

Week 7



Social Psychology of the Paranormal
OLLI Spring 2026
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WHY ARE WE COVERING THIS CLAIM?

The Usual Reasons!

- If real, it would violate physical laws
- It's *very* popular
- Users & consumers believe it's scientific

TWO POPULAR ASPECTS OF NUMEROLOGY

- 1) Imbue numbers with special meaning and power beyond their normal purpose
- 2) Apply simple algorithms to names and birthdays to derive one-digit numbers (1 – 9)
 - 1) “life path” -- your life’s mission and journey
 - 2) “destiny” -- how you will use your potential to achieve your mission

THE CLAIM: WHY IT WORKS

It assigns mystical vibrations to numbers.

Everything vibrates at specific frequencies.

Numbers are the key to understanding them.

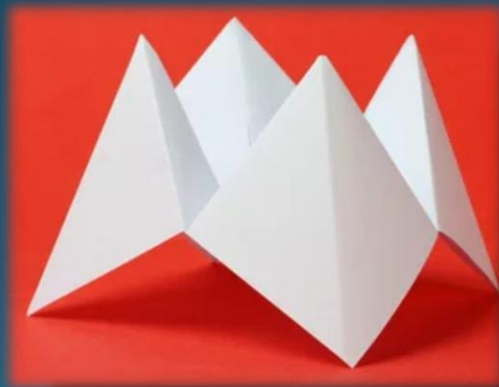
Numbers predict important dates, compatible relationships, optimal career choices, etc.

WHAT'S YOUR EXPERIENCE?

- Do you have any numerology-related experience?
- How did you feel about it?
- Has your view changed since then?
- How *might* numerology work?

MY EXPERIENCE

- “She loves me...she loves me not” with flower petals
- Paper fortune-telling “machine”
- Kennedy-Lincoln coincidences
- Bible Code best-sellers



MYSTATUTESANDMYLAWSANDDISAACDWELTI
NGERARANDTHEMENOFTHEPLACEASKEDHIM
OFHISWIFEANDHESAIDSHEISMYSISTERFO
RHEFEAREDOTOSAYSHEISMYWIFELESTSAID
HETHEMENOFTHEPLACESHOULDKILLMEFOR
REBEKAHBECAUSESHEWASFAIRTOLOOKUPO
NANDITCAMETOPASSWHENHEHADBEENTHER
EALONGTIMETHATABIMELECHKINGOFTHET
HILISTINESLOOKEDOUTATAWINDOWANDSA
WANDBEHOLDISAACWASSPORTINGWITHREB
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CANDSAIDBEHOLDOFASURETYSHEISTHYWI
FEANDHOWSAIDSTHOUISHEISMYSISTERAN
DISAACSAIDUNTOHIMBECAUSEISAIDLEST
IDIEFORHERANDABIMELECHSAIDWHATIST



LINCOLN-KENNEDY COINCIDENCES

- Both elected to Congress in '46 (18- and 19-); Presidency in '60
- Last names both have 7 letters
- John Wilkes Booth & Lee Harvey Oswald:
Used 3 names, 15 letters
- Both succeeded by Southern Democrat “Johnsons” born in '08:
Andrew & Lyndon
- Both shot on Fridays, in the head, wives present
- Lincoln shot at Ford’s Theatre; Kennedy in a Ford car (Lincoln)

COINCIDENCE: “JUST” or “MORE THAN”?

- Co-occurring phenomena
- Questions of causation
 - Are they causally connected?
 - If so, which is the cause & which is the effect?
- Inferring causation
 - covariation
 - temporal precedence
 - eliminating spurious factors (e.g., churches/bars, drownings/ice cream)
- Video

NUMEROLOGY: BACKGROUND & METHOD

- Murky origins
- Claim: Numbers *cause* events
- Gematria – Turning words into numbers
- Sift through texts to find numerical patterns
- Attribute meanings to numbers
- Believe nothing happens by chance

BACKGROUND & METHOD

Key:

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I |
| J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R |
| S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | |

Calculating “Life Path” number:

J O H N D O E
1 6 8 5 4 6 5

Add: $1+6+8+5+4+6+5 = 35$

Add again: $3+5 = 8$

8 represents

“power, abundance, material mastery, and karma” or “highly focused, intelligent, achiever” or “...”

DECODING THE MYSTICAL?



CAN YOU TEST IT?

- Yes, if the phenomenon is
 - Repeatable – naturally or experimentally
 - Falsifiable – clear criteria for success/failure
 - Replicable – by any qualified, impartial researcher
- Must consider the role of chance
 - What is the “base rate” of the coincidence?

SIMPLE TESTS

- Can subjects match Life Path # to their own personality test results?
 - Nope
 - Replicated many times

THE BIBLE CODE

- Claim: A complex code in the Hebrew bible predicts events occurring thousands of years later
- Michael Drosnan (journalist) is certain he cracked the code in his best-selling 1997 book, *The Bible Code*.

Procedure

1. Use the original 304,805 Hebrew letters
2. Eliminate vowels, spaces, punctuation
3. Arrange text into a large array
4. Computer searches text for matches

THE BIBLE CODE

Procedure (continued)

4a. Text search algorithm: explore “skip” patterns

Example: search every n^{th} letter for recognizable words
(from King James Version, Genesis 31:28)

“And hast not suffered me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Thou has now done foolishly in so doing.”

Let $n = 4$

G H T E **R** S T H **O** U H A **S** T N O **W** D O N **E** F O O **L** I S H **L** Y I N S

Procedure (continued)

THE BIBLE CODE

- 4b. Rearrange array around found words,
keep searching for meaningful concurrences

S A N D M Y D A U G H T E R S T H O U H
M Y D A U G H T E R S T H O U H A S T N
U G H T E R S T H O U H A S T N O W D O
E R S T H O U H A S T N O W D O N E F O
H O U H A S T N O W D O N E F O O L I S
A S T N O W D O N E F O O L I S H L Y I
O W D O N E F O O L I S H L Y I N S O D
N E F O O L I S H L Y I N S O D O I N G
O L I S H L Y I N S O D O I N G I T I S
H L Y I N S O D O I N G I T I S I N T H

FINS COCK **K** AND **B**ULL STORIES **S** ABOUT HIM HAD PREVIOUSLY S
 OPEN WATER THE BRACING BREEZE WAXED FRESH THE LIT
 UEGANOBLE TRUMP THE CAPTAIN BEGGED HIS PARDON FROM T
 UPTHOUGH IT OVER WHE **L** MEDALL THE MILLIONS SINCH IN A H
 IXED WITH POUNDED SHIP BISCUIT AND SALTED PORK CUT UP
 R NEXT MORNING EARLY LEAVING QUEE QUEE SHUT UP WITH YO
 NEMENTIA **T** LENGTH **H** FOUND ONE **W** **H** **O** **B**Y **H** **I** **S** **A** **S** **P** **E** **C** **T** **S** **E** **E** **M** **E** **D** **T**
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 TO FALL TRIFLE SCAPTAIN **B**ILDADHAD **M** **O** **T** **O** **N** **L** **Y** **B** **E** **E** **N** **O** **R** **I** **G**
 LAYS AND THAT THESE LAYS WERE PROPORTIONED TO THE DEG
 ILL AN IMPENITENT **M**AN CAPTAIN PELEGIGREATLY FEARLE
 KYELAD NEVER SAY THAT ON BOARD THE PEQUOD NEVER SAY IT
 STANDS YONDER AND **H** **E** **S** **E** **L** **D** **O** **M** **O** **R** **N** **E** **R** **G** **O** **E** **S** **A** **B** **R** **O** **A** **D** **W** **I** **T** **H**
 TWAY I WONDER THOUGHT I IF THIS CAN POSSIBLY BE A PARTO
 TWILL DO FOR I KNOW THE INFERENCES WITHOUT HIS FURTHER
 DLE **S**IT ABOUT RIGHT ISAY QUO **H** **O** **G** **O** **R** **W** **H** **A** **T** **E** **V** **E** **R** **Y** **O** **U** **R** **N** **A** **M** **E**
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 NT TO TELL US OUT WITH IT BUT IF YOU ARE ONLY TRYING TO BA
T **E** **D** **C** **O** **M** **P** **R** **I** **S** **I** **N** **G** **H** **E** **R** **B** **E** **E** **F** **B** **R** **E** **A** **D** **W** **A** **T** **E** **R** **F** **U** **E** **L** **A** **N** **D** **I** **R** **O** **N** **H** **O** **O**
 EMEN BUT IT WAS **S** **T** **O** **O** **D** **I** **N** **T** **O** **B** **E** **S** **U** **R** **E** **V** **E** **R** **Y** **D** **I** **N** **V** **E** **R** **Y** **D** **I** **M** **S** **A** **I** **D**
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 ECAPTAIN **B** **I** **L** **D** **A** **D** **S** **T** **O** **P** **P** **A** **L** **A** **V** **E** **R** **I** **N** **G** **A** **W** **A** **Y** **A** **N** **D** **W** **I** **T** **H** **A** **T** **P**
 LADIES PLAUDITS AND IF THE IDEA OF PERILS SO MUCH ENHAN
 RE THE WHAL **E** **S** **H** **I** **P** **I** **S** **T** **H** **E** **T** **R** **U** **E** **M** **O** **T** **H** **E** **R** **O** **F** **T** **H** **A** **T** **N** **O** **W** **M** **I** **G** **H** **T** **Y**
 MACHINERY MIGHT BERUMINATED **D** **H** **E** **R** **E** **C** **O** **N** **C** **E** **R** **N** **I** **N** **G** **T**
T **O** **B** **E** **K** **I** **L** **L** **E** **D** **B** **Y** **T** **H** **E** **M** **F** **O** **R** **T** **H** **E** **I** **R** **S** **A** **N** **D** **T** **H** **A** **T** **H** **U** **N** **D** **R** **E** **D** **S** **O** **F** **M** **E**
 HENOSTEXASPERATED MONSTER LONGUSAGE **H** **A** **D** **F** **O** **R** **T** **H** **I** **S** **S**
 FIRST OF ALL WAS QUEE QUEE GWHOM STARBUCK **T** **H** **E** **C** **H** **I** **E** **F** **M** **A** **T**

I
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THE BIBLE CODE

- Drosnin: “No human could have encoded the [original Hebrew] Bible in this way.”
- (Perhaps the King James Version is also prescient?)
- Critics: Drosnin’s results are merely “data-mining.”
- Drosnin (in *Newsweek*): “When my critics find a message about the assassination of a prime minister encrypted in Moby Dick, I’ll believe them.”
- Guess what?

THE BIBLE CODE

- Brendan McKay, Australian National University applied *The Bible Code* method to *Moby Dick*.
- Assassination predictions were found for
 - Indira Gandhi (India)
 - René Moawad (Lebanon)
 - Leon Trotsky (Russia)
 - Rev. Martin Luther King (U.S.)
 - Robert F. Kennedy (U.S.)

VIDEO

- [David Packman on Numerology](#) (11:30)

ISSUES

- Different methods → different results
- Lacks explanatory theory
- Lacks of supportive research
- Ignores base rates & statistical controls
- Relies on intuition

WHY DOES IT “WORK” FOR PEOPLE?

- “Barnum Effect”
- Social influences
- Cognitive dissonance effect of doing the calculations
- Trust in unseen authorities

Academic Studies & Tests

Genovese, J. (2017). "A test of numerology: do birth numbers predict Nobel Prize winners?" *Journal of Articles in Support of the Null Hypothesis*, Vol 13, Issue 2.

Finding: The study calculated birth numbers for Nobel Prize winners (1901-2010) and found no significant deviation from chance, concluding that birth numbers do not predict career success.

Mudry, J. (1983). "A Test of Numerology" *Skeptical Inquirer*.

Finding: A test where subjects rated personality descriptions based on name numbers showed that the descriptions did not match the subjects' self-perceptions, indicating that "name numbers" do not reflect personality.

Dudley, U. (1997). *Numerology: Or, What Pythagoras Wrought*. Mathematical Association of America.

Finding: A detailed, critical look at the history and mathematics behind numerology, written by a mathematician who concludes it is fundamentally flawed and lacks evidence.

Wilkie, J. E., & Bodenhausen, G. V. (2012). "Are numbers gendered?" *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

Finding: Explores the psychology behind why people attribute meaning to numbers (like gender) in a social-cognitive context.

Critical Analyses and Reviews

Carroll, R. T. (2003). "Numerology" *The Skeptic's Dictionary*.

Summary: Provides a critical overview of the belief system, highlighting the lack of empirical evidence and the psychological mechanisms, such as confirmation bias, that make it appear valid to believers.

Nature (1985). "Numerology" *Nature*.

Summary: A brief editorial or commentary regarding the scientific standing of numerological claims.

Key Themes in Testing

Lack of Predictive Power: Studies consistently show that calculations based on birth dates or names fail to provide better-than-chance predictions for life events or personality.

Psychological Factors: Many critics argue that the perceived accuracy of numerology is due to the Barnum effect (people finding personal meaning in generic statements) and confirmation bias (noting when a prediction seems to work, but ignoring when it doesn't).

Statistical Analysis: Large-scale studies or tests involving statistical analysis generally yield null results (supporting the null hypothesis).

