The material object as evidence of supernatural harm

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Introduction
Beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery have been an object of anthropological research for a long time. They are spread worldwide and there are many ways to deal with them from a scholarly perspective. One of the first anthropologists who analyzed the phenomenon was Edward Evans-Pritchard in his famous study *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937). Evans-Pritchard made a distinction between two types of supernatural harm: while a sorcerer may be defined by what he or she does (and knows), a witch is fundamentally defined by what he or she is. Thus Azande believed that the witch had some inherent power by which s/he affected the victim; s/he did not have to do anything except to have negative thoughts targeted at the victim. On the other hand, sorcery does not require any special power or abilities and may be used by anyone, any time it is needed; s/he affects a victim by some kind of magical technique (Cohen 2007b, p. 151).

Although anthropologists recognized witchcraft and sorcery in different parts of the world as two different categories, it was not always possible to make a clear distinction between them, mostly because they occur together: the witch might have some inherent power but s/he still could use some magical practice to affect the victim. Similarly, what one writer interprets as “sorcery” may look like “witchcraft” to another, depending on what features are emphasized (Steward and Strathern 2004, p. 2).

However, when people speak about supernatural harm, they usually have in mind that

1) the supernatural attack is not direct (an attacker and an attacked person do not have to be in contact or do not have to be in the same place at the same time);

2) the attacker is using some kind of supernatural power or supernatural (magical) technique to attack.

The consequences are not usually immediately observable; it takes some time for a victim1 to realize that s/he has been attacked. The victim starts to think about it under specific circumstances – after a long-lasting chain of unfortunate events (job loss, relationship problems, or illness) or after unexpected misfortune.

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1 Henceforth I use the term *victim* to name a person who considers himself/herself to be attacked by a witch or sorcerer in a supernatural way.
Anthropologists have frequently remarked that it is not always possible to make an exact distinction between witchcraft and sorcery, but there have been no efforts to explain this fact further. The notions of witchcraft and sorcery have usually been explained separately, despite the fact that they can rarely be found in their “pure form”. The purpose of this article is to explain why people commonly combine those two concepts when they speak about particular cases of supernatural harm. My explanation will be based on the theories of cognitive anthropology: when we are dealing with cultural concepts we have to look at how the human mind works and explain what cognitive mechanisms and processes underlie the transmission of cultural representations and how they are applied in a particular social context (Kanovský 2004). In my paper I will present empirical material from my fieldwork conducted in central Serbia. I will not deal here in detail with previous results of anthropological research on witchcraft and sorcery. The representations of supernatural harm in the Slovak rural environment were lately analyzed by Tatiana Bužeková (Bužeková 2009).

All humans have the same basic cognitive equipment allowing them to acquire and organise information about the social environment. A cognitive approach attempts to account for aspects of cross-culturally widespread features of human thought and behaviour by identifying and describing the cognitive structures and processes that facilitate their transmission (Cohen 2007b, p. 136). Cognitive scientists work on the assumption that the information processing mechanisms of the human mind evolved in response to the selective pressures of our ancestral environment (Mithen 1996).

This also concerns the study of religious phenomena. “The scientific study of religion has historically focused on what might distinguish religion from ordinary life: special ecstatic experiences, peculiar brain states, uncommon emotional commitments, and belief in supernatural agents. What have been ignored until recently are the natural foundations of religion” (Barrett 2000, p. 29). The new cognitive science of religion differs from previous approaches by insisting that much of what is typically called “religion” may be understood as the natural product of aggregated ordinary cognitive processes (Barrett 2000). Religion does not activate one particular capacity in the mind, a “religious module” or system that would create the complex set of beliefs and norms we usually call religion. Religious representations and supernatural concepts are sustained by a whole variety of different
systems and all these systems are parts of our regular mental equipment, religion or no religion (Boyer 2004).

The same principles that are applied in various kinds of religious representations are also applied in case of representations of supernatural harm. Cognitive anthropologists are trying to explain why representations of supernatural harm have spread around the world and why they have similar patterns almost everywhere. This problem was elaborated by both Pascal Boyer (Boyer 2001) and Emma Cohen (Cohen 2007b).

Less attention, however, was given to the particular components of this set of representations. I will not analyze beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery as such here, but rather concentrate on some aspects that have not often appeared in the anthropological works.

Supernatural influence is nearly always detected post hoc. If somebody knew that s/he was going to be harmed, s/he would do everything to stop it in advance. However, nobody thinks about negative supernatural influence during those quiet life periods when nothing bad is happening to him/her. People start to think about it only when things go wrong. If supernatural harm appears as a possibility, the only way to stop it is to contact a “specialist” – an unwitcher – and then go through an unwitching procedure. In my paper I will concentrate on the following problem: people may represent supernatural harm as a result of a witch’s mental influence (transmission of negative energy), but when it comes to particular cases they search for material evidence of this influence. This material evidence is then treated as a vehicle of the witch’s negative essence. I suppose that invisible influence becomes visible in this way and may make processing information easier; representing a material object as a vehicle of supernatural influence makes the abstract concept concrete. What is much important, however, is that the material object may serve as evidence of an unwitcher’s credibility.

My argument goes into two directions:

1) supernatural harm as a mental attack is too abstract for processing and because of that people look for some more evident (visible) explanation;

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2 This term was used by Jeanne Favret-Saada in her excellent study of beliefs in witchcraft in Normandy (Favret-Saada 1980). I adopt this term as I think that in my context it also corresponds to an expert who is supposed to deal with the witch’s influence.
2) material evidence may probably serve in the first place as evidence of an unwitcher’s reliability.

**General presumptions about notions of witchcraft and sorcery**

The cognitive anthropologists investigated ethnographic evidence from different regions of the world and found some repeating patterns. Representations of supernatural harm were usually activated in cases of repeated or unexpected unfortunate events. Evans-Pritchard made a big effort to explain Azande beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery; he claimed that they could not be treated as manifestations of their irrationality and that they should be analyzed only in the context of their perception of reality and their cultural context (Evans-Pritchard 1937). As such, they were a part of a coherent explanatory system. Although in the modern western world they do not have the same function and role, these beliefs still cannot be explained as some kind of pre-Christian echoes or only as manifestations of superstitions.

According to cognitive scientists, there are specialized cognitive structures underlying the spread of beliefs concerning supernatural harm. These structures are not limited to the domain of witchcraft concepts. They support the mundane thinking about other kinds of social categories that is part of normal cognition and is fundamental to everyday perception and representation of the social world (Cohen 2007b, p. 137). From the cognitive point of view it is possible to explain these beliefs using theories dealing with the work of various cognitive mechanisms not depending on a particular time and cultural environment.

The cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer argues that “what anthropologists call witchcraft is the suspicion that some people (generally within the community) perform magical tricks to plunder other people’s health, good fortune or material goods” (Boyer 2001, p. 254). The cases that are connected with supernatural harm usually go like this: after a series of unexpected unfortunate events people might start to think that these events are not accidents, that there was a reason why things like that happened to them. The “reason” is supposed to be some person’s negative influence on the victim’s environment. This person usually has motives to wish bad luck to the victim: s/he might be jealous, envious or s/he might have had some conflict with him/her. S/he is supposed to affect the victim in some way that is not

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precisely specified. However, this effect is not direct and “natural” in the sense that the attacker uses supernatural power or magical technique. If the victim wants to solve the problem, s/he usually has to ask an unwitcher for help – a person who may detect the witch and stop his/her “attack”. Only if each of these steps is performed (and performed correctly), there is a chance that things will get better for the victim.

People have only a vague idea of how supernatural agents or people with supernatural abilities affect them or what their supernatural powers are. What they may “observe” is the effects of their influence. They do not know what exactly happened to them, they only know that something happened and that somebody is responsible. In situations that we cannot understand and explain we are accustomed to ask ourselves questions like: Why is this happening to me? What have I done? And from there it is not a long way to questions like – Is God punishing me? Is there anybody who wants me to be unhappy? We want to know why something is happening to us and why it is happening now. When people find supernatural causes it is not because they have ignored the workings of mechanical and biological causes but because they are asking question that go beyond these causes (Boyer 2001, p. 257).

On the basis of ethnographic data and psychological research, the anthropologist Stewart Guthrie concluded that people have a bias towards detecting human-like agency in their environment that might not actually exist (Guthrie 1993). People are particularly sensitive to the presence of intentional agency and seem inclined to over-attribute intentional action as the cause of a given state of affairs when data is ambiguous or sketchy (Barrett 2000, p. 31). The psychologist Justin Barrett calls the underlying cognitive mechanism a hyperactive agency detector (HAAD). From the evolutionary perspective, its hyperactivity is crucial because the consequences of the false detection of an agent that is not exactly there are less harmful than no detection at all (e.g. to think that there was a lion in the bush and it proved not to be there is less dangerous than to think that it was not there and it proved to be there). The human mind also tends to spontaneously connect events that might not really be connected – to perceive them as causally related (e.g. misfortunes are caused by some agent).

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4 I do not mean a real effect, but rather people’s perception of supernatural harm.
In situations for which we do not have a natural explanation we may look for an un-natural or supernatural explanation. Instead of a human or animal agent we look for supernatural agents because our mind works that way⁵ – gods, ancestors, ghosts, or witches – and consider them responsible for the situation in question. People attribute to supernatural agents an intuitive “logic of social exchange” that is active in non-religious contexts (Boyer 2003, p. 122). As Stewart Guthrie pointed out, we are so sensitive to the signs of agency that we see intentions where all that really exists is accident (Guthrie 1993). According to Scott Atran, the reason for connecting some events with supernatural agency should be the result of the urgency that these events evoke (Atran 2004).

Explanations that include agents with supernatural abilities or some supernatural activity, in our case witch/witchcraft or sorcerer/sorcery, can also help people in other respects. If a person blames somebody for his/her bad luck, s/he does not have qualms regarding his/her previous actions that could have led to misfortune, and responsibility for the bad luck is transferred to someone else. S/he had done everything s/he could do, but things got out of control. Of course, that does not mean that these considerations are the outcome of conscious reasoning. Evidence from social psychology tells us that people are quick to point the finger, slow to recognize their own flaws, or are simply “bad losers” when things go wrong (Blaine and Crocker 1993; Greenwald and Banaji 1995; In: Cohen 2007b, p. 138).

We may start to regard unfortunate situations we cannot understand in terms of everyday happenings and actions as the result of somebody’s activities. The person who is affecting others is doing so by his/her negative thoughts or/and magical actions. Victims perceive the situation at hand as urgent because it is unexpected and because their life comes under direct or indirect threat. This threat is mostly directed at the domains of health, relationships and property.

**Material evidence of supernatural harm: the ethnographic context**

I conducted my intensive long–term field research in central Serbia, in the region near Belgrade, during 2004/2005 (I carried on collecting data until the end of 2009). My informants were mostly people who had, according to their beliefs, some experience of supernatural harm – they believed they were bewitched or they knew

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⁵ Atran 2004; Barrett 2004; Boyer 2001; Sperber, Hirschfeld 1999 etc.
how to unwitch. I carried out my research in the form of half – structured interviews and participant observation. 6

During my field research I found that the bewitched person usually did not know who the witch was or how the witch affected him/her. From a cognitive perspective, the representations of supernatural harm would be a far less important category if they did not include consequences of this influence. If the victim only alleged that s/he was under the witch’s influence, the inferences originated from this knowledge would be too narrow and the representations of supernatural harm probably would not spread further, because they would not serve as a good explanation of events.

I assume that the possibility of solving the victim’s problem by the process of unwitching (by detecting the source of the attack, stopping his/her influence and perhaps even punishing the attacker7) is exactly what increases the inferential potential of this set of representations. The statement that the person is under supernatural attack is not itself enough to bring a feeling relief: it is the idea of finding its source and bringing life back to normal. Many ethnologists used to concentrate on the accusations and to investigate the facts about who accused whom and why. In the region where I conducted fieldwork the accusations themselves were not so important. People did not believe that if they accused somebody their problems would stop. It is possible that this might be a way to handle personal conflicts, but in the end this solution would not make the victim’s problems disappear. The victims usually do not have any real evidence of supernatural harm – all they have are feelings and problems. If they accuse somebody on that basis, it would not make their situation better. The presumed witch would deny the accusations and the victim’s agony would continue and might even become worse because of a feeling that the victim provoked the witch. Besides, in most cases the bewitched persons did not know who was the witch: they only assumed it.

Ko mi to radi?...

7 It was frequently mentioned in Slovak narratives regarding witchcraft and unwitching that the day after the unwitching procedure was finished the supposed witch would come to the victim to borrow something and would appear to be harmed in some way (e.g. with a bandage on his/her hand). Although it was not explicitly mentioned, we might presume that the unwitcher did not name the witch, but in this way the victim might find out his/her identity and be sure that s/he was punished.
To ne pitaj. Ja sam tu da to rešim

[ Client: Who is doing that to me?... 

Unwitcher: Do not ask that. I am here to solve your problems. ]

There is a reason why unwitchers usually do not want to reveal the witch’s identity and refuse to accuse someone concrete – they do not want to be accused of initiating and provoking social conflicts. By saying that s/he knows who the witch is but refusing to tell the name to the victim the unwitcher is avoiding the possibility of direct conflict between the witch and the bewitched. I recorded cases where the unwitcher mentioned a name that the bewitched identified as the name of a person from his/her environment as the supposed witch. When the unwitching procedure did not help, the desperate victim decided to solve the problems by attacking and killing the witch. Although it was not possible to take legal action against unwitchers, there might be some social consequences for them. As we will see later, attitudes towards them are mostly ambivalent, and their mistakes are very well remembered by their clients and neighbours. Therefore, instead of accusing someone in particular it was more important to stop the negative supernatural influence emanating towards the victim. It could happen only after the unwitching procedure, often complicated and prolonged.

Cognitive anthropologists interested in beliefs in witchcraft/sorcery concentrated on the cognitive mechanisms underlying transmission of the concepts referring to two types of supernatural harm. Beliefs in witchcraft are explained as a result of essentialist thinking: the witch is supposed to have some inherited power which s/he uses to affect his/her victim. This power is not observable, it cannot harm its host in any manner, it does not change and it cannot disappear. The human mind has a tendency to essentialize some biological and social categories (Gelman, Hirschfeld 1999). Notions about witches, race, gender, and other natural-like categories (e.g. ethnic categories) are characterised by “essentialist” reasoning. Essence defines category membership and causes category-specific properties to emerge (e.g. features of appearance, behavioural characteristics) (Gelman 2004).

The cognitive mechanisms involved in accounts of events relating to others’ inherent essences (e.g. witchcraft) are not the same as those that are operative in

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explaining one’s misfortune in terms of the malicious intentions of others (e.g. sorcery) (Cohen 2007). A sorcerer is a person who harms somebody by means of a magical act. S/he does not have any inherent power – s/he just has to know what to do and how to do it. Hence while witchcraft is practically unobservable, sorcery can be observed: the sorcerer has to conduct magical practice. Both sets of mechanisms underlying transmission of those concepts form part of the ordinary cognitive equipment that is available to all human beings and is crucial to inferring, acquiring and organising information about the social environment (Cohen 2007b, p. 137).

My field material, however, could not be separated into two types of representations. People may say that the witch had some internal power that s/he used to harm others, but it did not mean that s/he did not use some kind of magical act to direct this energy at the concrete place or person. What is crucial is that the person who harms somebody is doing so because of his/her bad will and is doing it intentionally.

If a person believes that s/he is subject to supernatural influence, s/he usually goes to an unwitcher. One may ask why people do not ask for help from the church, which could be regarded as the ultimate authority in dealing with supernatural issues. However, there is a reason why priests cannot help in these situations. The Orthodox doctrine does not deny the existence of people who can harm others by their bad wishes; from the Orthodox point of view, however, they are devil worshippers. People may protect themselves from their evil influence by means of devout faith, praying and visiting the church. If a person nevertheless continues to be attacked, s/he can only solve his/her problems by additional praying, fasting and visiting church. The trouble with this solution is that it is too impersonal: the victim is praying, but other people are praying too, how can s/he be sure that God is really listening? The answers that the victim gets from the priest are usually too general: you are a sinner; it is God’s will, be patient and pray. Most of us would not be satisfied with such general answers. People look for personal solutions, for concrete answers to particular questions; they want to know how to solve their problems and save their lives. The concept of salvation is not so important or relevant for everyday problems. Therefore, people usually contact an unwitcher – a person who might give them concrete answers, who will deal with their particular problems (at least during the treatment) etc.
When consulted, the unwitcher states “a diagnosis”, i.e. usually confirms that the client’s problems are the result of supernatural attack. Then the unwitching procedure is started. It is a long and stressful process, as it includes many complicated activities performed by both client and unwitcher (together and individually). Before it starts the unwitcher has to detect the witch (without giving the client the concrete name) and to find out how s/he attacks the victim. Although people believed that the attacker had some kind of supernatural power, they were also persuaded that the witch also used some magical technique. The source of this information usually was the unwitcher, who suggested looking for an unusual object in their house.

Još jednu vrlo zanimljivu stvar kad mi je rekla samo je potvrdila da joj mogu još više verovati. Rekla je: "Ispod kuće ima jedan panj, tu je nekad bila šljiva ali se osušila, osekli ste je a panj je ostao. Pod tim panjem je zakopano nešto, to moraš naći i potom zapaliti, ti, otac ili majka svejedno i nemoj se okretati kad budeš odlazio od vatre. To ti je ista osoba zakopala veoma dava i zato je napredak i zdravlje kroz vašu kuću išao vrlo teško". Naravno bila je u pravu, majka je strpljivo kopala i pronašla ostatke od soka (PVC sok sa slamčicom) u kojem je bilo zamotano parče crvenog konca toliko zamršenog da bi se i sam Bog namučio da sve to odmrst...bilo kako bilo određene promjene su svaki put bivale sve primjetnije i počeo sam osećati da stvari polako dolaze na svoje mesto.

[She told me one more interesting thing and it was the evidence that I could trust her. She told me – near your house... there is a tree stub, there was a plum tree once, but it dried up, so they hacked it down, but there is still the tree stub. There was something buried under this tree and you have to find it and to burn it, you, your mother or father, whoever. But do not turn when you leave the fire. Some person put it there long ago and because of that it was hard for success and health to pass through your house. Of course, she was right. My mother was digging patiently and found an old juice container with some red stitching in it, so knotted that God would be hard put to untwist it...After that some changes happened and things were slowly getting back to normal.]

Moja prijateljica je išla kod vlajne, zbog sina koj je imao problema sa novcem. Upao je u velike dugove i roditelji su morali nešto da prodaju da bi ih vratili. Vlajna mu je
My friend and her son visited the vlajna, because of the son’s problem with money, he had big debts, his parents had to sell something to help him to pay them back. The vlajna told him that he had to cut off his relationship with Marija and Milena – he did not believe in these things till then, but Milena was the name of his girlfriend and Marija was her mother. The vlajna asked him if they often made him his favourite cake and if he used to drink coffee there. He confirmed and the vlajna told him not to eat or drink there any more. She also asked him if he had a red pillow in his house, but he and his mother also claimed they did not have anything like that. The vlajna also told this man that he would have many problems with money. After some time, he was looking for something in his case and at the bottom of it he found a red pillow and he recalled that his girlfriend gave it to him. He called his mother and they found some fluff inside of that pillow and threw everything away.

The objects that people find are treated as evidence of supernatural influence, but also as a “vehicle” of witch’s negative energy (essence). The Serbian ethnologist Lidija Radulović (2007) made similar observations. The question we should ask here is why people used to combine two types of supernatural harm, i.e. if they spoke about negative energy, why did they also mention magical practices and material evidence of this harm? If somebody has an internal power why transmit it through an object and not directly at the victim?

When it comes to unwitching, people look for material evidence confirming supernatural attack. It is noteworthy that they do not always find it, or, on the other hand, that they may treat any object as a suspicious one. Probably anyone could find

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9 The term used in Eastern Serbia for an unwitcher.
10 This was a rare case when the unwitcher told concrete names. I will return to this case later.
suspicious objects at home, for instance, things of unclear origin. According to Radulović, only a few persons confirmed that they found evidence of supernatural harm. More often people mentioned that they could not find some things (clothes etc.) or they found things in unusual places (Radulovic 2007, p. 81). One would say that only something strange would be suspicious, but in real situations people are not consistent and clear in this respect.

If we think about witchcraft only in terms of a mental influence or transmission of negative energy from witch to victim, there are few things to be seen: this form of witchcraft is a markedly abstract concept. That could be the reason why people did not have an elaborated concept of what this influence looked like and how it was even possible.\(^{11}\) My informants, self-declared victims of supernatural harm, did not have any complex concepts. They presumed that there was somebody outside who wished them bad luck. They did not explain in detail what witchcraft or sorcery is; they did not describe how the attack from a distance took place; they only knew that something bad happened to them and it was not their fault.

**Supernatural harm as a form of contamination**

Psychologists have noticed that when people speak about supernatural attack they are accustomed to describing it as a form of contamination. As defined by psychologists and biologists, contamination involves transmission of a contaminated substance from a source (a person or an object) that is also “a vehicle” of this substance to a recipient (another person or object). In some cases contamination includes a medium that transfers a contaminated substance from the source to the recipient. This substance (essence) becomes part of the recipient’s body (Rozin, Nemeroff 1990, p. 207). Although the substance does not harm its source in any way, it is a strange element for the recipient and as such it might be dangerous. Contamination usually has negative connotations, but the essence can also be positive and even holy (contact with gurus, visiting sanctuaries etc.)

Beliefs about contamination are universal. Research in developmental psychology indicates that young children are already sensitive to contamination and

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\(^{11}\) Tanya Luhrmann, who conducted research in the community of magicians in London, noticed that the magicians frequently used metaphors: they said that truth was relative; they described magical forces as forces that science still could not detect or explain. Magic was an integral part of their lives and they saw connections where people normally did not see them, but their descriptions were not concrete (Luhrmann 1989, p. 283 – 303).
hold a “skeletal framework level” of its understanding: “Children understand that contamination may occur through invisible mechanisms (e.g. through transmission of germs), although they have little knowledge of the biological nature of such entities and the biological mechanisms by which they multiply and cause illness. They fail to grasp the underlying mechanisms of transmission and do not differentiate the contaminating processes of poisons, germs and irritants” (Cohen 2007b, p. 115).

From a contagion perspective, the world is suffused with essences: footsteps, money, clothing, all food and many other items bear the residues of insects and other people, savoury and unsavoury (Rozin, Nemeroff 1990, p. 218). Contamination activates strong emotions of disgust and fear: any contact with contaminated things, however minor, is repulsive (Bloom, 2004, p. 159). According to evolutionary psychologists, these emotions are an outcome of evolutionary pressure that might keep us from contact with toxic substances and objects that might cause disease (dead bodies, faeces, spoilt food) (Liebermann, Cosmides, Tooby 2000). Paul Rozin, a psychologist who has done much of the research in this area, argued that situations that evoke disgust obey the two laws of sympathetic magic as they were described by J. G. Frazer – the law of similarity, that is, “appearance equals reality” (like causes like), and the law of contagion – physical contact leads to the transfer of properties (once in contact, always in contact). It is possible to apply both principles to disgust, e.g. fake faeces are treated as if they were real (similarity); and if an object comes in contact with faeces it becomes disgusting. As Paul Bloom summarised, we are not rational beings; the laws of magic sway us (Bloom 2004, p. 160).

When people spoke to me about supernatural harm, they used to describe it as a form of contagion. Human beings, animals, as well as objects can be polluted – contaminated by some kind of negative energy. They do not know what is really going on, they do not know why and how it is happening, but they observe the consequences. And it may be quite enough for us to presume that there is somebody in our environment who is harming us in this way. I suppose that this could be the reason why the concept of supernatural harm is often used as an explanation for unusual illness. Even problems in love relationships used to be described as an illness (man’s impotence or woman’s infertility as well as loss of interest in sexual intercourse). Contamination caused by supernatural means is not possible to observe in a direct way. Thus my informants mentioned just “negative energy” that was
affecting them. We might call it an essence – an undefined invisible substance that “flows” from its host to the recipient.

Events that we do not understand make us vulnerable. Although we generally know that it is impossible for negative energy to be transmitted by thoughts or for somebody to harm us by slipping us a juice container or a red pillow, we are not always capable of thinking reasonably (although this is not good for us). We are led by mental mechanisms that come into action before than we are aware of their work. Most of them evolved to protect us from a dangerous environment or to help our ancestors survive in unsafe surroundings. According to Paul Bloom, disgust at a sweet in the shape of faeces may be irrational, but it is at worst an inevitable by-product of a system that evolved to do rational things. Our minds have evolved to focus on the deeper properties that objects possess - but we get information about them through our senses. And use of our senses makes us vulnerable to false alarms, cases where something looks like one thing but actually is another (Bloom 2004, p. 160). Our minds have evolved in a world in which it pays to take seriously what you see: better safe than sorry (Bloom 2004, p. 161).

Hence representations of supernatural harm are probably based on the same mechanisms as representations of contamination. Supernatural harm appears just as a possibility, although one that people had not thought about earlier. However, it becomes relevant when other explanations prove to be inadequate and it is not possible to explain and to solve problems by using them (going to the doctor, visiting the church, praying etc.). Supernatural harm not only explains the problems but also helps to find “an offender”, so people do not have to accuse themselves of failure.

The ethnologist Jeanne Favret-Saada (Favret-Saada 1980) and other researchers dealing with representations of witchcraft and sorcery argued that it is not always possible to distinguish two concepts of supernatural harm because people usually use an amalgam of both concepts. I believe this observation needs explanation. I noticed that informants might speak about mental influence and yet later mention objects they treated as evidence of supernatural influence. Moreover, it was mostly the experts-unwitchers that mentioned the abstract concepts, whereas the accounts of people who regarded themselves as victims of supernatural attack more often contained concepts referring to influence through a material object. It is possible to say that the concepts used in real-time judgments are usually more concrete, but if the same concepts are theoretically analyzed they might be more
abstract. Supernatural concepts serve at first as an explanation of particular problems and as such they need to be concrete: it makes them more comprehensible. When the expert is talking to his/her client, his/her language is simpler than when s/he is reasoning and talking about his/her knowledge and experience with another expert (or the anthropologist).

The psychologist Justin Barrett pointed out that though theologies around the world include enormously complex concepts, these are not the concepts that typically occupy the working minds of religious people (much as folk science differs from true science, and religious concepts often differ from the theological ones in their conceptual simplicity). The tendency to entertain religious concepts that are simpler than their theological counterparts is not merely an issue of expertise. The complexity of the concepts used appears to vary, largely based on the cognitive demands of the context in which they are used (Barrett 2000, p. 30). As I already mentioned, this is true in situations involving supernatural harm. People may theorize about supernatural influence, about the transmission of energy, inherited or acquired power, but when it comes to real situations, their representations are much simpler. In these cases concepts are as concrete as possible.

My informants’ stories as well as ethnologists’ accounts do not present situations involving supernatural harm in which one finds some unusual object in the house and then starts to think about somebody else’s negative influence: this is the reverse of the sequence of events. The unwitcher who makes the diagnosis of supernatural harm might insist on finding some kind of material evidence (of otherwise unobservable influence) because it may make his/her efforts to identify an attacker easier and more accurate (as in any “investigation” of someone’s doings). If the client brings an object it might also suggest that the unwitcher was right. We could say that it depends on the unwitcher whether s/he will or will mention an object that is at the same moment treated as evidence of supernatural harm and as the “vehicle” of the essence. While the object is present in the victim’s house, it emits the essence (or negative energy as described by informants) into the environment.

The representations of supernatural harm materialized in this way may be easily distributed because they are less abstract and therefore more comprehensible. People obviously process information that they do not fully understand (Sperber 1996). Children use this ability all the time to process half-understood information. They are told things that they do not quite understand by speakers whom they trust.
Thus they have grounds to believe that what they are told is true, even though they do not know exactly what it is that they are told (Sperber 1996, p. 72). The same things may happen to adults. The credibility of the source of half-understood information can be crucial here. If we get information from a person whom we trust in general we will probably accept further information from this person for which we do not have evidence or that we do not have the means to verify at the moment. But what if I get this information from a person whom I do not know well (hence I should be cautious)? What might influence my opinion and make me trust this person and accept his/her conclusions? I assume that the extremity of the situations and the threat to life may play an important role here.

As the mental mechanisms of HAAD inform us, supernatural harm involves the influence of an agent (i.e. a particular person) and therefore people have a tendency to look for evidence of this person’s activities. I suppose, however, that this is only a partial explanation. My key argument here is that searching for the material evidence of supernatural harm should be connected with the representations of the unwitcher and his/her abilities and activities.

**Representations of the unwitchers**

The victims of supernatural attacks usually do not speak about their problems with anybody. People might be very sensitive and cautious in situations involving supernatural harm. They share their thoughts mostly with those who have had a similar experience or those who they believe can help them, that is, an unwitcher. The problem is that they do not know much about the unwitcher. Despite this, they are supposed to trust him/her since, as they see it, it is the last chance to solve their problems.

People mostly represent an unwitcher as a person who detects supernatural influence and can stop it. They believe that unwitchers have unusual abilities (inherited or acquired) enabling them to deal with problems caused by supernatural influence. Those persons are regarded as experts in the supernatural domain. Their task is to recognize the source of the client’s problem and to put this knowledge into a wider context. They are believed to have access to strategic information, that is, information about a particular situation in everyday life available to a particular
person. In my context the victims of supernatural attack knew almost nothing about the source of the problems: it was the unwitcher who was supposed to have access to this knowledge (due to his/her special abilities).

The experts also know how to apply the general principle in a relevant way, an ability that is guaranteed by their special initiation. An expert’s utterances are not easily forgotten. They are quoted and commented on long after the corresponding situation has changed. They focus people’s attention much more than other forms of discourse (Boyer 1990, pp. 32–33). While non-experts usually speak about concrete cases of supernatural harm, only experts are capable of making generalizations. What makes unwitchers different from experts in other domains is a supernatural experience that is behind their knowledge.

As I already mentioned, when clients visit unwitchers, they usually do not know anything about these persons. However, this does not mean that one does not have any representations of an unwitcher. People do share reflective and non-reflective beliefs about people with supernatural abilities. Unwitchers appear in TV shows, they advertise their services, people know stories about persons who used their help and had positive or negative experiences. People decide to visit unwitchers because of somebody’s positive experience of their work or because the person who shared information about the unwitcher is a relevant source of information for the person in need. Attitudes toward persons with supposed supernatural abilities depend on many factors. People, at least in the modern western world, are mostly ambivalent or suspicious towards them. They might want some evidence of their special abilities.

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12 It is hard to tell precisely what information might be strategic to someone. As Pascal Boyer summarized, “to say that some information is strategic is not to say anything about the information itself but only about the way it is treated in the mind of the person who considers it” (Boyer 2001, s. 155).

13 Unwitchers are not the only category that is described in this way. Prophets, seers, magicians, psychics etc. are also supposed to have special abilities and to have access to information hidden from senses.

14 Justin Barrett defines reflective beliefs as “those we arrive through conscious, deliberate contemplation or explicit instruction. We reflectively believe many facts, such as that cars run on gasoline or that caterpillars turns into butterflies...But many, if not most, of our reflective beliefs, including belief in God, arise from and are supported by nonreflective beliefs. Nonreflective beliefs are those that come automatically, require no careful ruminmation, and seem to arise inantaneously and sometimes even “against better judgment”...Nonreflective beliefs we don’t need to consider consciously. Nonreflective beliefs are so ubiquitous and so often nonconscious that we frequently are not aware they are there”. (Barrett 2004, p. 2) Mental tools operate without our knowing it and constantly produce nonreflective beliefs. Nonreflective beliefs, being closely tied to mental tools that appear and function essentially the same to everyone, show little variations from place to place or from person to person. (Barrett 2004, p. 4-10). When people think about or discuss religious beliefs, they usually consider reflective religious beliefs.
In my paper I deal mostly with those informants who have had some direct experience with unwitchers (they used their “services”). Most of them had some previous expectations before they visited a person with supernatural abilities, and these expectations were directed at the particular sphere of his/her expertise: it was not important if the unwitcher was a bad cook or good mathematician; this information was irrelevant. For the person needing help the most important aspect was the unwitcher’s special skills. Although the client did not know anything about the unwitcher before his/her first visit, s/he knew that an unwitcher is not an ordinary person. What brought the client to the unwitcher was his/her supernatural abilities. In cognitive anthropology those properties are described as anti-intuitive characteristics.\(^{15}\)

However, this was not the whole story of consulting an unwitcher: clients wanted to be sure that the unwitcher was not a charlatan. Sometimes the clients were told that the unwitcher’s abilities were inherited and that his/her ancestors were involved in similar activities; this fact usually served as sufficient legitimisation of the unwitcher’s activities. However, such cases are not frequent in the contemporary Serbian environment. Many persons with supposed “special powers” started to work during the difficult period of the 1990s; most of them appeared just “from nowhere”. Although they frequently mentioned that some member of their family had similar abilities and used to help people, it was impossible to verify this information\(^{16}\).

Despite the counterintuitive features that the unwitcher is supposed to have, our cognitive mechanisms inform us that we are still dealing with a person. That means that we automatically attribute to him/her characteristics typical for the domain “person”, as described by Pascal Boyer and others (Boyer 2001; Barrett 2004): once the agency detection mechanism recognizes something that seems to initiate its own actions and does not merely respond automatically to a mechanism in the environmental factors, it activates the theory of mind (ToM), the mental system

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\(^{15}\) Anthropologist Pascal Boyer argued that most supernatural agents are explicitly defined as having counterintuitive physical or biological properties that violate general expectations about agents. The way people represent such agents activates the enormous but inaccessible machinery of “theory of mind” and other mental systems that provide us with a representation of agents, their intentions and their beliefs. All this is inaccessible to conscious inspection and requires no social transmission. On the other hand, what is socially transmitted is the counterintuitive features: this one is omniscient, that one can go through walls, another was born to a virgin etc. (Boyer 2004).

\(^{16}\) The important factor in this respect is the migrations that were frequent in the former Yugoslavian countries because of the political situation.
dealing with other persons’ beliefs and intentions. The ToM attributes to the agent in question a host of mental properties that enable it to negotiate the environment, desires that motivate action, thoughts and beliefs that guide actions, memory for storing percepts and thoughts and so forth (Barrett 2004, pp. 4-5). Because of ToM we also know that other people might be mistaken or misjudged. All these inferences are produced automatically and we cannot influence them in any way. On the other hand, the counterintuitive unwitcher’s characteristics violate the principles of intuitive psychology (ToM): people intuitively assume that others are not supposed to know things that only they know; they are also not supposed to have full access to the relevant strategic information.

Most of our mental machinery relevant to this is not consciously accessible. People’s explicitly held, consciously accessible beliefs represent only a fragment of the relevant processes. Experimental tests show that people’s actual religious concepts often diverge from what they believe they believe (Boyer 2003, p. 119). Our cognitive mechanisms deliver many inferences per second as we observe and interpret the behaviour of others. Most of these inferences are not consciously appraised and may therefore be generated and entertained without conscious checking and without appeal to counterintuitive features of the social situation (Cohen 2007a). Cognitive mechanisms that work automatically and independently of our consciously reflective beliefs (those we arrive at through conscious, deliberate contemplation or explicit instruction – Barrett 2004, p. 2) inform us that we are dealing with the domain

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17 When we meet somebody, both semantic and emotional knowledge that we hold about that person is automatically accessed. (Cohen 2007a). Researches in neurosciences showed that our minds are capable of recognizing an unlimited number of individuals based on the appearance of their faces. However, during the process of recognizing familiar individual, we do not only recognize his face, but also associate his face with other information about this person – his name, a previous encounter, representations of this person’s personality etc. (Gobbini et al. 2006, p. 1628) Neuroimaging studies demonstrated that different parts of brain are activated while encoding the person we meet. It is known that famous faces produce automatic retrieval of person-identity information from long-term memory (Bruce, Young 1986; Burton et al. 1990; In: Leveroni et al. 2000). Also, personally familiar faces evoke a stronger response than do famous familiar faces (celebrities, people we know from TV). (Gobbini et al. 2006, p. 1631). Neural responses to the faces of a stranger are different (see Leveroni et al. 2000). All information about perceived individuals is retrieved spontaneously. This information could be about personal traits (is that person kind or malicious, funny or serious, suspicious or trusting), intentions (what is that person up to?), attitudes (what are that person’s likes and dislikes), mental states (is that person happy or distressed, in the know or in the dark), and relationships to oneself and others. Activation of this information would prepare one to interact appropriately and effectively with that person. Stronger responses to familiar faces in areas that are associated with social cognition, personal traits and “theory of mind” may reflect the spontaneous activation of this kind of personal knowledge (Gobbini et al. 2006, p. 1632).

18 It is not question here of whether the unwitcher really gives precise information to his/her client, or the unwitcher’s monologue is actually a dialogue between him/her and the client.
“person” and because of that we spontaneously have certain expectations. However, these mechanisms do not inform us about the unwitcher’s supernatural abilities, as they belong to the counterintuitive sphere.

Emma Cohen, who analyzed representations of possessed mediums, argued that these everyday mechanisms of normal social cognition that allow us to process information about people we know make it virtually impossible to process the migration of minds (since this is how possession is defined) in real-time interaction (Cohen 2007a). My assumption here is that we could observe something similar in the interaction with unwitchers.

We cannot directly observe the processes that cause physical contamination, such as the invasion of our cells by rhinoviruses. In the physical realm, however, there are often observable symptoms of contamination, even when the process of contamination is unobservable. “Although people cannot observe rhinoviruses, a stuffed-up nose tells them they have a cold. If one is wondering whether a gallon of milk is fresh or spoiled, a quick whiff will reveal the answer. On the other hand, human judgments – even very bad ones – do not smell” (Wilson, Brekke 1994, p. 121).

The victim of supernatural attack usually treats the unwitcher as the last option for getting his/her life back to normal (I do not speak here about people who visit a person with supposed supernatural abilities out of curiosity). S/he is reliant on the unwitcher’s abilities, his/her judgments and solutions. However, unwitchers (in general) are rather ambiguous individuals in the sense that they may be too eccentric or too “normal”. Some of them may have some unusual physical characteristics, but many of them did not have any (in the cases I met). There is no way to perceive their special abilities; the client has to choose: trust their judgements or not. When the situation is critical, the client is practically “forced” to trust the unwitcher. People mostly trust only a few people. They need long-lasting positive experience or some other convicitive factors to become trusting and to treat a source of information as credible.19 Unwitchers, but also other people with supposed supernatural abilities (psychics, prophets etc.) are not persons enjoying general credibility. As I briefly described, this may be influenced by many factors.

19 On credibility see: Bužeková 2009; Sperber 1996.
Some way or another, the urgency of the situation at hand (the victim’s situation) forces the client to trust the unwitcher. However, it could be very costly if the unwitcher is wrong – if s/he detects the wrong person as a source of the victim’s misfortune, if s/he makes bad decisions about the unwitching process etc.\(^{20}\) People usually start to think about witchcraft/sorcery when things have developed badly – e.g., the late phase of illness – and it is necessary to work quickly to stop it. When the client visits the unwitcher, it would be bad for him/her to think about the unwitcher’s possible failure. S/he is supposed to trust him/her and to do what the unwitcher tells him/her. Nevertheless, the inferences we get from the work of our cognitive mechanisms may be in opposition to our conscious expectations.

My argument here is that the material object that is supposed to be evidence of supernatural harm could primarily serve as evidence of the unwitcher’s credibility. My informants chose the unwitcher mostly by recommendation. They knew that they needed “special” help and they partly knew what to expect. However, they rarely knew the unwitcher personally before they decided to use his/her services. Even previous knowledge about the unwitcher did not mean that the client automatically trusted him/her.\(^{21}\) We cannot stop inferences produced by our cognitive mechanisms and we have to deal with discrepancies between our reflective and non-reflective beliefs. How we would deal with them depends on different conditions in a given moment. I found that if somebody starts to think about supernatural harm, it would influence all his/her next actions. However, it does not mean that we do not have to explain what our informants have on their minds when they speak about the unwitching process and unwitchers and we also cannot ignore the cognitive dissonances that are product of that processing.

The inferences delivered automatically make it impossible to process access to information that people usually do not have: the unwitcher is supposed to have information about the client’s problems, but access to this information is possible only due to his/her special abilities. Cognitive mechanisms used in everyday interaction do not recognize any special abilities. Therefore, if our mind informs us that a person who is supposed to solve our problems may possibly be a cheater, we need additional confirmation to trust this person. If the client finds at his/her home some unusual

\(^{20}\) I do not deal here with the credibility of the unwitching as such.
\(^{21}\) Here I do not analyze mechanisms that deal with credibility or analyze what makes somebody a credible person.
object (mentioned previously by the unwitcher), it might be evidence that the unwitcher really knows what is going on in the client’s life.

I think that the unwitcher’s claims relating to the client’s past may have a similar function. In one of the quoted narratives the informant remembered that the unwitcher mentioned particular person as an attacker. It was a rare case, but as the names were known to the client, it might have increased the unwitcher’s credibility. Speaking about the past (or knowing about the client’s past) might serve as additional evidence assuring people that the unwitcher will also know what is going on in the present and possibly even in the future. Therefore, utterances about the past in some way verify utterances about the present (the future). 22

Conclusion

People who believe that they are under supernatural attack feel that their life is in danger. The only help they can get in a situation where other means have failed is the help of an unwitcher – a person who is supposed to have supernatural abilities and can detect who is attacking them and how to deal with it. The victims of supernatural attack do not have many choices; s/he has to trust a person whom s/he does not know personally. 23 If there is no previous experience of the unwitcher, reliance upon him/her is based only on the experiences of others or on his/her utterances regarding the past (that people may confirm or deny). The threat that people feel and the stress caused by the notion of a witch’s/sorcerer’s influence may affect their decision to rely on a complete stranger who is supposed to communicate with the supernatural sphere.

However, the cognitive mechanisms that work independently and cannot be consciously manipulated “do not care” about our feelings or consciously held beliefs. They automatically produce inferences about the person we meet, unwitcher or not. Some of these inferences are related to the notion that other people have limited access to information about others and can be mistaken. These inferences may clash with reflective beliefs about the unwitcher’s abilities. Therefore, in some cases the unwitcher can mention some object that would be evidence of supernatural attack. I believe that the function of this object is primarily to confirm the unwitcher’s abilities

22 When I say that unwitchers told something regarding their clients past I do not mean that they mentioned over-detailed information. Their statements were mostly very general.
23 We cannot compare this situation to visiting a doctor, a lawyer or some other specialist: those specialists acquire their knowledge in a completely different way and they do not base it on mystical or supernatural experience.
and the client’s decision to rely on his/her judgement. Various divination techniques often used by unwitchers may have a similar function. None of those beliefs, however, is a product of conscious thinking. All the processes I mention here are the results of everyday social perception. However, the factors that could influence perception and interpretation of unwitchers’ behaviour are multiple. Most of us would not even think of using their services, but for others they are the ultimate option. This obviously does not mean that their beliefs concerning unwitchers are unambiguous.

Beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery play a certain role in interpretations of misfortune when other explanations fail. The reason why people represent the supernatural agent’s activities is that our mind works in this way: we have a tendency to link together events that are not related at first glance. The set of representations of supernatural harm is very complex and consists of many different phenomena that need to be explained systematically. I have concentrated on one of them. Unwitchers are ambiguous individuals and their credibility is not automatically assumed, but is a result of social reasoning. If we want to explain why people trust them and what might influence their credibility, we have to take into account social as well as psychological factors.
References


