

# **An Educated Superstition: Studying the Effects of Education on Supernatural Beliefs and Superstitions**

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## **Introduction**

The conflict between science and the supernatural is a long and often intriguing history. Many people believe that the two will always struggle against each other, while others believe they can exist harmoniously. As American writer Elbert Hubbard said, “The supernatural is the natural not yet understood”(Hubbard par.1). Clearly, the two have always coexisted, peacefully or not, depending on one another other to validate each others existence. Hubbard's perspective is suggesting that the coexistence of the two is more than necessary, it is imperative for either of them.

The ongoing discussion about the supernatural has recently begun to involve higher education more due to its prevalence in the last few decades. Scientists, religious entities, and even the general population have become more interested in understanding how higher education affects people’s beliefs in the supernatural, especially the ones they were raised with. Thinking logically, one would likely assume that the more educated a person becomes, the more likely they are to question, or even abandon, their previous supernatural beliefs. Interestingly enough, the research done on this subject so far does not always support this conjecture. A University of Nebraska-Lincoln study on education and religion shows that higher education has a positive effect on Americans’ religious habits. Philip Schwadel, a professor of sociology at UNL said, “The effects of education on religion are not simple increases or decreases. In many ways, effects will vary, based on how you define religion.” The study did show that people questioned their

religion as the “one true religion” the more educated they were (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, par. 2-12). The research done by UNL student and staff demonstrates how the relationship between supernatural beliefs and education is complicated enough that we must dig very deep indeed to find any easily explained correlations. Similarly, a survey featured on the livescience website shows that students with more education were more likely to believe in ghosts, hauntings, telepathy, and a few other supernatural phenomena (Britt, par. 1-9). While this was a much less intensive form of research into the topic, this survey brings us to question what we understand of the discussion, and what we should try and consider going forward.

I will be doing research into this subject on my own with a short survey regarding a few supernatural topics. My goal is to try and determine if I can distinguish some sort of correlation between education level and supernatural beliefs, and if I can begin to try and explain why any correlation, or lack thereof, might exist. Despite the evidence suggesting otherwise so far, I hypothesize that there will be a decrease in supernatural beliefs as people complete more education. My prediction for this specific survey/experiment is that the data will show that people with more education will be less likely to believe in each of the supernatural monsters, beings, and phenomena tested for. Should the results prove not to support my prediction, my null hypothesis will be that there is no correlation between education level and belief in the tested supernatural topics.

## **Method**

The research done for this topic on higher education and beliefs include an eight question survey of 30 people and one interview with someone who had an “outlier” perspective based on their survey. The survey was printed on paper and handed out across five states in the southeast

US. I arbitrarily picked certain people to ensure the education levels were reasonably diversified. The education levels were divided into five categories based on how much education a person has completed (see attached survey and results). I made no distinction between someone who dropped out or was still enrolled at a certain level of education. The survey then asked for the likelihood of the existence or effectiveness of eight supernatural entities, monsters, or phenomena. Lastly, there was a comments or opinions section that was optional.

I choose my interviewee immediately after receiving his survey, and was able to gain a five to ten minute interview right then. I choose him based on his somewhat unusual answers, hoping they might offer a unique perspective when I analyze and discuss my results. Once I had thirty completed surveys, I charted, graphed, and quantified the data I had. I assigned an increasing value to each of the five answers to each survey question, five being certain and one being impossible. I then multiplied these numbers by the number of times they showed up and added all of these numbers from each education level for each topic. To account for the variability in surveys for each education level, I divided the previously found number by the number of surveys in that education level to get an average between one and five. I called this the “supernatural number” where a higher number means a greater average belief in that topic. Using this method, I was able to create comparable data sets which were then used for further discussion.

### **Results/Analysis**

As described in the method, a “supernatural” number was found for each education level. This following chart, Figure 1, shows the results.

	Ghosts	Bigfoot	Tarot/Fortune	Angels/Demons	Afterlife	Human Souls	Santa...	Theological Force
Part of High School (2)	2	1.5	3	4	4.5	3.5	1	4
High School (7)	2.57	1.71	2.71	3.43	4.57	3.29	1.71	3.71
Part of College (10)	2.8	2	2.4	3.7	3.7	3.3	1.6	3.9
College (6)	3	1.5	2.5	3.17	4.33	3.5	1.17	4
Grad School (5)	2.4	1.4	2.4	3.4	3.4	3.6	1	3.4

Figure 1

The table shows a number between 1 and 5 for each of the topics at each education level. The higher this supernatural number is, the greater the average belief in the topic is. As we can see at a quick glance, the numbers are fairly varied across the board. There is not a single education level that stands out as having significantly high or low supernatural number in any category. As far as the topics are concerned, the Theological force and Afterlife topics both had the highest belief across all the education levels, and the Santa topic had the lowest. It was important to keep the two contrasting topics at the end so the juxtaposition of their results would hopefully indicate how aware and serious survey takers were with their answers (although the comments section was overwhelmingly not serious). Looking at these results, it seems the difference is significant enough that we can consider the data as mostly reflective of people's actual beliefs.

An initial look at the results reflects a data set we can use to begin to make comparisons. The graph below, Figure 2, displays the results visually to aid in their comparison. Just as in the initial table, the results seem to be pretty varied across the board. Our prediction for this survey was that the data would show people would higher education would be less likely to believe in each of these supernatural monsters, beings, or phenomena. As the graph shows, this does not

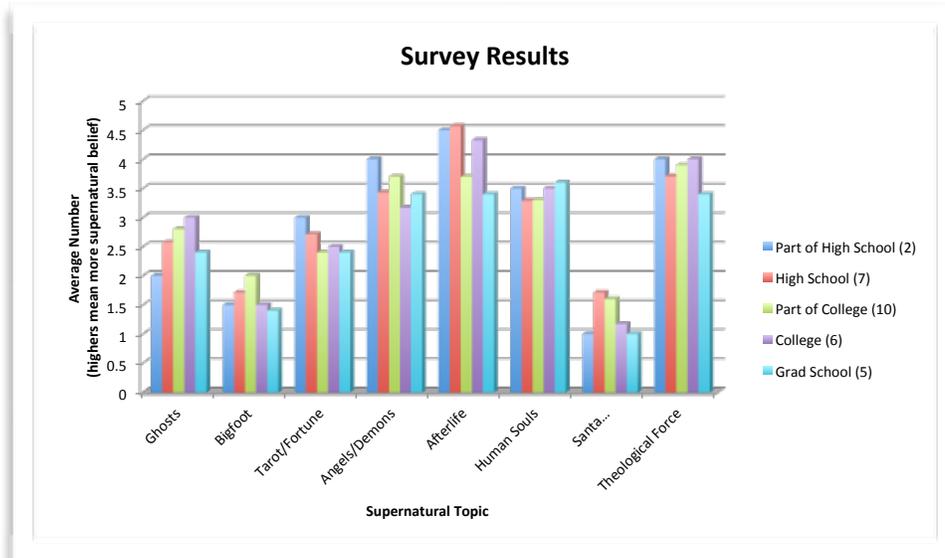


Figure 2

seem to be the case at all. The only subject that even remotely displays the staircase decline we would need to see for the prediction to be true is Tarot/Fortune. Also, the differences in the supernatural numbers between the topics is much greater than between the education levels for each topic. This shows that people across education levels are have a similar level of belief in each topic. Surprisingly, the ghosts topic actually displays an inclined staircase till grad school that would actually support the complete opposite of our prediction. Regardless, we must fall back to our null hypothesis, which is that education level does not have a significant effect on supernatural and monster beliefs.

## Discussion

In summary of the results, none of the supernatural phenomena tested for showed any real negative correlation between education level and belief. While I was unable to prove my hypothesis, I have added to the the portion of the discussion that seems to suggest that there is no negative correlation. My survey results simply fall in line with the research broached in the

introduction. So why then is there no trend when logic seems to support it? The livescience article states that college “is not necessarily a path to skepticism in these realms,” and that some selective confirmation may be taking place. In other words, educated people are better able to defend their ideas, even the more unusual ones (Britt par. 6-9). Perhaps the next step in the discussion is to ask which beliefs transcend education level the most and by how much.

To gain a rather unique perspective, I conducted a brief interview with Mike Hunt (pseudonym), one of my survey takers who had a particularly unique set of responses. His survey suggested he was one of the few people who had a tendency to believe in the more offbeat supernatural phenomena more than the religious based ones (think ghosts and Bigfoot versus afterlife and theological force). In response to being asked about why he believed in Bigfoot more than the religious topics he said, “If you think about it, the evidence for Bigfoot is far greater than god or an afterlife. Bigfoot, in a sense, could exist as an undiscovered Primate species. That seems more likely to me than believing in something with no evidence behind it and was provided by books written thousands of years ago.” I later on asked him about the unusual answers in his survey. He explained, “We as humans need to believe in somethings that cannot be explained. In fact, I would call it scientific to believe in the unexplained. After all, what is science but explaining things which were previously unexplained. I choose my beliefs partially based on logic, and partially on whim. I am not narrow-minded, but at the same time I would not call myself religiously inclined. What’s the fun in knowing everything?” Mike seemed to take a rather light view to the whole interview. While he was honest in all of his answers, he admitted that he may not answer the exact same if he took the survey again depending on the timing. Mike is a highly educated professor, and he would definitely be considered religiously

educated as well. My interview with him seemed to suggest that sometime believing in something matters more than what we believe in, and that transcends education level. Perhaps this perspective is not shared universally or even popularly, but it certainly is a refreshing one.

In Phil Suzkerman's book *Society without God*, he shares a stat that 86 percent of Americans without a college degree believed in the resurrection of Jesus versus 64 percent amongst those with a postgraduate degree (Zuckerman 96). The details of this study were not shared fully, but it does reflect a relationship. Such correlations obviously exist, but it is important to remember that supernatural belief is in itself such a varied and personal topic. We are essentially taking about the value sets and life experiences that define a person's character. At the same time, higher education will similarly shape and define a person's perspective, since it is often the time period when people leave their childhood environment and are exposed to varied and competing ideals. This study has proven that the debate is so much wider than any simple relationship, and if anything, it should be considered as further proof that science and the supernatural depend on one another in very complex ways. They are both intricate parts of what makes us human, and not even education level is significant enough to change that. As Albert Einstein said, "Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former." (Einstein p.1). If we need to believe in something, then there truly is not much that can change that.

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