Paper 4: Magic Performance

At MIT, students are taught the art of discovering, reassessing, and sharing scientific truths. In light of this, the act of learning magic tricks and performing these on fellow MIT students provides a unique opportunity to compare modes of learning and practicing between those immersed in a culture where scientific rigor is a cultural norm and those in the general population. In this paper, I hope to explore the ways in which MIT students' unique background affects the learning of tricks by one of their peers, and how this calls into question the traditional balance between the learner and those being "practiced on."

In Rappert's piece "Pick a Card, Any card: Learning to Deceive and Conceal- with Care," he purports that one can reimagine magic as a "practice of care." This idea comes from the effort audience members seem to place on striking a balance between providing criticisms and "giving into the experience". In this way, Rappert notes that deception is commonly misconceived as a "one-directional form of manipulation" , and that there is a "push and pull" of sorts involved. I argue that, in the context of my practice, deception was not bidirectional, but rather strongly unidirectional with a natural "ricochet effect," in which the practitioner of the trick is still seen as a domineering force, but is open to comments and questions that only strengthen his or her relative stature in the *magician/observer relationship* after appropriate responses are provided. In other words, as I embarked on the task of learning a trick, I realized that having MIT students as peers to practice on and learn the art of deception is in some way atypical given the strong analytical underpinnings of daily conversation at the institute.

After the magician Nemo's presentation of my preferred trick, I was interested in studying how MIT students differed in reaction to seemingly simple tricks. I performed the trick on several MIT students in my living community, paying particular attention to take on the tips given in lecture. My particular trick was that which involved a set of red and white cards with printed icons. The general trick is to ask a participant to pick an icon, and surprise them by guessing the icon based on a series of "yes or no" questions. Of course, the mechanics of a trick are only a fraction of experience of learning a trick. A much more ephemeral aspect is the physical and oral methodologies used to distract and impose a state of consciousness that a guest magician of ours aptly described as "entering another realm" of state of mind where the consciousness is more open to subversion. To this end, I not only hid the numbers with my finger as Nemo recommended, I also practiced with several different participants the process of "pretending to think of a result" and creating the guide of a deductive process.

Although the people I performed the trick on questioned the level of complication in the trick and made initial statements like "there must be a way to find the images given there is a finite number of cards", they were still bewildered as to the exact mechanism and expressed profound interest. As MIT students, they immediately began to think in terms of probabilities and permutations (how many cards and how many items on each card are needed to determine a given choice in the participant). For the sake of clarity, I chose some of the subjects in no systematic way and attempted to explain the trick to them to understand how their opinions and understanding changed. After I explained that there are numbers at the bottom of the cards that allow me to determine their chosen icon, they were more invested in the trick than ever before. They were now interested in how such a process was invented and how it can be optimized. Some immediately began thinking about how the numbers (1,2,4,8) presented an optimal

representation that could easily be translated to binary, or what would change if more cards/icons were added to the trick. This is a first indication that the population at MIT has less interest in feeling mystified, and more interest in feeling challenged. As a learner of the trick, I benefited from this extensively by gaining a better understanding of the trick itself, and being even more challenged to cloak the trick with further layers of distraction and deception.

As such, I claim that it is not necessarily the case that "those present in the sessions [play] an active role in enabling deception", as my experience implies that this subset of the population is more interested in determining the trick at play than engaging in the social "games" of power that lead to a more traditional show. More than ever, the learning of the trick involves "[practicing] in all things a certain nonchalance which conceals all artistry" as mentioned in Jones' paper "An apprenticeship in Cunning." More than ever, learning to trick MIT students takes an immense amount of the sort of "Cartesian cunning" that Jones mentions is important to French magicians, and was properly bestowed onto us (even if virtually) by Nemo.

In all, we have provided a slight counterexample to some of the claims found in Rappert's paper, using background from Jones to understand the interactions involved in learning tricks. MIT students form a unique subculture, since student life is centered around academic rigor and the pursuit of knowledge. The claims of this paper give rise to the broader question of replicability in different types of studies, and how an "odd enough" group of participants can beget a different idea of anthropological truths.

21A.520 Magic, Science, and Religion

Fall 2021