

Magic, Skepticism, and Belief

An Empirical Study on What Magicians Believe About the Paranormal

BY PETER M. NARDI

In 1868, THE FAMOUS MAGICIAN, ROBERT-HOUDIN, wrote that a conjuror is an actor playing the part of a magician. One way of interpreting this statement is by understanding that it is a warning to many people who perceive magicians as having real powers to transform, make appear and disappear, and restore objects. Being able to read minds and demonstrate psychic abilities does not necessarily mean that certain performers have actual psychic powers. Rather, it may illustrate how strongly capable they are in acting out the part of someone with “real” magical powers.

Introduction

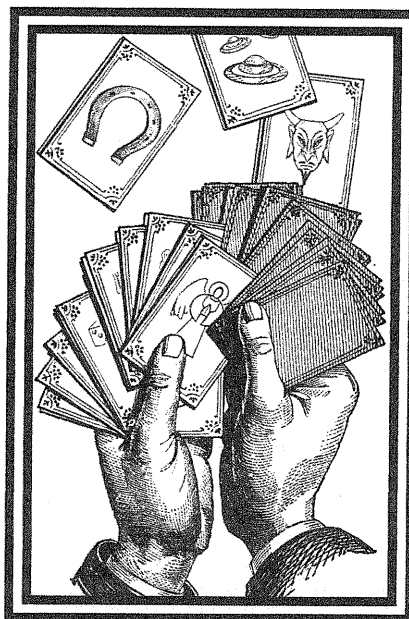
Distinguishing magical skills from actual supernatural abilities began as early as 1584 with the publication of Reginald Scot’s classic *Discoverie of Witchcraft*. Here Scot debunked the existence of witchcraft by describing the sleight-of-hand methods typically used by many conjuring entertainers. The unexplainable could be understood, not by invoking the work of Satan or witches, but by rational means employed by ordinary people. So prevalent was the association of magic with the supernatural that many magic posters of the 18th and 19th centuries advertising performances felt it necessary to add disclaimers by the clergy that Satan or evil powers were not involved in the magic shows.

Yet, magic during the “age of reason” was often based on the latest scientific discoveries that the general public had yet to learn; optics, electricity, and moving pictures were the secrets of the earliest magicians. Audiences often felt magicians were invoking powers that seemed inherent, rather than learned. And even in our modern era, when viewing a mind-reading (mentalism) act many people still wonder if the performer is a

“real” psychic with actual abilities to read minds and tell the future. Just look at the career of Uri Geller and many people’s failure to perceive him as a performer, playing the part of someone with “real” psychic abilities.

How audiences frame an event also contributes to how they perceive the performer. People attending a show at the Magic Castle in Hollywood are not likely to bet \$20 when faced with a “three-card monte” or “pea under the shell” routine as some do when encountering an urban street-corner con-artist asking you to follow the pea or a particular card. The magician sets up the routine in the context of an entertaining magic show, while the scam artist creates the illusion of a fair gambling event with random outcomes. Similarly, paying to have your palm read by a psychic requires a belief that the person has actual supernatural abilities. How audiences define the interaction leads to differing conclusions about which skills and attributes are used by the performers.

Even though some people attribute actual supernatural abilities to performers of mentalism acts, many others understand that there is a



rational explanation behind the magic performance. Still, there remains a bit of wondering if the magician is more than just an actor mimicking supernatural traits. Surely, they ask, magicians—even if they don't have actual psychic abilities and can't perform real magic—must believe in ESP or psychic phenomena, given their dabbling in the “mysteries of the unknown.” Others, however, take the opposite view and claim that magicians know that trickery and rational explanations are involved and so are less likely to believe in the supernatural. Which is it? To find out I queried a sample of magicians.

The Sample

To explore the beliefs of magicians and to see how strongly or not they believed in various paranormal and supernatural beliefs, and how skeptical they tend to be, I developed an online survey. Messages with a link to the questionnaire were posted on various magician web sites, chat rooms, and discussion boards (such as those run by the Magic Castle, Genii magazine, Penguin magic store). The results,

thus, cannot be generalized to the views of all magicians, given the impossibility of generating a national random sample of magicians, but represent only those magicians who participate in these Internet sites and were willing to complete the survey. There is no way of determining how representative this sample is of amateur and professional magicians since those data do not exist.

Nevertheless, the sample returned was encouraging: of the 227 completed surveys, 97% of the respondents are men; 25% are under 30 and 25% are 55 and older, with a median age of 45; 63% are college graduates; 65% are married or living with a partner; 4% are gay/bisexual; 80% are white; 20% live outside of the U.S.; 33% live in cities with a population over one million; and 35% listed “none” as their religious preference. Almost 18% defined themselves as amateurs/hobbyists, 12% as full-time professional magicians, 36% as part-time magicians who perform for a fee, and almost 35% are amateurs who occasionally perform publicly or some other combination.

Figure 1—Question: magicians were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statements (1=mostly agree; 2=somewhat agree; 3=somewhat disagree; 4=mostly disagree):

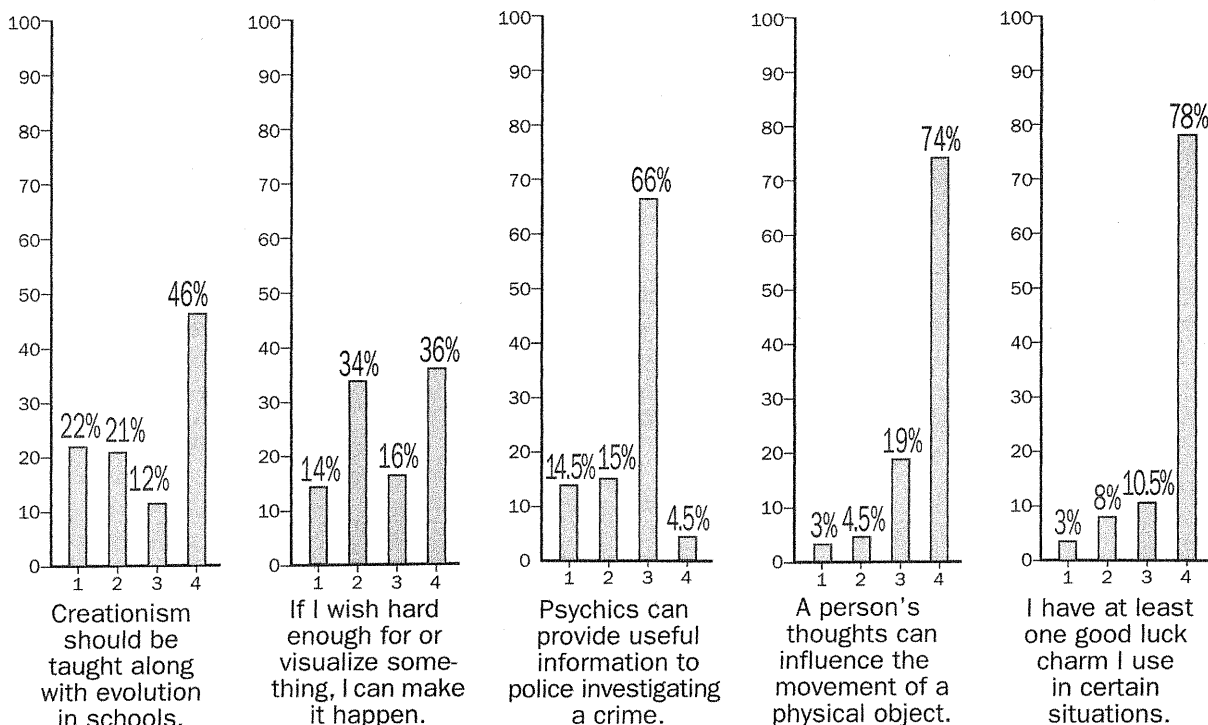
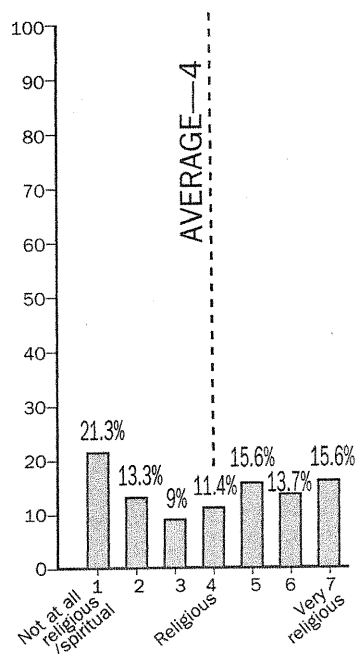
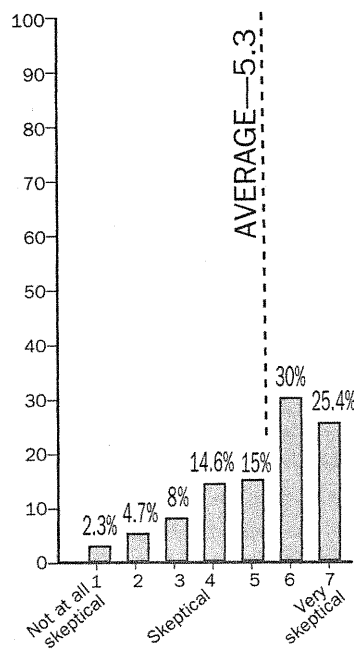


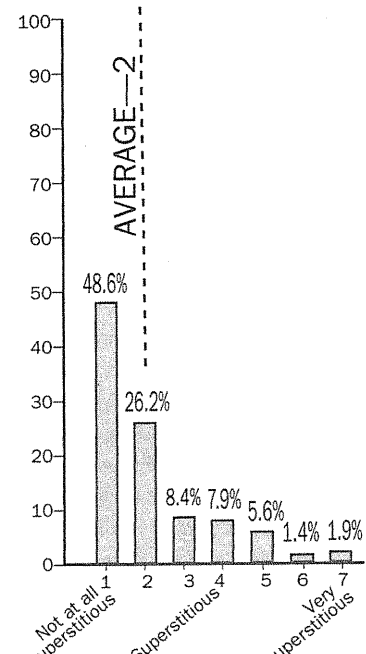
Figure 2—Question: using a scale from 1 (low) to 7 (high), magicians self-designated how superstitious, skeptical, and religious they are.



How RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL would you say you are (on a scale of 1 to 7)?



If we define a “SKEPTICAL” person as someone with “an attitude marked by or given to doubt, as being a questioning and doubtful person,” how would you generally characterize how skeptical you are (on a scale of 1 to 7)?



If we define “SUPERSTITION” as “a belief (not based on reason or knowledge) that an object or action can influence a course of events and its outcome,” then how superstitious would you say you are (on a scale of 1 to 7)?

In general, more than three-quarters of magicians claim they are not superstitious, fewer than 15% say they are not particularly skeptical people, and over a third are not religious or spiritual.

The Findings About Beliefs

Surveys suggest a large percentage of the population believes in a wide range of paranormal and supernatural events. For example, a 2005 Gallup Poll (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/16915/Three-Four-Americans-Believe-Paranormal.aspx>) found the following percentages of belief:

- 41% Extrasensory perception, or ESP
- 37% Houses can be haunted
- 32% Ghosts/spirits of dead people can come back in certain places/situations
- 26% Clairvoyance/the power of the mind to know the past and predict the future
- 25% Astrology, or that the position of the stars and planets can affect people’s lives
- 21% People can communicate mentally with

someone who has died

- 20% Reincarnation, that is, the rebirth of the soul in a new body after death
- 9% Channeling/allowing a ‘spirit-being’ to temporarily assume control of body

Comparing these figures, along with several other items, to this survey of magicians, I found that magicians are less likely to believe in many of these same things (Figure 3). The items generating the most support tended to be the religious-related ones (life after death, the devil, angels, and creationism). Respondents with high school education or less and those from smaller towns (under 75,000) were slightly more likely to believe in some of these paranormal or supernatural events and religious ones.

Figure 3—Question: please indicate how strongly you believe in each of the following: (1=very much; 2=somewhat; 3=very little; 4=not at all; 5=don't know if it exists.)

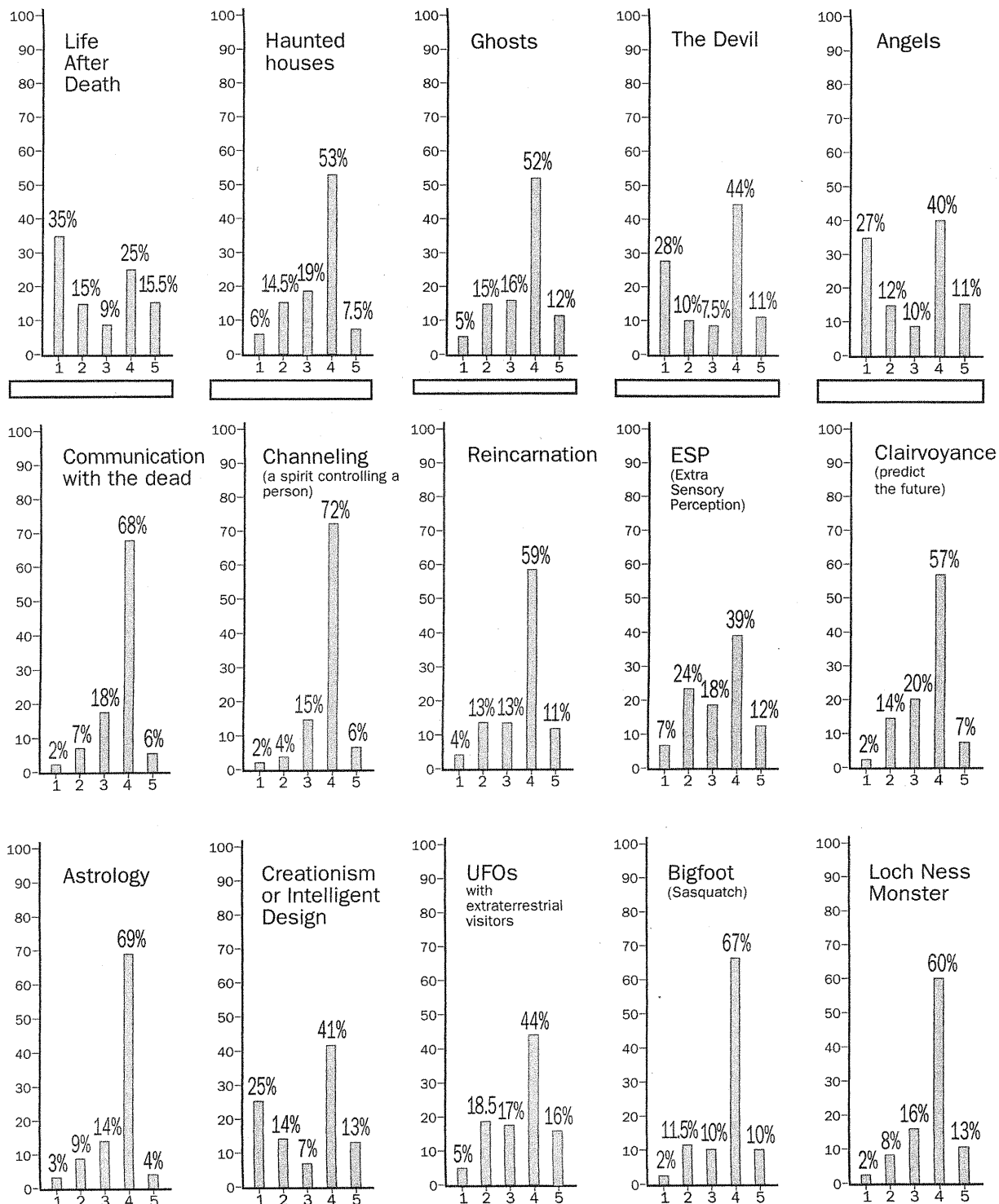
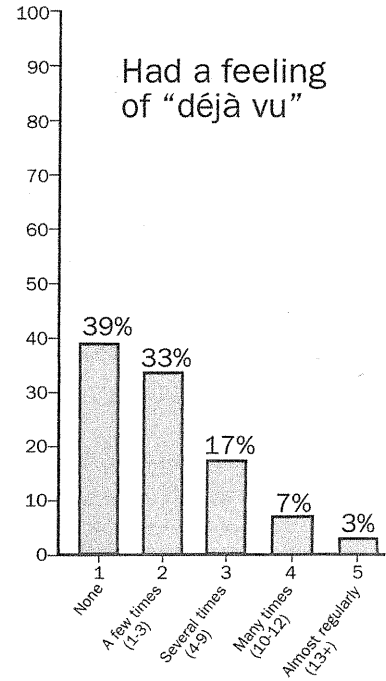
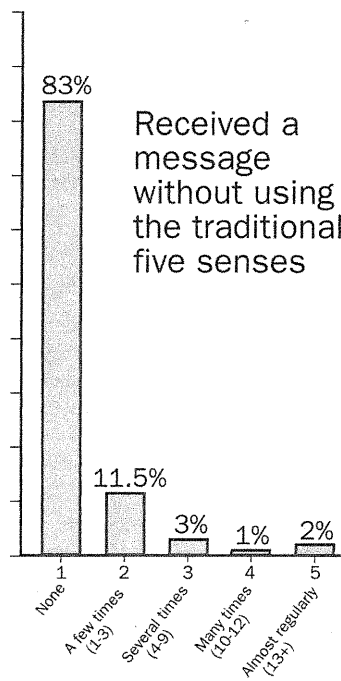
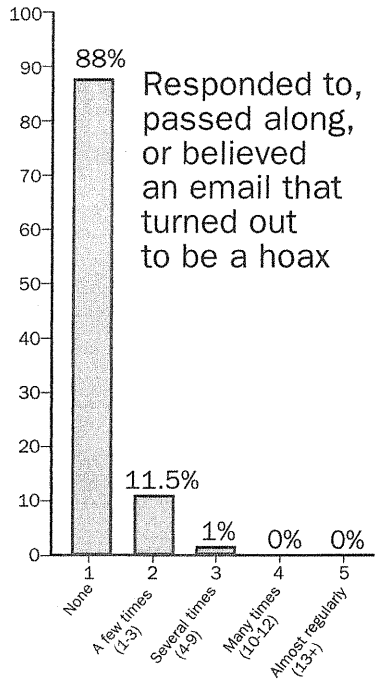
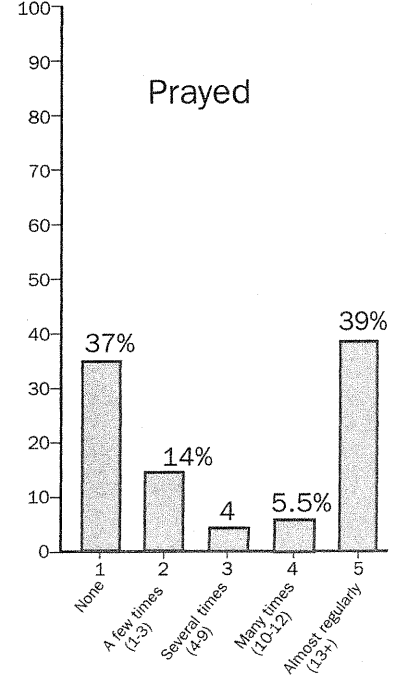
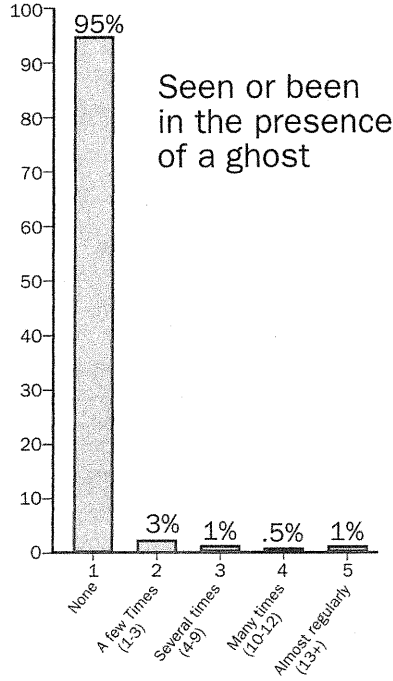
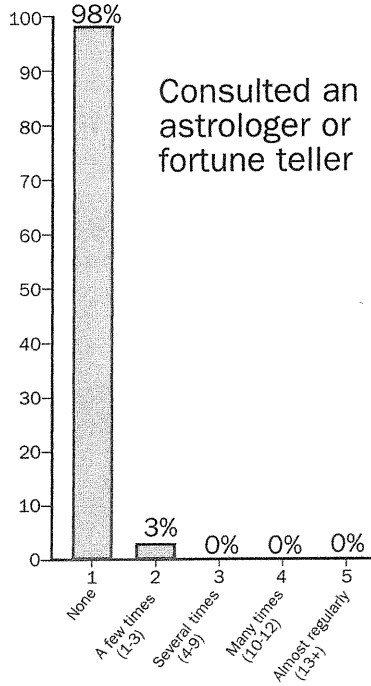


Figure 4—Magicians also reported how frequently they engaged in the following behaviors during the prior three months to taking the survey



Comments

The survey also invited respondents to explain how skeptical or superstitious they thought most magicians are. Responses generally fell into several categories: (1) magicians are a cross-section of the public and thus exhibit a range of skepticism; (2) magicians, because they know the secrets behind psychics and other magic tricks, tend to be skeptical folks and not easily taken in or fooled; and (3) other comments about superstition and religion.

(1) Magicians Are A Cross-section of the Public:

- a) I think magicians are about as skeptical or superstitious as the rest of the populace. Some have pre-performance rituals, others do not. The general magic population is drawn from the bulk of society.
 - b) I think that, magicians being people, they run the same range as people. They are no more or less likely to be skeptical or superstitious. Unfortunately.
 - c) Magicians come from all walks of life and practice various forms of magic. How skeptical are magicians? The same as anyone else. I would imagine, though, that mentalists are more skeptical because they see people who believe wholeheartedly in their "psychic" abilities even though the mentalist has probably told them that they have none. I have experienced this myself. I have done a cold reading and told the person beforehand that it was a magic trick. When they refused to believe me and told me I was psychic, I had to say again that it was merely a trick. Again, I was not believed. I don't do mentalism anymore as there are too many vulnerable people out there that are easily misled and potential victims of cranks like psychics, mediums, religious fundraisers.
- ### (2) Magicians Are More Skeptical Than the General Public
- a) I think most magicians are skeptical because they know how easily people are deceived.
 - b) More than regular people because we know most everything has an explanation.
 - c) We create the feeling that something impossible is happening so we question the impossible.
 - d) I would imagine that most magicians tend to be very skeptical for a variety of reasons. First of all, a lot of us have a very scientific way of thinking and love to acquire knowledge and understanding of how things work. This left side of the brain technical mindset is in opposition to belief in superstition. Secondly, magicians already know all of the tricks so called psychics, astrologers, and mediums are using. We can tell you exactly how Uri Geller does all of his metal bending, how John Edward does all of his talking with the dead, and how psychics appear to tell people their past, present, and future. These things aren't a secret or a mystery to us, so there is no sense in believing in any of it.
 - e) Most magicians are skeptical due to the nature of the superstitious beliefs. We look at séances and see magic. We look at psychics and see cold reading. However religion seems to be an area that many skip for some reason.
 - f) I think magicians tend to be skeptical because they know that seeing isn't believing and hearing isn't believing.
 - g) Magicians are in on the "secrets"... knowing how to fool, manipulate, and stimulate your audience via trickery can only instill upon a magi's mind that it's easy to fool people, thus increasing skepticism
 - h) Most magicians I would assume to be very skeptical of supernatural happenings simply because they see a magic trick and immediately form an explanation. Most magicians can't deal with not knowing so they decide it's not possible for these things to happen.
 - i) Quite skeptical. Because of their training in deception, they can see it better than scientists (which is why scientists are often fooled by paranormalists).
 - j) I think most are somewhat skeptical, somewhat more so than the general population. I think that's at least partly true because they pay attention to "how things are done." I think that sometimes makes us overly cynical as well.
 - k) In my experience most magicians are extremely skeptical. Knowing that it is possible (and sometimes extremely easy) to deceive a smart, rational audience I think makes magicians naturally question other beliefs that people commonly hold, especially when it comes to "supernatural" phenomena. After all, we are in the business of making the impossible happen!
 - l) I think because of their knowledge of trickery, if you will, they are slightly more skeptical than the

average college educated individual. And very much more skeptical than those with less than a college education.

- m) More skeptical than the general population. Being familiar with the techniques that simulate paranormal events, we are more suspicious of claims of the paranormal.
- n) Magic has something of a relationship with fake “psychics” and so on. If they can understand that these paranormal events have rational explanations, then perhaps the same is true of other things?
- o) I think that MOST would be at about 5 or 6 on your above scale. I don’t know whether this is a result of our exposure to so many deceptive practices, or whether our skeptical attitudes attract us to the magical arts—or, perhaps a little of both?
- p) Hopefully they are all extremely skeptical. Knowing the mechanisms and mental attitude necessary to make magic happen, should, by law, ensure you are a raging skeptic.
- q) Magicians that I’ve met tend to be very skeptical. I don’t know however, if this is because skeptical people are drawn to the logical explanations of magic, or if the literature and culture of magic influences them to become more skeptical and, at times, cynical.
- r) I think there is a divide between those who are concerned with “how” an effect is done and those concerned with “why.” There is a healthy skepticism in all, but in those concerned with “why,” there is also an understanding of the need for superstition and an open mindedness towards others’ beliefs.
- s) It is more of an age issue. Youth may not question as much as they should. With experience you see other likely questions to ask. Same in being a magi. The more magic you do the more you question its sources, connections, goodness when demonstrated, etc. But I will say that magic, in general, makes one more skeptical.
- t) The more they perform, the more skeptical they tend to become. Duplicating the “supernatural” tends to take the belief away.

(3) Other Comments

- a) There are two camps: the skeptics, and the people who use magic to preach gospel. Once you know how easy it is to fool the public, it’s even harder to believe the tall tales that comprise all religious texts.
- b) If you take belief in God out of the realm of superstition—because I believe there is much evidence for logical belief in the God of the Bible—then we can all reasonably be skeptical of other false spiritualisms in the world, from fraudulent TV preachers to witch doctors.
- c) I would say that most magicians believe they are skeptical, but that actually they tend to disbelieve things. There is a significant difference between questioning and disbelieving. There are some truly skeptical magicians, but they appear to be amongst the minority.
- d) As far as superstitious, it can go either way. Don’t we all have a lucky pair of underwear or socks?



Conclusions

Magicians may be actors playing the part of someone with real magical powers, but in surveys and in the perceptions of fellow magicians, they tend to be skeptical people, except perhaps when it comes to certain beliefs by the more religious magicians. Whether it is the secrets of magic contributing to their skepticism, or that skeptical people choose to follow the hobby or career is difficult to determine from the survey. But many suggest that the more you delve into the mechanisms of psychic and magical performances, the more you question the existence of paranormal and supernatural behaviors and beliefs. Yet, as some responded, is this really unhealthy cynicism masquerading as healthy skepticism? Or is it that magicians can better distinguish between truth and the illusions of truth? Perhaps it’s best said in the opening scene of Tennessee Williams’ play, *The Glass Menagerie*, when Tom Wingfield walks on stage and says: “Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.”