

Research Study: Supernatural Beliefs

Samantha Golembo

The following research study focuses on the predominant belief system of many Russian-American immigrants about the supernatural abilities of healers and fortune tellers. For any future member of the mental health profession, it is imperative to understand how these cultural ideologies influence immigrants' daily activities, perceptions about health care, and impact their compliance levels with prescribed treatments.

The Research Question

The research question attempts to answer an inquiry as to whether many Russian-American immigrants turn to healers and fortune tellers and, if so, whether their faithful devotion can be attributed to a placebo effect. Many Russian-Americans adamantly defend the legitimacy of faith healers and fortune tellers, insisting that these "miracle workers" are single-handedly responsible for their well-being, happiness, and good health.

Many immigrant groups who come to the United States continue to practice their cultural or ethnic traditions. As a result, they are also influencing the delivery of healthcare. When immigrant groups continue to use faith-based, non-medical interventions in the place of scientific, evidence-based treatments, mental health workers and other healthcare professionals should understand the source of this belief system, and how to appropriately deal with these patients' refusal for contemporary treatments.

Thesis/Hypothesis

Many Russian-American immigrants resort to the use of faith healers and fortune tellers when dealing with personal crises and health issues, and they believe that the supernatural approach is much more conducive to their well-being than the pharmacological/medical approach, even when the evidence suggests otherwise.

Methodology

The research was conducted via individual interviews and personal observations. Two interviewees were selected for an interview about their personal beliefs; additionally, an observation from a Russian pharmacy in Brighton Beach is also included in the study.

Research Process

Interview with Mrs. A

Mrs. A is a 37-year-old Russian-American immigrant. She has resided in

New York for the past nine years, and prior to that she lived in Boston for five years. Mrs. A is a divorced single mother of a 14-year-old boy. She reports history of domestic violence and indicates that she has been using fortune tellers and faith healers since she moved to New York. Mrs. A indicated that she is a strong believer that the fortune teller will guide her in her quest for remarriage, and that when she had health issues this same fortune teller also “healed” her. Mrs. A indicated that when she moved to New York she was in the midst of a divorce. She was dealing with an extreme emotional crisis as her husband and the father of her son left her for another woman. She felt her life was over, and she did not want to go on living. Mrs. A indicated that it was only her love for her son that prevented her from taking her own life.

She began using the healer/fortune-teller almost nine years ago. She has followed some very bizarre instructions, and in almost a decade has paid thousands of dollars to a woman who claims to have supernatural abilities and special powers. Mrs. A indicated that her fortune teller told her that there has been an “evil eye” or a “curse” that has been put on her by her ex-husband’s family, but to have no fear because the fortune-teller has the power to eradicate all evil intent. Mrs. A has gone out to purchase expensive outfits for her blind dates, has supposedly donated money to a church in order to have a nun break an expensive bottle of champagne at a busy traffic intersection, and has carried with her an egg for two weeks until it started rotting away in her purse. The rituals and instructions are as bizarre as her belief in their legitimacy. When asked whether the healer/fortune-teller has helped, Mrs. A indicated that she has, “I was in severe depression—I didn’t want to live any longer. If I went to a psychiatrist he would put me on some antidepressant medication that probably would’ve been habit-forming...The fortune teller gave me hope and still gives me hope.”

Mrs. A indicated that over the past nine years, she has experienced some health problems and the healer/fortune teller “cured” her. When asked the nature of the illness, she said her healer/fortune teller has terminated an unwanted pregnancy. When asked about details, Mrs. A revealed that it was not a doctor but the healer/fortune teller herself who reported the pregnancy and then indicated that she “got rid of it.”

Interview with Mrs. T

Mrs. T is a Russian-American immigrant, born and raised in Uzbekistan—a place that is known for propagating the existence of supernatural powers and occurrences. Mrs. T is 56 years old, suffers from severe health problems, including severe hyperglycemia—an extreme form of diabetes mellitus. Mrs. T has been using “healers” for health problems for the past three years. She immigrated to the United States fourteen years ago and is currently a resident of Brooklyn. Mrs. T indicated that she found her healer three years ago, and this woman has been “God’s gift” to her. About four months ago, Mrs. T’s healer instructed her to stop taking her insulin and metformin medications and said that she will be the one to control Mrs. T’s blood glucose through supernatural powers. Mrs. T discontinued her diabetic medications, and her blood sugar began to skyrocket. In fact, Mrs. T’s

glucose levels rose as high as 600—a reading that is indicative of a near-coma condition. As Mrs. T continued to visit her healer, the woman stated that the glucose reading meant nothing, and that she “controlled” Mrs. T’s glucose levels through different means. At that time, one of Mrs. T’s friends also suggested that she speak with an excellent healer from Queens, who claimed to have cured cancer in a family member. When Mrs. T spoke with the Queens “expert,” that woman indicated that she has close associations with professors at Columbia University, expert physicians and surgeons who call to consult with her. She requested that Mrs. T send her all her diagnostic studies—lab work and imaging studies, which Mrs. T sent. Mrs. T also included a personal check for \$500 for that consultation. A week later, the Queens healer instructed Mrs. T to place some candles on the window sill and said that for another \$200 she will give her the “correct prayer” that will heal her from diabetes forever. At the same time, the Brooklyn healer insisted that Mrs. T keep an egg under her bed for a 24-hour period and then bring that egg to her because the egg will “extract” all her illnesses, including diabetes. When Mrs. T’s glucose levels reached a reading that was not even available on the GlycoMeter, she finally went to a medical doctor, who was in shock that Mrs. T was still walking. Mrs. T’s final decision to go to the doctor did not come as the result of her physical illness, but rather from an alarming plea from one of her daughters who feared that with a glucose level of almost 600, her mother was hours away from a diabetic coma. Mrs. T, on the other hand, reported that each time she spoke with the healer on the phone or in person, she felt better and did not experience symptoms of high blood sugar.

The damage that Mrs. T potentially received from having such high blood sugar levels over a month’s time could be irreversible—this will only be determined with time. What was determined immediately was that her cholesterol levels rose to the 800s, while the norm for a woman of her age group is usually up to 190. Her blood was so thick and cholesterol was so high that the nurse barely was able to draw her blood, and they even saw a collection of fatty tissue settle down in the collection vial about 15 minutes after collecting that blood. This was a serious and potentially deadly condition.

Observation in the Russian Pharmacy

Observing patrons in the Trananaya Apteka (Herbal Pharmacy) for over two days, one pattern emerged—many Russian Americans resort to holistic and non-medical treatments, although they have clear instructions from their physicians to use prescribed medication. Also, for the most part, about 90% of the users of holistic or herbal treatments are elderly. These seniors generally retrieve their pharmacological medication from the pharmacy and then go straight to the herbal section. One woman in her late 50s or early 60s asked the herbal pharmacy workers if they know of any healers around Brighton Beach. When I asked the woman why she was looking for a healer, she said she was told someone had put an “evil eye” on her and her son, and she knows this because for over four months her son has had a recurring cough and rash. I asked if she addressed this with a doctor, and she indicated that she does not have medical insurance and going to

the healer would be cheaper than going to the doctor.

Research Findings

The pattern that has emerged from the collected interviews is that many Russian-Americans believe that faith healers and fortune tellers are an optimal approach to health maintenance, treatment, and well-being. This belief persists even in the face of the healers' ineffectiveness and in the lack of evidence that any of the fortune tellers' or healers' claims are true. In fact, as evidenced by Mrs. T's experiences and reports during the interview, her healer nearly killed her or at the very least nearly crippled her. Still, when asked if she feels that she has been schemed, Mrs. T is fully convinced that it was not the healer who was scheming, but it was she, herself, who messed up the "healing" process because she did not follow the healer's instructions fully.

When Mrs. A was asked if she feels that the healer/fortune teller is wrong for charging thousands of dollars over almost a decade, considering that there is no evidence to the effectiveness of her supernatural powers, she also found excuses and indicated that the fault lies with her and not the healer/fortune teller. It appears that the brain washing and psychological hold that these fortune tellers and healers have is so strong that their followers and patrons will defend them even in the face of contradictory evidence. It is also important to note that neither Mrs. A nor Mrs. T have achieved higher levels of education—both have only high school diploma and work in remedial jobs.

Conclusion

The current research illustrates how influential the power of suggestion is in our society. In addition, research suggests that people who are not highly educated are the ones to fall victim to schemes perpetuated by psychics, fortune tellers, and so-called healers. Research that has been conducted over decades, and even centuries, illustrates that cultures which are less economically, technologically, and socially advanced still have a predominant belief in the supernatural. In fact, many cultures consider supernatural occurrences and practices to be legitimate explanations for bad luck and illnesses, as well as successes. The research illustrates that cultural beliefs about the effectiveness of supernatural phenomena are equivalent to the placebo effect. Individuals who turn to healers and psychics for help genuinely believe that these approaches help, in the same way that people with a headache feel a sugar pill provides adequate relief. For social workers, human service workers, and mental health professionals these are important discoveries and may very well assist in greater or deeper understanding of human motivations and actions.

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Nominating Faculty: Professor Lisa Pope-Fischer, Anthropology 1102,
Department of Social Science, School of Arts & Sciences, New York City
College of Technology, CUNY.

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