The misdirected quest

Citation for published version:

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:
The Psychologist

Publisher Rights Statement:

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
The misdirected quest

Peter Lamont on how early psychologists turned to the grand wizards in an effort to transform illusions into a reality

At the end of the 19th century, Hermann and Kellar were the two greatest conjurors in the world, though who was greatest depended upon whose publicity one believed. In the United States they competed over audiences and advertising space, and each considered the other his arch-rival. When Hermann died in 1896, Kellar was free to establish his reign and, aside from his notable achievements in the world of magic, he was almost certainly the inspiration for the Wizard of Oz. But before Grégoire Melies, one of the conjurors and shortly before Hermann’s death, the two great rivals agreed to compete in a quite different environment – the psychological laboratory.

This was not the first time psychologists had taken an interest in conjuring. Gustav Fechner had observed a spiritualist medium in 1878, and he had concluded that, if it was not trickery, then it was proof of a fourth dimension in space. Wilhelm Wundt, who had observed the same medium, had simply dismissed it as conjuring, though he had no idea how it was done (Marshall & Wendt, 1980). Meanwhile, in Britain, William Benjamin Carpenter had been relying upon the writings of conjurors in an attempt to explain why tables were floating in Victorian drawing rooms (Carpenter, 1871). Thus, psychological interest in conjuring was provoked by the need to distinguish between miracles and magic, and to frame the extraordinary as nothing more than curious. The curiosity, however, had continued. In 1893 Alfred Binet had invited five of France’s most eminent conjurors to his laboratory in Paris. Binet had presented an account of how magic worked, based on the writings of conjurors, and observed some similarities to certain contemporary psychological theories. Following James Sully’s distinction between active illusions (such as hallucinations) and passive illusions (that were universally experienced), Binet had placed conjuring effects into the latter category and argued there were positive illusions (seeing what is not there) and negative illusions (not seeing what is there). Having observed some conjuring tricks, and with reference to recent experiments on letter recognition times, he had used new chronophotographic apparatus to allow him to view some basic sleight of hand tricks slowed down. In doing so, and by removing the conjurors’ commentary, he had found that the illusion was destroyed. This, for Binet, had been a successful separation of brute sensation from mental interpretation (Binet, 1894). As it happens, Georges Melies, one of the conjurors present, would make practical use of this distinction shortly afterwards when he invented the first special effects in early cinema. Binet, of course, moved on to other topics. The man who brought Hermann and Kellar together, however, was Joseph Jastrow, who had recently established a psychology department at the University of Wisconsin. He was interested in a wide range of psychological topics, including perception, and was the first psychologist to use the duck–rabbit illusion in a psychology article. Now he sought to make a similarly difficult distinction between two quite different beasts. His reason for conducting these curious experiments was, he claimed, that the influence of special kinds of occupation and training upon the delicacy, range and quickness of sensory, motor and mental powers is an important and interesting problem. For this reason, ‘psychological tests made upon virtuosis are desirable, even if in individual cases they suggest no very decided conclusions’. He therefore employed a range of
psychophysical tests that he thought 'to be related to the processes upon which their dexterity depends' and which he felt 'most likely to yield definite results' (Jastrow, 1896, p.685). As it turned out, he was wrong on both counts.

Jastrow compared the two wizards in terms of tactile sensibility, such as point discrimination (both were below average), weight discrimination (both were below average), and length discrimination by touch (Kellar was below average, and Hermann average). In tests of visual perception, they were unable to divide lines equally or judge lengths any better than others, and in a test using the 'form alphabet' (in which the subject had 90 seconds to identify as many instances of a chosen symbol in a long string of symbols), Kellar was average and Hermann 'did not fully comprehend what was wanted'. Both did manage to excel in rapidity of movement of finger and forearm, and in reaction time to visual and tactile stimuli. However, when the response involved some kind of discrimination, they were again below average.

Jastrow conceded that the positive results were 'small', that 'any suggestions which the data seem to warrant must be put forward with great caution', and that the methods were better adapted to statistical groups than individuals. So it was that he pioneered a trail for psychologists to study the topic and reach, to use his phrase, 'no very decided conclusions' (pp.686–689).

Just a few years later, Norman Triplett wrote a thesis, suggested by G. Stanley Hall, and published it in the American Journal of Psychology in 1900. This substantial article discusses the origins of deception in mimicry, and links various themes in conjuring to the origins of deception in mimicry, and the highly contingent nature of deceptive entertainment is one reason why, despite superficial appearances, there has never been a ‘psychology of magic’ in any meaningful sense (Lamont et al., 2010). Such actions are regarded as innocent because they are deemed natural (i.e. not suspicious) in that time and place, and so are not noticed (or are noticed but then promptly forgotten). Whether it is necessary to ‘condition’ one’s audience to an action depends entirely upon whether that particular audience at that time might regard that particular action as suspicious. The highly contingent nature of deceptive entertainment is one reason why, despite superficial appearances, there has never been a ‘psychology of magic’ in any meaningful sense (Lamont et al., 2010).

The fact that Jastrow, Binet and Triplett were writing on the topic around the same time might suggest that this was a subdiscipline of psychology (e.g. Coon, 1992), but this was an illusion. These were ad hoc publications, in a variety of academic and non-academic journals, and the lack of coherence was such that Triplett was not even aware that Jastrow had recently written on the topic. Indeed, Triplett’s ball experiment was not replicated until more than a century later, when Kuhn and Land (2006) employed modern eye-tracking equipment to provide a rare example of psychology providing some insight into why a particular magic
DOCTORATE IN COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY BY PROFESSIONAL STUDIES (DCPSYCH)

A Joint Programme with Middlesex University

This 5-year part-time programme is accredited by the British Psychological Society (BPS) for the training of Chartered Psychologists and by the Health Professions Council (HPC) for the training of Registered Counselling Psychologists. The programme is also accredited by the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) for the training of Integrative Psychotherapists.

The programme is based on a practitioner research philosophy and comprises an innovative design that seeks to integrate research and practice at doctoral level. It is open to psychology graduates who possess the Graduate Basis for Chartered Membership (GBC) as specified by the BPS, and who believe that they have the capabilities to make a significant contribution to practice based knowledge in the psychological therapies. The course offers an integrative programme of study in the theory and practice of psychological therapy, and covers both clinical and research training. It is offered over ten 3-day weekend modules during each academic year, thus allowing students to combine their broader life commitments with the demands of further study.

Applications are invited for the 2011/12 academic session. The application process includes attendance at an Introductory Workshop and at a Group Assessment Interview. For further information please contact our Academic Co-ordinator, Cathy Simeon, on 020 8579 2505 or on 020 8832 3072 (direct) or email her at cathy.simeon@metanoia.ac.uk.