

# Born with a superstitious brain

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An unusual experiment, conducted by Bruce Hood, Professor of Developmental Psychology at the University of Bristol, demonstrating that even the most rational people behave in irrational ways, became one of the star features at this year's British Association Festival of Science.

Professor Hood conducted the experiment to argue that scientists' efforts to combat 'irrational' beliefs are ultimately futile.

To demonstrate his theory, Professor Hood asked members of the festival audience, if they were prepared to try on an old fashioned blue cardigan in return for a £10 reward. After receiving no shortage of volunteers, he then told the volunteers that the cardigan used to belong to Fred West, the mass murderer. On hearing this most of the volunteers put their hands down. Though a few did try it on, others moved away from them.

In fact, the cardigan had not belonged to Fred West. The experiment demonstrated that the belief that it had, made even the most rational of people feel uncomfortable.

Professor Hood said: "It is as if evil, a moral stance defined by culture, has become physically manifest inside the clothing."

"Similar beliefs, which are held even among the most sceptical scientists, explain why few people would agree to swap their wedding rings for identical replicas. The difference between attaching significance to sentimental objects and believing in religion, magic or the paranormal is

only one of degree.

“These tendencies are almost certainly a product of evolution. The human mind is adapted to reason intuitively, so that it can generate theories about how the world works even when mechanisms cannot be seen or easily deduced.

“Because we operate intuitively, it is pointless to get people to abandon their belief systems because they operate at such a fundamental level that no amount of rational evidence or counter-evidence is going to be taken on board to get people to abandon these ideas.”

Source: University of Bristol

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