Sex Roles, Vol. 19, Nos. 11/12, 1988

The Social World of Magicians: Gender and Conjuring[1]

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This paper discusses the relationship of gender to magic. It explores sociological and social-psychological reasons, both historically and in contemporary society, for the dearth of women magicians. Such factors as the social-structural dimensions of the magic profession, the socialization of gender roles in play and communications, the nature of magic, and the role of power and control in a performance are discussed. The uses of magic as a metaphor for an analysis of gender roles in everyday life are proposed in the concluding section.

Gender role differences are visible in almost every facet of entertainment magic (conjuring) in Western cultures, whether it be performance, participation in magical associations, or audience behavior. Specifically, the number of women magicians is relatively small, both historically and today. When they do participate in magic, women are either assisting male magicians or performing the more psychic and occult forms, such as mind reading, seances, and fortune-telling. Why women's roles in magic have been so limited and why so few women actively perform magic is the focus of this article.

Consider the stereotypical magical image of "sawing the woman in half." The powerful male with his sharp instrument penetrates and mutilates the woman ("I always feel a twinge of pain whenever I watch a magician's assistant climb into her coffin-like box.... Once again, woman is being put on

[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Sociological Association meetings in Washington, DC, August 1985. Comments were generously provided by Ruth Borker, Gary Alan Fine, Glenn Goodwin, Meredith Gould, Danny Maltz, Myriam Ruthchild, Susan Seymour, Molly Squire, and Robert Stebbins.

0360-0025/88/1200-0759$06.00/0

display as the victim of a male-dominated torture fantasy"; Marshall, 1984, p. 41). And only he can restore her to her original wholeness. One need not, however, resort to simplistic Freudianism to make sense out of these images. The reasons may have more to do with (1) the sociocultural and historical tradition of performing, (2) the social organization of the magic profession, (3) the socialization of gender roles in conversation and play in Western society, (4) the nature of magic, and (5) the relationship of power and control between a performer and an audience. Each of these will be discussed as possible explanations for the dearth of women magicians.

Adelaide Hermann (1981, p. 5), one of the few famous women conjurers, wrote,

> Magic is a graceful art, and, as those of my own sex are the real exponents of grace, I have often wondered why more young girls do not turn their attention to the study and practice of magic, as it develops every one of the attributes necessary to social success—grace, dexterity, agility, ease of movement, perfection of manner, and self-confidence.

Although the promise of grace and social success may attract some women to the practice of magic, there are a number of social-structural reasons for the limited appeal that magic has to women in general.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The virtual absence of women in conjuring circles prior to the mid-19th century can be traced to several cultural sources. Foremost is the association of women with witchcraft. For a woman even to attempt a magical performance would have been tantamount to a public declaration of witchcraft. The earliest extant book on magic, *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (Scot, 1584/1972), emphasized the link that existed in the public's mind in the 16th century between conjuring tricks and witchcraft. Scot's purpose was to debunk the existence of actual witchcraft and to demonstrate its dependency on ordinary sleight-of-hand magic tricks. Scot argued that anything unexplainable or out of the ordinary was not necessarily due to the intervention of the Devil and his forces. He demonstrated that what witches were accused of doing in cooperation with satanic forces could also be performed by popular entertainers using explainable means.

The almost universal association in Western societies of women with witchcraft and sorcery has been substantiated by many historians (Demos, 1982; Macfarlane, 1970; Russell, 1980; Thomas, 1970). Russell (1980) argues that sexist religious assumptions led to the belief in the preponderance of women as witches. Women had little influence and legal power during the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries. They were often socially isolated, financially destitute, and viewed by religious tradition as responsible for carnality

(Russell, 1980). In short, the position of women in the social structure was subservient; they were vulnerable to charges of being mysterious and performing evil deeds. In the *Malleus Maleficarum* of 1486, according to Russell (1972), women were described as susceptible to demonic temptation because of their "manifold weaknesses." Coupled with this misogynist view was an exaggerated respect for women's magical powers. The *Malleus Maleficarum* described women as carnal and impressionable, as liars and deceivers unable to conceal, and as having weak memories. At the same time, there existed a belief that they had power to perform dark and mysterious deeds.

Within such a context, any woman engaging in ordinary conjuring tricks or juggling (as it was called until the 18th century) would have been viewed as dangerous. Christopher (1973) tells the story of a girl who, after publicly performing a torn-and-restored handkerchief trick in Cologne in the 15th century, was subsequently tried for witchcraft. While similar fates and diabolical labels often awaited male performers, women were more at risk and culturally less acceptable as public performers. Magical entertainment typically was offered by performers traveling from fair to fair, street corner to street corner, and tavern to tavern (Clarke, 1928, 1983), and it was unlikely that respectable women would perform in such public places.

For that matter, women rarely performed in the theater in England until the Restoration, and even then men continued to portray witches, magicians, and comic old women (Brockett, 1968; Bullough, 1974). Although women occasionally performed on the stage in Italy, France, and Spain, they were not always greeted warmly: "When two French companies appeared in London, the first in 1629 and the second a few years later, their actresses were hissed and pelted with rotten apples" (Macgowan & Melnitz, 1955). Since women were essentially forbidden participation in public performances, conjuring and juggling were occupations primarily limited to male performers. Few documents before the 16th century refer to conjurers, but those that do, describe only males as jugglers in the British courts (Clarke, 1928/1983). Even in fiction, many of the noted magicians were men such as Merlin, Faustus, Friar Bacon, and Prospero (Traister, 1984).

Occasional reference is made to women performers—usually before or after the witch craze of the 14th–17th centuries. Clarke (1928/1983, p. 24) notes that "it is clear that long before the Christian era there was a class of public performers, of both sexes, who specialized in juggling, fire-eating, sword-swallowing, and ventriloquism." Women were shown juggling in 10th century illuminations, and the *Domesday Book* mentions Adelina, "a Joculatrix who is described as being a landowner in Hamsphire" (Clarke, 1928/1983, p. 13). But historical accounts, both the original sources and secondary ones, make few references to women magicians. Like priests, conjurers and other public performers were almost always male (see Butler, 1948).

In short, as Apte (1985, p. 72) notes, "Historical and analytical studies of the development of court jesters, clowns, buffoons, and fools... show that women rarely, if ever, played such roles."

Perhaps the earliest recorded evidence of a woman performer, according to Clarke (1928/1983) is a French conjurer, Mlle. Regnault. The wife of a showman during the late 17th century, she presented a cups-and-balls routine. Christopher (1973) writes about Mrs. Brenon, the wife of an 18th-century Irish conjurer, as the first woman to perform magic professionally in North America. In both cases, however, the conjurer followed in the path of her performing husband rather than originating the magic act herself.

Around the 19th century, the style and popularity of conjuring began to change from street-corner and parlor sleights-of-hand to larger effects performed on stages (see Pecor, 1977). The new style of magic required assistants to participate in the performance and to help manipulate the equipment. Usually these assitants were the wife, daughter, or son of the magician. These assistants, almost always a (more powerless) woman or child, were the ones the magic was performed on by a (more powerful) male magician.

Furthermore, as playbills and posters from the 19th century illustrate, magicians were typically referred to as "professors of scientific experiments." They performed illusions that were essentially newly discovered scientific principles, staying just one step ahead of the general public's knowledge of them. The roles of professor and scientist in the 19th century also had a predominantly male image, thereby making it even more difficult for a woman to take on the magician's persona.

As magic shows developed into more elaborate productions and became part of a music hall or vaudeville tradition in the late 19th century, women were often given their own spot in them. Interestingly, it typically was as a medium or a mentalist performing a "second-sight" routine. For example, Barnado Eagle, a mid-19th century performer, was assisted by his daughter, known as the "Clairvoyant Lady" and "Fore-Sighted Lady." After her father died in 1873, she performed alone as Madame Gilliland Card until about 1886 (Clarke, 1928/1983). Women often entered this career by taking over when a husband or father, whom they assisted, died.

A content analysis by the author of 19th-century posters and playbills on file at the Harvard University performing arts library supports the idea that early women magicians were typically performing a mentalism routine or assisting in their husband's or father's shows.[2] Ten out of 87 playbills included a reference to women performers. In 7 cases, these references were to a second-sight mentalism routine or to some equivalent supernatural powers. One example is an 1899 playbill for Mme. Konorah, who was described as a "modern witch." Another is an 1843 London poster for the "Mysterious Lady" asking "what would the people of Salem in the days of witchcraft have said or done to a woman whose wonderful faculties would have enabled her to name articles that she saw not?" Other noted women performers of the day, such as Madame Bosco, Miss Anderson, and Miss Heller, all performed second-sight routines in their husband's or father's shows.

[2]This content analysis does not represent a random sample of all possible playbills in the Harvard collection. Several boxes were made available to the author. These contained a variety of posters illustrating several types of performing arts, such as music hall performances, magic shows, and other vaudeville acts. Eighty-seven focused on magic and were analyzed for references to female performers. It should also be noted that these posters are not a random selection of all possible 19th-century playbills dealing with magic. The majority of them referred to acts in the Notheastern United States and in England. However, based on what is portrayed in Christopher (1973), the Harvard posters appear typical of 19th-century magic act playbills.

It was not until Adelaide Hermann carried on the show of her famous husband (Alexander) for almost 30 years after his death in 1896 that a woman performer finally achieved a fame that lasted many years beyond the influence of a husband or father. Hermann became one of the most renowned performers in Europe and North and South America, and the most famous woman magician in the world. Yet the historical accounts of her work are sketchy. The much-quoted histories of magic by Christopher (1962), Clarke (1928/1983), Dawes (1979), and Lamb (1976) barely mention her shows and give only fleeting acknowledgment to the performances of such other noted women conjurers and spiritualists as Nella Davenport, the Fox Sisters, Anna Eva Fay, Aimee Desiree ("Mystia"), Annie Vernone ("The Only Female Professor of Modern Magic in the World"), Madame Cora de Lamond, Talma, Ionia, Okita, Vonetta, and Dell O'Dell. Despite the notoriety of these performers and of some contemporary magicians, the woman magician remains overlooked in many historical accounts and is the exception in this strongly male-dominated entertainment field. Why this is so today in a society that no longer supports beliefs in witchcraft and no longer refuses women access to the entertainment fields is the focus of the following sections.

THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF MAGIC

Magic is one of the few fields in the world of entertainment that remains strongly male dominated. Comedy, acting, singing, and dancing are occupations more open to females than is performing magic. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1984), 42.5% of writers, artists, entertainers, and athletes are female. Females are 28% of musicians, 46.7% of authors, and 47.4% of artists. Over 30% of a sample of actors and 12% of a sample of comics were female (Fisher & Fisher, 1981). Yet according to the Interna-

tional Brotherhood of Magicians (personal communication), approximately 5% of their membership are female magicians. Only among comics is the proportion of female entertainers close to the proportion that characterizes the field of magic. Interestingly, stand-up comedy is an entertainment field that also demands an aggressive, powerful role, involving one-upping people. The relationship of humor and gender (see Apte, 1985, and Canter, 1976), and how these in turn relate to magic, is discussed below.

In a survey of 169 magician members of the leading U.S. magic club (the Magic Castle in Hollywood), only 7% of the respondents were women, and not all of them were performing solo shows (Nardi, 1983). A magic-shop owner interviewed by the author reported that about 1 out of every 20 people entering the store to buy magic was female. Stebbins's (1984) study of 56 magicians included only 2 women. Furthermore, a review of a list of performers in 1987 at the Magic Castle reveals that about 3% were female. In short, magic is dominated by male performers; women, when present, are almost exclusively used as assistants.

The organization of the world of magic resembles a male social club. Like any secret society, magic clubs work to preserve their identity, in this case their male identity, by controlling access to it. One of the oldest magic associations in the world, London's Magic Circle, remains closed to women, a decision upheld by the British courts. It is an association, described in its brochures, "for gentlemen, 18 years of age and older." Although American magic organizations are open to both men and women, access is often through personal references, auditions, and contacts. When the gatekeepers of the profession, the images in the literature, and the role models are predominantly male, access is difficult for women to attain. Although magic clubs are open to women, the message conveyed by the brochures, books, magazines, and magic kits is that this is really an activity for males. The magic world is dominated by male leaders, masculine imagery (such as swords, top hats, and wands), positive male role models (such as Houdini, Blackstone, and Henning), and male-oriented language (such as the International Brotherhood of Magicians). With this generally masculine image and with so few female role models, it is not likely that many women will consider the field of magic for a hobby or a career.

IMPLICATIONS OF SEX ROLE SOCIALIZATION FOR LEARNING MAGIC

Most magicians enter the field through years of amateur play and apprenticeships. Hanging out at magic stores, many boys begin to learn the field and gain entry into the school arena of magic. The social organization

of leisure and amateurism (see Stebbins, 1979) in this case tends to benefit men and to discourage the participation of women.

Magic is usually a hobby for the people engaged in it, rather than their career (Nardi, 1983). Most professional magicians began practicing magic at some early point in their lives as a hobby. Gender differences in the ways that children and adults organize leisure time and play help explain the greater concentration of males in the field of magic. Fine (1983) estimates that only 5–10% of the participants in fantasy role-playing games are female. Lever (1978) found that boys' play activities are more competitively structured, more complex, and involve face-to-face confrontation. Girls emphasize more cooperation, less interaction and interdependence, and play in smaller groups with less structure and fewer rules. Performing magic is more male in this regard. It is a structured activity, involves face-to-face interaction of a competitive nature, and requires a dominant leader.

Differences in conversational styles between males and females similarly give males an advantage in magic. Maltz and Borker (1982, p. 200) state that "American men and women come from different sociolinguistic subcultures." Boys posture and counterposture, using speech to assert their dominance even when others have the floor and to attract and maintain an audience. In other words, boys perform while speaking. Girls, on the other hand, use speech to create relationships of closeness and equality, to share secrets, and to establish intimacy. In adulthood, female conversations emphasize harmony and interaction maintenance. Males perform narratives, argue aggressively with jokes and put-downs, and make challenging statements (Maltz & Borker, 1982). Furthermore, Stebbins found that men are more likely to deceive women by putting them on than women are likely to deceive men or even each other (Stebbins, 1975). Apte (1985) found that very few ethnographic accounts of women playing practical jokes or pranks in everyday interactions exist. He argues that cultural norms of propriety preclude women from engaging in totally uninhibited ways, especially in ways that involve belittling others. Women's humor rarely involves competition or enhancing one's own status through putting down others.

An analysis of a magic performance indicates the congruence with male styles of humor, conversation, and interaction. Magic involves challenges, jokes, and narratives. A magician needs to be able to perform and take control. Secrets cannot be shared (except among selective others) and equality is not the goal in the interaction.

In sum, the ways in which sex role socialization shapes play, leisure time, and interaction styles may be an important factor in the selection of hobbies and careers, especially magic. In general, socialization patterns for males are more congruent with the ways that magic is performed and structured.

MAGICAL ACTS BY MALE AND FEMALE PERFORMERS

The process of performing a magic trick involves a kind of deceit that involves power, control, and one-up-man(*sic*)ship. Magic is an aggressive, competitive form involving challenges and winning at the expense of others. Parlee (1985) made similar arguments in her discussion of why so few women play poker. The illusion created is not simply putting on makeup or altering one's character, as in a play or other type of performance (as would an actress or clown). It is creating an illusion that involves putting something over someone, to establish who is in control, and to make the other (the audience) appear fooled.

Males in our culture are more likely to be encouraged to demonstrate power, control, and competitive manipulation of others. Magic is an activity that ideally exploits these characteristics and gives them a more benign, socially approved context. We tend to socialize males in roles and characteristics that lend themselves to expression in magic performances.

Social approval from audiences and its correlates (frequent bookings, career mobility, etc.) may not be generated as readily for women magicians. For magic to work, the audience must believe a rational explanation exists, yet find it impossible to offer one, even an incorrect one (Nardi, 1984). Some people in audiences believe women engage in real magic—seances, palm readings, and witchcraft—and that there is no rational explanation. What they experience, then, is "real" magic and not entertainment. Women are capable of making things appear through the "magic of childbirth" and of seeing what someone is thinking by means of "women's intuition." The rapport between performer and audience and the style of the performance as perceived by the audience may be subtly affected by the gender of the interacting parties.

Furthermore, most magic performances make use of instruments of some form, such as swords, wands, and boxes. Using the traditional dichotomy of expressive vs. instrumental, the nature of magic can be defined as instrumental. Men play the instrumental roles in magic, creating and controlling with tools of the trade and following rational rules to create the effect. Power appears to emanate from the performer. However, the roles women have traditionally performed in magic, such as psychics, mediums, and palm readers, reflect an expressive nature in which power is transmitted through the mediator. They touch hands, communicate with the dead, read minds, and share secrets. Cooperation and intimacy are essential for the interaction to be successful.

Mediums and psychics become the conduit of power rather than the source of power. Gyspy fortune-tellers, often using admitted confidence tricks, play a nurturing, listening role, almost therapeutic (Okely, 1983). They transmit, interpret, and mediate. They themselves do not create, alter, or make objects disappear. Power is not in them, it is through them. These remain relatively safer cultural roles for women to enact and for others to interact with. McLaughlin (1980, p. 43) concluded that "Fortune-telling is a skill in character analysis rather an exhibition of extrasensory powers."

THE AUDIENCE'S VIEW OF MAGIC: POWER, CONTROL, AND STATUS

All interactions involve a performer and an audience. Magicians normally select women as participants and as assistants in their acts. The woman is sawed in half or placed in the box through which swords are pushed. Canter (1976, p. 166) makes the argument that "in humor, the sex of the target of ridicule is an important determinant of the humor response, and ... it is still funnier to see a woman than a man disparaged."

Observations of magic performances by the author also show a difference in responses according to gender. Although most people respond similarly to a trick, men more often than women state they know one also or publicly attempt to figure out how it was done. What role gender plays in defining audience behavior is a subject in need of more systematic analysis.

Audience composition and location for different magic events ususally are gender typed. Fortune-tellers tend to meet privately with their customers rather than perform in theaters or halls. Furthermore, their audience is mostly female (McLaughlin, 1980). Motivation for attending is also a factor in the interrelationship between performer and audience. The customers of psychics and fortune-tellers generally seek advice while audiences for traditional magic performances want to be entertained. In other words, what goes on in the performance is partly a function of who the audience is and why they are there. Silverman (1982, p. 395) found in her work on impression management and urban gypsies that "different performances are enacted for various non-Gypsy audiences.... Language, appearance, demeanor, and props are manipulated so that the audience receives selective information."

In general, both male and female audience members of magic performances, in order to be entertained, must allow themselves to be tricked, to be one-upped. They must relinquish control to the performer. This also may be related to gender differences in the performer. Perhaps audiences are not likely to do this with someone of perceived lower status. Women, blacks, and other minorities (with the exception of Asians whose image fits with a magical and mysterious one) rarely perform magic, and each is perceived to be of lower status in our society. To be one-upped or tricked by those less powerful or to have control coopted by them may make it difficult for audiences and the gatekeepers in the field to support minority performers

of magic. While this is probably not a conscious process, the structure of social interactions in everyday life verifies that such dynamics are at work (see LaFrance & Mayo, 1978).

CONCLUSION

No single explanation can account for the relative invisibility of women in magic; there is likely to be a complex interaction of sociological and social-psychological processes. There are, of course, some women magicians. Conversations with a few of them confirm many of the factors discussed in this article. Interest seems a major variable. Those women who did enter the profession or became hobbyists did so because they were attracted to the magic itself. They found it fun, intriguing, and fascinating. Women who are not magicians typically say they never thought of it as an option, not because they perceived obstacles and discrimination ahead, but because they were just not interested enough to pursue it. Their responses underline the importance of the lack of female magician role models and of gender differences in socialization and play.

Why study gender and magic? One answer lies in the usefulness of magic as a metaphor for illustrating the properties of everyday interactions. By looking at women's roles that involve both power and assistance, such as those in a magic performance, an understanding of women's and men's roles in contemporary society is enhanced. Goffman (1974, p. 564) argues that 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." The social world of magic and its allocation of roles according to gender clarify similar relationships in everyday life. The metaphor of magic, as opposed to the more dramaturgical model often used in symbolic interactionist studies, suggests looking beyond the mask, and focusing on the various levels of interaction and reality ongoing in a magic performance and in everyday life. The attribution of power and control to the male persona and the indifference enacted toward the female assistants by the audience illustrate the multiple levels of reality occurring in everyday interactions (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1970).

In the world of magic and often in the "real" world as well, the social structure either allocates powerless roles to women or assumes they have some secret manipulative power hidden from men's worlds. This duality of images that women have been assigned—a dualism that can be traced back to the Bible's depiction of Eve and to the *Malleus Maleficarum* with its picture of women as both powerful and weak—reinforces a type of oppression that

becomes difficult to eliminate. The world of conjuring clearly describes this stage version of a mundane world made up of women's roles as assistants and victims yet holding some secret power and control. This perception of women as having some secret magic but not being legitimate participants in the exercise of power is concisely summarized by Mauss (1955, p. 28) in his study of religious magic:

> [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.

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