

Do You Count Fence Posts?

Psychology

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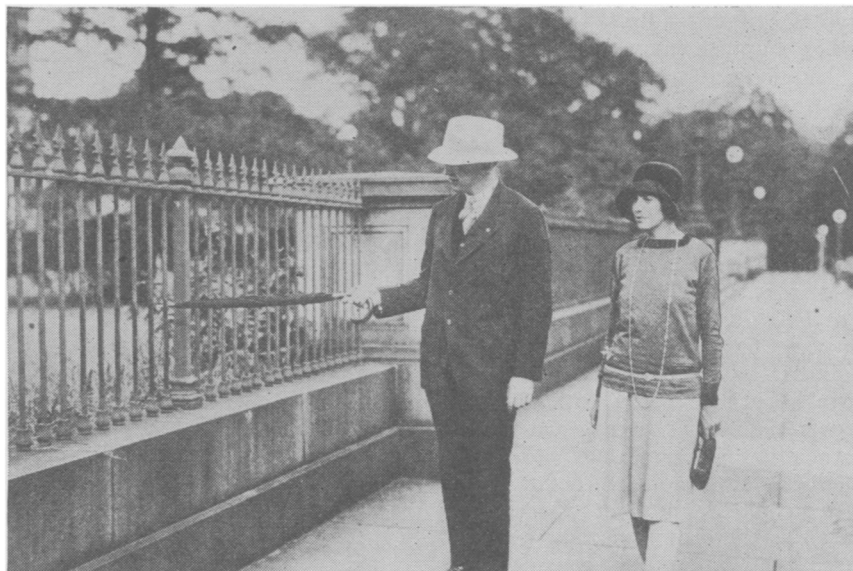
Do you count fence posts as you walk along the street? Can you report precisely how many steps you take when you walk home from work? Do you find yourself counting the cars of a passing freight train, or the automobiles that whiz by as you drive down the road? Or perhaps you occasionally engage in the game of Beaver—counting all the whiskered gentlemen you can find?

If you do any of these mental arithmetic stunts, you are using your brain in a manner that is highly popular with the human race—much more popular than has heretofore been supposed, for up until now nobody has taken the time to count the people who have the counting habit.

A psychologist who apparently likes counting things himself has at last gathered statistics on the number of students at his university who have what he calls "arithmo-thymic inclinations". His discovery is that more than half of the young people count one thing or another. It may be books on library shelves, motifs in wall-paper patterns, buttons on clothing, funeral equipages, steps from one landing to another in university buildings, letters in the words on signboards, houses on each block in the town. A complete list of the objects in the world that are found suitable for such counting would be long and varied.

The students who were questioned are at the far-away university of Poznan, in Poland. But it is safe to say that their mental habits are fairly typical of human beings anywhere, and not merely college-age humans either. The Polish professor, Stefan Blachowski, first presented his discovery, that counting objects is a prevalent occupation, at the International Congress of Psychology held recently at Yale. His address provoked lively discussion among his fellow-psychologists. And wherever the Polish professor's experiments entered into a conversation, a surprising number of Americans remarked: "Why, I count that way, too."

Women are more inclined to the counting habit than men, Prof. Blachowski explained. Among 96 college students evenly divided as to sex, he found that 67 per cent. of the women had the habit as compared with only 44 per cent. of the men. He made a retest, using 71 new students, and again women were the chief counters.



COUNTING FENCE PALINGS is an ordinary mental amusement of normal people

This slant on the feminine mind is unexpected, considering the popular belief that women are inclined to shy from figures. If we look into the matter more closely, however, we can see that the popular belief is not necessarily discredited. For being addicted to arithmo-thymia is very different from having a mathematical turn of mind. The individual who counts the people opposite in a face-to-face street car is not really juggling with any principle of arithmetic beyond the first lesson in first-grade addition. The mental effort of adding one to twenty-three is not to be compared with the mental effort of making a bank account balance.

The psychologist's figures show that some of the students count only one sort of object. Others are more liberal in their interest. One student made a remark which the psychologist regards as typical:

"If I see something in a row, pictures upon the wall, for instance, I count them."

Another student said: "I always count the stations during railway journeys. Perhaps I do so because I always describe my journey in detail. I count the houses and jot down my precise observations in my diary."

The experiences of the students show that the counting habit occurs with very different degrees of distinctness and force among normal people. If you are an arithmo-thymic, it may only mean that once in a while you idly set yourself some such task as counting the number of brown

coats on the street, because it pops into your mind that an extraordinary number of brown-clad people are in sight. Or, you may count steps as you walk, because your sense of precision pesters you to find out how many steps you have to take to reach a given point, or because, like Sherlock Holmes, you believe in close attention to details of this sort. You may remember that he advised his friend Watson to ascertain the number of steps in their lodging house.

The author Swift amused himself in this fashion, and in his "Diary to Stella," written in 1711, he states:

"I leave my best gown and periwig at Mrs. Vanhomrigh's, then walk up the Pall Mall, through the Park, out at Buckingham House, and so to Chelsea, a little beyond the Church: I set out about sunset, and get there in something less than an hour; it is two good miles, and just five thousand seven hundred and forty-eight steps."

But suppose you become so accustomed to counting steps that it is a regular part of your daily routine. You omit the counting process one morning, and an unpleasant sense of incompleteness lurks in the back of your head. In the course of the day's work an order is balled up, and your brain switchboard flashes instantly a connection between the office difficulties and the failure to start the day according to custom. Superstition, luck, fear—when these insidiously link themselves with the counting habit, the inclination to count (*Turn to next page*)

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may soon shade over into a compulsion.

Even then, the individual may still be captain of his fate. That is, his counting impulse may not interfere with his daily life any more than a superstitious belief that events may be expected to go in series of threes, for good or evil.

But if a counting compulsion is so powerful that an individual does not dare to act contrary to it, then he is a victim of paralyzed will, and he is eligible for the doubtfully desirable title of being an arithmo-maniac.

In the past, psychologists have thought of the counting habit as being abnormal, because many patients suffering from mental disease are slaves to a mania for counting. Patients with this compulsion to count long ago attracted the interest of science, because their symptoms were pronounced and therefore conspicuous. Prof. Blachowski pointed out that here, as in other domains, science at first occupies itself with extreme cases, and for a long time it escaped observation that arithmo-mania is merely an abnormal variation of the common impulse to count.

Thirty years ago, a French scientist, Ginestoux, reported to a society of anatomists and physiologists the strange case of a young man who counted every letter in every phrase that came to his attention. This young man counted the letters in each sentence that he spoke, read, heard, wrote or thought. He had to, he explained. The counting began when he awoke in the morning and was kept up until he fell asleep at night. If any sentence was spoken to him, he could immediately announce the number of letters it contained.

He had been at this incessant mental occupation since the age of ten, but he told the scientist who investigated his case that he found his habit no great burden. It did not prevent him from holding a conversation, reading a book, nor from making a living at a profession. He was a placid and intelligent young man, in spite of his arithmo-mania, and that is the really remarkable part of his case. For most individuals who become saddled with the counting habit to the extent of incessant counting are no longer useful or contented members of society.

Needless to say, an individual is not likely to succumb to a counting mania unless his mental health is in a precarious state from other causes. When Prof. Blachowski's report was discussed at the International Congress



STEPPING OVER THE LINES in the pavement is one of those odd stunts akin to counting things

of Psychology, Dr. Leonard Seif, of Munich, arose to suggest that mental patients who cannot resist counting are using this device in order to escape from the responsibilities of life. The neurotic wishes to escape from the tasks that face him. His relations with other people have become disturbed in some way, and so when he has to face responsibility or a task, he does something else, usually something useless, such as counting, in order to evade his duty.

"One of these cases," the German psychiatrist explained, "is a lady who wants to be a magician, though this workaday planet is not arranged for magicians. She has a magic number thirteen, and it is a wonderful number. It makes life work pleasantly for her. One day she fails in what she wishes to do and the day is the thirteenth. Then she has to avoid everything connected with the thirteenth. It is no longer lucky, but unlucky."

Such a person has shifted the responsibility of making decisions away from herself and placed the responsibility squarely on the turn of magic numbers. If she happened to count thirteen children playing in a school yard, her apprehensions would be aroused. Something unpleasant would happen. If she then met a friend at the turn of the corner, her distorted imagination would probably suggest that the friend wished to do her evil and that she had been forewarned. And so the entire life of such a person becomes a maze of ritual counting and fears and expectations.

Applying Dr. Seif's theory of why abnormal people count, to normal people, it appears that the average person who engages in arithmo-thymia is thereby filling up the mental vacuum which his brain would abhor by inserting thoughts that are painless and effortless. If he is counting fence posts he is not bothered by the letters he ought to write, nor the rent bill, nor the embarrassing remark he made that morning. Nor, on the other hand, is he solving any of the problems of his universe.

Perhaps when Prof. Blachowski goes deeper into the subject of arithmo-thymia, as he has promised to do, he will gather statistics on how much time the average arithmo-thymic spends at his avocation, and whether this should be cultivated as beneficial relaxation or condemned as innocuous desuetude.

There are many forms of habits closely allied to the counting impulse which are also waiting for statistical studies and a complete explanation from science. The learned Dr. Samuel Johnson tapped with his cane against fence railings in Fleet Street as he walked along, and if he missed one, he turned back to touch it. He also had the habit of counting his footsteps so that he might go out of a door with the same foot first.

Children take notions that they must not step on the cracks in the sidewalk, or else they must step on every single crack. A. A. Milne delightfully shows the motive back of this game in one of his poems about Christopher Robin. Christopher imagines that masses of bears wait at the corners to eat the sillies who tread on the lines, and he concludes:

"It's ever so 'portant how you walk,
And it's ever so jolly to call out,
'Bears,
Just watch me walking in all the
squares!'"

When another child than Christopher Robin steps over cracks, the object may not be to avoid imaginary bears, but there is the same victorious feeling of escaping something.

Throughout all these mental stunts and habits there runs a thread of the deep-rooted human affinity for magic and superstition. Also, there is a feeling of satisfaction which rises from acting in a precise or rhythmical way. These desires, apparently, are not satisfied by our daily work and amusements, and so 54 per cent. of us—in America, no doubt, as in Poland—engage in arithmo-thymia.