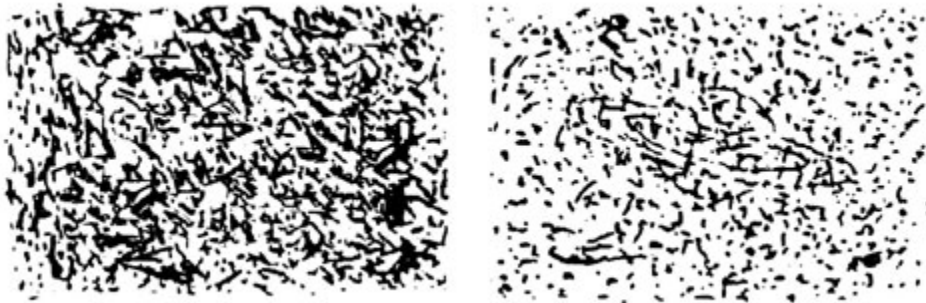


See a Pattern on Wall Street?

By [JOHN TIERNEY](#)

Take a look at the two blurry images below. Can you see an object hidden in each one?



Before I give the answers, here's another question: Do you feel a certain lack of control over events right now?

These questions are not unrelated, according to [a report in the new issue of Science](#) by Jennifer Whitson and Adam Galinsky. The researchers found that when people were primed to feel out of control, they were more likely to see patterns where none exist. They would spot an object in each of the images above, even though only the image on the right contains one (the outline of Saturn and its rings). If you thought you saw something in the image on the left, don't be too hard on yourself — your feeling may be perfectly understandable given the chaos on Wall Street.

The researchers say that their experiments, which also tested people's tendency to detect conspiracies and see superstitious lessons in stories, help explain why conspiracy theories and superstitions flourish when people are feeling out of control. Previous researchers have reported, for instance, that first-year business-school students are more prone to imagine conspiracies than are second-year students, and that deep-sea fishermen have more elaborate rituals and superstitions than ones who fish in more predictable conditions near shore.

I asked the Dr. Whitson, a professor at the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin, if Wall Street traders might be behaving these days like those deep-sea fishermen.

“They may be more likely pull their lucky shirt from their closet to wear into work or avoid stepping on any cracks while walking to work,” Dr. Whitson replied. “And individual investors may be looking

more to astrology to determine when to buy and sell or even seeing more nefarious patterns in the actions of their family or coworkers.” She noted that previous research has shown an increase in superstitious belief during times of economic uncertainty.

In the experiments by Dr. Whitson and Dr. Galinsky, people were more likely to see nonexistent patterns after they’d been assigned frustrating tasks with nonsensical rewards and punishments, or after they’d been asked to recall situations in which they’d felt out of control. Dr. Galinsky, a professor at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, noted some historical examples of this tendency, like the reactions of Londoners during the bombing of their city in World War II.

“Even though later statistical analysis clearly demonstrated that the bombs fell randomly across the city, people were certain that parts of the city had been targeted and other parts spared,” he told me. “People in those areas of the city seemingly spared came under suspicion as Nazi sympathizers, and their livelihoods and physical safety were threatened. And in those areas seemingly targeted by the bombs, people moved out, attempting to escape systematic bombing that was in fact not systematic.”

The researchers noted that the delusion of order might be useful in some circumstances, if only because it eases depression and gives people confidence. Dr. Whitson told me:

Feeling in control might be one of the central animating forces for psychological and physical well-being. Not only are people who feel in control less likely to see things that aren’t there and end up chasing ghosts, as our research shows, but there are also a wide variety of health and societal benefits. When people are given information about a medical procedure – and thus feel less uncertain – they recover more quickly.

Dr. Whitson pointed to [an earlier study](#) in which some people at a nursing home were given plants to care for themselves, and a control group received plants that were cared for by the staff. After six months, the people who took care of their own plants were judged by themselves and by the staff to be better off emotionally and physically than the control group. And in the course of 18 months even their mortality rate was lower.

So should we all be tending plants until the financial crisis eases? Or have you found some other techniques for feeling in control? And, however you did on the test with the images, can you recall any instances when you saw any kind of pattern that wasn’t really there?

(Credit for images: R. B. Ekstrom, J.W. French, H.H. Harman, D. Dermen.)