



Is Magic a Serious Research Topic? Reflexions On Some French Students' Remarks About Magic in Psychology



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Short Communication

This paper investigates the reasons for which some students in psychology curriculum seem to be not interested in the theme of magic as a research topic. Contextual factors are evoked, but this apparent disinterest is also interpreted in terms of representations of psychology, representations of magic, historical factors, and in terms of social value of the topic.

Is magic a serious research topic? This question seems a bit weird. Obviously, in psychology show magic is a very serious topic. It deals with psychological processes, and with social interactions. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, famous psychologists as Binet [1,2]; Jastrow [3]; Triplett [4] use magical performances to understand psychological functioning. In 1999 Lamont & Wiseman [5] published *Magic in theory*, a theoretical book analysing the art of magic. Between 1887 and 1999, only 12 empirical articles about perception of magic in adults were published; they were 55 between 2000 and 2016 [6]. Nowadays, this field is sometimes called "science of magic" [7,8] or, most specifically, "neuromagic" [9]. In psychology, magic can be studied as any other object, or can be a mean to study psychological processes [10]. To our knowledge, most studies deal with perception and cognitive psychology [11,12] and very few with social psychology [13,14].

As a psychology teacher, I frequently receive students who want me to be their research director for the study and the report they have to achieve in their curriculum (L3 and M1 that is, bachelor and master). All psychology students know, because it figures on my academic profile as a social psychologist, that magic is now my only research topic. As I previously worked on stereotypes, discrimination, and social contexts of influence, they come to me with some expectancies. To illustrate, let me give you two examples of interactions I have with most of them. Student: "I'm coming to you, because I want to work on sexual discrimination in hiring/in work". Me: "Okay, we will work on sexual discrimination in the hiring of magicians vs female magician/in the fees of magicians vs female magicians". Student: "Oh... Well... Hem... It's interesting, but finally I cannot work with you. I want to study sexual discrimination in hiring/in work". Second and last example: Student: "I'm coming to you, because I want to work on inattention blindness". Me: "Okay,

we will work on social factors affecting inattention blindness in a magical context". Student: "Oh... Well... Hem... It's interesting, but finally I cannot work with you. I want to study inattention blindness". I could write many pages about these examples, but it would always be the same discourse. For the most of these students indeed, it seems that magic is not a "serious" research topic in psychology. This conception seems to be specific of our psychology students, because many students from other curricula than psychology worked with me on research on magic.

Of course, the reactions of our psychology students are conditioned by the context: the university they are in, the way psychology is taught, and the fact that most of the time, the topic they have to investigate at this stage of their curriculum is very rarely dictated by the research director. But other reasons can be hypothesized. All are to be linked with the representations of psychology, of the art of magic, and probably most widely with representation of artistic professions. More generally, I think they are linked with the value attributed to the research topics in psychology.

Firstly, it seems that for most of our students, "psychology" mainly refers to "clinical psychology", which only seems to mean "psychopathology", which only would mean "psychoanalysis", limited to Lacan's approach. That is specific to our university, and of course this representation is not homogeneous. Most of our students are moving towards clinical psychology or work psychology. Conversations with some students let me think that our students forget that a clinical approach means, too, an individual approach. In that sense, Piaget's work on child development [15] is a clinical one. They seem to forget that psychology explore mental functions/processes and individual or social behaviors. They seem to forget that a psychologist has to support is reasoning on different theoretical knowledge and on a large range of methodology of research. They seem to forget too, that psychology provides explanations at different levels [16].

Furthermore, and specifically about magic, our students seem to believe that magic is "only" an entertainment. They seem to forget that, on the one hand the practice of an art is, too, a work that

involves psychological processes and contents (including learning, schemas, motor patterns, representation of goals etc.); on the other hand, that magicians too are workers earning money, at least the full-time or part-time professionals' ones. As a work activity, magic too can be addressed in social psychological terms. Students seem to forget that practicing magic is a social activity that has a history, is socially evaluated, is related to beliefs, etc. And they forget that psychologists, as therapists, can use magic as a tool to help people to develop motor skills, assertiveness, positive self-image, openness to others, creativity, etc. (these examples only refer to my personal experience as a part-time professional magician, and must be investigated in psychological research). In my opinion, our students also "forget" because of us, their psychology teachers (most of us in our university), are not interested in magic as a research theme. But that may be specific of our university. Wider, that may be since for this moment, magic is a relatively little developed field of research, comparatively to other topics. Indeed, a historical perspective leads me to think that a topic is determined by history and by available techniques. So, in psychology several points of interest (or levels of analyses) have been addressed according to the period (for example Freud's psychoanalytic model, perceptive thresholds, priming, majority vs minority effects, obedience to authority, discrimination etc.). Maybe historically speaking, magic is a too (apparent) young topic.

It is possible that students perceive magic as a too specific topic unrelated to psychology. For example, in France, magic seems to be first and automatically conceived as an entertainment, specifically for kids. As a part-time professional magician, I frequently hear such remarks. Moreover when I propose, as a social psychologist, to a library or a cultural place a conference on historical and psychological aspects of magic, people frequently answer: "Oh, "magic" ... Well ... No thank you. Here we are a cultural place. But we could be interested in a show for kids". So, some themes are defined as cultural ones (sculpture, painting, theatre etc.), other not. Of course, this is not the case everywhere, some people think magic as a very seminal topic [17]. But because of this social definition, our students too, probably think that magic is not a very serious research theme.

Linked to the previous reasoning, I think that one of the main reasons of this perception is the social value of magic as a research topic. It is well known that the concept of "value" underlies human activities and perception [18-21]. Value is a polysemic construct [22], and in this paper it refers to Beauvois' model [23,24], which postulate that people may be evaluated according to a bi-dimensional model. So, people may be perceived as more or less "socially useful" (social utility dimension), i.e. they are yielding money, as economically important. But people can be too perceived as "socially desirable" (social desirability dimension), i.e. they are seen as more or less "likeable". This bi-dimensional model is different but close to the Fiske's warmth-competence model [25].

These two models are useful to investigate person perception, stereotypes, but are useful also to describe the way other targets are perceived, for example animals [26-28]. For example, as a job magic is conceived as more socially desirable than socially useful [28,29]. In other words, it seems to be perceived as a sympathetic

job, but not very economically profitable. It may be the case for other artistic professions, but probably not for all [30] and that perception may depend on cultural factors. Furthermore, research contracts with institutions refer to other fields than magic (discrimination, security, car driving, terrorism, conspiracy theories, education, etc.). So, this perception of the social value of magic may influence students in their choice of research topic. Probably for psychology students (at least ours), a research report about magic may not seem very lucrative for their future curriculum and job, comparatively to a report on other professions (lawyer, accountant, seller, surgeon, etc.). So, the topic of sexual discrimination in hiring or in jobs seems to be perceived as a profitable theme but not sexual discrimination in artistic professions. More largely this reasoning applies to many other topics in psychology. Concerning the question of the representation of the topic, I think interesting to notice the latter fact. I observed that, when I describe the relation between a student and a research director as a "winner-winner" relation (the director teaches a method, a way of thinking and working, and the student contributes to the studies of his teacher, who must publish in his field), more students accept to work on the topic of magic. Moreover, as a teacher, for two years my strategy is now to systematically present the results of my different studies in psychology courses, first to illustrate a methodology of research or social psychological phenomena/processes, second to initiate discussions with my students. And I systematically—and if possible, more and more—insist on the fact that, for psychologists, the most important is the validity of the process.

In the future, on the one hand it would be of great interest to investigate the field of social value attributed to different research topics in psychology, first in students beginning the psychology curriculum in our university. Questionnaires will be built to this purpose. In my lab, and in collaboration with another lab (LAPCS: Laboratoire d'Anthropologie et de Psychologie Cognitive et Sociale, EA 7278, University of Nice- Sophia Antipolis), I began a series of studies with colleagues in cognitive and social psychology, trying to more implicate students in the topic of social determinants of inattentional blindness and change blindness [31,32], two processes implicated in magic. On the second hand, without denying the great importance of studies about magic in cognitive psychology, it would be rich to persevere in the study of magic in other fields of psychology, like developmental psychology [33,34]. In this field, in collaboration with a colleague and one student of us, I first ran a study on the link between the theory of mind and the perception of magic in children [35]. Finally, I now want to develop my studies in social psychology, for example about the link between group identity and perception of magic [36], or about the social value and fees attributed to a magician according to his. Her gender [37]. Students or not, "show must go on".

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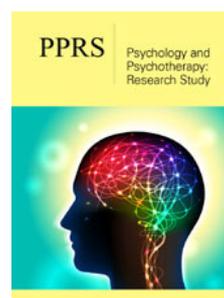
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