

MAGICIANS AND PARAPSYCHOLOGY*

The recent rise of interest in static PK, precipitated by Serios,¹ Kulagina,² and Geller,³ has provoked the question of how readily possible it may be for psi researchers to encounter undetected deceit. As a magician and parapsychologist, I feel the need to express some considered opinions which should bring into better focus the question of employing a conjuring consultant.

Reasoned precautions not only should be adequate to prevent deceit, but they also can reduce the number of ESP 'star subjects' who have been lost to parapsychology over the decades as a result of mistaken suspicions of fraud. I submit that a magician may be of no more than minimal value unless he is himself intelligently familiar with the literature of psychical research. Unfortunately, with many magicians pure prejudice finds an easy entrance, simply because their professed interest and resultant attitude is one of deception. As I stated in a 1974 paper,⁴ 'it is an anomaly. . . that magicians nevertheless are as expressive as anyone about having 'an open mind'. . . The more likely truth, it seems to me, is that these claimants don't—and that their open minds indeed might best be "closed for repairs".' A competent co-experimenter generally would be a better policy.

The parapsychology textbook by Rhine and Pratt⁵ gives fairly ample information on how to achieve the precautions which are continually demanded. Neither that book nor this text suggests that magicians, as such, are an asset. They may be as likely to disturb the psychological conditions of the test as they are in pointing out a reasonable opening for deception.

THE PRACTICAL LIMITATIONS

In conjuring, the practical limits are relatively distinct, however widely their directions may vary. Literally, these are rigid and restricted, while in parapsychology the greatest limit is simply the inability to produce upon demand. The hallmark which distinguishes deceit from real evidence of the paranormal is simply that in the one the magician 'sets his own stage', while in the other it is the observer-experimenter who is in charge. If a reputed ESP or RSPK sensitive produces, then all too often the consulted magicians may 'duplicate' his trick(?), but knowingly (and with secrecy afore-thought) *without* the identical conditions obtaining. Because of deliberate demonstrations of this kind (usually not in his presence) a scrutiny of Uri Geller has been bypassed by parapsychologists, notwithstanding the several superior and responsibly offered reports of his metal bending³ and ESP effects.⁶ Too often the magician quickly 'is willing to arrive at conclusions, . . . and to include in his premises possibilities for which there is no evidence. . . In serious investigation [he] is not essential as a safeguard'.⁷

When a particularly novel claim is made, it is advantageous first to allow the claimant freedom to perform in his own way. Then tighten up on safeguards in repeat tests. Any fraud is likely to become evident. In psi investigations, unlike in legal practice, a subject must be considered guilty until proven innocent; and proof must be sought without fear or favor.

* This is a condensed version of an unpublished paper written in 1982.

It is only natural for the uninformed to doubt extreme psi evidences, whatever they might be. In my opinion, this need not be shared by parapsychologists. Before addressing the point further, I shall turn to other formats in which the same problem has arisen.

CRITICS OUTSIDE OUR FIELD: 1. JOSEPH JASTROW

It was in regard to the schizoid Eusapia Palladino that the hypercritical Joseph Jastrow came to say "Thinking straight is essential to seeing straight. The evidence grows out of the attitude far more than the attitude results from the evidence".⁸

This statement is entirely true. But the precept has been violated, nevertheless, by Jastrow himself; for he was among the strongest denouncers of his time concerning psychical research. Rather than cite how much he omitted of the best of Palladino's static PK effects, or how strongly he pointed out her habitual deceit when unrestricted, in his *Psychology of Conviction*,⁹ I need only say that he made no mention of D. D. Home whatever. The reason is obvious: Jastrow's evidence against him grew out of his attitude. (He has his counterparts today, in Diaconis, Hyman, Kurtz, *et al.*)

2. MILBOURNE CHRISTOPHER

The first of three magicians in line for a retributive exposé, in this more opinionated section of the present paper, might be Milbourne Christopher, a former president of the Society of American Magicians. On all of Rhine's works he has been severely critical. Not even a Hansel would make such a statement as 'I guarantee to. . . equal or better the [ESP card] scores without [the] method being detected by Rhine'.¹⁰ As for the general psychic literature, he, like the hypercritical Jastrow, has simply ignored the most important evidences. One reviewer of his latest book¹¹ has aptly said that he is 'the dupe of his own prejudice'.

3. MARTIN GARDNER

The second magician to be discussed is Martin Gardner, an amateur, who is well known as a science writer and 'puzzle expert'. He once inquired of my scrutiny of Uri Geller, as published by Panati,¹² where I had recounted Geller's static PK effect upon my keys and watch.* He asked specific questions about the watch, in three exchanges, and none about two keys. My replies *re* the watch yielded only presumptuous reactions. His 'proposed non-psi hypothesis' was patently simplistic. It is he (among others), rather than Geller, who has done 'great harm to parapsychology. . . Almost all parapsychologists now recognize Geller [to be] a charlatan and a fraud. . .'¹³

* For specific details of a select jammed-watch effect, and of two bendings, see *Journal of Parapsychology*, 1974, Vol. 38, pp. 408-11. This watch was both double-backed and sealed. Not a single conceivable normal cause has been cited (Gardner's does not qualify, being *ad hominem*) in the decade since it occurred. What both Gardner and Christopher have failed to realize, being no parapsychologists, is that Geller's not succeeding for magicians is logically no evidence against his having psi ability. They tend to produce an atmosphere of tension, in which little can be done.

The regrettable fact is he may be correct about those parapsychologists; but if only reliable accounts of the best of Geller had been read, and their well-controlled tests borne in mind (however small a proportion of his overall total), they would have been much less likely to fall into the 'sour grape' position which has so slowed scientific progress in research with star subjects.

4. JAMES RANDI

'The Amazing Randi' is another magician who continuously has criticized parapsychological methods. His bold letterhead lists him as a Fellow of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal ('CSICOP'). Both he and this Committee have thus far in my considered opinion been quite unhelpful to the field. After all, replication of an effect, when under the performer's own conditions, is of little value.

These three magicians, as do so many of their compeers, if I may speak about my fellow-countrymen, unconsciously maintain what I have called an 'I can—you can't' syndrome.⁴ This produces a firm and natural doubt that Mr. Geller can mentally influence any watches to start, or clairvoyantly call ESP targets better than they.

This seductive opinion may be extended to include all such claimants. It is certainly not conducive to successful experiments with them. And even if a conjuring consultant were convinced by a 'satisfactory test' would he respond by taking intellectual interest in psi and its possible meaning for science, or neither?

THE USEFULNESS OF MAGICIANS

Before a final comment on the limitations of their value to parapsychologists, may I cite a personal illustration in favor of a knowledge of sleight-of-hand which magicians might render, given that they are fairly well grounded in ESP and PK research practices. On several occasions at Duke and the FRNM during my 35 years of active association, star subjects have been referred to us (as claimants). As it happened, instead of finding them to be tricksters myself, this had become an opinion which was spawned in the minds of other colleagues there who happen to have made the first experimental studies of the claimants. It fell to me to find *not* that they were what in all probability most other magicians would have all too promptly concluded, but rather the opposite.*

If this experience is not exceptional, the value a discerning magician *can* have may be more than just 'recognizing fraud and taking action, of spotting self-delusion and advising wisely'.¹⁴ Magicians with any interest in being a consultant to a parapsychologist need also to pass certain qualifications for the job. On stage, they specifically do imitate these same effects, and indeed should be examined by the parapsychologist-experimenter—just as they are the

* These included L. Harribance, Delmore ('B.D.'), L. Foos and S. Cottrell, at the Laboratory. Also Serios, Geller, Girard, and O. Jonsson.

'examiners' (or critical observers, rather) of the protocols and psi claimants.* (For this reason, I have suggested that the P.A. Council delete from a 1983 Policy Statement on magicians as consultants the phrase 'regardless of their opinions on the existence of psi'.)

Finally, and magicians on either side of the fence will agree, excitement and anticipation during any tests should be kept to a minimum, particularly in 'field research', for otherwise one becomes a much less critical observer of what transpires. It is by this means that a magician subjugates his audience.

CONCLUSION

In these arguments on the study of any exceptional psi subject without excessive concern about his own deceptive skills, I am not speaking as a self-appointed apologist; for 'it serves no real purpose merely to yield a point and allow oneself to be convinced at a somewhat lower level of evidentiality than his scientific judgment required', as Rhine has stated.¹⁵ Adequate and repeated safeguards can prevent slick hocus, whereas the talent and training of magicians may tend to militate against their open-mindedness toward the paranormal. When so employed, they should serve as advisers rather than as monitors.

Stoic but devoted researchers should be able to guard 'against willful or unwitting deception [so] that no magician. . . is willing to attempt to work (as magician) under such conditions'.¹⁶

20 Southbrook Drive
Rolla, Missouri 65401 USA

W. E. Cox

REFERENCES

1. Eisenbud, J. *The World of Ted Serios*. New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1967.
2. Pratt, J. G. and Keil, H. H. J. 'Firsthand observations of Nina S. Kulagina suggestive of PK upon static objects.' *JASPR* 1973, **67**, pp. 381-90.
3. Owen, A. R. G. 'Uri Geller's metal phenomena: an eyewitness account'. *New Horizons*, 1974, **1**, 164-71.
4. Cox, W. E. 'Parapsychology and magicians'. *Parapsychol. Review*, 1974, **5**(3), pp. 4-6.
5. Rhine, J. B. and Pratt, J. G. *Parapsychology—Frontier Science of the Mind*. Springfield, Ill.: Chas. C. Thomas, 1957.
6. Targ, R. and Puthoff, H. 'ESP experiments with Uri Geller'. *RIP* 1972 (1973) pp. 57-60.
7. O'Neill, John J. 'Magic and psychical research'. *JASPR*, 1936, **30**, p. 61.
8. Jastrow, J. *The Psychology of Conviction*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918, p. 113.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 119-23.
10. Christopher, Milbourne. *ESP, Seers & Psychics*. New York: Thos. Y. Crowell, 1970, p. 25.
11. Christopher Milbourne. *Search for the Soul*. New York: Thos. Y. Crowell, 1979.
12. Panati, Chas. (Ed.) *The Geller Papers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976, pp. 139-49.
13. *Omni*, Jan. 1982, **4**, p. 69.
14. Cox, W. E. *Mentalism and Magicians—Some Conclusive Arguments about a Modern Problem*. Singapore: Stamford College Press, Ltd., 1972.
15. Quoted by Cox in essay on Physical phenomena and survival evidence—a critical restatement. *Light*, **78**, Sept. 1958, p. 108.
16. Rhine, J. B. 'The hypothesis of deception'. *JP* 1938, **2**, pp. 151-52.

* Note that in magic, unlike other disciplines, the terms 'professional', semi-professional', or 'amateur' have little bearing on one's knowledge of skill. They relate only to his charging for such demonstrations.