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BECOMING THE EASTER BUNNY

Socialization into a Fantasy Role

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> Ehh, what's up Doc. It's the Easter Bunny, Bugs. And he arrives at the . . . Mall tomorrow. So come on out, kids, and talk to the Easter Bunny. . . . You can even have your picture taken with him for just four ninety-nine. The Easter Bunny will be at the . . . mall every day until Easter, so don't miss him, Bugs. . . . [Local radio promotion]

To most Americans both the Easter Bunny role and its fantasy meanings seem relatively clear-cut. The mall Easter Bunny is that funny looking, adorable, fantasy creature with the long ears, oversized incisors and prominent cottontail, who annually visits American shopping centers, and proffers candy and plastic rings to children and their parents. Like Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny holds infants in his lap so that they may have their photographs taken to be shown to family members during the holiday celebrations, and placed in family photo albums and scrapbooks for posterity.

As Berger (1963: 23) has indicated "The first wisdom of sociology is this—things are not what they seem." The phenomenon of the mall Easter Bunny, which simultaneously combines childhood fantasy with blatant commercialism, seems ripe for sociological inquiry. The primary purpose of our study is to provide a descriptive analysis that examines the social expectations and meanings imputed to the Easter Bunny role, and to describe the process through which an individual becomes socialized into a fantasy role, a subject heretofore largely ignored in the sociological literature.

Popular notions suggest that playing a fantasy character, whether the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, or a character at

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Disneyland, is a relatively simple act that requires little effort. However, our research indicates that it is a far more complex task than is generally assumed, for taking on a role such as that of the Easter Bunny is not an *act*, but a *process*. Moreover, as symbolic interactionists have effectively demonstrated, a concept of "self" is not generated from within, but emerges and develops through the course of interaction with others (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1902). As Gary Fine wrote in his book *Shared Fantasy* (1983: 241):

> The extent of "getting into" a role, and the subsequent sense of "getting out," constitute a dimension along which secondary roles vary—whether of golfer, . . . blind date, or nude model. What is necessary for . . . identification is the self conscious realization that the role to be assumed is different from the "real self" but is nonetheless important to one's own self-image as a role taker.

Assuming the role of a fantasy character takes on special and perhaps unique dimensions as compared to other roles that people fulfill in the course of their daily lives. As a golfer, blind date, or nude model, the individual is still a human; consequently, his/her personal identity and concept of "self" are never totally submerged. In contrast, when an individual dons a costume that completely masks his/her human identity some unique accommodations must be made to playing the role.

On the one hand, there is a certain element of "safety" in being hidden in a costume. Persons playing a "human role" must adjust their actions to coincide with public expectations associated with the roles they play, and their personal identity is directly tied to those roles. Hence it is not merely a case that a golfer is having a bad day, but in fact that Joe or Lucy Smith the golfer is having a bad day. Likewise, it is not merely the nude model who is too fat, or does not hold poses well, but it is Bill or Mary Jones the nude model. This is not the case with the individual playing a fantasy character. If the Easter Bunny does not "act right" or Santa Claus is "grumpy," that is the final assessment by those who interact with them—the *Easter Bunny* did not act right and *Santa Claus* was grumpy. There is no apparent threat to one's self concept nor "loss of face" for the individual playing the part (although too many complaints of that nature and the person playing the part will lose his/her job, which would, of course, impact upon one's concept of self).

On the other hand, in some ways one's sense of personal identity is even more "on the line" when playing a well-known fantasy character, for most Americans have fairly clearcut notions of how fantasy characters ought to behave. Moreover, to violate the social expectations associated with fantasy characters is not only to temporarily disrupt social interaction, but also to threaten traditional understandings about them that have become so institutionalized in our culture that they border on the "sacred." Further, because stereotypic notions about fantasy characters are defined so narrowly, the individual playing them does not enjoy the flexibility usually associated with ordinary roles. That is, when the public encounters the Easter Bunny it defines the bunny as exciting and fun, and no matter how the person in the bunny costume may behave, the public tends to associate his/her actions with its fantasy images. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) have suggested, the public tends to react to the *typification* of the Easter Bunny as well as to the bunny itself.

Each spring at shopping centers across America the Easter Bunny makes its annual holiday appearance. At first glance, the bunny's visit appears to be made solely for the purpose of amusing and entertaining the public. However, beneath the clever bunny disguise lies another objective—to sell rather expensive photographs to a willing public. The Easter Bunny must achieve this commercial objective in actual social interaction with humans, most of whom choose to define the role solely in fantasy terms. Consequently, in order to effectively fulfill this mission the individual must undergo a socialization process into the role.

The theoretical framework for this analysis is based upon the dramaturgical analysis of everyday life as utilized by Goffman (1959; 1961; 1963; 1967; 1969; 1971). It is our

contention that during the course of social interaction, the photo company draws upon the mutual understanding of people who associate the Easter Bunny with its fantasy meanings, while using the role to promote its own commercial interests. By carefully constructing a scenario and effectively manipulating the course of social interaction, the photo company creates a situation in which mall visitors eventually become willing participants in their scheme. A critical element for the success of this commercial venture, however, is the ability of the individual "playing" the Easter Bunny to fulfill the role expectations associated with it. In the course of social interaction, he/she must go beyond the mere act of putting on a bunny suit, and in effect, "become" the Easter Bunny. This involves a socialization process unique to the assumption of a fantasy role. This process is the focal point for our study.

In the following article, we review the methodology used in our research and describe the setting in which the study took place. After a brief review of the development of the mall Easter Bunny fantasy, we look at the three major contributors to the Easter Bunny role: the photo company, the public, and the bunny actor. The focus of the article is on the processes through which the actor is socialized into the Easter Bunny role.

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this study was eleven days of full-time participant observation without disclosure of research intentions by one of the authors, who played the role of the Easter Bunny. This method followed the general outline for participant observation described by Schatzman and Strauss (1973) and Spradley (1979; 1980). The Easter Bunny job was discovered in the want ads. In order to enter the setting, one of the authors visited the job service employment office and went through a standard application process. During the interview, he was told that the mall was embarking upon a promotional photo campaign and that someone was needed to play the role of the Easter Bunny. Because of his background in amateur photography, and because the authors believed he could better observe the public interacting with the Easter Bunny, he indicated that he would prefer the job of photographer. He was informed that a photographer had already been hired, but that they still needed somebody to wear the Easter Bunny costume. As it turned out, by having one of the authors "be" the Easter Bunny, our study not only allowed us to observe the public in interaction with the Easter Bunny, but also to gain valuable insights into the complex process by which an individual is socialized into such a fantasy role.

After initial screening by a representative of the photo company, he was hired to work the noon-to-seven shift for eleven days in March. He kept a detailed journal of his experiences, and following the general guidelines of "team field research" discussed by Douglas (1976), he was visited by the other two authors. At these times his interactions with the public were observed. As Douglas (1976: 218) has noted, this approach offered the necessary balance between "the cool detachment of the outsider and the committed view of the insider." It also reduced the "uncertainty effects" of individual research (Douglas, 1976: 218). Additionally, by meeting during the field study and discussing our observations, we gained special insights into the actor's understandings of the Easter Bunny role and how he perceived his interactions with the public. More importantly, as Douglas (1976: 219) noted, we were able to "cross-check each other" and "balance each other in the collective grasps, understandings and reports that emerge[d] from the work."

A few methodological problems arose during our research. The single most frustrating problem centered on the difficulty in recording some specific interactions between the Easter Bunny and the children who sat on his lap for photos. Because the photo company demanded that the author "act like a rabbit" he was restricted from openly recording his observations while on the job (although on a few occasions he violated that rule). Consequently, some of

the documentation of the interactions relied more heavily upon the observations of the other two authors and the consensual view of all the authors of what had actually taken place.

SETTING

The setting for our ethnographic fieldwork was a shopping mall in a midwestern college town of approximately 26,000 people. The mall appears to be typical of others in the region.[1] At the time of the study it contained about twenty businesses including such large chains as Wal-Mart and Montgomery Ward. It also included the usual mix of small regional shoe stores, clothing shops, and other small business ventures. The mall was managed by a large national firm whose responsibilities included the promotion of mall enterprises. Annually, it sub-contracted with a photo company that supplied the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, and other fantasy characters to amuse and entertain mall visitors.

The management firm contributed space for the Easter Bunny and his entourage, and also supplied the 50-100 pounds of candies and plastic rings that the Easter Bunny distributed during his springtime visit. Initially, the photo company set up its booth in the center of the mall to make it accessible to the public. However, this location did not afford sufficient control over the environment in which social interaction took place. Consequently, the photo booth was moved to an empty store in the mall that the company believed better suited its needs. Mall businesses would have preferred that the Easter Bunny move about the shopping center and visit their stores, and certainly the children would have liked a "mobile" Easter Bunny. However, from the photo company's perspective, the Easter Bunny was meant to be a stationary prop, for the company believed the bunny could achieve its best commercial results only in a carefully structured environment.[2] As Goffman (1971: 284-293) has indicated, the "furnished frame"—or use of walls, floors, and enclosures can be a most effective means of manipulating social interaction for a desired outcome.

The photo company required few props. A large wooden platform where photos were taken was used to divide paying customers from the merely curious. A red imitation-velvet sofa, that could seat the Easter Bunny and several children, rested on the platform. Other than the camera, and a small table where Easter cards, photos, and the cash drawer rested, only two other props were needed. On either side of the platform two placards, each containing a 5 X 7 child's photo with the Easter Bunny, and a $4.99 price tag were displayed. With these few props strategically arranged, the appropriate fantasy environment was achieved and the Easter Bunny was ready to encounter the public.

THE MALL EASTER BUNNY

Mythology, Hollywood, television, and newspaper cartoon characters have all contributed to our understandings of the Easter Bunny role. In ancient and medieval times the rabbit was strongly associated with fertility and renewal; its public mating rituals may account for this association. Moreover, rabbits are quite prolific, producing several large litters each year. This may explain the curious association between rabbits and colored eggs in the folklore of many people. In ancient Egypt, and in western Europe and America today, "children are told not that a hen laid them [colored eggs], but rather that a rabbit brought them in a basket" (Lonsdale, 1981: 102).

Although Playboy Magazine adopted the rabbit as its logo, Hollywood and television cartoon characters have largely purged the rabbit of any sexual connotations. In cartoons, the playful and comic aspect of rabbit behavior are stressed, or at times the mischievous or unpredictable elements. In the folklore of many cultures, the rabbit is also famous for its resourcefulness and its ability to escape

impossible jams; this too has been incorporated by Hollywood into the bunny character. A combination of innocence and roguery often results, which seems to mirror the behavior of those individuals most loved by middle Americans—young children.

Like all social roles, the mall Easter Bunny has no fixed meanings. Rather, it is defined and redefined through the process of social interaction. From the symbolic interactionist perspective, meanings are viewed as "social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact" (Blumer, 1969: 5). In addition to media contributions, the meanings attached to the mall Easter Bunny are primarily derived from the interaction of three main actors, each of which has its own needs and objectives. A central player in the role's definition is the photo company that uses the Easter Bunny for one reason—to make a profit. The photo company designs the Easter Bunny suits, arranges for a place to sell its products, and hires people to promote its commercial goals. The public also brings to the interaction its own special definitions of the Easter Bunny role, which usually are void of any commercial connotations. Finally, the individual hired to play the Easter Bunny contributes to our understanding of the role. While it is generally assumed that playing the role merely involves donning a costume and entering the mall, our research suggests that in order for an individual to fulfill the requirements of the Easter Bunny role successfully, he/she must go through a socialization process whereby he/she is no longer merely a person in a bunny suit, but instead, *is* the Easter Bunny. As Fine (1983: 241) has indicated:

> When one takes on a role that is distinct from one's primary role, one must decide how to embrace it. How should one manifest identification with that new self? Should one play the role or play oneself in the contours of the environment in which the role is set?

The meanings that the individual attributes to the role and communicates to others emerge "by virtue of this process of communicating with himself" (Blumer, 1969: 5).

THE PHOTO COMPANY AND THE EASTER BUNNY

In late March, one of the authors was told to report to the janitor's office at the mall where he would be provided an Easter Bunny costume. The photographic company carried a variety of East Bunny suits to fit persons of average size. The bunny costume was snow white and contained thousands of cotton-polyester curls that were meant to represent rabbit fur. No part of the human anatomy was allowed to show. The bunny suit stretched from neck to ankle, with pull-over socks covering the feet. Hands were hidden within white mittens. A large cotton tail that is usually part of the outfit, had been removed from the suit for some unknown reason.[3]

Most elements of the Bunny attire directed one's attention to the rabbit's head and face—the central focus of interaction. A blue vest with two rows of false red and gold buttons embellished the rabbit's upper torso, along with a double gold tie around the neck. The eyes dominated the face. Two black ovals with triangular white discs in each, gave the rabbit a permanent gleeful expression (a twinkle in his eyes). A tiny pink button nose called attention to the rabbit's mouth, which displayed oversized incisors and a permanently fixed pleasant smile. The puffy cheeks gave the Easter Bunny an infantile look, while the two cocked ears reinforced the image of the bunny as a playful or comic figure.

It was no accident that the photo company chose these particular features to be crafted onto the Bunny costume. The rabbit's kindly and playful visage was meant to amuse and entertain, but more important, it was designed to serve as a kind of neon sign that beckoned to children in a nonthreatening way, saying "come over here, kids, and have fun; visit the Easter Bunny." Folklorist Tom Sullenberger has written about similar associations between fantasy figures and commerce in his article "Ajax meets the Jolly Green Giant." He called such associations "folklure—

the deliberate exploitation of myth for the sole purpose of commercial gain" (Sullenberger, 1974: 53).

Only one other element was needed to make the enterprise work—the commercial photographer. If the Easter Bunny embodied fantasy, the photographer was pure commerce. Children were generally delighted after seeing the Easter Bunny. They laughed and shouted for joy, ran to him and often hugged and kissed his furry face. While this fantasy was played out, the photographer, usually in a very business-like manner, discussed with their parents the price and quality of photos. After the sale was made, he carried the child to the Easter Bunny's lap, took his/her picture, and collected the fee. To the public the rabbit seemed fun and exciting. The photographer was usually perceived in opposite terms. He was viewed as dull, menial, or even bad—"someone out to get your money" or worse still, a person who probably didn't like kids, a public understanding that even the bunny actor initially shared.

Despite his initial negative reaction, the author soon adopted a very different attitude about the photographer. After playing the role briefly, he discovered that he was almost totally dependent upon the photographer for most of his human needs. The photographer was his "seeing-eye dog," literally leading him from location to location. For example, at break time he had to be led to the bathroom, and there the photographer assisted in removing the costume. Most importantly, he provided the one human contact with which the author could exhibit "backstage behavior" and for a brief moment resume his human and personal identity (Goffman, 1959: 112).

While the public tended to perceive the photographer in negative terms, relatively few seemed to recognize that without this role there would be no mall Easter Bunny. By taking responsibility for all commercial transactions, and providing for the bunny's earthly needs, the photographer allowed the Easter Bunny to remain in the realm of fantasy. If the Easter Bunny needed more candy or plastic rings, it was the photographer's responsibility to see that he was resupplied. He also picked up small children and placed them on the bunny's lap for their photo, and then removed them when finished.

The photographer's role was vitally linked to the bunny fantasy in that it enabled both the photo company and the public to deny that the Easter Bunny had any association with that most earthly of human endeavors—the making of money. By requiring the photographer to handle all commercial transactions, and disallowing the Easter Bunny from any contamination with money, the public was shielded from the fact that the rabbit was, in fact, a *shil*, an agent hired to promote purely commercial objectives.[4] This area was so sensitive that even the slightest association between the Easter Bunny and commerce was met with strong public disapproval, as we discovered during our research. One incident, in particular, revealed this in dramatic fashion. Midway through the study, the photographer made the mistake of displaying two photos of the Easter Bunny alone, each with a $4.99 price tag, instead of the typical photos of bunny and child. After hearing several negative comments including "that Bunny costs too much," the photographer realized his error, and he replaced the bunny photos with those which included children. Upon doing so, public hostility immediately subsided.[5]

PUBLIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE EASTER BUNNY

The mall Easter Bunny is a uniquely American invention. Freud once wrote that "unsatisfied wishes are the driving power behind fantasies and that every fantasy contained the fulfillment of a wish, an improvement on unsatisfactory reality" (cited in Griffith, 1984: 81). This notion may help explain the appearance of the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, and other fantasy figures in the very heart of the commercial domain. In such an environment, the irrational may fill an obvious void granting the individual a sense of worth and allowing for the public expression of emotion, in the

dehumanizing and impersonal context of buyer and seller. Although they stand on ground where human worth is measured by money alone, people get misty-eyed as they watch their children hug and caress the Easter Bunny and the rabbit respond in kind.

The social dimensions of the role are as compelling as the psychological. Given the conventionalized nature of the encounter with the Easter Bunny and its strong fantasy associations, mall visitors soon discovered that they had relatively few lines available to them in their interaction with the bunny. Further, as Goffman (1967: 9) indicated "once [people] initially present a line they tend to build their later responses to it, and in a sense, become stuck with it" (Goffman 1967: 11-12). The photo company readily capitalized on those lines of "mutual acceptance" to promote its product.

Only infants and children to about the age of two seemed to have difficulty responding to the Easter Bunny as a fantasy creature; in fact, many initially responded to him with uncertainty and fear.[6] As recorded in the bunny's journal, "they loved me at a distance, but getting to touch them took work." In most cases, it was only after receiving treats, and with much encouragement from their parents that they came to accept the Easter Bunny as a "good bunny" and define it in positive terms. Older children, aged three to seven, having watched their parents' positive responses to the bunny for a number of years, and having been exposed to many comic and playful rabbits on television, almost always reacted to the bunny with affection and joy. As logged in his journal, "they ran to me, hugged me and even kissed my false face."

Children from the ages of two or three up to about five years old largely perceived the Easter Bunny as a purveyor of gifts or rewards. Upon seeing the Easter Bunny, many children instantly extended their arms, palms up for their reward. As noted in his journal, the author wrote: "They were only interested in what I could do for them." Several children told the Bunny that Easter was very near their birthdays, and thus they should receive two presents. The childhood association of the Easter Bunny with gifts was so strong that many children seemed to consider the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus as almost one and the same. On numerous occasions, children asked the Easter Bunny if he were Santa Claus in a disguise. One child asked the bunny if he and Santa Claus exchanged gifts, and many others attempted to give the Easter Bunny a list of desired gifts that were to be delivered on Easter day.

If the Easter Bunny is perceived as a giver of gifts, he may, like parents everywhere, also deny such things, or even withdraw favors as punishment for improper behavior. Having witnessed their parents using such sanctions on many occasions, children seemed to clearly recognize the possibility. One young girl asked the Easter Bunny for candy, noting that she had been good the previous week. But in the same breath she told the bunny not to give her brother a treat, for during the same period he had hit her. Parents occasionally used the Easter Bunny to sanction a child's behavior, even in the Bunny's presence. One mother confessed to the Easter Bunny that she had told her daughter that if she kept sucking her thumb the Easter Bunny "would steal it."

By the time children had reached school age there was obvious recognition that the mall Easter Bunny was, in fact, a "man or woman" inside a bunny suit. Children of this age investigated the bunny's human characteristics, making their discoveries known to the actor. Questions were often couched in expressions of a concern for the bunny's welfare. At other times, children told the actor that certain human traits they discovered during their investigations were, in fact, desirable. One child noticing a green band showing the actor's tube socks, expressed concern that the bunny's shoes were too big for his feet. Another child, peering under the bunny head noticed eyeglasses, and told the actor that "it was good the Easter Bunny wore glasses". These discoveries on the part of children rarely upset the interaction, for as Goffman (1959: 91) noted, "Insofar as

children are defined as 'non-persons' they have some license to commit gauche acts without requiring the audience to take the expressive implications of these acts too seriously." However, as he also pointed out, these discoveries potentially threatened the interaction because "whether treated as non-persons or not, children are in a position to disclose crucial secrets" (Goffman, 1959: 91).

School-aged children were fully aware that a fantasy was being played out, and that they could potentially disrupt it. However, other than revealing this fact to the bunny actor, they, like their parents, were unwilling to expose the rabbit's deceit. As Goffman (1967: 14) noted, "the person has two points of view—a defensive orientation toward saving his own face and a protective orientation toward saving the other's face." Our research findings suggest that children protected the bunny fantasy not only for their own benefit and that of their parents, but also for younger children who they knew believed in such fantasies. By six, children recognized that they, along with their parents and the Easter Bunny, were in fact coconspirators in a fiction promoted for the benefit of others. In his journal the actor wrote, "they [school age children] go up to the bunny, tell him their names and grade in school, politely receive their candy and leave . . . it seems they only wish to make their parents happy." But more may be involved. By participating in a social reality tacitly created by their parents, the photo company and the bunny actor, children may also show that they are making satisfactory progress toward adulthood.

There was an exception to this observation, and that was the behavior of male teenagers in groups. While others took considerable pains to promote the bunny fantasy, teenagers (especially teenage boys in groups), went to great lengths to expose, challenge, and ridicule the bunny fantasy. When alone, teenagers behaved much like adults, generally promoting the Easter Bunny fantasy. In contrast, groups of teenage males often taunted and teased the Easter Bunny. On one occasion, three 13-year-olds discovered the rabbit had a blind spot, and they took turns walking behind him and poking him in the back. The author found this doubly offensive; not only did he perceive it as a challenge to the Easter Bunny fantasy, but more importantly, it overtly challenged his human persona. On other occasions, a cub scout (in front of his peers) asked the bunny if he wanted to buy "Scout-O-Rama" tickets, and another teenager, after smelling the actor's after shave, called the Easter Bunny "musk rabbit," in a loud voice so that everyone could hear.

Of all age groups, adult responses, especially when the individual was alone, were most varied. Some adults ignored the bunny and did not respond to his waves. Others, especially men, met the bunny's greetings with hostile glares. The elderly almost always responded in a very positive way. They returned the bunny's waves, and many shook his hand or even hugged him.[7] The behavior of adult women was the most surprising to the author, for many responded to him in sexual terms. In one case, a woman winked at the bunny and ran her tongue suggestively over her lips. Another time, a woman asked if there was a "boy bunny" inside the suit and another young woman declared that he was a "hot to trot" bunny. Although one woman told the author that he was a "gay bunny," another told the photographer that "she wanted to take the bunny into a back room and rape him."

The strongest predictor of an adult's response to the Easter Bunny was whether he or she was in the presence of a child. In the presence of children, adults not only promoted the bunny fantasy, they seemed to "overact." As noted in his journal, "they made funny sounds (baby talk) and strange faces, called to their children and even played games." Much of their behavior seemed to be an attempt to show young children how they "ought" to respond to such a creature. This is reminiscent of the expression of "role distance" on the part of adults riding merry-go-rounds as described by Goffman (1961: 107-109).

In the presence of small children, adults apparently believed that it was so important that the bunny fantasy be maintained that they reacted negatively to anything in-

terpreted as a threat to the fantasy. As Goffman (1967: 20) declared: "participants take on the responsibility of called attention to the misconduct; [and] by implication they suggest that the threatened claims are to stand firm." This was demonstrated in an incident in which a woman brought two children to visit the Easter Bunny. The interaction proceeded nicely until one of the children looked under the bunny head and remarked, "I can see his face in there." The mother became incensed at this expression of disbelief, and in a tone that clearly suggested he had made a serious mistake, she scolded him. Realizing his error, the boy apologized, and in an instant the three visitors resumed their fantasy behavior.

The parental need to perpetuate the bunny fantasy was readily capitalized upon by the photographer. By encouraging parent-bunny interaction, the photographer subtly applied added pressure on parents to purchase a photo. In some cases, parental commitment actually seemed to be called into the public limelight. In other words, after "playing with the bunny," encouraging the child to sit on his lap, etc., the photographer subtly implied that any *caring* parent could not possibly pass up the opportunity for a photo of his/her child with the Easter Bunny. Amid onlookers, many parents seemingly recognized that their fulfillment of the role of "good parent" had been publicly questioned. As Goffman (1971: 163) has noted, individuals need to maintain a favorable impression during social interaction, and consequently, "when the scene around him ceases to provide this information . . . he is likely to feel compelled to act to control the undesired impression of himself he may have made." In private, most adults would be unwilling to pay $4.99 for a photo valued at approximately twenty-five cents. However, when publicly acting out the fantasy scenario and responding to a challenge to their parental commitment, the reinterpretation of the situation transformed the photo price into a seeming bargain. For *only* $4.99, parents received the photo of their child with the Easter Bunny, while at the same time, their role of "good parents" was publicly confirmed.

THE ACTOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE BUNNY ROLE

While the public and photo companies try to shape understandings of the Easter Bunny role, they are not the only contributors. Those who play the Easter Bunny, usually young men and women who are often college students, also help shape its definition. There is considerable room for subjective interpretations and experimentation, for bunny actors receive little formal training; they are given a small list of the do's and don'ts of bunny behavior, given a costume, and sent out to play the part.

The public assumes that the Easter Bunny role is so simple and stereotypic that anyone can play it well. Our research indicates otherwise, for not only is there little latitude in playing a fantasy role, but the individual must also decide how much of one's "self" should be submerged in that role. Moreover, as Berger and Luckmann (1966: 77) have indicated,

> To learn a role it is not enough to acquire the routines immediately necessary for its "outward" performance. One must also be initiated into the various cognitive and even affective layers of the body of knowledge that is directly and indirectly appropriate to this role.

On his first day on the job, the author donned the Easter Bunny costume and, accompanied by the photographer, he entered the mall. His initial reaction was one of acute embarrassment. He felt like a "man trying to be a bunny." Before he had put on the bunny costume, he thought that it would be like Halloween costumes he had worn as a child, outfits that were moderately comfortable and which to his thinking allowed him to express some semblance of "self." In contrast, the bunny costume was awkward and uncomfort-

able, and his every movement seemed stiff and unnatural. Guided by the photographer, he felt totally helpless. Moreover, the bunny head was inordinately heavy, and his visibility was poor. Hot and sweaty, and barely five minutes on the job, his greatest desire was to beat a hasty retreat from the mall and remove the detested costume.

Then he noticed that a large number of people had detected him. Their reactions were shocking. Not only did they fail to recognize his deceit or judge his appearance as foolish, they responded to him in a most positive way. Children shrieked and waved with obvious joy. With a basket in one hand and the photographer holding the other arm, the author could not immediately respond to their waves. So he decided to nod his head up and down, a tactic that apparently worked, for the slightest nod increased the children's expressions of glee. Even some adults waved and smiled at him, but he felt no need to respond to their greetings. To the author, it seemed silly for adults to wave to "a man dressed in a bunny suit."

By the time he reached the photo platform he felt more relaxed. But he still was unable to separate his bunny and human personas. He sat on the velvet sofa and the photographer began to place one child after another on his lap to have their pictures taken. At first, he watched them laugh and happily pose for their pictures without emotional reaction; all he could do was stare inside the bunny mask noting its every stitch and seam. The author also remained preoccupied with the heat generated inside the bunny suit; sweat ran in his eyes and down his nose reinforcing the author's belief that he was a man "trapped" within a bunny suit.

Surprisingly, these initial feelings and sensations quickly dissipated. As more children arrived to have their pictures taken, he focused his attention less on himself and the costume, and more on the children, noticing more and more how extremely happy they were in the Easter Bunny's presence. Soon he began to smile and laugh and to respond to the children's needs rather than his own. By the end of the day, after posing with dozens of children, he felt transformed. His journal entry that day read "They know I am good . . . I have let myself go . . . and am happy go-lucky . . . I walk the mall and mingle with humans enjoying their hugs and smiles . . . I gave them gifts and freely returned their embraces . . . I have even become accustomed to being called cute, darling, and adorable." In short, he had become the Easter Bunny.

Several days into the job he began to feel guilty about his association with the commercial aspects of the role, and as the author noted in his journal "being a part of the photo racket."[8] Yet, at the same time, he found it impossible to separate their interests from his. For example, some people tried to cheat the photo company by claiming dissatisfaction with their photo, which, according to company policy, entitled them to a free photo. The actor, knowing their intent, recorded in his diary, "It is really strange how people could steal from the Easter Bunny."

Despite this notable transformation from being a "man in a bunny suit" to being a fantasy character, the author did not lose his sense of personal identity. For as Fine (1983: 206) has noted, "despite the ability of some [fantasy] players to *become* their characters . . . these roles are too temporary and compartmentalized for us to speak meaningfully of a role-self merger." Adopting a fantasy role, then, could more accurately be described as "role embracement" rather than "role merger" (Goffman, 1961: 106). Consequently, the author learned to balance his various roles, alternately or simultaneously being a man in a bunny suit, a researcher observing public interaction with a fantasy character, and/or the Easter Bunny. More importantly, he developed the skills necessary to adopt any of those roles with relative ease.

Although he learned that he could effectively perform a variety of roles, he also discovered that the public was unwilling to recognize any but the fantasy role. Speaking was his most obvious means of expressing both his human and individual identities, and occasionally, although it was

against company rules, he tried to speak. However, he soon discovered that the photo company had designed the bunny suit in such a way that his speech, which according to Goffman (1967: 37), might not only place the speaker in jeopardy but others present as well, had little or no significant impact on the nature of bunny-human interaction. The head was designed in such a way that the author's voice resonated within the rabbit head rather than without. Thus, to the author it seemed he was always shouting. In contrast, the public heard only hollow whispering sounds which they could not clearly understand. Again, the photographer filled a critical need, serving in this case as the Easter Bunny's interpreter. After briefly attempting to understand the bunny's garbled sounds, many mall visitors turned to the photographer with a quizzical look, and as might be expected, the photographer was more than willing to help. The photographer's interpretation of what the bunny had said was almost always some variation of: "The Easter Bunny said that he would like to have his picture made with you, wouldn't that be fun?" Having heard these words many people needed no further encouragement, but proceeded directly to the photographic platform to fulfill the rabbit's request.

Another example of how the design of the suit negated the human persona was made apparent when the author's wife and two nephews visited him a week into the job. They approached him cautiously until they heard him speak. His speech, however, did not ensure that the interaction would be smooth, for his voice was too garbled to be understood and more importantly they were unable to separate voice from bunny persona. For example, when his normally affectionate nephews sat on their uncle's lap, they could not fully respond to either the uncle or bunny. Even the author's wife who sat on her husband's lap for a photo felt uncomfortable; she could hear her husband's voice coming from the bunny's head, but she could not overcome the feeling that she was "talking to the Easter Bunny."

The author also found that he was "entrapped" in the bunny role as the result of a variety of other public expectations. For example, the bunny suit was extremely hot, and thus he was constantly thirsty and in need of a soft drink. At first he tried to drink soda in a back room, but the public reacted negatively to his absence. So he began to drink his soda discretely through a straw, but in their presence. It was under these circumstances that the actor realized why the photo company had no need to establish elaborate rules of bunny behavior. Whenever his behavior deviated too far from public notions of the role, there were strong negative reactions. As he recorded in his diary "everyone who saw me doing these things stopped and stared in disbelief." In effect, the actor learned, as Goffman had predicted, that

> if he is willing to find out from hints and glances and tactful cues what his place is, and keep it—then there will be no objection to his furnishing this place . . . with all the comfort, elegance, and nobility that his wit can muster for him [Goffman 1967: 43].

Accepting public definitions of the role had other unanticipated results. As the author learned that the public expected a cheerful and playful bunny, he in turn, began to expect a warm and loving public. He expected people to respond to him with affection and joy and when they did not, he became upset and angry. He began to measure his days in the number of waves and hugs received. It only took two or three people to ignore him for him to define them as "hateful" and the entire day as a "grump day." As Fine (1983: 217) wrote, "In playing a character for a long time, identification grows and the player begins to feel what the character feels."

As the Easter Bunny, the author also learned that he had to temper his anger. For example, when poked in the back by teenagers, he had to understand that they were not merely poking at the human inside the bunny suit but the Easter Bunny as well, and that the public would not tolerate any expressions of hostility from a fantasy character. He also had to learn to live with human failings, as fantasy

characters must do. He was often appalled by adults' behavior toward their children—especially if it alienated them from the Easter Bunny. Parents often forcibly pushed their children onto the bunny's lap. In his journal the actor noted, "some parents shoved kids down my throat so that neither of us was happy." Parents also punished their children in the Easter Bunny's presence, often by denying the bunny or his rewards to their children. On one occasion, because his child had initially rejected the Easter Bunny, a father took and ate candy presented to the child, and would allow the child none of it. On another occasion, for some unknown reason, a father had his picture taken with the bunny, but over the protests of his wife and children, would not allow their pictures to be taken.

If the "Easter Bunny" could express displeasure with such behavior he found that he had to temper it in the extreme. Although his smiling face might say "come hither," his body and hands could be used to express the opposite message. Children who became pests or demanded too much candy, might be unable to detect the bunny's ire by studying his countenance, but few failed to recognize the negative meanings in his body language. If small children pestered him too much, the bunny only had to stand and turn away. If adults irritated him, he disappeared into a back room in the mall and returned when they had departed.

By the end of the study, the author had come full circle in his socialization into the Easter Bunny role. He had learned to ignore physical discomforts and overcome feelings of embarrassment associated with being inside the bunny suit, and he had learned to successfully fulfill the bunny role while maintaining his individual and human personas. He also had come to understand the public's expectations of the role and the demands of him as a fantasy character. Finally, he learned that despite the severe limitations placed on his behavior by the photo company and the public, he could express his personal feelings by couching them in a socially acceptable way—the end result of any effective socialization process.

CONCLUSION

The mall Easter Bunny is a uniquely American phenomenon, that, like most American institutions, is largely taken for granted. Americans are so familiar with the fantasy that they assume that it is the only, or at least the dominant, feature of the role. To them, the Easter Bunny predictably arrives at malls across America each spring, hands out candy to children, sits with children for their holiday photos, entertains the public, and then is suddenly gone. Although its visit is brief, few Americans have difficulty interacting with the Easter Bunny, for in their view, bunny behavior seems so simple and stereotypic that all participants in the interaction always know exactly what to do.

Our study has demonstrated that like any social role, the Easter Bunny role is more complex than rigid stereotypes imply. Although the public may think the role is fixed, it is in reality constantly being defined and redefined through the process of social interaction. During the last few decades the role has become institutionalized through the typification of behaviors associated with it. However, while institutionalized, the role is far from being rigid, for the successful bunny performance continues to rely heavily upon the willingness of all participants in social interaction to maintain shared mutual understandings of its meaning (Goffman, 1967).

We have illustrated how different social audiences responded to the Easter Bunny. Preschool children often initially expressed fear and took some coaxing to accept the bunny as harmless and friendly. Schoolaged children, who were well acquainted with the folklore associated with the Easter Bunny, almost uniformly accepted him immediately and treated the bunny as "real." Teenagers, especially boys, seemed compelled to show their contempt for the Easter Bunny fantasy in some type of overt manner—even to the point of physically abusing the individual inside the bunny suit. Adults demonstrated the most diverse responses to the Easter Bunny, ranging from total acceptance (by the

elderly), overt rejection (usually by middle-aged men) to suggestive sexual innuendoes (young adult women). Many adults simply ignored the fantasy character altogether. The most predictable response was from adults accompanied by young children, who were most likely to encourage and promote the fantasy associated with the Easter Bunny for the sake of children, and for some out of consideration for the human suffering inside the bunny suit. These individuals, of course, were the target audience of the photo company.

By capitalizing upon understandings related to the Easter Bunny role, and by attempting to structure the environment in such a way that parents and the bunny actor progressively became obligated to acknowledge and even defend the fantasy elements of the role, the photo company was able to promote its commercial goals in an inoffensive, and at times even pleasant way. The key to the successful merger of fantasy with commercialism seemed to hinge on the continued ability of the photo company to create and maintain the desired consensual "definition of the situation" (Thomas, 1931).

Most important, as our study has shown, a central element in the perpetuation of the Easter Bunny fantasy is the complex process whereby ordinary citizens (college students or unemployed persons) become socialized into the role. In order to effectively play the role to the satisfaction of all parties in the interaction, the individual playing the bunny must make the transition from merely being a person inside a bunny suit to actually assuming a fantasy character that is different from his/her self-identity, but is nonetheless important to self-image.

Once this transformation has been made and the person has "become the Easter Bunny," he/she not only must meet the photo company's demands and the public expectations concerning the role, but his/her own expectations of how the public should react to it. Through the course of social interaction these overlapping but different and sometimes conflicting notions about the Easter Bunny role must be resolved, and a new and consensual understanding of the role emerges.

Our study has implications beyond the mere description of the Easter Bunny fantasy being portrayed in the setting of the shopping mall. There are at least two general areas of theoretical significance into which our study provides valuable insight: socialization and costumed social behavior. Additionally, it may add to the general understanding of popular culture by providing additional insights into fantasy characters, and in particular how they are used to promote commercial ventures.

Socialization into the Easter Bunny role involves all of the complex social learning processes that are involved in the assumption of any social role. As we have clearly demonstrated, assuming the Easter Bunny role requires the acquisition of a complex set of attitudes and behaviors in interaction with a variety of social audiences. However, there are some unique characteristics involved in the assumption of a fantasy role that lend special insights into the socialization process. By assuming the Easter Bunny role one is afforded the rare opportunity (because of the anonymity involved) of taking on a role with very little, if any, risk to one's sense of personal identity. Moreover, the public totally disassociates the role from the actor. Significantly, however, the actor does not. Due to the socialization process the actor feels a need and, as we have described, finds a variety of ways to express his/her multiple selves. In other words, social roles take on meaning to those who occupy them that go beyond the structured cultural meanings assigned to the role. Consequently, when an individual is socialized into a role, even one which involves a fantasy character to be portrayed only for a very brief period of time in a special setting, it becomes a significant part of his/her overall concept of self.

This study may also provide insight into general understandings about costumed social behavior and wearing masks, on both ceremonial occasions and in everyday life. Beyond the notion that "to wear the mask is to suspend all

other identities" (Vlahos, 1979: 84), our study suggests that while wearing the mask does indeed provide a degree of anonymity and a special identity, the actor still associates himself/herself with the role being played. While the public may think that the mask suspends all other identities, the individual playing the role realizes that this is not the case. When we wear costumes and masks, we cannot fully disassociate ourselves from our various social identities, for what is uniquely ours, our personality and inner self, are inevitably shaped by the parts we play, whether professor, golfer, nude model, or the Easter Bunny.

Finally, our study contributes to the understanding of popular culture, and in particular, how fantasy characters can be used to promote commercial interests in everyday life. For example, we have alluded to a close connection between the two roles of Easter Bunny and Santa Claus; both are mall fantasies associated with holidays, gift-giving, and photo enterprises. Both characters have been purged of religious associations and are today purely secular roles. At the present, the public seems to treat both fantasies as roughly equivalent. Our analysis of the Easter Bunny suggests why this is so—the same forces responsible for the one, are largely responsible for the other. Further, through the process of social interaction, tacit understandings have been created that have institutionalized these roles in a way that publicly acknowledges the fantasy element while ignoring other dimensions of the role—specifically, the fact that there is a human being inside the fantasy character suit, and that the main purpose for its existence is profit.

In the last two decades fantasy characters have increasingly appeared in malls, athletic stadiums, amusement parks, business openings, and a variety of other commercial contexts. While some of these fantasy characters have clearly human attributes, such as Santa Claus and clowns, there seems to be a greater tendency to use fantasy characters in animal form to promote commercial products. Our study helps explain why this is so. One possible reason

may be the affinity that American culture has with animals, especially those associated with childhood fantasy. More importantly, however, our study suggests, that the use of animal costumes provides businesses a stronger element of control over the individual playing the role, more severely limiting the likelihood that his/her human identity will enter the interaction. By removing all human elements, and the distractions ordinarily associated with human interaction (such as facework, speech, etc.) businesses can more effectively achieve their desired goals. We would expect that where there are not strong traditions that demand human fantasy characters (like Santa), animal characters, and in particular those that are fully costumed, will emerge as the dominant fantasy in the commercial landscape.

NOTES

1 Jacobs in *The Mall* noted that there there are 23,000 shopping malls in the United States and that they account for about half of all annual retail sales in the categories of general merchandise and clothing (Jacobs, 1984: v, 1).

2. According to Real (1977: 85). Disneyland involves all the senses of the visitor by controlling the entire environment. A visitor is removed from the normal environment, thereby suspending usual reality-testing mechanisms. Persuasive techniques disguised as value-free entertainment actively involve the visitor in the ongoing themes and symbols of the park, creating a group consensus around these central themes and symbols.

3. We discovered later that the tail had been pulled off by some teenaged boys the previous spring.

4. This disassociation from the collection of money by a person whose motive is commercial, but perceived as altruistic, is not at all uncommon in other social arenas. For example, doctors almost never directly collect fees for their services. The doctor is perceived only as interested in helping the patient, while the receptionist or cashier is the person who insists on being paid, or having proper insurance forms completed.

5. Commercial photographers seem to be particularly adept at using fantasy to sell photos. One studio we have encountered uses "Mother Goose" as its trademark and utilizes a person dressed as Mother Goose to promote and display photos and to assist the photographer in posing children.

6. Hagstrom (1966: 25) in his article "What is the meaning of Santa Claus" remarked that Marxist authors have shown that "children are often distressed by Santa and anxious in his presence and that adults can recall only unhappiness in their childhood experiences with Santa."

7. This supports Jacobs' (1984: 93) notion that for teenagers, suburban housewives, and retirees, "malls are . . . not . . . one of many alternative settings in which to pursue social interaction, but . . . [are] the *only* setting for such an undertaking."

8. Interestingly, while playing the Easter Bunny, the actor strongly resented the photographer for using the bunny fantasy to make money, totally ignoring the fact that for most actors the primary motivation for taking on the bunny role was also money. This seemingly hypocritical position may be a classic example of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis of sincerity as merely being a person taken in by his own act.

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