

# Nonconscious effects of peculiar beliefs on consumer psychology and choice

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## Abstract

Irrational or illogical beliefs are referred to variously as magical thinking, peculiar beliefs, superstitious beliefs, and half-beliefs. We first distinguish the various terms according to their most common and relevant usage for consumer psychologists and define a conceptual structure for the roles of conscious and nonconscious processes associated with peculiar beliefs in decision-making. We present a study that provides initial evidence of the effect of nonconscious, experiential processing on the impact of peculiar beliefs in a consumer auction-based sales scenario. We also offer propositions that extend the theory on peculiar beliefs to their nonconscious effects on consumer psychology and choice.  
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Nearly half (48%) of Americans believe in ghosts (Alfano, 2005), 23% of Americans have seen one or been in the presence of one, and one in five believe that spells or witchcraft are real (Handwerk, 2009). Likely, many readers of this article will note these statistics, scoff at the absurdity of others, and then unwittingly proceed to knock on wood, don a lucky hat for the football game, or refrain from sharing news of a potential positive event for fear of jinxing it. Such common irrational or illogical beliefs, which often play an important part in people's lives (Berenbaum, Boden, & Baker, 2009), illustrate that peculiar beliefs may be consciously rejected yet still have an impact on consumer psychology and decision-making on a nonconscious level.

Irrational or illogical beliefs are referred to variously as magical thinking, peculiar beliefs, superstitious beliefs, and half-beliefs. Moreover, the definitions of these terms vary across fields and across researchers, which can make it difficult to generalize results across studies. In this article, we first distinguish and define the various terms according to their most common and relevant usage for consumer psychologists. Given the increase in articles

appearing in consumer behavior journals on superstition and magical beliefs, it is important to distinguish these types of peculiar beliefs because such conceptual clarity will enable greater theoretical progress. As well, the current state of the literature does not adequately address whether the underpinnings of peculiar beliefs are consciously or non-consciously derived. While the simultaneous activation of conscious and nonconscious components of peculiar beliefs is implied in the anthropological, psychological, and consumer work in this domain, to date only a few studies provide direct empirical evidence of the same. To address this limitation of the literature, we report findings from a study that provides initial evidence of the effect of nonconscious, experiential processing on the impact of peculiar beliefs in a consumer auction-based sales scenario. Finally, extant research on peculiar beliefs has progressed in isolation; we provide theoretical bridges to other conceptually related domains in consumer psychology through propositions that extend the theory on peculiar beliefs to their nonconscious effects on consumer psychology and choice. Our intention with this manuscript is to foster future academic work in this area by (1) suggesting a common language through definitions, (2) presenting a conceptual framework for analysis of the conscious and nonconscious components of peculiar beliefs, and (3) offering potential areas for future consumer research via proposition testing.

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## Defining the concepts

### *The peculiar bent of the genius of each*<sup>1</sup>

#### *Peculiar beliefs*

Peculiar beliefs represent the broadest, most comprehensive category of illogical beliefs. Peculiar beliefs are beliefs that are “presumed (by scientists, at least) to not be veridical” (Berenbaum, Kerns, & Raghavan, 2000). As the most general type of irrational beliefs, we define peculiar beliefs as beliefs that are non-veridical and do not have a rational, empirical, or scientifically established link to an outcome they are intended to influence. As such, peculiar beliefs are rather common and include magical thinking (e.g., beliefs that people’s essence is transferred into objects they touch), superstitious beliefs (e.g., beliefs that black cats bring bad luck), religious beliefs (e.g., beliefs that angels exist), psi (e.g., beliefs that people can move objects with their thoughts), and precognition (e.g., beliefs that psychics can predict the future) (Dudley, 1999). At its extreme, peculiar beliefs are considered delusions and are the core of several forms of psychopathology, most notably psychotic disorders (Berenbaum et al., 2009).

Two specific types of peculiar beliefs have recently received attention in the consumer psychology literature, namely, magical thinking and superstition. To foster a more unified use of the terminology among researchers, we define these two next, and then discuss their differences, as well as their intersection. The other types of peculiar beliefs indicated above are not referred to interchangeably (e.g., religious beliefs) or not as relevant for consumer researchers (e.g., psi or precognition).

#### *Magical thinking*

Magical thinking was broadly defined by Meehl (1964) as “belief, quasi-belief, or semiserious entertainment of the possibility that events which, according to the causal concepts of this culture, cannot have a causal relation with each other, might somehow nevertheless do so” (as cited by Berenbaum et al., 2009). For example, Subbotsky (2004) found that adults seem to exhibit magical thinking when making irrational causation judgments, showing that people were reluctant to stick their hands into an empty box when the suggestion was made that this might cause some harm to their hands. In addition, Pronin, Wegner, McCarthy, and Rodriguez (2006) demonstrated that participants who were instructed to have evil thoughts about a confederate victim felt more responsible for the victim’s later reported physical pain. This erroneous judgment of cause and effect is quite common, with people assuming responsibility or guilt due to the co-occurrence of an ill-wish and a conceptually related negative event.

Nemeroff and Rozin (2000, p. 5) recently popularized a more narrow definition of magical thinking (sometimes referred to as sympathetic magical thinking) as “an intuitive, and possibly universal, aspect of human thinking that follows the principles of similarity and contagion.” The law of similarity is based on

the illogical belief that if two objects share a superficial similarity, they also share deeper similarities. In layman’s terms, the law of similarity suggests that “appearance equals reality” or “like causes like.” Rozin et al. have demonstrated the “appearance equals reality” heuristic with food and consumer choice, including subjects’ hesitancy to put fake rubber vomit (vs. a rubber sink stopper) or chocolate shaped like dog poo (vs. round) into their mouths. Finally, even after subjects themselves labeled a jar “Sodium Cyanide, Poison,” they exhibited an unwillingness to consume sugar from it (Rozin, Markwith, & Ross, 1990; Rozin, Millman, & Nemeroff, 1986).

The law of contagion proposes that physical contact between a source and a target results in a permanent transfer of essence between the two entities. This contact may be direct or may be mediated through a third object or vehicle, which either simultaneously or subsequently touched both objects (Rozin & Nemeroff, 2002). Several properties govern the laws of contagion, including the necessity of actual or perceived physical contact, the permanency of the essence transfer (“once in contact, always in contact”) and dose insensitivity [essence transfer does not require a large amount of contaminant; see Rozin & Nemeroff (2002) for a review of the characteristics of contagion]. For example, Rozin and Nemeroff suggest that a sweater worn but not owned by a person they dislike is more concerning to people than a sweater owned but not worn by the same person (law of physical contact). To illustrate the law of permanency, they use the example of a cockroach briefly running across a bowl of mashed potatoes; if the potatoes are frozen for a year and then defrosted, they are still judged to be inedible. Staying within the food paradigm, Rozin, Ashmore, and Markwith (1996) demonstrated dose insensitivity, such that even small or trace amounts of essential nutrients (e.g., salt and fat) renders food to be labeled as unhealthy.

Perhaps the common acceptance of magical thinking as beliefs conforming to the laws of similarity and contagion is due to the influential and vast work of Rozin and Nemeroff (2002), or perhaps it is due to their express statement that these laws are “more tractable to experimental study” and “easy to manipulate in the laboratory.” In this paper, we define magical thinking consistently with this most commonly accepted definition as peculiar beliefs that conform to the laws of similarity and contagion.

As such, recent work in the marketing literature demonstrates the pervasiveness of magical thinking in consumer contexts and retail environments. Specifically, Argo, Dahl, and Morales (2006) and Morales and Fitzsimons (2007) present a series of studies that collectively demonstrate that consumers’ evaluations of products change in response to perceived physical contact that elicits disgust. Developing a theory of consumer-to-product contagion, Argo et al. (2006) and Argo, Dahl, and Morales (2008) demonstrate that consumers are believed to contaminate products through physical contact. For example, when a clothing item is thought to have been tried on by a previous customer, such perceived contact can result in decreased product evaluations, purchase intentions, and willingness to pay (Argo et al., 2006) or increased evaluations if the

<sup>1</sup> “Do not train a child to learn by force or harshness; but direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each.” Plato.

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