

CHANGES IN SOME COMMON "SUPERSTITIONS" OF COLLEGE STUDENTS OVER A TWO-DAY INTERVAL

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ABSTRACT

In 1930 A. R. Gilliland administered a revised version of Nixon's test of common "superstitions" to a group of college students before and after taking a course in general psychology. He found a noteworthy decline in the average number of superstitions: from 9.58 to 6.15 (or 3.43 per student) for 103 liberal arts students in a three-hour course, and from 11.98 to 6.58 (or 5.4 per student) for 46 commerce students in a two-hour evening course. In the present study, the Gilliland-Nixon test, as reprinted with slight modifications by Scheidemann (1939), was administered to a group of 33 students on the first day of a course in freshman psychology and repeated on the second day, 48 hours later.

This two-day interval was not the only factor affecting judgment upon retest. The students had also been instructed to read the first 15 pages of Ruch's *Psychology and Life*, which included a "test of 'common sense'" consisting of ten statements somewhat similar to those in the Gilliland-Nixon list. While none of Ruch's items are found in Scheidemann's version of the earlier test, any student who examined them at all carefully might well be expected to become somewhat more hesitant in accepting statements of the "common-sense" type. Apparently not more than half of the students had actually read the assignment; some of the rest had encountered similar material in another freshman course.

While the results are hardly startling, I believe they are not uninteresting. Six of the 33 students actually accepted a larger number of the Gilliland-Nixon "superstitions" on the second test; in two cases the number of items accepted remained unchanged. The other 25 students, however, showed themselves more sceptical; and there was an average decrease from 12.76 to 9.85 (or 2.91 per student) for the members of the class as a whole. This is a reduction of 22.8% as against Gilliland's more impressive claims of 36.8% and 45.2% over a four-month interval.

These changes, however, encourage one to ask how much of Gilliland's reduction can be accounted for in terms of test-unreliability, specific refutation of some of the more questionable statements during the course, and non-specific warnings against "superstitions" of the "common-sense" type. Certainly these results suggest that for elimination of popular superstitions, the four-month psychology course is hardly an efficient device.

LITERATURE CITED

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