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Hocus Pocus, Hexes, and Healers: The Placebo Behind Magic

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Introduction

In the 1970s, many travelled from all over the globe to the Philippines seeking a specialized surgery. Doctors of unconventional medicine guaranteed they could operate and remove disease without surgical instruments. On the operation table, with no anesthetic, patients saw these specialists plunge deep into the flesh of their abdomens, removing piece after piece of the unwanted tissue with only their hands. Placed in a bowl beside them, the patients could see the blood-soaked materials previously extracted from their bodies. To this day, you can find videos online of the jaw-dropping technique. After the intense procedure and some days of rest, the patient returned home feeling cured—without a scar to remind them of the surgery. This amazing procedure—psychic surgery—is nothing less than magic. With a few sleights of hand, the so-called doctors pretended to remove tissues from the abdomens of patients (Unproven Methods of Cancer Management,



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1990). But how could one confuse magic with modern medicine?

In what follows, we argue that the two collide in more than one way. Working from the perspective of a former magician and of scientific researchers studying placebo effects, we consider the convergences between contemporary biomedical practices and what is colloquially termed “magic.” We do so in order to examine the power that suggestion and psychology have on our physiology.

The Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveau, MD, PhD

Long ago lived the powerful Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans, hairdresser by day and voodoo miracle worker by night. Many praised her for her awe-inspiring powers and abilities. The Voodoo Queen could make or break a politician’s career with a single spell, or so the story goes. In her free time, she sold pouches of gris-gris to help those most in need. No matter the ailment, Marie Laveau and her magical gris-gris had you covered. These little sacs change lives: plants, herbs, minerals, oils, stones, bones, hair, and bodily fluids bundled together bring wishes to life (Folk Figures, 1948; Touchstone, 1972; Voodoo Queen, n.d.). To this day, her traditions and gris-gris still thrive in the old quarter of New Orleans.

The Voodoo Queen held an ancient secret recipe for success: a carefully decorated placebo pouch (Long, 2006). Many hotly debate the active



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ingredients and their precise concentrations—voodoo has never been an exact science. Nonetheless, gris-gris hides more than what the eye can behold. The ingredients do not differ much from the bottles of medicinal herbs, lavender, essential oils, vitamins, and minerals often purchased today (Newmaster et al., 2013; Harvard Health Publications, 2012; Cravotto et al., 2010; Zhu, Liew, & Liu, 2016; Chen et al., 2012). Altogether, the evidence for the individual ingredients themselves demonstrates that they do not promise health any more than the so-called sugar pill; this does not, however, take away from their healing powers or their ability to alleviate curses or strike love in the heart of lonely.

To manufacture gris-gris, one must purify the pouch with crystals. These magical stones remain grounded in many modern healing practices (Regal, 2009). Unfortunately, shiny stones do not improve the immune system, nor do they make you any more attractive (you'll need something stronger than quartz, perhaps silicone). But insofar as studies have demonstrated that people feel the effects of crystals regardless of whether the stones flow with energy or just lie there like static ordinary pebbles, the crystals can be said to heal via psychological mechanisms—like many medical practices of today (Regal, 2009; Spellman & Price-Bayer, 2011). The crystals contribute to the ritual of healing, an integral part of the process. The sacrifice of personal items required for spells and



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pouches—like hair, nails, and blood—add the final *je ne sais quoi* needed to inspire belief in the patients. And there you have it: Marie Laveau designed the perfect custom-made placebo for your liking.

As with any placebo, part of gris-gris' efficacy lies in the showmanship behind the craft. Marie Laveau prescribed pouches based on her clients' needs and performed the required rituals with diligence. Belief ("expectancies" in placebo studies language) is key in magic and placebo, hence the need for elaborate rituals. Her renowned reputation, or rather her clients' belief in her powers, forms another essential ingredient. Much as someone would seek a doctor for help, many sought the advice and expertise of Marie Laveau. They implicitly trusted her knowledge, and this gave her the power to influence the lives of many. In short, gris-gris boils down to a placebo drenched in showmanship, pizzazz, and rumors.

Our modern world parallels this old tradition in many ways. Humans require peace of mind and a sense of control: talismans to ward off evil spirits and curses. Cupping therapy, acupuncture, chiropractic interventions, and even sometimes the act of handing a prescription—these do not dramatically differ from the spells of Marie Laveau (Lee, Kim, & Ernst, 2010; Davis, 2016; Ernst, 2006; Rubinstein et al., 2013; DeNoon, 2008; Tilburt et al., 2008). In fact, many remedies we practice today do no better than a placebo (or a



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ritual); however, they arguably remain just as useful. The belief in a remedy holds the power to make magic happen.

Many distraught people search outside western medicine for alternatives that could provide them with the hope they need. Magic can do the trick for patients who cannot find the care they search for in modern medicine (Martin, 1999). Consider again psychic surgery: although a sham procedure, it provided psychological comfort for patients seeking care, giving patients hope for a better tomorrow (Allison & Malony, 1981). And this would not be the first time people believed in the power of sham surgeries. Certain modern medical procedures perform no better than a sham surgery, yet they aid people (Louw et al., 2017; Laupattarakasem et al., 2008). Rituals in medicine, such as the surgical show, give people a psychological hold over their disease and thus have measurable and meaningful effects on the lives of patients (Welch, 2003).

Revealing the magic: The importance of ritual

Medicine, to some extent, relies on showmanship and ritual to deliver the active agents. We immerse ourselves in treatment routines to our benefit (Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, 2016; Carvalho et al., 2016). Many have firsthand experience with the medical rituals of Western Society. The medical ritual, a long drawn out healing process, begins as soon as one makes an appointment. One must travel to a strange lo-



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cation, fast before entering the hospital “healing hut,” wear the correct attire for the occasion, ingest drugs, and even ceremoniously cleanse our bodies before the big event. All this work goes into both supernatural and surgical rituals (Green, 2006). Doctors typically hang their credentials in fancy frames in their offices as badges of honour, whereas witches’ reputations come from the word of mouth. The rituals and symbolism typically associated to the occult also play a role in modern medicine. Every detail counts. The symbolism of modern medicine speaks to the art of its practice (Kleinman, 2008). White lab coats symbolize power and knowledge; they are meant to instill trust and authority (Milgram, 1963; Milgram, 1964). Certainly, for some generations and some social contexts, this remains true. The designation “Dr.” carries more weight than we think, much like the title “Voodoo Queen.” And as such, medicine goes beyond what has traditionally been conceptualized as physical.

Rumor has it that one can summon the spirit of the iconic “Dr.” Voodoo Queen to help with your ailments to this very day. People travel from far and wide to visit her grave, carve a single X on her tomb, and make a wish. And so, the magic lives on in legends, herbal pouches, placebos, surgeries, and medical rituals. These are so deeply intertwined that many often forget the magic behind the surgical curtain.

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