The Relationship Between Social Class and Supernatural Belief

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Abstract

This paper explores if there is an empirical relationship between social class and supernatural belief and what seeks to explain it. The sample used to test the hypothesis consists of data gathered from GSS Data Explorer using the years 1998 and 2008. The sample size is 1,929 surveyors. The hypothesis is that as an individual's socioeconomic status increases, they feel more safe and secure, therefore, they are less likely to believe in a higher power or supernatural beings. Income and education are found to be significant in determining the individual's supernatural belief. As education rises, the level of superstition decreases. Income is interesting however, as income increases the level of superstition initially increases, but once it reaches the inflection point, the level of superstition decreases.

Introduction

Are people that belong in a low social class more likely to believe in supernatural beings or occurrences? Is there a link between social class and supernatural belief? If there is a link what is it? This paper will look at what people tend to believe and their social class. Social class is determined by their income, education, race, age, and gender. Their supernatural belief is determined by their belief in hell, heaven, God, and the ways God has changed their lives. Secularism and existential security theorized by Norris and Inglehart (2004), states that existential security, meaning that "Survival is secure enough that it can be taken for granted,"(p.4) is reason for the relationship between social status and religiosity. When an individual's security increases religiosity decreases. People of lower social class (lower income) are more likely to feel less secure than someone of high social class (higher income), therefore they are more likely to have faith in religion and other supernatural beliefs. There is no composite measure for social class, therefore, income is the variable being measured for social class and education is the control.

Literature Review

Social class and religiosity are closely linked according to Almquist (1966). Depending on an individual or groups social class, their denomination can be determined. For example, Episcopalians are usually upper-class while Baptists tend to be a part of the lower-class. Each denomination has specific rules to follow, social class also plays a part in that. The Episcopal denomination is not rigid in its rules or requirements. Whereas, Baptists have more strict guidelines to follow. Lower class groups need more strict guidelines because they have an absence of education, fixed or limited mental contexts, little reading and occupational isolation. Almquist (1966) found that individuals of the lower class know that God exists and they don't

need intellectual assurance. Whereas, individuals in classes higher can't just "believe" they need intellectual reasoning to believe. This may be because of a lack in education in the lower classes. Almquist believes that there are many social factors that go into determining someone's religiosity.

Religious belief can be put into two assessments, the first is those which assess religious belief itself and those which assess the holders of religious belief. Sociology studies the latter. Segal (1980) states that sociology can assess why a person has certain religious beliefs, but sociology cannot assess what an individual believes. "The social sciences assess the origin and function of religious belief," (p.404). This is important in helping to determine the origins of the beliefs and the types of people that believe in it. This can also predict what an individual's religious belief is for example, just by looking at their social class. Goldstein (2007) states, "The conventional academic point of view that supernatural beliefs are survivals from a naive past and must decline as scientific thought ascends," (p.60). This thought is outdated though. Freud (1962) defines why individuals believe in religion quite perfectly. He states that the helplessness which humanity experiences make them long for the kind of security their father provided them as children. That longing turns into them imagining a supreme deity that looks over them. Religious belief is then created to help humanity deal with the unfriendliness and indifference of the world. Thus, when humanity becomes educated and realizes that the belief that they had of the supreme deity is not possible. They may also stop believing because they have become wealthy and educated and have no need to believe in such a thing because they can deal with the harshness of the world.

Every culture has supernatural beliefs and within each culture there are even more. These beliefs can range from actual beings that are human-like beings with nonhuman-like properties to

a supernatural belief system according to Shtulman (2008). To be able to study why certain people believe in supernatural beings and why others in the same culture do not, the origins of superstition and beings must be looked at. Shtulman assesses that each culture has their own beliefs and beliefs from other cultures are seen as less unlikely to exist. For example, Shtulman states, "In the United States, for example, most individuals believe in the existence of angels, Satan, and God, but most individuals do not believe in the existence of ghosts, witches, and demons," (p.1124). This is because in the US culture, the existence of God, angels, Satan, and demons are normal. At least more normal than other superstitious beings. People who believe in superstitious beings like gods and spirits are seen to not have human features, but they have human minds, thoughts, memories, and intentions. People who believe in these supreme beings believe that they are similar to humans but also greatly more powerful. People may believe this because they feel a sense of security that there is someone, or something, out there who more powerful than them looking over them. Individuals who belong to the lower classes in a society may feel less safe and secure, therefore they are more likely to believe in those beings.

Where people believe in God and angels, there are also people who believe in the devil and evil. Most people who believe in one also believe in the other. Baker (2008) states that as income and education increases the belief in religious evil decreases. People of lower socioeconomic class are more likely to believe in religious evil. This is because, according to Baker, they feel that God has given up on them and the devil has control of their lives. African Americans and women believe the most in religious evil. African Americans have faced many hardships such as, oppression, racism, and poverty. Women are firm believers because they are more likely to be a part of a lower socioeconomic class than men. Also, they statistically believe in religion more than men so it makes sense for them to also believe in religious evil. Baker

states, "Whether this higher level of involvement and belief in women is due to physiology, socialization, or other factors is currently unclear," (Baker 218). There is no known reason as to why women believe more heavily in religion than men, however, there is still ways of determining what they believe. Baker's study states that social class has a significant correlation with religious evil and there may also be a correlation with superstition as well.

Does social class determine what congregation an individual belongs. Schwadel (2012) did a study on exactly that. Schwadel determines that an individual's income and education define their social class. His results stated that there was a correlation between someone's social class and what congregation they belonged to, but it wasn't a very strong correlation. He found that social class and denomination had little to do with each other, however, at the congregation level there was some evidence. He states that his research was inconclusive and further research would be required. He states that congregational differences are more important than denominational differences. People who are a part of a church, regardless of the denomination, all generally believe in God and other religious affiliations. Since Schwadel was unable to assess the true differences in social class between congregations or denominations, looking at just the individuals church is not a significant way in determining the relationship between supernatural belief and social class.

The studies used all discuss supernatural belief and its impact to society. They look at ways in which superstition is influenced by social class and vice versa. These studies all support the idea that there is a correlation between social class and supernatural belief.

Theory and Hypothesis

Secularism and Existential Security Theory is a theory that states when survival is secure enough, it can be taken for granted. Norris and Inglehart (2004) state that this is an underlying mechanism of the relationship between social status and religiosity. They contend that as this security increases religiosity decreases. People of lower social class feel less safe and secure because they have little money and might be living paycheck to paycheck. Whereas, people of higher social class feel more safe and secure because they have money and are well educated. When individuals feel safe and secure they have no need to believe in a higher power that might keep them safe. A hypothesis that can be made is that as an individual's socioeconomic status increases, they feel more safe and secure, therefore, they are less likely to believe in a higher power or supernatural beings. The null hypothesis that will be tested against the hypothesis is that there is no correlation between social class and supernatural belief. The independent variable is social class and the dependent variable is supernatural belief.

Methods and Data

What defines an individual's social class or supernatural belief? The variables I decided to use to determine an individual's social class is income and highest education level is the control. The variables to measure superstition are belief in heaven, hell, God, and how God has changed the surveyor's life. I used GSS Data Explorer to obtain data and survey questions for the independent, dependent, and the control variables. I decided to use GSS because it provided the information, survey questions, and data that I needed to answer my research question. The sample used is data from 1998 and 2008, and the sample size is 1,929. The independent variable is social class, since there is no composite for social class; I am using income as a proxy. The dependent variable is supernatural belief. The sample frame for the independent variable is

income. The sample frame for the dependent variable is belief in God, heaven, hell, and how

God has changed the individual's life. The surveyors were asked whether they definitely believe,

yes they probably believe, no they probably do not believe, and no they definitely do not believe

for God, heaven, hell, and how God has changed their lives. Each of these variables were then

coded together to create SuperS. SuperS is a composite of each of the dependent variables as one

whole measure of superstition. The dependent variables were put into a scale together to

determine the individuals overall level of superstition. Table 1 provides the summary of statistics

for each variable used. The control variables that are used are age, sex, race, and education.

These are important to control because when looking at the income of the individual, their

education level, race, sex, and age can also be observed to see if those have an effect on

superstition.

	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION
SUPERS	4	18	15.6	3.368
RACE	1	3	1.3	.605
EDUCATION	0	20	13.32	3.002
SEX	1	2	1.55	.498
AGE	18	88	45.54	16.555
INCOME	1	10	5.2	2.279
GOD CHANGE	1	6	5.22	1.347
HELL	1	4	3.19	1.059
HEAVEN	1	4	3.49	.861
GOD	1	4	3.71	.735

Table 1. Summary of Statistics Table

Results

In order to test the hypothesis, a linear regression was run (see Table 2 below). The

regression assesses the effect of the independent variable of interest (income) and controls on the

dependent variable (the composite measure of superstition). Looking at the coefficient for

income and income squared, we see a highly significant (p<.01) positive than negative association, indicating there is a curvilinear relationship between income and superstitious belief. This means, that at lower levels of income superstitious beliefs strengthen, but that once a certain level of wealth is acquired, the effect lessens with addition increases in income. This lends support to my hypothesis in that those with the highest levels of superstitious belief are more likely to have lower incomes.

Education level also has a negative and significant (p<.01) effect on superstition. For every one-unit increase of education, there is a .194 decrease in superstition. This means that as education rises, the level or likelihood of that individual believing in superstition decreases. Age is also a variable worth examining. There is a positive association as well, for every one-unit increase in age, there is a .008 increase in superstition. This means that as people get older they are more likely to believe in superstitious beings, God, or heaven and hell. Now this increase is small, however, superstition gradually rises as people get older. Table 2 shows the independent variables in the regression table. These results mean that Secularism and Existential Security Theory has some validity since as income and education increase, individuals feel more safe and secure they have less of a need to believe in a higher power or superstitious beings.

Coefficients[a]

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	14.598	.654		22.310	.000
income	.393	.150	.266	2.624	.009
income2	-.036	.012	-.291	-2.903	.004
Age of respondent	.008	.005	.041	1.832	.067
Highest year of school completed	-.194	.027	-.173	-7.160	.000
Respondents sex	1.240	.150	.183	8.279	.000
Race of respondent	.311	.126	.056	2.469	.014

a. Dependent Variable: superS

Table 2. Linear Regression Table

Discussion and Conclusion

Is there a relationship between social class and supernatural belief and if there is a

relationship, what is the relationship? My hypothesis states that there is a relationship and that as

individual's social class rises their supernatural belief decreases. This is because of Secular and

Existential Security Theory, which states that people are less likely to believe in a higher

supernatural power if they feel safe and secure. People of lower social class feel less safe and

secure than people of higher social class, therefore, the higher the socioeconomic status, there is

less of a need for belief in supernatural beings. My research findings supported my hypothesis in

that as income rises, superstition decreases. And as an individual's education increases, their

superstition decreases also.

Some limitations of my research are that the surveys conducted may not have had an

equal representation of each social class, therefore some of the data might be skewed. There also

is a limitation on the amount of data for superstition. I would have liked to also include belief in

ghosts, aliens, and mythical creatures. I think that if I was able to gather data on those other

variables there would be more of a concrete level of superstition. I conclude that my hypothesis,

given the amount of data I was able to obtain, is supported. I believe there needs to be more data

to strongly support my hypothesis. However, with the data that I have is able to show that there

is some form of correlation between social class and supernatural belief.

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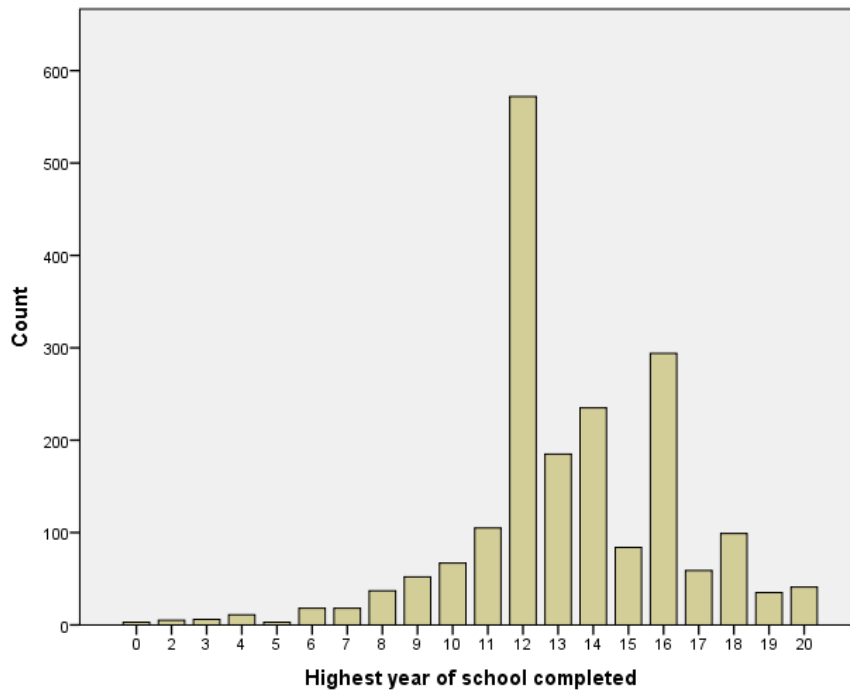
Appendix

Figure 1. Histogram for education level
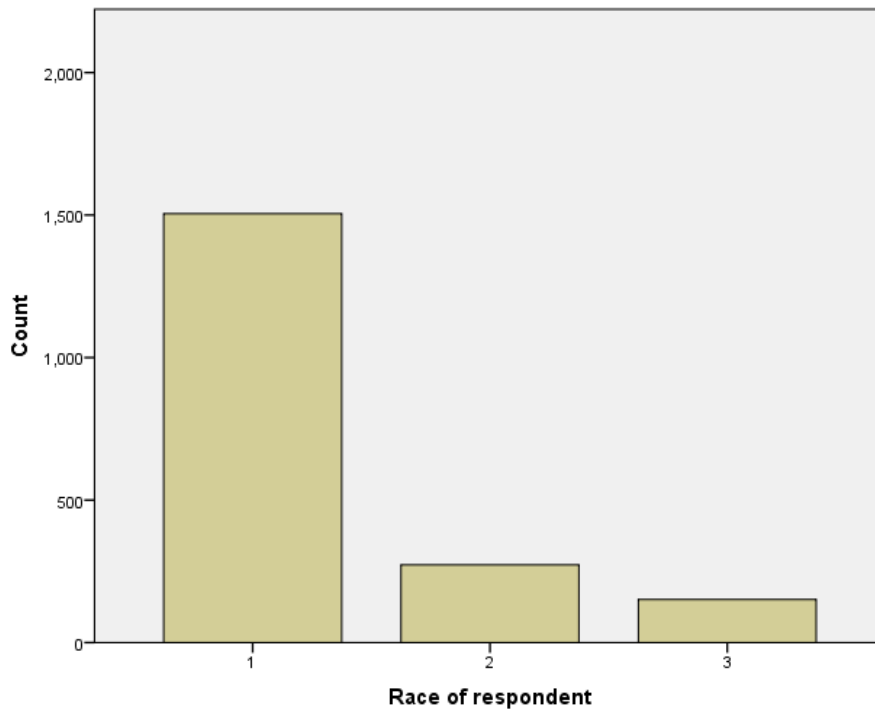

Figure 2. Histogram for race

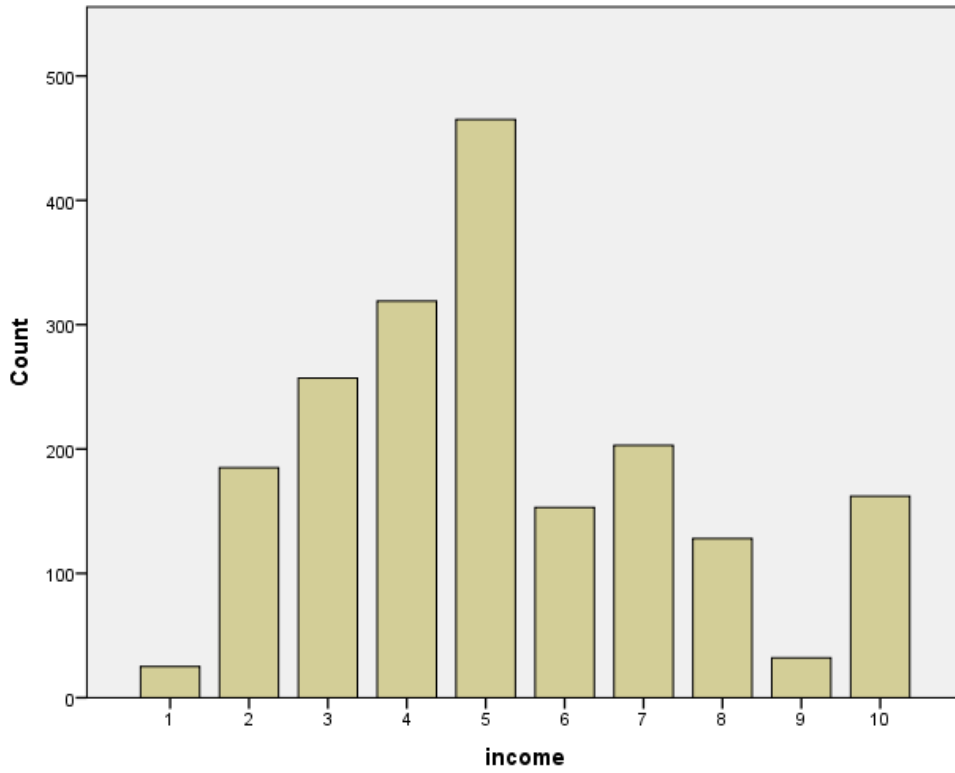THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL CLASS AND SUPERNATURAL BELIEF
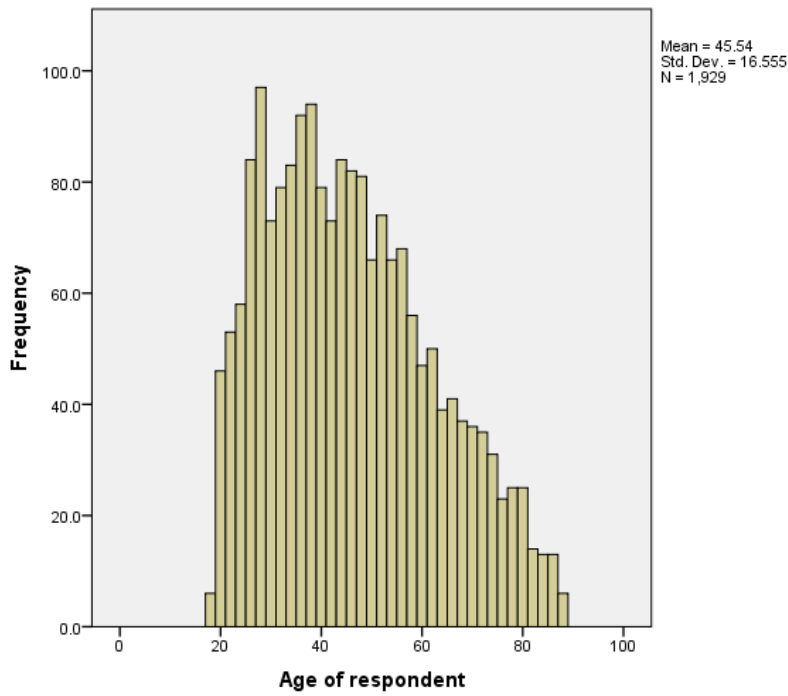

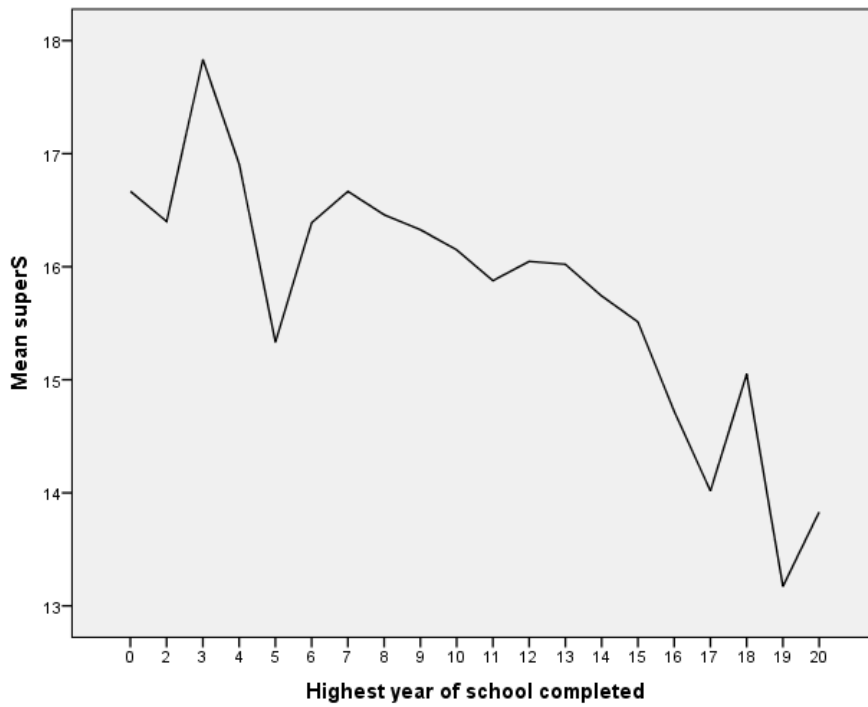*Figure 3*. Histogram of income

Figure 4. Histogram of Age

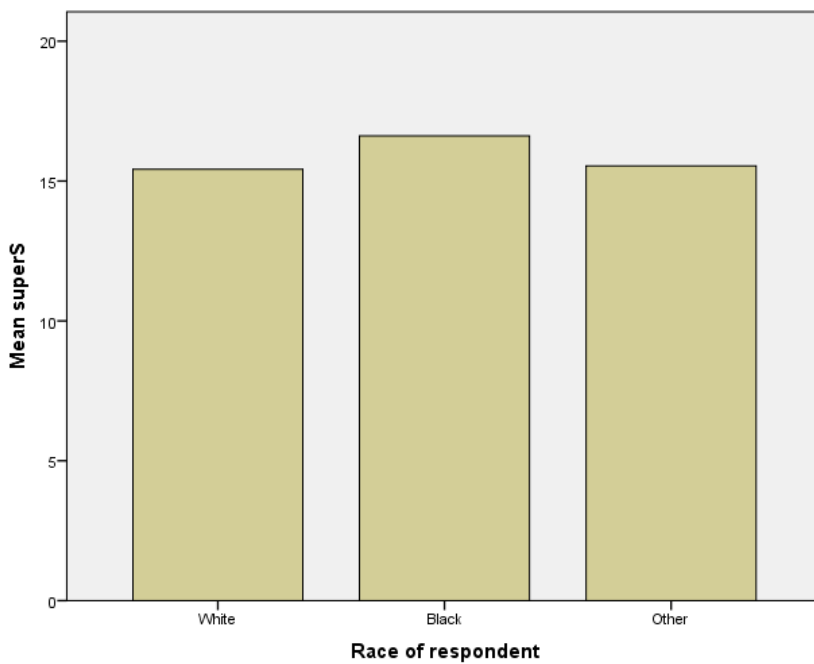*Figure 5.* Graph showing Superstition and Education.

Figure 6. Graph showing race and Superstition

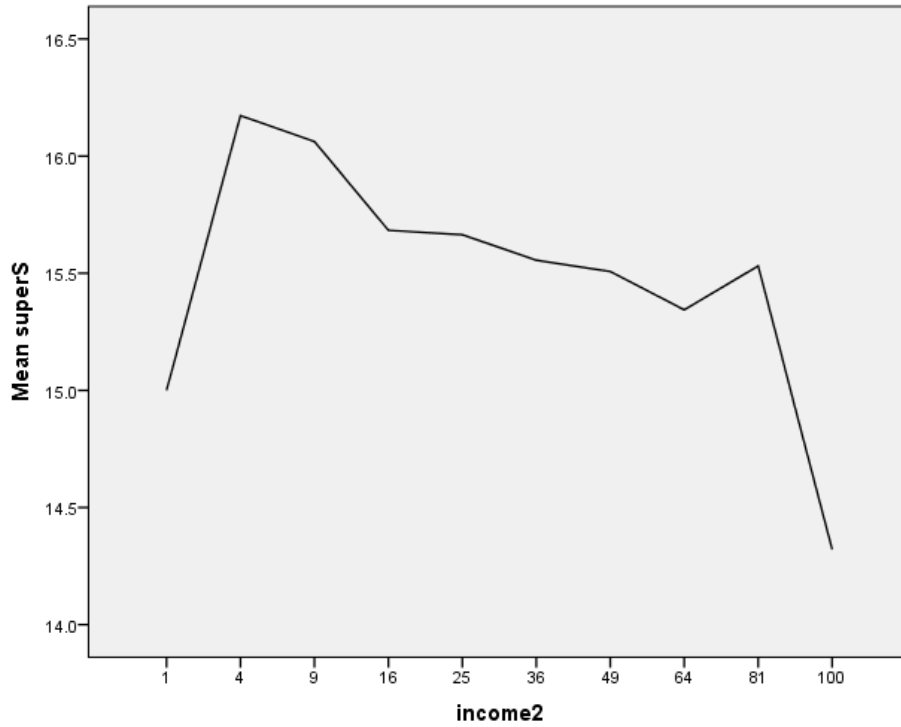THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL CLASS AND SUPERNATURAL BELIEF

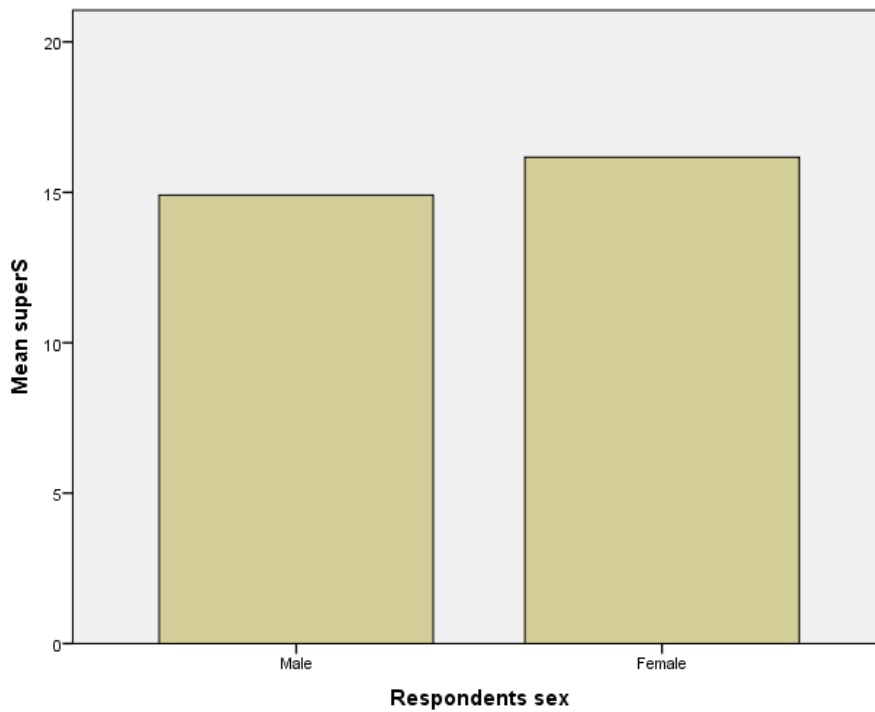*Figure 7*. Graph showing the relationship between superstition and income

Figure 8. Graph showing sex and Superstition

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL CLASS AND SUPERNATURAL BELIEF

Correlations

		Highest year of school completed	superS
Highest year of school completed	Pearson Correlation	1	-.190**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	1929	1929
superS	Pearson Correlation	-.190**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1929	1929

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Bivariate Correlations

Correlations

		superS	Race of respondent
superS	Pearson Correlation	1	.066**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.004
	N	1929	1929
Race of respondent	Pearson Correlation	.066**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	
	N	1929	1929

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4. Bivariate Correlations

Correlations

		superS	income
superS	Pearson Correlation	1	-.116**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	1929	1929
income	Pearson Correlation	-.116**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1929	1929

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5. Bivariate Correlations

Correlations

		superS	Respondents sex
superS	Pearson Correlation	1	.186**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	1929	1929
Respondents sex	Pearson Correlation	.186**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1929	1929

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6. Bivariate Correlations

Correlations

		superS	Age of respondent
superS	Pearson Correlation	1	.053*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.019
	N	1929	1929
Age of respondent	Pearson Correlation	.053*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.019	
	N	1929	1929

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 7. Bivariate Correlations

Codebook:

Income

Total family yearly income:

1=less than $1000   9=$80,000-89,000

2=$1000-9999   10=$90,000-99,999

3=$20,000-29,999   11=$100,000-over

4=$30,000-39,999

5=$40,000-49,999

6=$50,000-59,999

7=$60,000-74,999

8=$75,000-79,999

Education

Highest year of school completed

0= no years completed

1= 1 year   11= 11 years

2= 2 years   12= 12 years (High School Diploma)

3= 3 years   13= 13 years

4= 4 years   14= 14 years

5= 5 years   15= 15 years

6= 6 years   16= 16 years (bachelor's degree or equivalent)

7= 7 years   17= 17 years

8= 8 years   18= 18 years

9= 9 years   19= 19 years

10= 10 years 20= 20 years

Sex   Age

1= Male   Age of participant

2= Female   18-88 (88-over put into same category)

Race

Race of the participant

1= White

2= Black

3= Other

Superstition (SuperS)

Individual's level of superstition

4-18

4=don't believe

11= somewhat believe

18= fully believe