

In the news

OUT OF CONTROL

A study published recently in *Science* showed that people who feel that they're not in control are more likely to see non-existing patterns.

The researchers manipulated participants so that they felt a lack of control, or asked them to recall a situation in which they were not in control. When these participants subsequently looked at grainy pictures they were more likely to see images that didn't exist. They also tended to perceive conspiracies and were more likely to create superstitious beliefs by causally linking unrelated events. Study author Jennifer Whitson of the University of Texas at Austin says: "This suggests that lacking control creates a visceral need for order — even imaginary order." (*Boston Globe*, 6 October 2008.)

When participants were made to feel more confident through self-affirmation techniques the effects disappeared, indicating that, "There is no point going up to them and telling them they are wrong, we need to make them feel more secure," says Professor Galinsky of Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois, USA), who also contributed to the study (*BBC News*, 3 October 2008).

It's not known whether the tendency to see non-existing patterns affects our decision making, but if it does, the study "suggests that we're going to exhibit these tendencies at the times when they're most dangerous for us", according to Dan Ariely, a behavioural economist at Duke University in Durham (North Carolina, USA) (*ScienceNOW*, 2 October 2008). This might be relevant to traders and market dealers today, as few will feel in control in the current economic climate. Cary Cooper, Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health at Lancaster University, UK, speculates that, "If they feel out of control they will not be looking in the right way at the information that is coming to them." (*BBC News*, 3 October 2008.)

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