

# Review of: "Re-calling Magical Thinking: Different, yet Connected Views on Magical Thinking"

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**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

The short paper discusses “magical thinking,” a notion of cognitive anthropology, and links it to changes in behavior caused by the Covid-19 global pandemic. The survey of different definitions given of the term is informative but not complete. In my own research, I found the observation that magical thinking is “nowadays considered universal and present in every society” very useful (Namdiero-Walsh 2022: 2). This is also reflected in the author’s comment that “adults also practice magical thinking” and that “[M]agical thinking has been taken as a commonplace activity in the everyday lives of both children and adults.”

From my perspective, however, there remains a problem with the current view of magical thinking, as it still seems to be primarily associated with irrational thoughts and absurd ideas. This is not different from the understanding given to the notion of “conspiracy theory,” which is sometimes considered an oxymoron, widely regarded in pejorative terms, and often used to dismiss uncomfortable questions (Neuwirth 2021: 842). Thus, the problem with both terms, magical thinking and conspiracy theory, is the insufficient understanding by humans of causal relations between a great variety of events or phenomena. From a cognitive perspective, it is even natural, as humans would otherwise have to be omniscient. Thus, perhaps it is only human “ignorance that leads to chance” (Zajonc 1995: 397).

Even Cass Sunstein noted in his book that “some conspiracy theories have, of course, turned out to be true” (Sunstein 2008: 4). Magical thinking therefore should be regarded as a kind of “outside-the-box” or “paradoxical thinking” and not merely dismissed as unscientific or irrational. Oxymora and paradoxes, for instance, are understood to be only apparently contradictory and constitute a language of the future (Neuwirth 2018: 243). They were even found to both highlight inadequate knowledge and also fuel scientific progress (Kapur et al. 2011: 1). Therefore, magical thinking should today, and even in the context of Covid-19, be construed in a way that individuals are encouraged to cooperate in a joint quest for a deeper understanding of the world instead of being a divisive tool of spreading dissent. After all, it was an English poet who observed that the “universe is full of magical things patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper” (Phillpotts 1918: 19).

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