CHAPTER V
SURVEY OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

Studies on Superstitious Beliefs

The majority of the studies of the prevalence of superstitions are devoted either to a description of the various kinds of superstitions and their origin or to a compilation of beliefs current among people of various national and cultural groups. Among such exploratory investigations the Kentucky Superstitions,1 Louisiana Superstitions,2 and the Superstitions among American Girls,3 are worthy of mention. Such compilations are usually based on records, observations or testimony. The monumental study of Frazer4 also belongs to this category.

Another approach is to prepare tests of superstitious ideas and present them to a large number of subjects

with a request to indicate for each idea whether or not the subject believes it to be true. A study of superstitions which was conducted half a century ago by the Committee on Experimental Psychology was based on such a questionnaire.¹

A similar study by Dresslar on Superstition and Education was published in 1907.² The purpose of his study was to determine the number of superstitions with which the students of California were familiar with and believed. The group consisted of 875 students with an average of approximately 18 years. 80 per cent of the group were women and 20 per cent were men. Return showed that the men differed but little from the women in the number of superstitions known and believed. The students were asked to respond in one of the three ways, 'no belief', 'partial belief', or 'full belief', to all the superstitions which they were able to list. He found that the 875 students were able to list 7,175 superstitions and that of this number 44.9 per cent were believed fully or partially. In summarising his findings, Dresslar states:

"The figures seem so extra-ordinary that one would be inclined to doubt their correctness were it not for the

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fact that every precaution has been taken to reduce the possibility of error ....... But because of the almost universal tendency of the human mind to sparingly acknowledge its own weakness and short-comings it is safe to say that we have here an underestimation rather than an exaggeration of belief in superstition ...... And it is the more disturbing when it is recalled that it describes the mental condition of those who pass as educated.

Gould, in 1921, made a study of the superstitions of Scottish girls, taking teacher training.1 The study is similar to that of Dreslar in that the subjects were asked to recall as many superstitions as they could and indicate the ones that influenced their conduct. He found that a surprisingly large number of them were influenced by superstitious beliefs. He also found that those living in rural or small urban communities were more superstitious than those living in larger urban centres.

Conklin,2 in 1919 at the University of Oregon, reported returns from a study of 260 men and 270 women, ranging in age from 16 to 25 years. The study was conducted over a period of four years (1913-1917). During this period the students of

beginning psychology were asked to fill out the questionnaire calling for the following items: (1) age, (2) sex, (3) statement of superstitions believed or that influenced students' conduct, (4) statement of superstitions formerly believed, (5) age at which former superstitions influenced conduct, (6) reasons - superstitions are or were believed, (7) remarks and other informations. (His summary and conclusions were as follows: (a) There were 40 per cent of the men and 66 per cent of the women who admitted belief in superstitions. (b) Of those denying belief in superstitions, 61 per cent had at sometime in their lives believed or practised them. (c) The early years of adolescence form the period of greatest superstitions. (d) As to sources of superstitious beliefs, social suggestions of parents or elders, social inheritance, literature, almanacs, newspapers, cheap books, philosophy and religion were found to be responsible. (e) Males tend to outgrow superstitions more easily than women. (f) Men are slightly less superstitious than women.

In 1930 Lundeen and Caldwell published the results of an elaborate study, the purpose of which was to discover to what extent high school seniors of various localities have heard of, believed in, and are influenced by certain types of unfounded beliefs. The study was conducted in ten high schools in Kansas, Indiana, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, New York, Chicago
and Minneapolis. Data were obtained by a questionnaire containing 200 items. The pupils were asked to indicate whether they had heard, believed or were influenced by, each statement. Nine hundred and eighteen usable returns were received. For purposes of comparison, returns were obtained from 264 college students also. That the high school seniors had heard and were influenced by nearly 50 per cent of the statements. They were influenced by approximately 10 per cent of the total number of items presented. The pupils from small town believed in, and were influenced by more of the beliefs presented than were those coming from large cities. The results obtained from the college students showed that they had heard more, but believed in and were influenced by fewer of them than were the high school groups. (In both high school seniors and college students, superstitions and misconceptions about natural phenomena ranked first in the number heard. Ideas dealing with witchcraft and spirits had the lowest ranks.) Ter Keurst\(^2\) likewise found in another study that many superstitious beliefs were accepted by high school students. In 1933 Maller and Lundeen conducted a study\(^3\) to determine the source of superstitious beliefs prevalent among high school pupils.

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3. J.B. Maller and G.E. Lundeen, "Sources of Superstitious Beliefs", Journal of Educational Research, 1933, XXVI:
One hundred and seventy nine junior and senior high school students were involved and they were asked to indicate whether or not they believed each item to be true and to state the source of the superstitious beliefs. (The findings showed that friends or associates ranked first as a source of superstitious beliefs and that the home ranked second. Those who preferred to read books on science and inventions were the least superstitious, and those who preferred fiction, adventure and mystery were inclined to be the most superstitious.)

Emme's 1 study in 1941 revealed that parents are the strongest factor in determining belief and disbelief in superstitions.

Smith in 1930, 2 investigated the effect of the study of science on the superstition of children. The laboratory method was used in general science classes. In the study of general science and in the laboratory work connected with the study, somewhat specific instruction and demonstrations were given showing the absurdity of some common misconceptions. (He found that such work in general science decreased decidedly the number of superstitions believed by the pupils.)

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In 1932 Ronton Paul\(^1\) made a study of the extent to which health superstitions, misconceptions, and scientifically unsound beliefs are subscribed to by graduates from the different types of teacher training institutions. Two thousand three hundred and seventy nine subjects were involved in the study. He made comparison of these beliefs on the basis of the type of training school, duration of the training period, type of training received, sex and habit. He found that women made better scores than the men, which he concludes, is due to better health instruction and to a greater interest in health matters. The mean score was seen increased as the length of training increased. He concluded that more training in health is needed in the teacher training institutions.

The extent to which college students believe in fortune telling was studied by Diserens and Wood, (1932), while the prevalence of other misconceptions among college students was examined by Valentine (1936) whose list of 37 misconceptions included superstitions, and erroneous notions in the fields of psychology, biology, sociology and economics.\(^2,3\)

The various superstitions associated with food and the restrictive effect of superstitions upon the utilization

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of certain articles of food are described by Graubard who points out that there is hardly any article of food which does not arouse disgust within some culture.  

The consistency in the prevalence of superstitions is revealed in a study by Garret and Fisher (1926) who found that the order of prevalence of certain misconceptions among children is practically the same as the order found in a study of adults by Nixon (1925).  

In England Eric Maple (1971), presenting a survey of contemporary superstitious beliefs, found that most individuals are unable to recognise their own superstitions, yet at the same time, while disclaiming any superstitions of their own, many are adepts in recognising those of others. He also found that most of the old superstitions had still survived in tact, and even when a new superstition was discovered it proved to be no more than an adapted version of an old one. Children are also found as a veritable treasure house of an ancient lore which must have been handed down from the remote past. He also


found that the world of child could well be a reservoir from which humanity draws most of its psychic beliefs. In many ways, his survey can be regarded as a voyage of exploration into uncharted territory, for it ranges from the love rites of teen-agers and the phobias of gamblers to that latest manifestation of the occult, the modern 'witchcraft' movement. What he established here is that the basic beliefs of our magically minded ancestors continue to exert an amazing influence upon the men, women and children of the supersonic age.

In England, Stewart F. Sanderson\(^1\) of the Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies of the Leeds University is engaged in studying superstitions found not only in the British Isles, but also in other parts of the world.

Gustav Jahoda\(^2\) in 1970 developed a more general interest in superstition as a psychological problem. He in his document shows that superstition is not solely confined to the Dark Age or to the poor and ignorant, but is an integral part of humanity, intimately tied up with our character and environment.

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