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## “Pick a Card, Any Card”: Learning to Deceive and Conceal – with Care

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Because of the asymmetries in knowledge regarding the underlying hidden mechanisms as well as because of the importance of intentional deception, entertainment magic is often presented as an exercise in power, manipulation, and control. This article challenges such portrayals and through doing so common presumptions about how secrets are kept. It does so through recounting the experiences of the author as a beginner learning a craft. Regard for the choices and tensions associated with the accomplishment of mutually recognized deception in entertainment magic are marshalled to consider how it involves ‘reciprocal action’ between the audience and the performer. Attending to forms of inter-relation and coordination been all those present will be used to appreciate how intentional concealment and deception can be situationally and jointly accomplished. The stakes and possibilities of that accomplishment will be explored by re-imagining magic as a practice of care.

### **Keywords**

agency, asymmetry, care, conjuring, concealment, deception, ethics, knowledge, magic, reciprocal action, secrecy

### **Cover Page Footnote**

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Deception is a widespread social practice, including those forms of it based on intentional concealment (Levine 2014). The activities, commonly referred to by labels such as "modern conjuring," "entertainment magic" or "secular magic" (During 2002), are often marked out as forms of deception in which the deceit is not hidden; indeed the acknowledgement that it is afoot underpins the rules of the game for performers and audiences alike (Villalobos et al. 2014). In this, modern conjuring differs from other forms of deception and concealment

in which these acts are denied or unacknowledged (e.g., Blum 1994) or their presence is part of overt conflictual group dynamics (e.g., Hunt and Manning 1991).

This article poses the question: How are deception and concealment accomplished in magic? I engage with this question in order to challenge common conceptions of deception and secret keeping as one-directional forms of manipulation. Instead, I want to turn toward appreciating how all those present in interactions can contribute toward secret keeping and deception.

In order to do so, the third section elaborates the somewhat unconventional research design employed for this article; namely, a self-study of learning magic. Based on the analysis of recorded small group performances, section four identifies forms of inter-relation and coordination whereby participants contributed to the production of trickery. The identification of forms of inter-relation and coordination is used in section five to pose the question: How can magic as an activity be re-imagined? In offering a response to this question, I want to propose a novel framework for conceiving of the practices of deception and secrecy; naming, I wish to ask how modern conjuring can be approached as an activity of caring. The final section offers concluding remarks.

## **Portrayals and Semblances**

But, first, what is entertainment magic? Practitioners and scholars

theorizing it have offered a diverse range of definitions; a diversity that indexes alternative conceptions of what is at stake as well as the complicated resemblances between magicians and others (e.g., politicians, advertisers, con-artists, clowns, military strategists - see Allen [2007]).

During's (2002, 1) definition of secular magic as a form "which stakes no serious claim to contact with the supernatural," though imprecise, enables the possibility of acknowledging the variety of manifestations historically placed under this label as well as the range of sub-categories of performance (street, mental, close-up, theater, etc.). Others have looked to the situational factors in order to differentiate magic from scams, crimes, or mysticism. Entertainment magic is the art of fooling or lying by a magician to an audience that knows it is being fooled (Luhmann 1989a).

Still others have pointed toward the resulting puzzlement from witnessing inexplicable effects to mark it out; as "magicians both invite audiences to speculate about their methods even as they systematically thwart possible hypotheses" (Jones 2012, 197). Relatedly, what has been said to characterize magic is the way the impossible is realized by the magician (Reynolds [2003] 2013). Mangan (2007) employed the term "boundary work" to signal how popular notions of what is possible have shifted over time as well as how conjurers have purposefully marshalled the cultural beliefs of their day to obscure and misdirect (see also Smith

2015). For Legginton (2016), the term magic should be reserved only for those kinds of displays of the impossible for which the magician has cancelled out every reasonable explanation. That is to say, the impossibilities shown should be represented as impossibilities. Herein the magician “coerces the audience into trying to imagine how the illusion of the depicted event might be produced and the main point of the performance is to *prevent* them from succeeding” (Legginton 2016, 260 - italics in original).

For Nelms (1969 [2000]), “tricks” challenge their audience to discover how the deception was achieved, whereas as “illusions” actually convince the audience – at least for a time. As with many others, he advances the latter as the proper aim for conjuring. As such, what affectively takes place for audiences is critical (see as well Aronson [2003] 2013). In academic writing, framing has provided a common entry notion for conceptualizing how meaning for the audience gets structured by the magician (e.g., Mangan 2007; Jones 2012). Similarly, for some professionals, the inducement of emotions like astonishment and enthrallment are taken as the goal of magic, not necessarily whether audiences treat acts as impossible as such (e.g., Brown 2003).

The contrasting approaches surveyed above point toward alternative aspects of what conjuring entails and what matters about it. While conceptualizations vary, entertainment magic is widely regarded as necessitating the presence of both a performer and an audience. For the

purposes of this article, I want propose as noteworthy how audiences are positioned vis-à-vis conjurers. A common contention in attempts to theorize magic is that it is an asymmetrical relation in which the audience's imagination is – or certainly should be in the case of a competent performer – subject to the magicians' hands:

\* The process of performing a magic trick involves a kind of deceit that involves power, control, and one-up-man(*sic*)ship. Magic is an aggressive, competitive form involving challenges and winning at the expense of others [...] It is creating an illusion that involves putting something over someone, to establish who is in control, and to make the other (the audience) appear fooled (Nardi 1988, 766).<sup>1</sup>

\* Crucial to the magician's art is the ability to control audiences' interpretations of what they perceive (Villalobos et al. 2014, 638).

In short, the audience figures as material - sometimes rough, sometimes dull, sometimes pliable - for magicians to shape according to their skills and knowledge (Fitzkee 1943). In line with these ways of understanding the relation between magicians and audiences, domination, violence, humiliation and cruelty have long been the shadow manifestations of conjuring (During 2002, 131-2). Rolfe (2014, 1610) situated the tendency to theorize the magician as a "willful character, the hero in its own drama, capable of producing extraordinary feats" within the prevalent and:

ancient division between performer (active subject; capable of perceiving causes and designing action; knowledgeable) and spectator (passive body; capable only of experiencing sensation; ignorant); a binary epistemology that reproduces inequalities at the heart of theorizing theatre (Rolfe 2014, 1607).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Sic" in original.

<sup>2</sup> The magician is also cast as the central figure through the displacement and

In the manner the magician-as-secret-keeper is set apart from others through access to esoteric knowledge and attributed with a heightened status, entertainment magic shares much with occult forms of magic (Luhmann 1989b) and other kinds of secret keeping (Rappert 2012).

As of particular note for the purposes of this article, such divisions and assumptions are evident even within scholarly attempts to understand magic; and specifically to understand it as a form of social interaction. While Nardi (1984) forwards a social psychological analysis of magic as an unfolding interaction reliant on the actions of both the magician and the audience, control rests with squarely with the former. The latter's role is largely limited to one of possessing background knowledge, perceptual limitations, and social expectations that magicians can manipulate. While audiences might be adversarial at times, any such challenges are done with an unwritten contract of entertainment that ensures "acquiescence... [that means that audiences] become easily suggestible (witness the various "hypnotism" acts) and tend to agree with the performer's statements, even when they know otherwise" (Nardi 1984, 39).

While the previous paragraphs illustrate gross types of audience relegation even as attention gets cast towards them, subtler forms can also be pointed towards. One is the relative dearth of empirical studies of

the expectations of audiences, their intra-group dynamics and how individuals interpret performances of magic. This is so even in studies that otherwise pitch the audience as collaborators in the co-construction of magic. This lack has characterized the literature cited above, for instance, which has been founded on empirical evidence and reasoning overwhelmingly pertaining to magicians. In social science and humanities studies, at least,<sup>3</sup> an audience's first-person experiences and reasoning are typically taken as known from their overt observable behaviors, stipulated by seasoned magicians whose virtuosity and experience are taken to imply that they can account for spectators' lived experiences (first person reasoning, affective conditions, expectations, motivations, etc.), or reconstructed from inevitably limited historical records (Lamont 2006).<sup>4</sup>

The result is a curious situation. Within many social science and humanities aligned studies of modern conjuring, the audience is both typically deemed central and sidelined.<sup>5</sup> As has been argued, the upshot of this is that "we know that magic requires a spectator, but we do not know what a spectator is" (Rolfe 2014, 1615).

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<sup>3</sup> By contrast, empirical data on first person experiences is gathered in cognitive science and psychological studies that use tricks as stimuli to gauge visual perception and cognitive heuristics (Raz et al. 2016). Within such designed experiments, though, the tricks and viewers can be configured to the requirements of experimental designs associated with measuring specific behavioural responses (e.g., eye movements); set-ups that can require audiences to act in ways antithetical to everyday magic performances (e.g., Danek et al. 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Although, at least at times, practising magicians have noted fundamental problems with being able to gauge audience's thoughts from their reactions (see Brown 2003).

<sup>5</sup> For a sustained effort to engage with audiences with regard to more supernatural forms of magic, see Hill (2010).

## Research Design, Methods and Methodological Considerations

In what follows, I aim to further alternative appreciations of conjuring and through doing so examine how deception, revelation, and concealment are situationally accomplished. In seeking to differentiate this analysis from existing ones of magic as a social interaction, I characterize magic as an activity entailing “reciprocal action.”

This characterization is based, in large part, on data from an exploratory study. This study marks itself out from the existing conjuring literature in a few respects. In the tradition of taking learning rather than established proficiency as a pathway for appreciating a craft (e.g., O’Conner 2005; Atkinson 2013), this article is based on the initial stages of a wider study of learning to perform magic.<sup>6</sup> Prior to late 2017, I had no directly relevant experience. Through a process of learning card magic, the aim was to use my emerging choices, dilemmas, and frustrations of learning as a basis for reflecting on matters that might pass as seen but unnoticed by seasoned practitioners.

Against the aforementioned relative dearth of attempts to empirically study the first-person experiences of audiences in non-experimental set-ups, I sought to engage participants in their sense making. A nine “self-working” card trick session was devised for small groups.<sup>7</sup> Akin to a standard focus group method, through combining the

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<sup>6</sup> For a description of wider project, see <https://brianrappert.net/magic>

<sup>7</sup> While definitions for “self-working” card tricks vary, the term is often used to  
<https://scholarworks.wisc.edu/secr/vol2/no2/art8>  
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presentation of information (in this case, the tricks) with moderated discussion, the intention was to explore participants' experiences. A focus group inspired method was utilized for a number of reasons: (i) the basic small group composition of focus groups mirrored the typical performance setting for the (close-up) magic performed; (ii) the structured openness of the format provided by the discussion format gave participants the ability to generate their own questions and framings (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999); and (iii) the emergent situational participant-participant interactions spawned reflections and insights (Morgan 1998).

The use of focus groups, though, comes with methodological and epistemological issues about how statements and embodied forms of action are analyzed as data (Halkier 2010). The contingent, temporally unfolding interactions between participants (and between moderators and participants) sought for in focus groups means that topics and interpretations emerge in idiosyncratic manners. Therefore generalizing results across groups has additional complications beyond those normally associated with survey methods. In the section that follows, overall patterns in the discussions are noted without the pretense of making claim to statistically generalized views and attitudes of participants and without claiming to have sought to represent the content of all of the dialogue.

Another set of issues pertains to the status of language, and in particular the long running division in the social sciences between

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denote tricks that do not rely on forms of misdirection requiring sleight of hand skills.

whether it should be conceived as a form of *representation* or *discourse*.<sup>8</sup> To view language as representation is to portray it as a means of describing the world that enables individuals to communicate their views, motivational states, etc. Representations can be scrutinized as to whether they accurately and clearly depict what is taking place. In contrast, approaching language as discourse entails treating it as a form of situated action. Herein, verbal accounts of the world do not simply represent the output of some underlying reasoning process; they are instead managed descriptions given in an interactional setting and assume their meaning within that setting. The contrast can be summarized in the distinction between taking talk as evidential resource for making claims about the world and taking claims-making as the topic of analysis. Both contrasting orientations are adopted below.

Thirteen card sessions with thirty-three different participants were conducted between January-March 2018 in the UK and Sweden, each of which lasted between seventy minutes to two hours. The participants<sup>9</sup> consisted of fellow academics<sup>10</sup> chosen through convenience sampling with all but two of the sessions held at a participant's or the author's home.<sup>11</sup> In other words, these sessions were akin to performances

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<sup>8</sup> For one of many statements on this see distinction, see Edwards (1997).

<sup>9</sup> In nine of the sessions my academic wife attended but only actively took part in the tricks during the first two sessions.

<sup>10</sup> And in two cases their non-academic partners.

<sup>11</sup> As has often been proposed (e.g., Rolfe 2014), the background knowledge and cognitive resources of audiences can affect their experiences of magic. In this case participants were highly educated, with only three who did not possess a PhD. They spanned a wide range of disciplines including: philosophy, information technology, history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, politics, medicine, anthropology,

amateur magicians might offer with individuals within their networks of relations for the purpose of social entertainment. Twelve sessions were audio recorded and in seven cases video recorded (with an additional two partially video recorded).

Detailed elaboration of the reasoning for and evolution of the content of the sessions has been given elsewhere as part of a wider elaboration of the research design.<sup>12</sup> In terms of their presentation style, though, the tricks were thematized through the notion of "embodiment" – participants were asked to look in particular directions and say certain kinds of things (for instance, call off cards). In my accompanying verbal patter and bodily movements I forwarded the notion that I was identifying selected cards on the basis of reading facial expressions, postures, eye movements, voice, and the like. I was not.

Whereas only two of the participants reported prior (minor) experience with performing sleight of hand tricks, for the practical purposes of undertaking a magic routine all were conversant with the basic conventions of card tricks as consisting of a mix of patter, directives, and responses. At times this familiarity manifested itself in an attitude of contrarianism to my accompanying patter. As part of a discussion about the role of bodily signals in the identification of cards, for instance, one participant commented: "...the thing about the magic is...that the magic is not what it seems. So if the magician starts telling

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management, and art.

<sup>12</sup> See the "Going On" entries at <https://brianrappert.net/magic/performances>

you they are reading a book about body language, I immediately think it's not about body language" (Session 4, Participant 1). This quote points toward the multi-layered and complex processes of deception-discernment at work. To expand, as a magician I sought to anticipate the responses of participants, to factor them into the details of my staging of the tricks (e.g., to prevent discernment of the underlying mechanisms), and to riposte backchat (e.g., to reply to expressions of suspicion about my explanatory patter). Participants anticipated acts of misdirection and sought to see through them, in part, on the basis of the very details of the staging of tricks that were meant to mislead them.

Overall then, such voiced apprehensions as well as general cultural assumptions about entertainment magic provide ample reasons to hold that the interactions did not operate under the assumptions of cooperation proposed by Grice (1989); namely the belief that others are generally telling the truth or at least what they believe to be the case.

As indicated by the description of the set-up as well as the diversity of conceptualizations of magic noted in the previous section, these sessions – or any sessions – could not be taken as representative of entertainment magic as a whole.

Rather than seeking to give a definitive depictions, in the remaining sections I want to identify aspects of the sessions undertaken that suggest how magic can be understood as entailing "reciprocal action."

Following Kirsh (2006, 250), at its base, reciprocal action is understood

as phenomenon in which "two entities are closely coupled," whereby "changes in one cause changes in the other, and the process goes back and forth in such a way that we cannot explain the state trajectory of one without looking at the state trajectory of the other." In this vein, in these sessions actions taken at one point in time conditioned subsequent deception-discernment dynamics. For instance, my explanatory pattern and participants' avowals of (dis)belief in claims co-constituted each other through an emerging sequence of actions.

More than this though, in a manner specific to the substantive topic at hand, I use the notion of "reciprocal action" to signal the ways in which those present in the sessions played an active role in enabling deception and concealment integral to the tricks. I classify actions taken along these lines as forms of "cooperative."

The next section begins by considering the relation between competition and cooperation, a relation to be returned to in the final section.

### **Producing Co(-i)llusions**

Competition has figured as a central organizing principle for the analysis of the structure of games. As part of a wide-ranging study of practical reasonings, for instance, Livingston (2008) argued that one of ordinary, unnoticed, but essential social requirements of checkers is that players must try to win. In its absence, a game becomes pointless as the

reasoning that necessarily constitutes play cannot be sustained. Likewise, as suggested in section two, within the theorization of magic, a central notion is that conjuring is the activity of magicians seeking to foil attempts by the audience to discern the hidden mechanisms of tricks (or even to preclude them from believing they could discern such mechanisms). Without scrutiny on the part of the audience, a vital key precondition for magic is lost (Jones 2011, 140). It is also widely acknowledged that audiences can be more or less shrewd or unruly; at times they might deliberately seek to sabotage tricks, at other times they can intervene in order to detect their underlying mechanisms, etc. Herein though, the agency of audience is conceived as a troubling potential that magicians must effectively manage or even possibly harness to their advantage (Lamont and Wiseman 1999, 64-66; Hartling [2003] 2013).

For the card sessions I undertook, I want to advance a more negotiated characterization of the interactions at play. In short, while participants undertook various forms of challenge and non-compliance, these were inter-mixed with actions that helped to maintain the setting as one of the performance of magic, and furthermore were frequently self-accounted for as instances of intentional cooperation.

Consider some points along these lines in relation to how directives were given and the response sequences that followed (see Goodwin and Cekaite 2012). Like many types of conjuring, the sessions undertaken relied on direct audience participation in response to my directives:

selecting cards, shuffling the deck, calling off numbers, etc. On some occasions participants undertook actions such as secretly removing cards from the deck, demanding to inspect the deck before and after card revelations, taking the cards away from me mid-trick in order to rearrange them, or grabbing away my written notes. In an exceptional (and memorable) session one participant did all these actions. Such interventions significantly undermined the prospect that the cards could be identified, or threatened to reveal the underlying mechanism of card manipulations.

More common, though, were non-compliant responses or requests that did not fundamentally undermine what could be defined as the overall "directive trajectory" (Goodwin 2006). Momentarily feigning an alternate card selection, asking me to physically re-position myself, politely requesting to inspect the deck, alternating the pitch of their voice, etc. were some (often playfully delivered) forms of non-compliance that did not pose any significant problems for the planned directive arc and presumably were not intended to do so.

When questioned about their (typically) restricted challenging, in eight of the sessions participants accounted for their (in)actions through varyingly appealing to their desire to contribute toward the success of the tricks. As one discussion went:

*Session 6*

P1: Of course I know I could mess up your trick

P3: Yeah, yeah.

P1: But that is not fun.

P3: I know, I am like that as well, you know, I just, in fact I still don't want to know how he makes it because

P1: Yeah.

P3: it's fun. I agree it is a cooperative enterprise so what is the point of...

((side discussion))<sup>13</sup>

P2: But I also don't think you don't want to be too disruptive because you want...you want him to succeed as well. Do you know what I mean?

P1: Yeah.

P2: Like you kinda, when he spins over the card you want it to be the right card.

P1: So in that sense...

P3: Yeah.

P2: Yeah.

P1: we are a willing audience, but I think generally audiences for magic at least are willing.

P2: Yeah.

P1: Cooperative.

P3: Yeah, yeah...Yeah it is a kind of a game you play together. In a

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<sup>13</sup> The use of double parentheses denotes text that provides comments or

sense you don't want to be disruptive.

P2: Hmmm.

P3: You want to be surprised.

P2: Yes.

P3: You want to be amazed, that's the deal.

Taken as representations of motivational states, such dialogues stand as evidence for not treating participants as locked into a zero-sum competition of wits against the magician. Participants retained a sense of control through the options they elected *not* to pursue under labels such as "cooperation." Relatedly, a common assumption in the examination of magic is that audiences will want to know how magic effects are achieved (e.g., Danek et al. 2014, 176). Yet, when asked whether they wanted to know the mechanisms for the tricks, a diversity of responses were offered in these sessions. Whether and what participants wanted to know were reported as turning on whether the affective value of trickery would be enhanced by knowing, whether they might be more at ease with the comfort of ignorance, and even whether I could be trusted to provide a true explanation after all of the deception on show.

Further along the cooperative lines, it is possible to identify numerous forms of participant behavior that worked toward the success of the tricks. In relation to the directives of instructions, for instance, mutual coordination was commonplace. Participants routinely used visual scrutiny, verbal corrections, and pointing gestures on one another to

ensure actions were in taken accordance with the directives given. This was particularly important when I turned backwards or left the room.<sup>14</sup> They also verbally glossed their actions of manipulating cards so that others present would be able to follow along with the sequence of what was taking place.

Taken as discursive enactments, dialogues such as the one quoted above accounted for the behavior of participants through defining magic as an activity, retrospectively offered a justification for their behavior, characterized this specific setting as a shared one of “cooperation” by a group to which their actions were accountable, and thereby prospectively set out a common scheme for interpreting subsequent actions (as in Wieder 1974). In these ways, our identities as audience members and as a magician were defined as part of the emerging interactions.

Likewise, in eight of the sessions participants voiced their conscious commitment to shared rules and roles that bounded the scope of legitimate conduct and, in doing so, defined a sense of the proper normative order for magic. This assumption of behavioral norms was varyingly described by expressions such as “You play, of course, to the rules of the game,” but also with a more nuanced sense that adherence to limits was an ongoing, negotiated accomplishment. When asked why they had not sought to interfere with the tricks, the following discussion ensued:

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<sup>14</sup> Also frequent were participants’ queries to me checking whether they were undertaking appropriate card manipulation.

*Session 3*

P1: That would violate a norm

P2: Yeah.

P1: That, I mean, there is this sort of implicit participatory expectation that we are all part of this performance and, and we just implicitly trust, we know there is an explanation for this. There are mechanisms, there are a logic behind this, but we want to be caught up in this and share this experience so we go along with you. We let ourselves be guided by you.

P2: ((side point)) We know that we are both in this

P3: Yeah.

P2: together. Sort of a...so it is not like you're doing magic to us.

P1: Hmm.

P2: We are

P3: Yeah.

P2: you know, agreeing to do magic. Whether it is

P1: Yeah.

P2: fantasy or logic sort of.

P1: Well we talked about body language too. If we were not giving you ongoing feedback, raising our eyebrows and ((saying)) no, way that is a good one Brian.

P3: ((laughter))

P1: If we were just a dead unreceptive participant, that would have

changed the character of all of this. Certainly,

P2: So.

P1: so we play an active role in determining how this develops as well, the audience does.

Again, at one level, what is at stake in these characterizations is how individuals report on their motivations and assert agency. In this case, rather than a state of acquiescence being secured by the magician's handlings, the contention was that the tricks unfolded in relation to the active decisions by participants to co-produce certain patterns of relations. An implication that followed was that this compliance could be forgone.

It should be noted in this regard that the codes, rules, values, and roles evoked across the sessions justified a varied set of participants' "non-compliant" behavior. Many concurred with the claim that certain forms of behavior would violate a norm, but not on what counted as instances of deviance. Rather than simply "following" some definite and shared social norm then, the relevance of norms was accomplished as part of the sequential unfolding of interactions. In the case of the Session 3 extract, the appeal to the relevancy of norms developed a sense of the joint moral situation at hand (it was one of trust, agreement, sharing) and that sense of the situation was used to re-interpret aspects of the interaction (in this case how body language should be characterized). The points in the preceding paragraphs suggest a need to revisit prevalent

divides between magicians as active sculptors and audiences as the resulting fashioned object.

As a beginner I keenly felt that the performance relied on a highly contingent interrelatedness. The way asymmetries depended on both parties was not something that went unappreciated in the discussions with participants. At the end of one session, after sharing my sense of ever-present vulnerability despite the asymmetries of my role, participants commented:

*Session 10*

P1: I was trying to think of other examples of power where risks are taken as well, and vulnerabilities exist, it's just that it is not visible. And I would think that actually power always has that element, it is just a question of how conscious people are of that. There are some characters that might just kinda bulldoze through it, but I would certainly say that power is not invulnerable, the position even hierarchically higher up is not necessarily invulnerable to and not independent, always dependent on the reactions of others to recognize it. And so maybe, yeah, maybe that is where the actual, turning attention to that is the actual strength, rather than saying it is not about power, it is saying that this is actually telling us something about the nature of power. Rather than saying.

P2: That it is actually inherently vulnerable.

P1: And always dependent on consent.

P2: And always depending on consent.

P1: And exactly. It is always complicit, right?

P2: Yeah, yeah, everyone is always complicit in it.

P1: These games.

P2: Yeah.

In summary, instead of a one-way process of control, the considerations above suggested a more negotiated, bidirectional dynamic. While tricks would hardly be worth their name in the absence of (some level of) audience scrutiny, there was no unremitting scrutiny (this would have made the performing of tricks impossible). As one person characterized his orientation:

I think it is tricky because umm, you don't want to be, umm, fooled, I mean you don't wanta miss something obvious, but at the same time, you like it when it is pulled off. So, OK, so you wanta be kind of lured by the trick but you of course don't want to be sheepishly foolish. But, of course, you won't kinda want to be all, don't you trick me, because it is part of the sensation that you are going to be tricked. So I think it is kinda of double. You both want and don't want to be fooled (S12, P2).

Negotiated forms of engagement also characterized the specific issue of perceptual attention. Attention is a topic at the fore in the theorization of magic. Indeed, its manipulation through talk and nonverbal activity (such as the magician's gaze – Kuhn et al. 2009) is often portrayed as a main preoccupation for magicians. Within the sessions I undertook, practices of attention varied. At one extreme, one participant repeatedly attended to his mobile phone, a practice eventually

verbally sanctioned by another participant. At another extreme, one participant frequently made statements about how she was visually scrutinizing the cards based on her general understanding of the principles of card magic in order to discern the mechanisms utilized. Even in this case though, she did not fixate her gaze on the deck for the entirety of the session.

As in other types of small group interactions in which multiple lines of action take place simultaneously,<sup>15</sup> in these sessions forms of mutual monitoring between participants were general features of interactions. Participants monitored each other's reactions, physically orientated toward one another (e.g., during laughter), conversed with one another, etc. in ways that promoted mutual responsiveness between individuals, but undermined the prospects for all present to have a single joint focus for attention. In other words, unlike some activities (Tolmie and Rouncefield 2013), directing gaze elsewhere than toward the notional focal activity (i.e., my manipulation of the cards) was not necessarily treated as an accountable deviation; this was so even given the general recognized need for audience scrutiny. Indeed, establishing a shared visual orientation by participants to the card manipulations was one of my ongoing preoccupations.

Participants also reported more deliberate kinds of modulating attention. For instance, intentionality was brought into play through

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<sup>15</sup> For a survey of literature regarding attention in conversations and small group interactions see Rendle-Short (2006, Chapter 4).

active efforts to *disengage* from the performances:

*Session 13*

P4: I guess in my case I tried to not look at the card, too much, when you were doing the trick with me, umm, I won't not look at it, but look at all the cards, equally, kinda shifting a looking at you a lot, where you are looking. But when, umm, in the other cases I just tried not to get involved because I did not want to give it away. Like I did not listen to ((P2)) when she was counting, I did not know her card.

AU: OK.

P1: So you were afraid that you would give

P4: Yeah.

P1: the answer away when, yeah, OK.

P4: If I knew her card then maybe I was going to look at it too much and he would see that.

((Group "aha" followed by laughter))

Such comments point to the manner which participants attempted to exert agency within situations.

As a methodological consideration, while participants offered accounts advancing cooperation and their own agency, it is important to note that such statements only eventually arose through the dialogues undertaken. As conversation moderator, I posed questions to the participants. After the initial couple of tricks, this included asking

variations of the question: How is the magic being done? No participant at that stage offered comments that pointed toward their role as collaborating agents; instead, regard squarely focused on my actions as the magician (e.g., the belief that I was covertly manipulating cards, directing attention, etc.). Only after subsequent tricks and explicit questioning did any participants come to present themselves as contributing to the accomplishment of the tricks.

While noting the unfolding qualities of responses underscores the problems of taking participants' accounts as straightforward representations of definite motivational states, affective values and the like, it does nonetheless suggest the prospect that varied appreciations of magic as an activity can be fostered through the choices made about how magic is enacted in practice. In other words, acknowledging the emergent dimensions of interactions offers the possibility for fashioning them anew.

### **Care in Deception and Secrecy**

Ways of seeing are simultaneously ways of unseeing. As noted above, while conjuring is often theorized as a form of social interaction between magicians and audiences, the tendency is to treat dealings in one-directional terms. Agency, knowledge and the scope for action typically rest in the hands of the performer. In line with other secret keepers, the magician is cast in the role of manipulator and the experience of conjuring is largely grounded in this perspective. By

identifying forms of 'reciprocal action' in the previous section, I sought to acknowledged ways in which magic is jointly accomplished even as it entails intentional concealment, asymmetrical knowledge as well as deliberate efforts to control attention.

Against the opening provided by the contingencies of interactions noted at the end of the previous section, in the remainder of the article I want to consider an alternative possibility for imagining magic as an activity and therefore imagining the secret keeping and deception central to it. This possibility extends the previous effort in this article to understand conjuring as a form of social interaction; and in particular as a reciprocal action. It does so by asking what demands could follow from the recognition of inter-dependency.

Born out of the sensitivities fostered through my self-study, I want to ask how magic can be approached as a practice of caring. Care, and in particular the ethics of care, has served as basis for re-imagining many activities and role relations in recent decades (student-teacher, client-professional, patient-doctor, e.g., Reiter 1997).

Although multiply conceived, the notion of care is frequently understood as a situational and relational practice of attention. To seek to care is to be motivated to think and act in relation to the needs of others (Tronto 1993). As a form of embodied practice, the "dialectics of care and control, power and intimacy" (Cekaite 2010, 21) are enacted through varied modalities of communication and socialization: talk, gaze, touch

and posture. Conceived as such, caring is a deeply moral endeavor featuring vulnerability, responsibility and reciprocity.

The literature on caring underscores the importance of cultivating a willingness to be moved by and to respond to others (Hendriks 2012). This cultivation can be enabled by continually posing questions about how and why caring takes place, what it means to be receptive to others, how the cared-for contribute to caring, who is able to care in the first place, who defines what the concept means, and how self-reflection can be fostered (Johns 2009). In this way, the practice "care" is often contrasted with simply going through the motions of assisting others. Caring is done in specific situations in which attention is required because the matter of how to act appropriately is not pre-determined. What is necessary then, is a hesitation to neatly settle and an "openness concerning the very questions of what is cared for, how to care and who cares" (Schillmeier 2017, 58). Hesitation and openness can prevent care from sliding into its close cousin: carelessness.

While caring was not a notion central to my conceptualization of magic at the start of the sessions, it emerged as one through reflecting on the interactions. As suggested in the previous section, selectivity, mutual dependency, and affect were themes highly relevant to my experiences, as they are typically defined as relevant to care. Consider then some descriptive affinities then between these two activities, starting with selectivity. Lamont and Wiseman's (1999, 31) much quoted

characterization of entertainment magic is that it entails misdirection which takes "*the audience towards the effect and away from the method*" (italics in original). Martin, Myers, and Viseu (2015, 629) echo the two-part structure of Lamont and Wiseman's definition for magic when they contend: "Care is an affectively charged and selective mode of attention that directs action, affection, or concern at something, and in effect, it draws attention away from other things" (Martin, Myers, and Viseu 2015, 635). As Martin, Myers, and Viseu (2015) also state:

Care is a selective mode of attention: it circumscribes and cherishes some things, lives, or phenomena as its objects. In the process, it excludes others. Practices of care are always shot through with asymmetrical power relations: who has the power to care? Who has the power to define what counts as care and how it should be administered? (627)

Similarly in this vein, while it is possible to treat care in an idealized manner as entailing acts of altruistic self-sacrifice, it is often recognized as involving relations of unevenness and discrimination (Pettersen 2011).

Care as a notion for interpreting the practices of magic offers the possibility for reframing its common depictions. For instance, rather than the asymmetries and inequalities of caring justifying one-sided conceptions of relations, many of those theorizing care have taken them as the basis for underscoring forms of mutual dependency. For Noddings (2013) the act of caring for another entails a mutual dependency; the one cared-for and the one-caring realize themselves through each other.

Caring cannot take place when those cared for reject the caring offered.

dependency. Especially to the extent that magic is treated as entailing deception, the magician requires an audience to complete the performance.<sup>16</sup> That audience might be compliant, antagonistic or even adversarial - possibly all these things at different times or at the same time - but it needs to be engaged at some level. Perhaps especially owing to my novice status, in this regard it is worth noting that my most emotionally charged moments came, not from when the tricks went awry or when participants challenged me about how the tricks were done, but rather when I felt participants attentionally disengaged while I was trying to engage them in the performance. In other words, the strongest affective charge was associated with conditions of responsiveness rather than the specific content of responses. Through actions that might even go unnoticed by participants themselves, experiences of vulnerability and control can shift dramatically as part of interactions. While undoubtedly as a beginner the profile of my concerns would be patterned differently than a seasoned professional, the reliance of the performer on the audience means that the vulnerabilities are shared. The heckler, for instance, is often regarded as troubling figure by magicians. At least part of the destabilizing aspect of the hecklers is that they don't subscribe to same notions of who can speak when, about what, to whom, and in what manner that emerges from the interaction of magicians and the rest of

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<sup>16</sup> Although deception is a common theme in attempts by scholars and practitioners to theorize magic, not everyone concurs with this assessment (Reynolds [2003] 2013); Hass 2014). In any case, dissimulation figured as a central theme and resource in the sessions examined in this article.

the audiences.

While explicitly framing magician-audience relations as forms of mutual care is not common in the literature theorizing conjuring, owing to the manner it is often understood as a form of affective drama, the identities of magicians and audiences are often portrayed as intertwined. For instance, professionals regularly underscore the importance of responding to the emotional needs of individual audience members to realize their own potential, as well as the manner in which the day-to-day working demands can frustrate such a responsiveness (e.g., Brown 2003). How to guard against deceiving sliding into demeaning or another unwelcomed relation has been a topic of concern (e.g., Close [2003] 2013). Part of the response offered has been the call to refrain from treating magic as an act of fooling (Reynolds [2003] 2013) as well as using the acknowledged deceptions of magic to alert audiences to how unacknowledged deceptions underpin popular claims to supernatural phenomenon (Penn and Teller 1989).<sup>17</sup> Jon Allen (2013) spoke to a variety of techniques for making an emotional connection with audiences, techniques that can be associated with practices of care, including:

1. Using physical props that people attribute with significance or can be made significant;
2. Asking questions to audience that can inform the magic;
3. Using meaningful themes and symbols (e.g., togetherness);

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<sup>17</sup> Although by no means do those in entertainment magic seeking to debunk others' claims to supernatural or paranormal abilities necessarily present the deceptions of entertainment magic as unproblematic. See Measom and Weinstein (2014).

4. Having a personality;
5. Matching the energy of the audience;
6. Getting audience members interacting with one another;
7. Ensuring everyone present participates and feels positive from the experience;
8. Being okay with struggling in front of audiences.

More generally, humor, storytelling, and self-effacement are some of the devices advocated to avoid demeaning others (e.g., Nelms [1969] 2000).

A prominent question posed in the study of care is how to enable caring relations to flourish despite the developments and conditions that frustrate care. One set of responses offered is to find ways of "*avoiding, staying with, and transforming the trouble*" (Schrader 2015, 669 - italics in original). Such actions are predicated on a prior step: acknowledging trouble.

In this spirit of such suggestions, let me note some sources of trouble I experienced in the aforementioned sessions. The previous sections spoke to some general relational troubles identified with magic as well as some of those associated with the specific sessions carried out. More could be acknowledged on the latter though, certainly. Despite the sessions taking place between (largely) known academic colleagues as form of research-entertainment, they weren't without sources of ethical knots, binds, and discomforts. One person become agitated to the point of repeatedly getting up from the table because cards tricks reminded

him of childhood experiences of being humiliated by magicians. This action was verbally sanctioned at one point by his partner. Others bristled at my reluctance to divulge the secrets mechanisms. This included one person that insisted to know whether I could actually read her body language and, as well, the hidden mechanisms of one trick (information the other participant did not wish to know and left to avoid hearing). The final trick in the routine involved a deliberately ironic, spurious, and playful explanation for how the tricks in the session were accomplished. Unfortunately, some participants took the explanation at face value to my and other participants' visible discomfort. When approached as a matter of care, the question of how to stay with and transform such troubles comes to the fore.

How to make magic responsive to others as well as how to become able to be moved by others in the undertaking of tricks, though, are matters in need of ongoing consideration. That the audience recognizes that deception-concealment is afoot and in the service of entertainment does not begin to exhaust the question of how to stay with the troubles of magic. This is especially so in the specific case of the sessions under examination in this article, not least, because they involved extensive interactions between all those present.

An imperative that follows from the previous analysis is that a sustained engagement with these troubles – what they are, who defines them, what can be done in response – should be part of understanding

magic as a form of interaction.

## **Discussion**

In his influential article, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies", Georg Simmel (1906) wrote of how the possession of secrets by some offers the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest one. Entertainment magic entails acts of secrecy and deception recognized as present and, in general terms, assented to by all those involved. Herein, the seemingly improbable or downright impossible becomes manifest. In the process, what is visible and appreciated belies what is concealed and unrecognized. What appears to be one thing, if only it could be inspected properly, could be revealed as otherwise.

Just how appropriately modern conjurers position themselves vis-à-vis secrecy and deception though remains a matter to be settled in relation to specific situations. As with other types of relations based on asymmetrical knowledge, the hazards entailed are many. Magicians, for instance, have reproached one another for fetishizing their possession of secrets (Neale 2008). When it comes to performer-audience interactions, another danger is that magic can be conceived of as a competitive struggle between opposing sides. As has been argued, while modern conjuring endures as a form of entertainment, the emphasis on placed on control and manipulation in its popular portrayal results in a highly

gendered form of performance that thereby attracts a limited sub-population of new entrants (e.g., Nardi 1988; Jones 2011).

While certainly not denying entertainment magic can entail forms of contest and mutual testing between performers and audiences nor that some individuals participate in magic with highly competitive mindsets, this article has sought to foster non-conventional ways of characterizing it as an activity. In doing so I have countered common conceptions of magic involving a binary opposition between the magician and audience, as well as tendencies to reduce performances to the initiatives and know-how of magicians.

When approached as a reciprocal action, the practice of conjuring shifts from being a one-directional competitive act of manipulation by a secret keeper to a negotiated and emerging process negotiated between individuals. Herein audiences are defined not according to an internal logic or invariant qualities. Instead audiences are understood through their situated and embodied relationality to the magician, and (vital for the purpose of robustly theorizing magic) the magician is understood through audiences. In other words, the limelight is not with the individualized performers (who possess esoteric knowledge) but instead with instances of interaction and how all those present negotiate their actions (and inactions) in relation to one another.

To be sure, as conventionally understood, magic is decidedly asymmetrical in the manner magicians forward directive after directive,

whereas participants do not. Magicians also conventionally make use of asymmetrical rights to speak, such as in how pauses in their verbal pattern typically are not taken by others as possible points for their own verbal contributions but instead orientated to as temporary stoppages controlled by the performer. So too were such features present in relation to the sessions examined in this article. Moreover, unlike as is commonplace for other activities (e.g., child care, see Goodwin & Cekaite 2012), I was not compelled to escalate directives into imperative demands or to engage others in extended argumentative sequences because individuals refused to undertake my directives. In such ways, magicians frequently assume an authority that would be out of place in many other walks of life.

Despite this, reasons have been given in this article for suggesting how that overall authority can be and is subject to negotiation. Competitive dynamics of oppositional striving and cooperative relations of mutual striving toward a shared goal mixed to support participants acting together based on ordinary understanding of the conventions of card tricks. In this, participants sought to be responsive to the actions of other participants and the magician. Appropriating a term from social philosophy, it might be said that "shared intentionalities" were built through the mutual responsiveness (as well as evoked collective ethos) enabled by the joint activity undertaken.<sup>18</sup> Viewed as a mutualist enterprise, the justifications for treating magic in hierarchical, one-sided agency terms diminishes.

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<sup>18</sup> For an examination of these themes see Bratman (1999) and Toumela (2007).

And yet, treating magic as a form of situated practice involving inter-relation, coordination and mutualism simultaneously also foregrounds the contingencies of the specific enactments under examination in this study. With an eye toward such contingencies, I have sought to acknowledge how the methods employed to facilitate learning about audiences' experiences were co-constitutive of the data produced. Within the sessions, due to my prodding through questions, participants responded in ways that went beyond the typical (dis-) affiliation displays that follow tricks (e.g., applause, laughter, jeers, expressions of "How did he do that?"). Instead of just being with the activity at hand, they were explicitly asked to account for what it meant to be involved with it. As part of doing so, at times individuals presented their actions and inactions as born out of commitments to cooperation and, as with other aspects of behavior, such utterances shaped an understanding of magic as a practice there and then in the unfolding scene.

Given the acknowledgement of such contingencies, the goal of this article has not been to set out a definitive conceptualization of magic, but to ask how it (and the deception and concealment that are central to its enactment) can be alternatively appreciated. With a view from moving from empirical description to normative possibilities, I have advanced parallels between the practice of magic with scholarly approaches to care. Caring as a concept can help direct regard toward what is affectively and otherwise at stake in forms of interactional commitments associated with

the undertaking of magic: attention, responsiveness, and affective charge. Seen through the notion of care, of critical importance to learning how to perform magic is finding ways of cultivating appropriate awareness, discussion, and responses to the ethical knots, interactional binds, and productive potential associated with deception and concealment.

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