TOWARD A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF ENTERTAINMENT MAGIC (CONJURING)*

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The dynamics of everyday social interactions can often be clarified by studying the social organization of unusual realms of activity. One such activity is conjuring—magic performed as entertainment. This article discusses various sociological and social psychological dimensions in the performance of magic. It focuses on the similarities between a magic act and the social interactions of everyday life. It also discusses the dialectic between magic reasoning and mundane reasoning—between the audience’s expectations built from the organization of everyday life and the violations of expectations produced by the magician’s construction of an alternate reality. A magic trick is described from the perspectives of both magician and spectator using such topics as the directional, concealment, and disattend channels of activity; breaking frames; bracketing; sex roles; expectations; perception and attention; and rationality. The article concludes with some brief suggestions for additional research topics and some implications for both a theoretical and an applied sociological social psychology.

What follows is a study of the similarity between entertainment magic and everyday life. Conjuring performances will be discussed, focusing on the social organization of a magic performance, the meanings and frames employed by magicians to effect their performances, the definitions and frames the audience develops to

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participate in the activity, and the implications these have for an understanding of human interaction in ordinary situations. As will be seen, the effectiveness of both magic shows and everyday social interactions depends not only on a psychology of perception and misdirection, but also on a sociology of situationally relevant principles of organization and meaning.

The focus here is on the processes and outcomes of framing various channels of ongoing activity; i.e., investigating the definitions of situations and meanings of events held by interacting participants according to principles of a social organization of experience (Goffman, 1974). Underlying such investigations is the assumption of multiple realities of experience. Berger and Luckmann (1966:25) state, "Compared to the reality of everyday life, other realities appear as finite provinces of meaning, enclaves within the paramount reality marked by circumscribed meanings and modes of experience." They go on to cite the theater as an illustration of such a finite province with its own meaning and order.

The theater as a model for everyday life has been one of the dominant metaphors in symbolic interactionism (Douglas et al., 1980). Life is viewed as a dialectic between self and others in which social interactions are continuously being constructed, negotiated, and managed. Embedded in this dramaturgical perspective are concepts about the nature of appearances and reality, about who people are and who they appear to be (Weigert, 1981).

However, life may be more than a benign theatrical performance. It often involves instances of conscious deception, illusion, and fabrication in everyday interaction, and some roles (such as advertiser, con artist, or someone making a first impression) usually depend on these (see Fitzkee, 1945). Perhaps, life is more like entertainment magic: tricks and illusions are continuously being constructed. One focus of this article is to describe the dynamics of a magic performance and to underscore its similarity to everyday life behaviors and social interactions. This relationship between everyday life and magic is possible because at the core of a magic performance is interaction: it cannot be performed alone.

On the other hand, the nature of this interaction illustrates the contrast which exists between the norms of everyday life and the norms of a magic performance. A dialectic is created between the performer and the audience which in turn illuminates not only the magical aspects of everyday life but also the contrasting mundane processes involved in everyday social interaction. The dialectic is based on the expectations constructed from the social organization of experiences which the audience brings to a magic performance and the magician's fabrication of apparent realities which violate the rational sequence of events and expectations of everyday life. It is here that the act of magic works and is judged successful; it is here that magic uncovers the meaningful structure of ordinary experience.

As Goffman (1974:564) writes, realms other than the ordinary can be "a subject matter of interest in their own right [and can] provide natural experiments in which a property of ordinary activity is displayed or contrasted in a clarified or clarifying way." In short, by viewing a magic performance in terms of a dialectic between audience and performer, the dialectic between self and others in everyday social interactions is clarified and the similarities between magic acts and everyday life are demonstrated.
DYNAMICS OF MAGIC PERFORMANCES

Consider the following card trick as an example:

Magician (M) asks spectator (S) to select any card from the deck. S chooses one, looks at it, and returns it to deck. M shuffles and asks S to name the card, upon which M turns over the top card to show selected card. M then turns it face down on top and asks S to tap the card three times. M now turns over the top card to reveal another card; the original one has disappeared. M reaches into his pocket, takes out a sealed envelope, asks S to break it open to find the originally selected card inside.

This card effect will serve as a simple example of several basic principles in the social organization of a magic performance, discussed throughout this paper.

Embedded in this apparently straightforward interaction are numerous instances of deception, false starts, collusion, misdirection, selective perception, misframing, disattention, false endings, definitions of the situation, and social meanings concerning the roles and behaviors of the magician and spectator. We will consider some of these as we focus on the similarities between the elements of everyday life and the dynamics of a magic performance and by drawing on Goffman's (1974) concepts of framing and fabrications as a method of analysis.

The discussion of magic performances and routines is based on numerous observations of magic acts by the author, who is an amateur magician. It is also derived from many articles and books written by and for magicians, and studied over the years from a sociological perspective by the author. Insights about the dynamics of a magic routine evolved from the author's own attempts at performing magic.

Framing

Depending on time, age, and place, an effect, such as the one just described, can be variously interpreted as a miracle, a religious sign, an omen, a con game, science, or a magic trick. For example, unscrupulous performers can profit from an event when it is defined by the performer as a con and by the spectator as a legitimate activity. Throughout history, street-corner mountebanks selling elixirs have convinced gullible spectators to believe in the magical properties of the product or service. Even today, advertisers use many of the same selling techniques and ploys to convince the audience about the "magical" properties of the product (Leff, 1976). Another example is the three card monte gambling seen in today's urban streets. This is not framed as a magic performance by the participants; it is seen as a fair gambling event or contest by the spectators and as a con by the performer who uses a common sleight-of-hand card trick. The same card performance, defined as a magic act, would hardly have people reaching for their wallets to wager on the outcome. Thus, how the situation is constructed by both performer and audience, an important implication for the enactment and interpretation of the event, becomes an important element when studying the similarities between a magic act and everyday social interaction.

What is framed as magical is also dependent on the age and cognitive development of the spectator. A young child, unable to make cause-effect connections...
or to distinguish fact from fantasy, can be easily tricked by a simple “thumb-removing” hand movement, but not by the card trick described above. Many children, say below age 6 or 7, are not surprised by the card changing on the top and appearing in an envelope, since it breaks no logical schema yet developed. On the other hand, they are fascinated by the thumb removal, a movement which doesn’t fool older children and adults.

In other words, whether a flick of a lighter producing fire is interpreted as natural, supernatural, magical, religious, or mechanical/scientific is a function of primary frameworks. Definitions and meanings which evolve from social and cultural characteristics of the time and place, as well as from the age-related cognitive development and knowledge of the spectator are brought to an event by the spectators. These meanings are made viable in the event by the performer, who elicits certain perspectives and inhibits others. In short, everyday reality is socially constructed and negotiated (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). For our purposes, contemporary conjuring performances will serve as a key illustration of this general thesis.

Entertainment Magic and Fabrication

Limiting this analysis to a situation defined by spectator and performer alike as a magic performance for entertainment, several interesting elements emerge. A magic performance is a staged act, simulating “real” supernatural powers, performed by an actor playing the part of someone with supernatural abilities. It is a kind of entertainment “in which supernatural frameworks are simulated but with no clear-cut claim that they are literally in dominion” (Goffman 1974:199). Most people watching magic, in our culture, in this era, and at a certain level of cognitive development and knowledge, frame it as a performance, as imitation magic. They know there are ordinary, rational explanations for the witnessed event. However, a successful performance does not allow any of these explanations to emerge as viable. On the other hand, the more the performance involves spiritualism or mentalism routines, the more some of the audience seems to define it and the performer as real. Many people in our society still believe in psychic powers and often bring this framework to a mentalism or seance performance. In this situation, they do not believe there exists an underlying ordinary, rational explanation for the witnessed event, but rather a supernatural or mystical source.

At the core of a magic performance is fabrication: “the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on” (Goffman 1974:83). The successful trick is dependent on the ability of the performer to conceal the ordinary sequence of events through fabrication of an apparent sequence of events (Kelley, 1980). However, only those who know the trick are aware of the dynamics of the fabrication: the spectators are unaware of the elements of the deception, yet expect to be deceived and believe there does exist concealed ordinary cause-effect sequences. Modern audiences, however, are more skeptical and adversarial than in past eras. Spectators often attend magic performances prepared to disbelieve what the magician says and not necessarily
to believe all they see (Fitzkee, 1945). If a positive rapport is established between
the performer and audience, this disbelief is often suspended. The trick is then
successful when the audience is unable to detect the relationship between the
apparent and the concealed sequence.

Magic performances are “benign strategic fabrications” (Goffman 1974), unlike
con games or “real” seances which employ the same sleights, gestures, and words
and in which the spectator does not expect to be tricked. For a conjuring per-
formance to exist, both the performer and spectator need to agree upon the de-
inition of the situation as a benign fabrication. Furthermore, the performer must
act to conceal the fabrication and the spectator must want to be deceived (Binet,
1896).

If collusion about the fabrication is a necessity, so too is the magician’s con-
cealment of the real cause-effect sequences while simultaneously communicating
the apparent cause-effect sequences (Kelley, 1980). For example, while the spec-
tators rationally know that the card, in the above trick, does not really fly from
the top of the deck to the sealed envelope, they must be kept from developing a
simple explanation for it, even if it is an incorrect one. In this case, a duplicate
card was already sealed in the envelope; the audience may guess this, but they
are still surprised by the outcome and perplexed as to where the other one went
or how they picked the original card “randomly.” Thus, the performer’s objective
is to control attention away from the real sequence through the construction of
apparent causal sequences and by the development of events not expected within
the logical framework. The effectiveness of a magic performance depends on a
dialectic established between definitions of real and apparent, between the or-
ganization of mundane everyday reasoning and the organization of magic rea-
soning, and between the social psychological processes used to interpret the social
world and those used to follow a magic performance.

Since a dialectic between the apparent and the real underlies the process of
magic, successfully managing both simultaneously, through techniques of mis-
direction, disguise, and attention control, becomes what the magician practices
to achieve (Fitzkee, 1945). It also explains why a child performs a magic
trick, such as one obtained from a magic kit of gimmicked objects, the performance
appears crudely executed and fools few. The gimmick may be properly used, but
little is communicated about the apparent cause-effect sequence. The child (and
often the beginning magician) rarely exhibits the necessary skills to communicate
effectively the apparent events and introduce other diversions, while concealing
the real sequence.

The magic is not just accurately manipulating the marked cards, false coins,
trap doors, and false bottomed boxes, but in constructing the situation and story
(the “patter”). To read about a trick (its apparent sequence) is different from its
performance (communicating its apparent sequence). To find out how it’s done—
to disrupt the fabrication—is to find out the concealed real cause-effect sequence,
often sounding surprisingly simplistic and “obvious.” (“Of course a duplicate
card was already in the envelope; of course, you forced the original card!”) The
trick is not solely in the materials (coins, cards), but in the ability to get the
The Channels of Activity

| MAIN Track | What is apparently going on: the routine of the trick, the descriptive story line of the trick |
| CONCEALMENT Track | What is really going on: the actual cause-effect sequences hidden by physical, verbal, and nonverbal techniques |
| DIRECTIONAL Track | How the apparent (main track) is communicated and the real sequence (concealment track) goes unnoticed: the use of numerous misdirection techniques |
| DISATTENDED Track | How some of the concealment and directional activities are accomplished: the peripheral, subordinate activities which usually go unnoticed because of their ordinariness; used by the magician to keep attention on the apparent (main) sequence |

The Channels of Activity

In every interaction, there occurs simultaneously several levels or channels of ongoing activity.Appearances are not always congruent with other more hidden levels of being. Politicians, defense attorneys, and salespersons are a few examples of the tenuous relationship between appearance and other levels of reality. The dialectic inherent in the negotiation of various channels of activity in everyday social interaction between self and others is also apparent in an analysis of a magic performance.

The essential process of doing the real movements of a trick while concealing them through the communication of fabricated words and movements (the apparent) involves the skilled simultaneous manipulation of (1) a main track of activity, (2) concealment tracks, (3) directional tracks, and (4) subordinate disattended channels of activity (Goffman 1974). Most of this is accomplished by making effective use of the human process of selective attention, the principles of a social psychology of everyday interaction, and a performance style which communicates trust and confidence (Weibel, 1980).

The Main Track

As the magician asks the spectator to select a card, he engages various levels of activity. The main track is the performer's apparent movements, dialogue, and interpersonal interactions. It is the routine of the trick, the effect. In the above example, the main track is the magician asking the spectator to select any card and to replace it, the magician's shuffling the cards and having the selected card appear on the top, the spectator's tapping the top and the card disappearing, and its reappearing in a sealed envelope in the magician's pocket. However, by exploiting basic concepts of human behavior and social context, the magician uses misdirection to keep the spectator on the main track (the apparent sequence) and
directed away from the concealed track—the ordinary, real sequence of events which allows the trick to occur.

Concealment Tracks

One set of activities essential for successfully performing magic involves concealment tracks. Sometimes the trick happens by physically concealing objects in hands or behind curtains, by blocking the spectators’ lines of vision from the objects resting on the lap or on the stage, or by getting the spectator to look away from the cards using body gestures, auditory signals, and facial expressions. This “screen system” (Binet, 1896) makes use of available physical boundaries (tables, curtains, hands, angles, etc.) as well as verbal ones constructed through dialogue and suggestion. For example, in the example trick, the pocket is concealing the envelope which is concealing the card, thus allowing a surprise finish. The magician’s moves also conceal the process of forcing a card and getting it to the top of the deck. The “double-lift,” concealed by angles, physically hides the real top card and the outcome of the trick is verbally concealed by not announcing at any point what is really going to happen next. Often the magician will exploit the concealment track by allowing the audience a glimpse of the concealed object. This is done as a set-up for a more elaborate trick; it then becomes a method to misdirect and to create another concealment track. For example, the magician tears and restores a napkin; then he shows the audience how it is done: by concealing another untorn napkin in the hand and switching the torn pieces for the new napkin. But this is a set-up; for while he is showing how it is done, he is switching the torn pieces for yet another full napkin concealed in his pocket. The audience’s attention is directed onto the apparent concealment track (the hidden workings of the trick) and away from the other hand (the real sequence of events). It is now that the magician says “But what is difficult to explain is how to get rid of the torn pieces after the switch, unless you also restore them to a full napkin!”, as he unravels the supposedly torn pieces to show a new napkin (what magicians label a “sucker finish”). Revealing the routine is a way of falsely clearing the frame to create a new frame for the completion of the trick. It also serves as the creation of a new concealment track in itself.

Directional Tracks

Physically concealing the gimmick and sleights and verbally concealing the real sequence of events are not sufficient to complete a magic trick. Simultaneously, and essential to the performance of magic, the performer must verbally and physically direct attention and ideas along a main track (the apparent sequence of events) and away from the concealed channel of gimmicks and sleights (the real cause-effect sequences). This is accomplished by means of directional cues which are constantly being given, leading people to select pre-arranged cards, to focus eyes at a certain place, and to respond in expected ways. Misdirection, as magicians label this process, is a core concept in magic and the chief skill necessary for its effectiveness (Fitzkee, 1945).
Just as a variety of verbal and non-verbal cues direct attention and define situations in everyday life, so too do they importantly contribute to the success of a magic performance. Kinesic cues are routinely used; for example, the magician points to an empty moving hand, supposedly carrying a coin, and, as all eyes follow the empty hand, the other hand concealing the coin moves undetected to replace the coin in a pocket (Jastrow, 1900). The spectator’s eyes are often directed away from the magician’s hands by asking him/her a question. This normally gets the spectator to look the questioner in the eye and the rest of the audience to look at the respondent, not at the magician’s hand. The magician will also force the spectator to choose a certain card (as in the example trick) through visual cues, such as a slightly pushed forward card or a card placed slightly askew in a series. In stage magic, the performer will misdirect the audience’s attention away from an activity on the left part of the stage by causing a humorous event or having someone enter on the right part of the stage. In mentalism shows, the performer can direct people to divulge information about themselves necessary for the act without them realizing it, a common ploy also used by con artists in rigged seances (Houdini, 1924). In everyday life, professional pickpockets make use of directional cues by bumping into a person or stepping on toes to direct attention to the spot bumped or stepped on and away from the pocket.

Directional cues are not always kinesic or physical gestures. Verbal directions play an important role in directing spectators’ attention to the “wrong” track, not only by what is said but how it is said through implication (Fitzkee, 1945). The performer verbally suggests and interprets what the spectator sees, thus the spectator sees it that way. The magician must not describe what is really happening, but must suggest what is apparently happening: “The significance of the words themselves are here of great importance in inducing the audience to attribute effects to other than their true cause” (Triplett, 1900:482). When a performer says “pick a card, any card,” the audience must believe that any card has a chance of being selected, or when the magician says the three uneven ropes will slowly all become even as he pulls on them, the audience must so perceive it happening. Verbal direction has been used to give the spectator a false sense of the logical sequence of events. In recapping the sequence, a magician often inserts events that have not occurred, yet go unquestioned by the audience. For example, the performer might say, “Now that you have examined the steel linking rings . . .” when, in fact, only one or two of the eight have been examined, or “Now that you have shuffled, selected any card, looked at it, returned it somewhere in the deck . . .” when, in fact, it has not been shuffled. Suggestion directs the audience to follow the apparent main track of activity while the real sequence of events continues undetected.

Thus, exploiting the directional track to achieve false logical connections and misplaced perceptions and creating a sense of the absence of concealed ploys (apparently free choice of card, supposedly meaningful shuffle, or the seemingly empty box) is essential for a magic routine to be successful. It is also the reason for never repeating a trick twice or for announcing ahead of time what will happen in the trick. In such occurrences, the audience’s attention is directed to what they
I define situational success of the magician as all eyes detected to be often directed. This northerly of the magician (projected through a ghastly askew 's attention towards event shows, the necessary goal on artists in tricks make us to direct it. I directions on the 'track, kee, 1945), it, thus the really happen of the once to attend at any card even rope so perceive false sense is often dience. For teel linking amined, or ed it sometime directs al sequence actions and taunted ploys seemingly the reason will happen by what they know will happen and not to what the performer wants them to see. In short, as Triplett (1900:487) says, The chief part of conjuring lies in the artist's ability to so lead the thoughts of the audience into chosen paths, to awaken at the proper time such new images that the development of the trick appears for the moment as the logical outcome of the surrounding conditions; then by the production of a result totally unexpected and at variance the sense of illusion is produced.

Disattend Tracks

Subordinate, disattend channels must also be manipulated during a performance. In everyday life numerous actions, such as people's movement and dialogue, simultaneously occur during activities, yet go unnoticed in normal, ordinary interaction. In addition, people usually assume an unconnectedness among disattented events. In a magic routine, exploiting these social psychological facts is an essential component in producing a successful trick. In the example trick, the magician, through his casual way of shuffling and talking, allows the audience to disattend the falseness of the shuffling. It seems ancillary to the trick—shuffling appears not to be part of the main activity. In stage magic, most spectators disattend the actions of the magician's assistant (almost always female) once she has appeared on stage, treating her as part of the subordinate track. In fact, assistants are often used to make the real sequence of events work by concealing on themselves about-to-be-produced objects or by taking away about-to-disappear objects. Assistants are also used to misdirect the audience's attention from the magician by continuously going on and off stage. In this example, disattend activities allow the concealment and directional tracks to work effectively.

Magicians often take advantage of the fact that some gestures, words, and even physical appearances (the tuxedo, the fringe around the close-up table, the curtain behind the performer), due to their apparent ordinariness, are taken to be subordinate to the main activity by the audience. As Goffman (1974:223) writes, "Scratching the nose, placement of hands, touching a particular piece of clothing, and other comfort movements" can easily be manipulated into a secret code for transmitting information. Such familiar movements become relevant to a mentalist or, in the case of a con, to a card cheater or crooked medium. These seemingly incidental and disattented movements are used by magicians to conceal, to misdirect, and to enact the real sequence. Thus, learning to hold one's hands naturally while palming something and to say one thing while thinking something else become the goals of a magician and the objectives of practicing magic.

Bracketing

In order to conceal the real sequence of events, the magician often employs false starts and endings. Through disattention and misdirection, spectators are made unaware of the actual bracketing of a trick: i.e., when the apparent trick begins and ends is typically different from the real beginning and end. For example, casual shuffling by the performer between tricks or a statement such as "Let me just make sure this is a complete deck"—seemingly subordinate events to the main activity—may, in fact, demarcate the actual beginning of the real
causal sequence of the trick (Kelley, 1980). It is only when the performer asks
the spectator to "pick a card" that the audience defines the event as just beginning
or when the performer says "three" in a count from one to three that the spectator
looks for the ending (when the real sequence already ended on the two count)
(Jastrow, 1900).

Concealing the true beginning and end brackets of a trick is normally accom-
plished by employing physical and verbal moves that reflect everyday behaviors
and are, thereby, easily disattended. For example, the magician might say he
needs to get the four aces from the deck and while going through to find them,
he sets up the other cards for the same or for a later trick. The audience disattends
the move as ordinary, yet the move conceals a real component of the trick, namely
the actual beginning of it. In the example trick, the apparent start occurs when
the magician asks the spectator to select any card. In fact, the trick began when
the magician arranged the forced card in a particular position and earlier placed
the duplicate card in an envelope in his pocket. The trick might also seem to end
when the top card no longer is the chosen one. This is a common ending to a
simple trick. By having it "reappear" in an envelope, sealed no less, adds a twist
to an "additional" ending. Even while the spectator is opening the envelope and
the audience is reacting, the magician can begin the real start of the next trick.

In some mentalism acts, the beginning and ending brackets of the trick are
interchanged. Using the "one-ahead" technique, the mentalist makes the audien-
ence think the mind-reading is followed by a confirmatory disclosure when really
it "is a mind-reading following a confirmatory disclosure" (Goffman, 1974:469).

Breaking Frame

An interesting case occurs when the performer commits an unintentional error,
such as dropping a card, exposing a gimmick, or verbally calling attention to part
of the real sequence. The fabrication is uncovered; elements of the concealment
track are brought into the main frame. Adult audiences often react by disattending
the error, or, if noticed, by not calling attention to it (due to what Binet [1896:557]
calls "a sentiment of discretion" and "a certain timidity"). Children, however,
often call attention to the error, not having been socialized yet to "proper" au-
dience behavior. There are some tricks designed for children that exploit this fact,
i.e., that allow them to catch the magician's "error" only to have been fooled by
the finish (Randi, 1978).

In magic performances, spectators can also frame the error as part of the per-
formance. It is often not clear to the audience whether it is real or apparent. Many
spectators have expressed skepticism and stated that the witnessed error was
probably part of the trick. The lesson here for magicians is never to admit an
error, but allow the spectators to assume it was part of the routine. Since they
don't know what is to happen, everything which occurs can be defined as part
of the event or disattended. Contingency plans ("outs" and multiple end points),
concealed by misdirection and disattention, are typically followed when the mag-
cician makes an obvious error or when the spectator makes an "error," i.e., does
not select the forced card or say what the mentalist predicts. For example, if the
sylphs. The performer asks the spectator to make two counts, and then asks them to find a certain card. The magician then switches to another trick which can use a randomly selected card. The magician changes frame and track, while the spectator does not.

THE MAGICIAN’S ROLE

In addition to the simultaneous negotiation of various levels of activity (main disattending, directional, concealment), a successful magic trick depends on the participants engaging in appropriate role behavior and shared definitions of the situation.

The chief task for the magician to master is “the faculty of following simultaneously two different ideas or things; he [must] think of what he [is] doing and what he [is] saying, two very different operations with the conjurer” (Dessoir [1885]1942:22). He must learn to dissociate customary movements and do the real sequence of events while communicating the apparent sequence by means of verbal and physical misdirection and concealment strategies. This is best accomplished by developing an ordinary everyday style, i.e., by learning to move and speak naturally while unnaturally concealing objects and variant thoughts (see Fitzkee, 1945). He must unlearn the habitual movements which the audience must still have for the trick to work. As Jastrow (1900:125) describes it,

The conjurer directs your attention to what he does not do; he does not do what he pretends to do; and to what he actually does he is careful neither to appear to direct his own attention nor to arouse yours.

In order for the audience to suspend disbelief, the performer must communicate trust and confidence. In addition to simple stage presence and performing style (see Maskelyne and Devant, 1911), the magician must appear to be “really” invested with magical skills or supernatural powers. This impersonation is similar to the results created by a skilled actor when he or she appears no longer to be acting but to actually be the person portrayed. Role and person get intertwined.

Although magicians are playing the part of someone with extraordinary powers, and people know they really don’t have them (perhaps with the exception of mentalism and spiritualism for some people), magicians still become identified with the part; they are defined as magicians, even off-stage. People commonly quip to a magician, “Well, I certainly wouldn’t want to play cards with you,” as if his ability to turn up four aces during a magic trick is something he could or will do during a poker game. Except for professional card cheats or pickpockets, the sleights used during a performance are not brought to other situations as part of the person’s non-magician roles. Yet, it is important to suggest this impression of special powers, to create a minor doubt in the audience concerning the separation of role and person, just as happens to viewers watching excellent actors.

Confidence is also communicated by actually doing what you want people to believe you are continuing to do afterward (Jastrow, 1900). For example, a few
coins are actually thrown into a bucket before the magician starts to palm the coins and creates the illusion of throwing additional coins in, or by actually cutting a piece of fruit in half with the sword before it is used to cut a person in half. Con artists similarly gain the spectator’s confidence in a three card monte routine by letting a confederate really win at the game before engaging in sleights when the mark bets money. However, the swindler is held responsible for the accuracy of his behavior and words (he can be arrested for this kind of interaction) but a magician, since he is a performer, can distance himself from the everyday interactional norms and “legally” deceive and fabricate in the interaction (Roger Abrahams, personal communication). As Fitzkee (1945:39) states, “But the dishonest layman, applying mental deception, has an advantage over the magician. By the very nature of the magician’s field of activity, his spectators are forewarned.”

Sex Roles and Magicians

One curious aspect to the role of magician and the element of confidence is the apparent necessity to be male. There are few female magicians, despite the relative openness of the entertainment field to women performers. One explanation is that a woman magician breaks the gender-appropriate power distribution assumed as given in everyday life. Male audiences may not enjoy being tricked by someone of perceived lower status and female audiences may not like being fooled by other women. Furthermore, since males serve as gatekeepers regulating access to the profession and evaluating performances, the number of women magicians hired remains small.

Historically, women have been associated with witchcraft, healing, and spiritualism. As Mauss (1950:28) writes in his study of magic in primitive societies, women are

> everywhere recognized as being more prone to magic than men. ... They are said to be the font of mysterious activities, the sources of magical power. ... The magical attributes of women derive primarily from their social position and consequently are more talked about than real.

In fact, there are fewer female practitioners of magic than public opinion would have us believe. The curious result is that on the whole, it is the men who perform the magic while women are accused of it.

Today, palm reading, fortune telling, and seances continue to be associated with women. These are the last remnants of magic which still have the connotation of “real” magic. Women are linked with actual magic and men with magic as entertainment.

Another explanation for the predominance of male magicians is the socialization of boys in our traditional culture toward positions of control and power. Since magic involves the ability to control attention and manipulate perceptions, men are more likely to have been taught this. In addition, the desire to figure out how things work and to take things apart may be related to performing magic and to early sex role socialization experiences. Conversely, the traditional role of women to acquiesce to authority contributes greater credibility to women as magician’s assistants (or victims) and as spectators of magic.
Based on interviews with magicians, observations of their performances, and personal experiences in performing magic, the author hypothesizes a relationship between the social psychology of performing magic and sex role socialization. Since magic depends more on psychological control of audiences’ perceptions and attention than on manual dexterity, the connection might rest here. Magic involves a form of domination and manipulation, positive terms for men but not for women. Magic is also viewed by some as a form of “one-up-manship,” a type of trickery which is not seen as a positive component of traditional female roles (Myriam Ruthchild, personal communication).

Furthermore, social context does not support the magician role for women. Women are less encouraged to seek hobbies or to be forceful centers of attention. Rather, they are socialized to take supportive, less competitive roles. Perhaps, then, there are so few women magicians because magic does not present many positive benefits in fulfilling traditional female sex roles. It is a risk for women to engage in magic, since magic will give them non-traditional sex role identifications (power, control, domination, and one-upping). For many women, these would be negative attributions and could threaten self-esteem. For many men, these identifications would be positive and culturally supported.

THE AUDIENCE ROLE

As in every face-to-face social interaction, the audience is also expected to behave and think in certain ritualized ways. Jastrow (1900:122) believes that “the effect of a trick depends more upon the receptive attitude of the spectators than upon what is really done.” The audience brings to a magic event several features necessary for its effectiveness: (1) knowledge and rational faculties; (2) perception; (3) expectations; and (4) a willingness to be entertained, in fact, to be tricked.

Knowledge and Rationality

The amount of information available to people in a particular culture and in a particular era is salient to the performance of magic. When an audience constructs a plausible explanation for the trick, even if incorrect, its impact is diminished. For example, before fingerprinting was known, a magician could evolve an elaborate patter about how he can pick out the chosen card by reading the fingerprints on the cards. In an era when fingerprinting techniques are known to the general public, this patter works against the trick; it is a plausible, albeit a bit farfetched, explanation for selecting the chosen card. However, spectators must bring to the interaction the modern knowledge that there is a rational explanation or else they are likely to be taken in on a con or to believe in a supernatural explanation. An audience must bring to a magic performance some amount of knowledge concerning the existence of scientific and technological explanations in order for tricks to be framed as entertainment.

Rationality, rather than working against a trick, is also a necessity for understanding a magic performance (Fitzkee, 1945). Much of it is based on the ability to make cause-effect inferences (Kelley 1980). Leading the audience through seemingly logical sequences of events does not prepare the spectators for the
apparently non-rational and illogical conclusion of the trick. In the example trick, the disappearance of the chosen card from the top position only is magical if one believes logically that it cannot just disappear. If rational thinking does not yield a plausible explanation, then the trick had worked well. However, the performance depends on the audience trying to recapitulate the apparent logical sequence of events and believing there is an actual rational solution. The audience must be capable of constructing meanings using the familiar, logical, and patterned elements of a cause-effect relationship with the objects and knowledge of their everyday experiences and culture.

Randi (1978:56) gives a cross-cultural example in which the Shipibo Indians of Peru failed to be entertained by a handkerchief changing color, yet were surprised when a stone vanished from the magician’s hand: “The stone they were aware of as a real and common object; their experience told them that it simply would not do what it had appeared to do in my hand. But the silk handkerchief, for all they knew, might well be a piece of technology... One trick was interesting. The other was possibly supernatural.”

Perception and Attention

Basic social psychological principles of human perception are important components of audience behavior at magic performances (Binet, 1896; Solomon, 1980; Weibel, 1980). Selective attention and selective perception, as has been demonstrated, contribute much to the effectiveness of a trick. Seances especially depend on the fact that participants are suggestible and “in doubt as to the interpretation to be placed upon what they see, or more or less prepared or determined to see in everything the evidence of the supernatural” (Jastrow, 1900:126). Many people see their own deceased relative in the same dimly lit, gauzed-covered wire mask hanging in the corner during a seance. People see what they want to and what the magician or medium suggests they see. Selective retention also allows the audience to forget the correct ordering of the steps in the trick, thus aiding the magician’s misdirection and concealment strategies.

People see and hear using frames based on everyday familiarity. A spectator tends to choose objects in abnormal positions (slightly out of line, inclined a bit, etc.) or in middle positions. The audience will focus on the flashy and disattend the familiar—a red handkerchief in the right hand keeps people from looking at the left; a hand quickly moving toward the spectator is difficult to focus on but attracts attention (Weibel, 1980). Audiences fill in the blanks (develop closure) created by ambiguity, thus following some basic cognitive principles of perceptual organization and gestalt psychology (Solomon, 1980). They believe they have seen the complete coin when they have only seen one side; they believe they hear the coins clinking in the actually empty hand; and they easily forget details while changing the order of events and adding new ones that weren’t there. In other words, the audience perceives the situation using familiar details of everyday experience and thereby helps the magician build the apparent sequence of events while he conceals the actual moves.
Expectation

Expectations, constructed from personal, cultural, temporal, and spatial factors, help shape perceptions and contribute to the success of a magic event (Jastrow, 1900; Weibel, 1980). These expectations are used to interpret the event and are built from the organization of everyday activities. Weigert (1981:75) states that:

Each adult is normally equipped with sufficient interpretive frames to achieve routine significance in typical situations. Interpretations then provide the basis for expectations concerning the other’s next move. Expectations are another symbolic construction shaping our lives.

Spectators expect that the card or coin they see is the same as the cards and coins with which they are familiar. If they do suspect something unusual, they rarely are familiar enough with the magician’s gimmicks to figure out the real components of the activity. Expectation is based on a simple principle: if you see a familiar object you expect it to be the same as an ordinary one.

It is expected that things that are transparent are empty. It is expected backgrounds that match are continuous and have nothing behind them. It is expected that something with no bottom contains nothing. It is expected that objects that are freely shown are “normal,” not specially constructed within. It is expected that what has been shown empty is indeed empty (Weibel, 1980:11).

Entertainment Agreement

Finally, the audience’s role must involve a collusion to agree to the construction of a benign fabrication. Spectators agree to be entertained, manipulated, and tricked, but not to be conned. “He knows that he is being deceived by skill and adroitness, and rather enjoys it the more, the more he is deceived” (Jastrow, 1900:125). In some forms of magic, such as escape routines and mentalism acts, challenge situations occur. The magician-audience relationship may become adversarial, yet the overall definition of the situation agreed upon remains one of entertainment. Many times, particular members of the audience feel challenged or threatened, unable to figure out how it was done or believing they have been made a fool of publicly. Through the use of humor and a sensitive performing style, the magician can prevent such unwanted adversarial relationships. Typically, males are more likely to challenge the performer and more likely to heckle. This is one of the reasons most magicians select a woman to participate in the act; it is one way of avoiding non-cooperative situations. Perhaps little has changed since Binet (1896:557) wrote that illusionists “invariably address themselves to a lady, as a woman is much more given to reserve than a man; ... her timidity makes her the artist’s accomplice.”

The unwritten contractual agreement to play along also creates an acquiescence set in the participants, similar to the demand characteristics of a research situation. They become easily suggestible (witness the various “hypnotism” acts) and tend to agree with the performer’s statements, even when they know otherwise. The feeling of being one of the few in on the performance helps the participants to
maintain the frame. It is the same principle behind not telling others how it was done when one knows how, except in situations in which power or social esteem can be obtained by divulging.

In sum, the spectators of a magic event, like those of any theatrical performance, usually collaborate in the framed activity. They act as onlookers, allowing themselves to be contained (Goffman, 1974); in fact, expecting to be contained. Some may even be called on to participate as a subject in the trick. Even more so, these subjects collaborate in the event, and while helping to maintain frames and to prevent errors, contribute to the apparent channel of events. The contained are helping the performer to contain others.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It has been demonstrated that a social organization of entertainment magic is similar to the dynamics of everyday interpersonal interaction. A magic performance is a non-ordinary realm of activity (a "finite province of meaning," as Berger and Luckmann [1966] would call it) which derives its effectiveness for clarifying the dynamics of everyday life interactions through the establishment of a dialectic between the expectations brought by the audience to a performance and the violations of expectations accomplished by the magician. Magic uncovers the rituals of ordinary social interaction and the negotiations involved in maintaining a relationship between appearances and other levels of reality. In addition, magic serves as a useful mechanism to assess the dramaturgical dimensions of everyday social roles and behaviors, especially those involving fabrications, manipulations, and deceptions. Defense attorneys, politicians, advertisers, people making first impressions, and salespersons all use the techniques of magic in socially approved ways. An analysis of the social psychological dimensions of everyday life events (from con games to children's pranks) would benefit from an application of the dynamics of a magic performance.

An ethnomethodology of everyday life is also more fully developed through the application of a magic metaphor. Attempts to manipulate and manage impressions, to construct ordinary face-to-face social interactions, and to persuade and change public opinion are illuminated by focusing on the negotiation of the apparent and real aspects of the situation. Analyzing the various channels of activity (main, concealment, directional, disattended) occurring in all social interactions in terms of a magic performance can clarify the complex dimensions involved. For as we study the interaction between performer and audience and the role of manipulation and deception in these interactions, we uncover the dialectic involved between self and others, and between the real and the apparent in ordinary social interaction. Magic, as an extension of the dramaturgical metaphor frequently used by symbolic interactionists, can provide useful tools for analyzing the layers of meanings and channels of activities constructed in everyday life.

The techniques of magic can also contribute insights to a variety of unique situations. For example, Solomon (1980:3) has encouraged the study of magic in psychology classes as "a pedagogical tool for teaching the principles of sensation
and perception," and Moskowitz (1975) has discussed the utility of magic in breaking the isolation barrier experienced by shy, insecure, or schizoid children.

Finally, a social psychology of entertainment magic raises salient questions concerning the social construction of meanings about religion, science, and magic. The shifting frames employed to understand magic historically and cross-culturally over time and space are a function of the knowledge, religious values, scientific/technological development, and definitions of entertainment available in a given culture. Further historical and cross-cultural analyses in this area are needed for a better understanding of the role entertainment magic plays in a society and how it is defined by its members. In addition, age-related and sex role differences in performing magic and in constructing frames to interpret magic are important topics in need of further work.

In short, the realm of activity known as conjuring adds meaning to ordinary everyday behavior, and vice-versa. The study of entertainment magic can offer much to both a theoretical and applied sociological social psychology of everyday life.

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