) enabled us to check whether insight as to the nature of the test altered the pattern of responses – there was no evidence of this happening in any of the cases tested. The test showed very high reliability (r = .90), correlating the split-half scores.

Over a period, as the opportunity arose, experienced teachers were asked to test intact classes in their own school or in other accessible schools. The full range, from educationally sub-normal children at special schools, through primary school, secondary and grammar schools, to technical college, was sampled in Britain. In Canada children from four comprehensive schools were tested. The total number of subjects involved was 1,749 distributed as shown in Table 1.

The British sample, reflecting the nature of the educational system, is much more heterogeneous than the Canadian. This is true of the educational levels included and also of age. In age distribution, the British sample is more extended at both ends of the scale (Table 2).

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

IBM cards were punched for each respondent recording responses to the 90 statements. From these, sub-totals for each of the nine dimensions and the total score were generated. Various comparisons of the sub-totals and total scores were then made by age, sex, nationality and educational group. The differences were tested for significance by analysis of variance. In addition, a factor analysis was made by inter-correlating the nine dimensions. A separate analysis was made of the British and Canadian samples (Table 3).

British children of the same age are more superstitious than Canadian. On the average, between 12 and 17 years, there is about six points difference. Girls tend to be more superstitious than boys in both groups at all ages. The sex difference in the British sample is less than in the Canadian and, in fact, is not significant. The age differences are significant at a high level.

As far as age is concerned, in the British sample there are different transition points for boys and girls. With boys, at ages 10 and 16 there are two breakpoints; with girls, there is one breakpoint at age 19. In Canadian boys and girls the breakpoint is at age 16 and is a much smaller decrease. In other words, in terms of this test, Canadian children are more likely to disbelieve common superstitions at a much earlier age than their British

TABLE 1

The sample tested: classified by education and sex

British				*Canadian*				
Group	*Boys*	*Girls*		*Group*	*Boys*	*Girls*		
(1) Single-sex Grammar	105	158		(1) Comprehensive High School I	—	149		
(2) Coeducational Grammar	71	72		(2) Comprehensive High School II	75	125		
(3) Secondary – Urban	80	59		(3) Comprehensive High School III	70	82		
(4) Secondary – Rural	36	36		(4) Comprehensive High School IV	81	69		
(5) Primary Schools	124	146						
(6) ESN Schools	22	9						
(7) Technical College	101	79						
	539	559	(1,098)		226	425	(651)	[1,749]

NOTE: total of boys and girls according to nationality in parentheses; grand total Canadian and British boys and girls in brackets

TABLE 2
The sample tested: classified by age and sex

	British		*Canadian*		
Age in Years	*Male*	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*	*Totals*
9	41	34	—	—	75
10	32	48	—	—	80
11	81	69	—	—	150
12	60	57	20	37	174
13	105	111	62	132	410
14	75	75	57	80	287
15	22	38	17	46	123
16	15	35	56	34	140
17	42	57	13	70	182
18	29	23	1	22	75
19	16	4	—	2	22
20+	21	8	—	2	31
Grand Totals	539	559	226	425	1,749

TABLE 3
Nationality, age and sex Differences

	British			*Canadian*		
Age	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
9	39.2	41.9	40.56	—	—	—
10	27.1	28.3	27.70	—	—	—
11	30.2	27.3	28.76	—	—	—
12	23.1	28.7	25.91	17.90	20.89	19.40
13	23.4	26.0	24.58	17.52	21.02	19.27
14	24.3	28.6	26.44	16.98	22.78	19.88
15	28.8	22.2	25.53	17.12	21.54	19.33
16	18.3	20.2	19.28	17.98	18.74	18.36
17	17.1	20.0	18.52	12.00	13.39	12.69
18	16.4	19.8	18.14	—	—	—
19+	12.2	12.3	12.26	—	—	—
	23.64	25.04	24.30	16.58	19.72	18.68

ANOVA	*British*	*Canadian*
Sex Differences	$p = .132$	$p = .003$
Age Differences	$p = .000001$	$p = .002$
	National difference	$p = .0001$
	Interaction	$p = .083$

cohorts. The difference is of the order of five years between the samples in "superstition age."

The question arises whether this is because particular superstitions are unknown to the Canadian children, or whether British children *are* basically more superstitious. We incline to the latter view on the basis of a detailed item analysis of the test and its nine dimensions (Tables 4 and 5).

It will be seen that British children generally tend in all areas to be more superstitious (Table 4). However, the proportion of acceptance of individual items is often markedly different in the two groups. Of the 90 items, 33 show differences in acceptance of more than 10%, nine show a difference of more than 20% and three show a difference of more than 30% (Table 5), as between national groups.

It is interesting to note particular beliefs which are acceptable or relatively unacceptable. More than 50% of both groups accept the following: that we are born with a conscience (No. 3); that we can be forced to commit criminal acts while hypnotised (No. 21); that we should say "Bless you!" when someone sneezes (No. 35); that if we had enough will-power we could overcome any difficulty (No. 51); that one is often guided by an "inner voice" which no one else hears (No. 53); that the wishbone of a fowl can be used as an augury of good luck (No. 85).

On the other hand, about 95% of both groups reject the following: dipping of a tooth in salt for good luck (No. 5); counting sneezes (No. 56); that Friday is a bad day (No. 67); that if a picture falls off the wall it is a forecast of death (No. 38).

On 37 questions the British sample makes substantially greater scores than the Canadian – from twice as many to five or six times as many, in proportion to numbers. On the other hand, there are five statements where Canadians accept a specific belief substantially more often than do the British. These are: an unusually thick coat of fur in animals predicts a very cold winter (No. 2); a person may be forced to commit criminal acts while hypnotised (No. 21); some people can read your thoughts by just looking at you (No. 31); if we had enough will-power we could overcome any difficulty (No. 51); we can make a person turn round by staring at his back (No. 91). These beliefs (apart from No. 2) fall in the same dimension – they have to do with the power of an idea, wish or intention. These various differences argue for cultural differences as the major factor accounting for the relative scores of the five groups.

The fact that the British sample was drawn from different educational levels enables us to assess the effect of academic ability on superstition. The evidence is clear: grammar school and technical college populations score much less, on the average, than do the children from a relatively non-academic background. This may reflect parental, socio-economic and/or peer influence. It probable has no connection with the school as such, except with reference to these factors.

Another question is whether a science education affects superstitious

TABLE 4
Specific dimensions of belief compared

Dimension	*Description*	*British Score**	*Canadian Score**
(1)	The power of thought and intention	3.48	3.39
(2)	Misconceptions about nature	3.68	2.70
(3)	Superstitions about spirits, devils, angels	3.25	2.60
(4)	Occult predestination	2.48	2.02
(5)	Superstitious Rituals	3.33	1.89
(6)	Lucky or unlucky numbers	1.64	1.15
(7)	Misfortunes following events	3.01	2.04
(8)	Omens and Portents	2.85	1.84
(9)	Misconceptions about physiognomy	1.58	1.05
Grand Mean		25.30	18.68

*The maximum possible score in each dimension is 10.

TABLE 5
Percentages accepting each superstitious belief

Tens	*0*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*Average*
British											
1's	18.5	29.6	57.7	35.5	19.8	62.7	10.8	50.3	38.6	24.3	34.8
2's	37.1	15.1	64.4	22.3	18.3	39.2	55.5	65.9	25.6	24.6	36.8
3's	60.8	18.0	38.6	26.6	19.3	55.6	27.9	37.7	23.3	16.8	32.5
4's	19.5	21.6	36.8	18.3	32.4	21.8	21.1	28.7	12.0	35.8	24.8
5's	5.6	36.4	27.5	69.6	14.8	35.4	25.1	27.8	74.0	16.5	33.3
6's	17.1	26.6	18.7	15.5	10.7	9.7	23.6	12.4	17.7	11.5	16.4
7's	27.2	36.4	32.0	41.1	22.1	42.9	9.2	29.5	40.9	19.9	30.1
8's	37.5	23.0	10.0	12.0	14.5	10.7	8.8	13.8	10.3	17.0	15.8
9's	19.0	25.2	13.1	30.4	38.8	50.0	30.2	11.9	25.4	41.4	28.5
Canadian											
1's	9.4	27.2	73.9	56.7	5.2	76.2	7.4	23.2	15.4	45.0	33.9
2's	51.8	3.4	30.4	11.7	11.1	41.5	43.5	42.1	20.7	13.5	27.0
3's	63.4	20.1	22.0	19.7	8.4	52.2	21.8	19.0	17.1	16.1	26.0
4's	14.3	24.0	41.5	24.9	14.1	17.2	24.0	24.9	6.0	11.5	20.2
5's	0.8	5.8	23.3	55.8	10.8	8.9	3.7	10.1	59.3	10.6	18.9
6's	16.1	32.1	9.7	3.4	5.4	1.8	11.1	7.8	14.9	12.3	11.5
7's	8.3	26.0	41.5	26.3	15.5	19.5	3.5	22.4	29.2	12.1	20.4
8's	38.1	15.2	8.1	6.6	2.9	3.8	4.6	10.3	2.8	12.3	10.5
9's	6.8	12.1	7.5	29.6	14.3	44.9	30.3	6.1	9.2	22.1	18.4

NOTE: British N = 1,098; Canadian N = 651.

TABLE 6
Educational level and superstitious beliefs (British Sample)

Group	*Type*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*
1	Technical Colleges	15.18	18.59	16.89
2	Single-sex Grammar Schools	17.71	21.66	19.69
3	Co-educational Grammar	16.28	23.42	21.98
4	Secondary Schools – Urban	30.37	32.05	31.21
5	Secondary Schools – Rural	30.00	33.11	31.56
6	Primary Schools	33.90	31.45	32.57
7	Special Schools (E.S.N.)	39.59	42.22	40.90

ANOVA: Type of School p less than .001. In general, differences of 3 points and above are significant. Interaction effect is not significant.

TABLE 7
Average superstition scores of subject groups

British (N = 179)			*Canadian* (N = 200)		
Group No.	*Subject*	*Average*	*Group No.*	*Subject*	*Average*
(1)	Catering	22.29	(1)	Commercial	18.96
(2)	Social Studies	17.05	(2)	Social Studies	15.00
(3)	English & General	15.91	(3)	Biology & Maths	13.77
(4)	Science & Engineering	13.39	(4)	Literature	12.05
Average Score		16.56	Average Score		15.09

ANOVA:
Subject differences $p = .004$
National difference, this sample $p = .163$
Interaction, subject by nationality $p = .237$

beliefs. To answer this question, those over 16 years of age were classified by their main subject (Table 7).

The groups are comparable in age and contain approximately the same number of males and females (except that the British science group is predominantly male). The conclusion indicated is that the natural and physical sciences have little effect when compared with literature and English studies. This is in sharp contrast to the national differences. The social sciences yield average scores significantly *higher* than the humanities. Whether this is an effect of the subject-matter (or method of teaching) or whether there is a selective process, the fact that less critical students choose the social sciences and practical subjects, and more critical students choose mathematics, science and literature, cannot be decided from the figures alone. However, it can be stated with assurance that any effect which science, mathematics and literature may have on superstitious belief is by no means automatic. This is shown by the considerable

TABLE 8
Factor saturations: British and Canadian

Dimension	*Definition*	*Groups*	
		British	*Canadian*
(1)	The power of thought, wish and intention	.675	.726
(2)	Misconceptions about nature	.735	.614
(3)	Superstitions about spirits, devils, angels	.707	.617
(4)	Occult predestination	.804	.785
(5)	Superstitious rituals	.747	.710
(6)	Lucky or unlucky numbers	.747	.687
(7)	Misfortunes following events	.791	.751
(8)	Omens and portents	.782	.773
(9)	Misconceptions about physiognomy	.791	.734
Percentage of Variance Accounted for		51.18	45.78

range of scores in each of these groups: English, Literature and General (from 0–43); Science, Maths and Engineering (from 0–60); Social Studies (from 0–47); Catering, Shorthand and Typing (from 3–50).

The British students shown in Table 7 (n = 179) also completed the Crown Word Connection List. This is a measure of neurotic anxiety. This test is used as a screening device. The subject is presented with 50 words to each of which two associations are given, to choose one. The responses were initially selected from those typical of hospitalized neurotics and a sample of normal people. Split-half reliability is in the region, r = .80. The correlation between anxiety and superstition tests is significant (r = 0.25). In other words, there is a low but positive association between neurotic anxiety and the number of superstitious beliefs accepted.

A factor analysis was carried out to discover the structure of superstitious beliefs in the two samples. The British and Canadian scores on the nine dimensions of superstition (Table 8) were intercorrelated.

It is gratifying that only one factor is revealed. The test clearly measures superstitious belief and nothing else. The general factor accounts for approximately 50% of the standardized differences in response in each of the two samples. The remainder of the variance is explained by factors specific to each of the nine dimensions as well as to errors of measurement. The latter (error) is not very great, as shown by the split-half reliability of the whole test, r = 0.90.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

It might be argued that the cause of lower scores by Canadian children is simple – they may never have heard of particular superstitions. This

argument gains some support from the data on educationally sub-normal children. Their scores *increase* with age. Perhaps this means that they do not assimilate the culture of the group until their mental growth brings them into the "superstitious years." However, examination of the Canadian responses shows only nine statements where the acceptance rate is less than 5%. These relate to dipping a tooth in salt, the snake's tail, counting fish, a falling star, counting sneezes, "first footing" on New Year's Eve, touching wood, Friday as an unlucky day, and a dog howling at night. Only one of these appears localized in origin; four are very common superstitions (falling star, touching wood, Friday, a dog howling); of the others, "dipping a tooth in salt" and counting sneezes, are not generally accepted by the British group either. Superstitions about the snake's tail living until sunset and the bad luck associated with counting fish seem better known to the British children. The consensus of a dozen teachers indicated that Canadian children, unless of Scottish origin, are unlikely to have heard of superstitions connected with New Year; the frequency of acceptance of these does not support this opinion. Making all possible allowances, and taking account of the patterns of response (Table 5), we conclude that Canadian children are significantly less superstitious than British. The difference in score is of the order of six points.

There is considerable overlap between the groups. More than 30% in each accept 17 of the 90 superstitions offered. As examples, shared superstitions are about dreams, a red sky at night, we are predestined to fill certain positions in life, it is unlucky to wear bridal clothes before the wedding day, some people can read your thoughts, will-power enables us to overcome any difficulty, squirrels can foresee a hard winter, "inner voices" speak to us, a straight glance is a guarantee of honesty, porcupines shoot out their quills when angered, a person with red hair has a bad temper, and pulling a wishbone makes the wish come true.

Comparing the results of this study with earlier studies of children's superstitions, it seems clear that the level of superstitious beliefs has hardly changed since the 1930s. It is not possible to make direct comparisons since our instrument was devised specially for this study. Neither does it seem appropriate to give a digest of the literature. It is characteristic of this area that most of the material is survey data, only now of historical interest.

The tremendous advances in science and technology, the increasing sums spent on popular education, the spread of affluence to broader sections of the community, the pervasive influence of the mass media have little or no influence in decreasing this residue of intellectual rubbish transmitted to our children. It would be interesting if we could discover whether and which of these (education, affluence, media) substantially *increase* the total volume of superstitious belief and practice.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In general, the findings of this study support the results of earlier work. There are clear indications that little has changed over the past 30 or 40 years – contrary to Dudycha's (1950; 1966) findings in 1950 on college freshmen. The dearth of work over the past 30 years makes it difficult to detect long-term trends.

There is no evidence that education has an effect. The decline of superstition with age is probably a product of general maturity rather than of the educational process. This should be a matter of concern to Canadian teachers. ("Spot checks" in graduate courses indicate a high degree of superstitious beliefs in some members of this group.) The fact that scientific education does little to reduce superstitious belief is extremely disquieting. It raises questions about the quality and the relevance of teaching in this area. The laissez-passer approach to superstition, which seems characteristic of contemporary educators, implies that reduction of scores with age represents the taking-over of the older group's culture. This is a matter of dropping the cruder and sillier superstitions rather than applying rational analysis to belief and behaviour. Whatever the reason, there is a marked decline in declared superstitious belief with increasing age except with educationally subnormal children in Special Schools. Here there is a marked increase.

The evidence is clear that Canadian children are considerably less superstitious than British children; the reasons are obscure. It may be that the Canadian children (mostly second- or third-generation immigrants from Europe) are increasingly cut off from the older, sub-cultural beliefs in witchcraft, portents and omens, irrational rituals. In the older tradition, these are transmitted afresh to each generation in children's literature, fairy tales and orally transmitted culture. This theory, however, is too broad and general. It does not explain why Canadian children accept particular superstitions in greater number than do the English children.

There is evidence (correlation of superstition test with Crown test) that in the older subjects, superstition is related to neurotic anxiety. It would be interesting to discover the nature of the connection, whether it is to be found with younger children, whether it applies only to certain kinds of superstitions or whether it is general in its effects.

The data provide no support for the belief that rural children are more superstitious than urban children. The two Cambridgeshire Village Colleges and the three secondary schools (their urban equivalent) have virtually the same average scores and the same frequency distributions.

Finally, something should be said about the reliability and validity of a paper-and-pencil test of superstitious beliefs. The various built-in consistency checks indicate that the written test has a high degree of reliability.

There is a consistent pattern of responses which argues for the honest reporting of belief. It is possible that the subjects are over-responding to the suggestion that there is nothing harmful or silly in accepting such beliefs. What seems likely, in light of Zapf's (1939) experiment, is that what a paper-and-pencil test provides is, at best, a minimal estimate of the number of unfounded beliefs which children continue to accept. As Marmor (1956) has said: "We cannot expect superstitious practices to disappear or even diminish as a necessary result of advances in science and technology. Indeed, we might see an opposite effect as man's feelings of helplessness and insecurity increase as a result of these developments."

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Ein Test mit 100 Posten, der neun Gebiete des Aberglaubens umfaßte, wurde geplant und zusammen mit 10 Kontrollposten an 1749 Kindern in Großbritannien und Kanada ausgeführt. Im Durchschnitt glaubten die britischen Kinder an sechs mehr abergläubische Vorstellungen (im Ganzen von neunzig) als die kanadische Gruppe. Jüngere Kinder waren bemerkenswert abergläubischer als ältere, Mädchen waren ein wenig abergläubischer als Jungen, akademisch geneigte Kinder waren weniger abergläubisch als andere. Eine wissenschaftliche Bildung hatte wenig Effekt auf den Aberglauben in dieser Probe. Die Folgerung für das kanadische Bildungswesen wird diskutiert.

Se ha concebido y aplicado, a unos 1749 niños canadienses e ingleses, una prueba de 100 entradas sobre nueve areas de supersticiones, junto con diez entradas de control. En promedio, los niños británicos estuvieron de acuerdo con seis supersticiones más (de un total de noventa) que el grupo canadiense. Los niños más jóvenes eran marcadamente más supersticiosos que los mayores; las niñas eran algo más supersticiosas que los varones; los niños con intereses más académicos eran menos supersticiosos que los otros. Una educación basada en las ciencias tiene poco efecto sobre las supersticiones en esta muestra. Se discuten las implicaciones para la educación canadiense.

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