

# MAGICAL THINKING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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**Report:** the article provides a brief overview of the studies of the magical thinking phenomenon, as well as studies that prove the similarity of suggestion based on the magical worldview and suggestion used in psychotherapy. Magical thinking is considered as one of the forms of self-regulation (as a kind of autosuggestion) and as a special type of psychological defences, which can be presented both in constructive and destructive forms.

**Keywords:** magical thinking, prelogical thinking, superstition, psychological defence, participation, suggestion, autosuggestion, self-regulation, psychotherapy

Nowadays the phenomenon of magical thinking is quite common among the population, so in this regard, it raises questions about the norm and how to deal with it in the framework of psychotherapy. Quite many studies present the connection of magical thinking with obsessive-compulsive disorder when magical rituals as a variant of compulsive behaviour are considered as a way to cope with anxiety. Thus, the issue of the connection of magical thinking with self-regulation is of special concern.

According to the accepted definition from the scientific literature, magical thinking is the belief that through symbolic physical and/or mental actions, one can influence significantly or decisively the true causes of what is happening in reality; or the belief that thinking is equated with action.

The representative of the so-called English anthropological school was the first who tried to explain magical thinking from the psychological point of view. Its well-known representative George Frazer in his work *The Golden Bough* identifies two principles on which magical thinking is based. According to the first one, similar one produces similar one or the effect resembles its cause. The second principle claims that things that once have come into contact with each other continue to interact at a distance after cessation of direct contact. Frazer calls the first principle the law of similarity, and the second the law of contact or contagion. On the basis of these two principles the author distinguishes two types of magic: imitative and contagious. Frazer also notes: "If our analysis of magical logic is correct, then its two basic principles are simply two ways of abusing the connection of ideas. Imitative magic is based on the connection of ideas by similarity; contagious magic is based on the connection of ideas by contiguity."

Edward Tylor, another representative of the same school, writes as follows: "As the social development of the world advances, the most important views and actions may gradually become just remnants. Their original meaning is gradually eroded; each generation remembers it less and less, until at last it completely disappears from the memory of the people. Esoterism is based on

the ideas association, an ability which lies at the very base of the 'human mind', but to the large extent of human unreason as well. This is the key to understanding magic. Even being in his lower mental state human learned to unite those things which he found connected with each other in reality in thoughts. However, he later wrongly perverted this connection, concluding that the association in thought must presuppose the same connection in reality."

Thus, the representatives of the English anthropological school are characterized by the principle of empiricism, according to which everything that exists in the human mind is the result of previous experience. Evolutionism is the second special feature of this school. The representatives of this trend believed that primitive human thinking does not essentially differ from the modern one. The reason for the magical belief's prevalence is just simple ignorance, that is, insufficient information for explaining natural phenomena and their laws. That is why in the minds of primitive people, erroneous connections arise between objects and phenomena, which can be associated with the principles of similarity and contact.

The second trend in the study of the magical thinking phenomenon can be identified in the works of the famous German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt. Wundt distinguishes a special thinking characteristic and its "animating property" towards perceived objects and phenomena. The author calls this property a mythological apperception. He associates a special nature of magical thinking with the emotional sphere. According to Wundt, external objects can so strongly irritate human perception that they cause a powerful release of effect, and, at the same time, that effect is transferred to the object itself and makes it as if "alive" and "personified". Thus, sensations perceived from objects become properties of the objects themselves. Wundt considers an aesthetic form of apperception to be a more advanced one, in which the projection of effect on an object is preserved as well, but in this case objective visual representation prevails.

The works of the French sociological school are the next important trend in the study of the phenomenon of magical thinking. The studies of the famous anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl are the most important in this trend. Unlike Tylor and the English anthropological school, Lévy-Bruhl believed that magical thinking is not just a consequence of primitive people's ignorance, their delusions and their simple attempts to explain the phenomena of the world. Lévy-Bruhl was the first who described the phenomena under study as a special form of thinking. According to his concept, each type of society has its own special kind of thinking, determined by the collective ideas of the society. According to Tylor and the English school, a modern human thinking nature and an ancient human thinking nature do not differ and magical ideas are only a consequence of ancient people's delusion. Lévy-Bruhl believes that an ancient human thinking nature and a modern human thinking nature are fundamentally different.

In his theory, Lévy-Bruhl refers to the studies of two prior authors, in particular Théodule Ribot and Heinrich Maier. Ribot introduces the concept of "affective reasoning" in his work *The Logic of Senses*. Ribot writes that "we have the opportunity to see modern savages who are considered similar to primitive people. Observations show that their logical abilities are at a very low level, savages are not capable of abstraction and they just barely connect the concepts, depending on the objective relationship. But they are capable of practical thinking, based on perception and

images and the average terms that lead to the desired result, that is, to the conclusion". According to Ribot, there are two kinds of logic — emotional, more primitive, and rational. In ancient times, the first kind of logic dominated in primitive people; the rational one would have been forming in the future on the basis of accumulated experience. The author mentions that the emotional form of logic is still relevant despite its unreliability and primitiveness. According to Ribot, this is because rational logic cannot cover the entire sphere of human knowledge and action. He writes as follows: "A human has an insuperable need to know some things which cannot be fathomed by mind and to affect some people and some things but the logics does not give us the means necessary for this. In short, the logic of the senses serves man in all those cases when he needs to deduce or confirm any conclusion theoretically or practically and when he cannot or does not want to use the techniques of rational thinking." The basic principle of emotional logic is finitude. That is, rational reasoning strives for a conclusion, and emotional reasoning strives for a goal, it does not pursue truth, but a practical result, and acts in this direction. Mayer, like Ribot, in his work *Psychology of Emotional Thinking* writes that the process of cognition in the acts of emotional thinking seems to be obscured, pushed to the background, and even acts as a side effect. In this case the focus is on a kind of practical purpose: "in judging and emotional thinking there are similar logical processes (interpretation, objectification, activity of categorical apparatus). However, objectification in affective thinking acts is illusory, since the fantasy images belong to a fictional reality. In this situation, the mechanism of 'affective autosuggestion' comes to action." That is, all those operations of thinking, which are characteristic of rational logic, are common to emotional thinking, but they are subject to the achievement of a certain goal, which is more or less affectively charged, which determines the direction of mental activity, making it biased.

Referring to Maier's and Ribot's works, Lévy-Bruhl tries to establish his own theory explaining the magical thinking nature. Lévy-Bruhl notices the special features of this phenomenon. One of them is the principle of "after that means as a consequence of that." The misuse of the principle of causality is common for mystical primitive thinking, in particular the carriers of the magical ideas associate phenomena with the principle of sequence in time, and not with true causal relations. However, the researcher notes that this condition is typical, but not sufficient to explain the principle of the magical thinking nature. It is also noted that in the construction of magical causal relations, more obvious sequences are not observed. For example, some primitive peoples explain death as the influence of witchcraft, while the wounds received by the deceased are sufficient to explain this death. The mystical thinking of primitive peoples has little in common with experience, but it is flooded with a variety of collective ideas. Lévy-Bruhl refers the basic principle of the magical thinking nature to the law of participation, that is, participation between beings and objects associated with collective ideas. The effect is a main force in creation of such participation within collective ideas. Involvement (participation) can take many forms: contact, transference, sympathy, etc. Fundamentally distinguishing an ancient human thinking nature and a modern human thinking nature, the author calls magical thinking to be prelogical thinking for which the logic is not significant, though it happens to be. Participation is the most important thing in this form of thinking, that is, the participation of various phenomena and objects to each other, determined by the collective ideas of the particular society. Prelogical thinking is synthetic by its nature. But unlike a logical one, it is based not on syntheses, which are the consequence of

preliminary analysis, but on the contrary, "the connections of ideas are usually given with the ideas themselves." In primitive thinking, syntheses are almost always indecomposable. That is why magical thinking may be insensitive, has nothing in common with experience, and may be impervious to contradictions. "Collective ideas do not act independently in primitive thinking. They are not analyzed in order to be arranged then in a logical order. They are always in a certain connection with preperceptions, preconceptions, preassociations, almost in prereasoning: this way of thinking is prelogical because it is mystical" (Lévy-Bruhl).

Magical thinking consists in mystical complexes in which emotional elements are governed by the very idea and do not allow it to exist in its pure form. There is no naked objective fact for primitive thinking. Every object of perception, both ordinary and unusual, triggers a more or less strong emotion. The nature of the emotion is determined by traditions, that is, collective ideas. Lévy-Bruhl believes that "socialization" of emotions is common for primitive people, with the exception of rather individual emotions, which are the direct reaction of the organism. Thus, the guiding force of participation determines the processes of abstraction and generalization under the influence of emotions determined by collective ideas, forming a magical interpretation of certain phenomena.

Subbotsky summarises the study of magical thinking conducted earlier by various authors. He distinguishes four main classes of events considered in the scientific literature as manifestations of magic: The first type is the direct influence of consciousness on matter, such as the movement or creation of physical objects by just force of will. The second type is the sudden acquisition of spontaneity (the ability to feel or act) by inanimate physical objects. The third type of magic involves breaking the fundamental physical laws of object permanence when a physical object suddenly changes its shape, appears out of nothing, or disappears from the world without a trace (nonpermanence magic). Finally, widespread beliefs that certain objects (stones, skulls) or actions (crossing fingers, knocking on wood) bring good luck or affect the course of external events and constitute the essence of the fourth type of magic. They also come in various combinations.

Subbotsky cites data from the study, the main hypothesis of which is to establish similarities between magical suggestion and ordinary suggestion, used in psychotherapy inclusive. The study he described consisted in two experiments. The first experiment involved adult subjects and children of 6 to 9 years. Before the experiment, adults and children were tested for understanding the differences between magic and ordinary focus. Further, only those subjects who understood magic as a phenomenon that violated fundamental physical laws were admitted to the experiment. During the experiment, subjects were asked to imagine a certain object (for example, a blue pencil) and to keep it in mind. Then the experimenter tried to "change" it in the minds of the subjects by two ways: 1) a direct request to change the object (for example, to turn a pencil into a lizard), 2) using two types of suggestion: magical suggestion (the experimenter cast a magic spell aimed at turning the pencil into a lizard) and ordinary suggestion (the subjects were told that the pencil could turn into a lizard against their will). Then the effectiveness of suggestive influence was estimated in points by two features of the participation mechanism: 1) action in accordance with the suggested idea, 2) the subjects' awareness of the violent nature of

this action. It turned out that both magical and ordinary suggestions equally often led to an involuntary change in the object. Thus, it can be argued that the same mechanism lies on the basis of both types of suggestion: participation; and both types of suggestion are equally effective when influencing the consciousness of the subjects. The imaginary objects had to meet the following criteria: 1) the subjects had to be sure that the magic spell could supernaturally affect the object; 2) the nature of the imaginary object must be such that the subjects could control their actions in relation to it.

The second experiment investigated the features of magical and conventional suggestion in relation to personally valuable objects. In this experiment, subjects were asked to imagine their future lives. Then one tried to affect this imaginary object by magical and ordinary suggestion. In the experiment with magical suggestion, subjects were asked to imagine they met a woman on the street who introduced herself as a witch and offered to cast a magic spell on their fate. In one case, it was a positive spell (desired effect), and in another case, it was an evil witch, offering to cast a bad spell (undesirable result). In an experiment with ordinary suggestion, subjects were shown a series of numbers on a computer screen while explaining that each of the numbers represents a problem in their future lives. Then it was suggested for them to imagine that if the experimenter deletes some numbers from the screen, the volume of problems will decrease (desired effect), and if, on the contrary, he adds some numbers, then the volume will increase (undesirable effect). In both cases, the subjects were asked whether they would accept or reject the manipulation. The subjects were then asked whether the manipulations performed could really affect their future lives. As a result of this experiment, the subjects denied the possibility of influencing their fate both by the magic spell and changing the volume of numbers on the screen, while they demonstrated their belief in this possibility in their actions. In the case of the desired effect, the distribution of negative and positive responses was approximately the same, while in the case of an undesirable effect, the absolute majority of subjects forbade manipulations. This experiment showed the same efficacy of magical and ordinary suggestion as in the previous ones. This once again confirms the fact that both types of suggestion have the same psychological mechanisms, which are based on the participation phenomenon. Subbotsky writes as follows, "suggestive persuasion techniques used in religious, political, psychotherapeutic, and commercial practices can now be considered as historical successors to magical practices of mass consciousness manipulation.... It also means that the divide that exists between so-called archaic (primitive) and logical thinking (about which Lévy-Bruhl and several other authors wrote) is greatly exaggerated.... Both archaic and modern mentality are based on the same psychological mechanisms of communication."

Collective ideas are something that can really change seriously over time.

The correlation of the magical thinking phenomenon with norm and pathology concepts is still controversial. There is no clear understanding of how to deal with magical thinking in the framework of psychological counseling and psychotherapy.

It is well known that many psychotherapy techniques are based on suggestion and look like the insertion of certain messages into the client's consciousness by reducing his capability for conscious critical thinking. Such techniques have been used for a long time by psychotherapists.

Some studies show that hypnotism and suggestibility positively correlate with a tendency to believe in the paranormal. Thus, the magical thinking distorts reality, but at the same time it is the way of mental state stabilization, and therefore it was always used by shamans and sorcerers, and nowadays even by psychotherapists, practicing suggestive technology.

Autosuggestion is a special form of suggestion which is often considered as one of the ways of self-regulation.

Autosuggestion is a technique of some thoughts, desires, images, sensations, states suggestion to yourself. (B. D. Karvasarsky, 2000). Many psychotherapeutic techniques are based on autosuggestion (by A. Roman, by V. Bekhterev, by Coué, etc.). Autosuggestion has therapeutic effects like suggestion in general. As for the use of magical autosuggestion as a method of self-regulation, the various systems of collective ideas have long incorporated such methods and historically they have happened at all times. It is known that the belief in all sorts of signs and the use of rituals are strongly activated in the most disturbing, critical moments of people's lives: at weddings, funerals, when moving into a new house, during exams, etc.; when even nonsuperstitious people try to "follow the tradition." In these situations, superstitions and magic rituals are a kind of self-regulation, rooted in traditions and customs. In these moments, one can most clearly trace the manifestation of this very "socialization" of emotions about which Lévy-Bruhl wrote.

Many researchers consider magical thinking and its various manifestations as a particular form of psychological defence (which have similar properties; distorting reality to some extent, they help to stabilize the inner state).

The concept of psychological defence is contradictory; a general definition of this phenomenon, as well as a general concept that explains it, currently does not exist. Many authors consider it as pathological, as an inadequate means of adaptation, weakening the real contact of the person with the environment. Others see it as a necessary way to maintain a positive self-image and experience a frustrating situation.

In a traumatic situation, the protective mechanisms act as a kind of filter; disorganizing information is ignored or distorted, or replaced by more acceptable information (which happens when using magical thinking).

A number of studies show that the system of psychological defences is various for different people. For some it is weakly expressed and "does not keep from what it should protect." For others it is so strong that the information necessary for personal development is not perceived.

Studies that consider magical thinking as a psychological defence are poor in number. Stoyanova's studies aimed at comparing magical thinking in healthy persons and in patients suffering from neurotic disorders, as well as in persons with addictions, show that in healthy

persons magical thinking is not only a protective mechanism, but also one of the strategies of coping behavior, while in patients with nonpsychotic disorders it has a narrow protective orientation.

The issue of how to deal with the magical thinking in the patient and the client should be solved depending on its properties, as a psychological defence or form of coping.

Due to the different degree of psychological defences expression and various extent of their influence on the interaction of the individual with the environment, there were many attempts to classify psychological defences as normal and pathological, constructive and destructive. A. Maslow considered conditionality to the requirements of the social environment, focus on solving specific problems, and mindfulness of motivation and behavior to be the criteria of constructive reactions. Destructive reactions are unconscious and are aimed at eliminating discomfort, not at solving specific problems. Maslow considered defensive reactions to be nonconstructive in general. F. Kramer divided the psychological defences into primitive and higher ones, depending on the time of occurrence in the development. Primitive defences appear at an early age and are associated with instincts; the higher ones occur later in the timely social development of the individual and replace the primitive ones. According to B. Zeigarnik, a constructiveness of psychological defence determines the degree of its mindfulness. The destructiveness of unconscious psychological defences relates the fact that in addition to consciousness, the system of defence determines human behaviour, which in consequence may differ from what the situation requires. L. Grebennikov also considered mindfulness of defence to be a criterion of its constructiveness as well. R. Plutchik classified psychological defences according to the criteria of primitiveness and maturity. Like a number of other authors he associated the constructiveness of psychological defences with normativity (using within the average parameters of the group to which the person belongs). V. Kamenskaya considered meeting the adequacy of the situation in addition to the requirements of the social environment to be the criterion of defences flexibility use. If a person uses only one method of psychological defense, it leads to rigidity in behavior and the same type of response in different situations that require different types of reactions.

Summarizing a number of previous studies, V. Dolgova identifies a number of conditions that determine the constructiveness of psychological defence.

Individual and personal conditions:

1. Psychological defence flexibility use (a person must have a certain set of psychological defences, without resorting to the rigid use of one or two mechanisms);
2. Moderate frequency use of psychological defence.

Situational conditions:

1. Awareness of the use of psychological defence and overcoming it through the analysis of own acts and actions;
2. Switching to adaptive actions of an undefended nature;
3. Failure to apply defences by mitigating circumstances.

If we consider magical thinking in the context of the psychological defence concept, the issue of what its constructive and destructive versions look like requires further studies. It can be assumed that in the case of magical ideas the signs of constructiveness should be: the conformity of these ideas with the cultural environment in which the person lives (a response criterion to the requirements of the social environment); they must be used moderately and give the opportunity to reconsider such ideas; and awareness of the fact that magic shows or actions are protective in nature. Depending on the form of magical thinking, its constructiveness or destructiveness, it is necessary to establish certain psychotherapeutic tactics.

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