



# PERFORMING DECEPTION

LEARNING, SKILL  
AND THE ART OF  
CONJURING

BRIAN RAPPERT



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2022 Brian Rappert



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Brian Rappert, *Performing Deception: Learning, Skill and the Art of Conjuring*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0295>

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0295#copyright>

Further details about the CC BY-NC license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Updated digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0295#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 9781800646902

ISBN Hardback: 9781800646919

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800646926

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 9781800646933

ISBN Digital ebook (AZW3): 9781800646940

ISBN XML: 9781800646957

Digital ebook (HTML): 9781800646964

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0295

Cover image: Follower of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Card Players* (17th century). Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Friends of the Fogg Art Museum Fund, Photo ©President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1929.253, <https://hvr.dart/o/231633>.

Cover design by Anna Gatti

# 7. Control and Care

---

‘You’re not playing with us, you are playing on us.’

– Anonymous

‘We don’t keep secrets *from* the audience, we keep secrets *for* the audience.’

– Michael Weber<sup>1</sup>

How should we be together?

In late 2019, as part of my apprenticeship in conjuring, I began undertaking paid-for small group shows akin in their basic format to the sessions discussed in Chapter 3.<sup>2</sup> At each show, a dozen or so participants assembled around a large table at the Ashburton Arts Centre near the edge of Dartmoor National Park. A series of magical effects were interspersed with group discussion which I prompted and then moderated. Eight events were held before the Covid-19 lockdown in England. After lockdown began, the sessions moved online, with 16 held through the Ashburton Arts Centre and the Exeter Phoenix up until February 2021.

Toward the end of my first show in November 2019, I suggested to participants how magic can entail a playful chemistry of concealment and revelation. At this point, one person interjected with the comment at the start of this chapter. Introducing himself as a retired schoolteacher, he contrasted the open-ended way children can play with the orchestrated actions that made up the show. The exchange that followed was one of several memorable episodes for me, in which disquiet was openly voiced about how we came together.<sup>3</sup>

---

1 <https://tomdup.wordpress.com/tag/michael-weber/>

2 All public shows were held as charity fundraisers.

3 For a discussion on ‘dark’ forms of play in magic, see Dean, E. 2018. ‘The End of Mindreading’, *Journal of Performance Magic*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.5920/jpm.2018.04>

As a further way into understanding conjuring as a form of interaction, in this chapter I hold together the notions of ‘control’ and ‘care’ to ask how each can inform the other. As in previous chapters, I do so by surveying the thoughts of professional magicians, as well as reflecting on my experiences. On the latter, in starting this self-other study in late 2017, I had no sense that care would figure as a theme in my research. At that point, questions about how concealment and revelation mixed were at the forefront of my mind. By the time I began offering public shows, however, matters of care had become central. This chapter shares some of the sensitivities and strategies that emerged.

## Control and Connection

As developed in earlier chapters, while conjuring is often theorized as an activity involving magicians and audiences, a tendency is to treat the encounter in one-directional terms. Certainly, when it comes to the magic effects themselves, control is often characterized as essential. Whilst conjuring is acknowledged as an activity done for an audience, frequently agency, knowledge and the scope for action is invested with the conjuror. Or, at least these things should rest there if conjurors are doing their jobs properly. To offer an analogy, conjuring is often likened to sculpting. Through skills of misdirection and much besides, the conjuror molds audiences’ perceptions and understandings. Some audiences are rough, some pliable and some strained in their composition. The task of the conjuror is to achieve the desired effect against whatever niggles might present themselves.

And yet, while the imperative for control reoccurs in instructional materials and professional discussions, so too does the importance of making an emotional connection to others.<sup>4</sup> A frequent refrain is that magic is created with, not just for, the audience.<sup>5</sup> As a result, thinking about how to guard against belittling audiences or inflating one’s

---

4 As, for instance, in Burger, Eugene n.d. *Audience Involvement...A Lecture* Asheville, NC: Excelsior!! Productions; as well as Vincent, Michael. 2021. Share Magic Lecture, 27 October. [https://www.sharemagic.org/sharemagic/?utm\\_campaign=Michael+Vincent+ShareMagic&utm\\_content=Michael+Vincent+Share+Magic&utm\\_medium=newsletter&utm\\_source=email](https://www.sharemagic.org/sharemagic/?utm_campaign=Michael+Vincent+ShareMagic&utm_content=Michael+Vincent+Share+Magic&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_source=email)

5 Clifford, Peter. 2020, January 12. *A Story for Performance*. Lecture notes from presentation at The Session. London.

self-importance is a recurring concern.<sup>6</sup> Humor, storytelling and self-effacement are some of the techniques advocated to avoid appearing smug, superior and so on to audiences, even as they are subject to calculated manipulations.<sup>7</sup> As part of an explicit attempt to move away from conceiving of magic in one-directional terms of domination, Jon Allen spoke to a variety of techniques for seeking emotional resonance in his instructional DVD titled *Connection*:

1. Using physical props that people attribute with significance or can be made significant;<sup>8</sup>
2. Asking questions of audiences that can inform the magic;
3. Using meaningful themes and symbols (for instance, togetherness);
4. Having a personality;
5. Matching the energy of the audience;
6. Ensuring audience members interact;
7. Making sure everyone present participates and feels positive from the experience;
8. Being okay with struggling in front of audiences.<sup>9</sup>

Through undertaking these kinds of techniques, the objective<sup>10</sup> is for magicians to be with others even if a sharp rift exists between the spectators' and magicians' understandings of what is taking place.

---

6 For instance, Close, Michael. [2003] 2013. 'The Big Lie'. In: *Magic in Mind: Essential Essays for Magicians*, Joshua Jay (Ed.). Sacramento: Vanishing Inc: 97–102.

7 For instance, Nelms, Henning. [1969] 2000. *Magic and Showmanship*. Mineola, NY: Dover.

8 Objects can be imbued with significance for many reasons. For instance, as part of my online shows, audience members were asked to have a deck of cards to hand in order to do some effects together. In one case, a participant had gone into her attic to find the box containing magic tricks that her recently deceased father had used on special family occasions. As she discovered, the deck of playing cards he used was almost completely made up of the same identical card, the King of Diamonds.

9 Allen, Jon. 2013. *Connection*. Las Vegas, NV: Penguin Magic.

10 Whether or not the techniques spoken to in this section of the book work in the manner expected is another matter. For instance, evidence does exist suggesting that some audiences decidedly like to be fooled and most would rather observe than partake in tricks, see Jay, J. 2016. 'What Do Audiences Really Think?', *MAGIC* (September): 46–55. <https://www.magicconvention.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Survey.pdf>

Other advice given by experienced professionals includes telling stories,<sup>11</sup> conveying messages,<sup>12</sup> giving gifts to audiences,<sup>13</sup> and even making tricks peripheral features of shows.<sup>14</sup> Whatever the specific technique, those seeking to realize an empathetic connection call for moving away from the tendency of conjurers to present magic as a puzzle-solving exercise that challenges audiences to figure out how ‘tricks’<sup>15</sup> are done.<sup>16</sup> While magicians’ fascination with technique makes puzzle-solving a suitable aim for when they perform for each other, creating astonishment for laypeople is said to require emotional engagement.<sup>17</sup>

The call for magicians to be responsive to audiences’ predilections (rather than their own) indicates one limit to conceiving of conjuring as an exercise in unilateral control. Even as conjurers seek to influence how others behave and what they perceive, they must do so in ways that audiences regard as recognizable, intelligible and appropriate. Thus, magicians need to give up pursuing their likings and ensure they act in ways regarded as suitable for specific audiences.<sup>18</sup> These preferences express culturally available, historically formed and locally enacted conventions, mores and judgements. As Steve Palmore maintained, as an African-American magician often performing for Caucasian groups, the demands of meeting audiences’ expectations can extend far beyond the minutiae of the naturalness of hand movements.<sup>19</sup> Instead,

- 
- 11 Neale, Robert. 1991. *Tricks of the Imagination*. Seattle: Hermetic Press and Jones, G. 2012. ‘Magic with a Message’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 27(2): 193–214. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2012.01140.x>
  - 12 Allen, Jonathan and O’Reilly, Sally. 2009. *Magic Show*. London: Hayward Publishing: 84.
  - 13 Hass, Lawrence. (Ed.) 2010. *Gift Magic: Performances That Leave People with a Souvenir*. Theory and Art of Magic Press.
  - 14 Brown, Derren. 2021. *Bristol Society of Magic—Centenary Celebration: An Evening with Derren Brown (Bristol), 3 May*.
  - 15 Along these lines, within performances magicians often avoid the language of ‘tricks’ and ‘trickery’ because of their connotations about fooling, in favor of other terminology for their feats such as ‘event’, ‘experience’, ‘experiment’ or simply ‘something mysterious’.
  - 16 Compare and contrast, for instance, McCabe, Pete. 2017. *Scripting Magic*. London: Vanishing Inc: 306; and Bruns, L. C. and Zompetti, J. P. 2014. ‘The Rhetorical Goddess: A Feminist Perspective on Women in Magic’, *Journal of Performance Magic*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.5920/jpm.2014.218>
  - 17 As in Harris, Paul and Mead, Eric. *The Art of Astonishing*. [n.p.]: Multimedia A-1.
  - 18 Comments by Paul Draper in ‘Scripting Magic 2.1 (Part 2)’, 11 September 2020. <https://videochatmagic.substack.com/p/scripting-magic-21-part-2>
  - 19 Palmore, Steve. 2020. *Vanish*, 31: 25.

pervasive cultural stereotypes can come into play.<sup>20</sup> It is by successfully engaging with others' expectations and desires, not simply their own, that magicians gain validation from audiences that they are competent, convincing and charismatic.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, even as magicians act to deceive others, doing so requires they labor to 'induce or suppress feeling so to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, conjurors need to police themselves for displays of emotion that might be deemed 'out of place' (and much more besides—see Chapter 4).

In sum, to do *for* another can entail doing *according to* another. And in commercial magic, there can be many others—audience members, performance venues, production houses, technical crews, online platforms, video directors, 'the market', etc.<sup>23</sup>

More than this, in attempting to exert control over others, magicians invariably make themselves vulnerable. While some conjurors might conceive of their central task as producing docility,<sup>24</sup> the prospect that others (for instance, children or partygoers) might not go along with such plans can never be fully eliminated. Indeed, it is the ability to go on in light of the possibility that things may go awry (because people and objects are not fully controllable) that, in significant respects, makes magic a skillful enterprise. The heckler, for instance, represents one, much professionally derided incarnation of unruliness.<sup>25</sup> This status

- 
- 20 For a gender-based analysis of such issues, see Bruns, L. C. and Zompetti, J. P. 2014. 'The Rhetorical Goddess: A Feminist Perspective on Women in Magic', *Journal of Performance Magic*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.5920/jpm.2014.218> and Noyes, P. and Pallenberg, H. 2008. *Women in Boxes: The Documentary Film About Magic's Better Half* [Motion Picture]. Available from <http://www.filmbaby.com/films/3277>
- 21 When magic is performed across cultures, what counts as magic skill can be much contested; see Goto-Jones, Chris. 2016. *Conjuring Asia: Magic, Orientalism, and the Making of the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139924573>.
- 22 Hochschild, A. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 7.
- 23 For a discussion of such matters, listen to Shezam. 2020. *Podcast 54—Catie Osborn on Shakespeare and Tips From an Entertainment Director*. Shezam Podcast. Available at <https://shezampod.com/series/shezam/> and Frisch, Ian. 2019. *Magic Is Dead: My Journey into the World's Most Secretive Society of Magicians*. New York: Dey St.: 102.
- 24 For a detailed analysis on how this can be done in unfolding interactions, see Jones, Graham M. and Shweder, Lauren. 2003. 'The Performance of Illusion and Illusionary Performatives', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 31(1): 51–70.
- 25 Jones, Graham M. 2017. *Magic's Reason*. London: University of Chicago Press: 156.

stems, at least in part, from the manner that hecklers do not subscribe to the same notions as others who are present about who can speak when, about what, to whom and in what manner. They want to be 'IT, no matter what anyone else thinks'.<sup>26</sup> It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the handling of hecklers is portrayed as a vital and nuanced proficiency.<sup>27</sup> Maybe even worse than being heckled, though, audiences can simply leave, never to return. And without an audience, can there be magic? Or even a magician?

## The Ethics of Care

The arguments in the previous paragraphs suggest reasons why control is not well understood simply as the command of the conjurer. To foster other ways of understanding, in the remainder of the chapter I approach magic through an alternative (yet not simply opposing) concept. Specifically, born out of the sensitivities fostered through my self-other study, I want to ask what comes to the fore when magic is approached as a *practice of care*.

To seek to care is to be motivated to think and act in relation to one's or others' needs. Attempts to theorize care, particularly developed within feminist studies, have led to varied formulations.<sup>28</sup> Although multiply conceived, care is frequently regarded as a practice of attention. More than just attention, caring has been said to entail a willingness to respond to needs, a competency in doing so and a regard for the possibility that responses can turn abusive.<sup>29</sup>

In recent decades, the concept of care has served as a basis for reimagining many relationships. How students and teachers, clients and professionals, as well as patients and doctors can be with one other

- 
- 26 Hopkins, Charles. 1978. *Outs, Precautions and Challenges for Ambitious Card Workers*. Calgary: Micky Hades: 76.
- 27 See Nelms, Henning. 2000 [1969]. *Magic and Showmanship*. Mineola, NY: Dover: 232 and Jones, Graham and Shweder, Lauren. 2003. 'The Performance of Illusion and Illusionary Performatives: Learning the Language of Theatrical Magic', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 13(1): 51-70.
- 28 Gilligan, Carol. 1982. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Held, Virginia. 1993. *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; and Kittay, Eva Feder. 1999. *Love's Labor*. London: Routledge.
- 29 Tronto, Joan. 1994. *Moral Boundaries*. London: Routledge.



has been informed by the 'ethics of care'.<sup>30</sup> Rather than the asymmetries in such relations leading to one-sided conceptions of what it means to deliver care, though, the asymmetries have been taken as the basis for underscoring mutual dependency. This is so because the one who is cared for and the one caring realize themselves through each other. Caring cannot take place when those cared for reject what is offered or when carers disengage from the cared-for.<sup>31</sup> Conceived as such, caring is a deeply ethical endeavor featuring vulnerability, responsibility and mutuality between all present.

With the centrality given to vulnerability, responsibility and mutuality, many of those theorizing care have asked how it can entail its notional opposites. For Aryn Martin and colleagues: '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'.<sup>32</sup> As they also argue, since our efforts and energies cannot be directed everywhere and to everyone, care:

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?<sup>33</sup>

Conceived in this manner, caring is a practice dependent on control.<sup>34</sup>

With the ways attention and inattention are bound together, the question of whether 'caring' is taking place cannot be assumed from the outset. A hospital might be a quintessential site for care, but just because some people are visibly attending to others does not mean that 'caring' is an apt description for what is going on. Caring requires continually

---

30 See e.g., Reiter, Sara. 1997. 'The Ethics of Care and New Paradigms for Accounting Practice', *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 10(3): 299–324. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513579710178098>

31 Noddings, Nel. 2013. *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Second edition, updated). London: University of California Press.

32 Martin, Arnn, Myers, Natasha and Viseu, Ana. 2015. 'The Politics of Care in Technoscience', *Social Studies of Science*, 45(5): 635. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312715602073>

33 *Ibid.*, 627.

34 Pettersen, Tove. 2011. 'The Ethics of Care: Normative Structures and Empirical Implications', *Health Care Analysis*, 19(1): 51–64 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10728-010-0163-7>

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 can care in the first place and who defines what the term means.<sup>35</sup> In this way, its realization is often contrasted with simply going through the motions of assisting others. Caring is done in specific situations in which the question of how to act cannot be pre-determined. An ongoing 'openness concerning the very questions of what is cared for, how to care and who cares'<sup>36</sup> has been advised to prevent care from descending into carelessness.

### Entanglements of Care

Let us return to conjuring. As suggested above, though rarely using the term care, magicians have questioned how they can be attentive and responsive to the emotional needs of their audiences. Beyond those already mentioned, additional entanglements can be noted regarding what counts as care, how to care and who should care in magic.

The place of deception is one source of unease. Conjurors routinely act with the intent to mislead. They strive to deceive through deliberate acts of dissimulation and simulation.<sup>37</sup> In this, they are hardly alone as professionals.<sup>38</sup> But still, the centrality of deception and secrecy in conjuring might be taken as in conflict with the possibility for responsiveness to others.

- 
- 35 Hendriks, Ruud. 2012. 'Tackling Indifference—Clowning, Dementia, and the Articulation of a Sensitive Body', *Medical Anthropology*, 31(6): 459–476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2012.674991>; and Johns, Christopher. 2009. *Becoming a Reflective Practitioner* (Third Edition). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- 36 Schillmeier, Michael. 2017. 'The Cosmopolitics of Situated Care', *The Sociological Review Monographs*, 65(2): 58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0081176917710426>.
- 37 In a wide-ranging analysis of deception (including magic), Barton Whaley defined *dissimulation* as hiding the real, whereas simulation is showing the false. See Whaley, Barton. 1982. 'Toward a General Theory of Deception', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 5(1): 178–192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402398208437106>
- 38 Tuckett, A. 1988. 'Bending the Truth: Professionals Narratives about Lying and Deception in Nursing Practice', *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 35(5): 292–302; Clarke, S. 1999. 'Justifying Deception in Social Science Research', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 16(2): 151–166. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5930.00117>; and Hunt, Jennifer and Manning, Peter K. 1991. 'The Social Context of Police Lying', *Symbolic Interaction*, 14(1): 51–70. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.1991.14.1.51>.

The quote from Mike Weber at the start of the chapter, however, provides one justification for secrecy.<sup>39</sup> Through obscuring the mundane methods for effects, audiences can experience wonder, astonishment and much else besides.<sup>40</sup> A parallel argument could be given for deception. And yet, even if secret-keeping and deception are taken as integral to inducing wonder, a countervailing danger is that the motivations for them can have more to do with bolstering the aura of magicians. In *The Royal Road to Card Magic*, for instance, Hugard and Braué propose the rule:

Never reveal the secret of a trick. Many good card tricks are so simple that to reveal the method is to lower yourself in the estimation of the audience, who have given you great credit for a skill that you then confess you don't possess.<sup>41</sup>

Herein, it is the status of the magician that takes center stage. However, bolstering the standing of magicians can, at times, also be an act of caring. For instance, hospitalized patients have been taught magic as a way of fostering a sense of control in order to counter feelings of disempowerment.<sup>42</sup>

Doubleness characterizes other aspects of magic. For instance, in conjuring, as in social life more generally, one way to build a connection with another person is to visibly attend to them. Making eye contact and closely watching others' reactions are essentials for being responsive. And yet, the appropriateness of the magician's gaze at the culmination of a trick has been called into question.<sup>43</sup> The root of the concern is that experiencing wonder leaves audiences in an effectively exposed state as

---

39 For a similar discussion read Laurier, Eric. 2004. 'The Spectacular Showing: Houdini and the Wonder of Ethnomethodology', *Human Studies*, 27: 385–387. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-004-3341-5>.

40 However, this is hardly the only way magicians make sense of knowledge of methods. Knowledge of 'how it was done' has been said to enhance the effects of (at least some) tricks. See Kestenbaum, David. 2017, June 30. 'The Magic Show—Act Two', *The American Life*. <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/619/the-magic-show/act-two-31>

41 Hugard, Jean and Braué, Frederick. 2015. *The Royal Road to Card Magic* (Video Edition). London: Foulsham: 10.

42 Shalmiyev, Rich. 2020, June 21. *Presentation in the 'Bridging the Impossible: Science of Magic, Wellbeing and Happiness' Workshop*.

43 Of course, in some settings (such as stage magic), performers staring into darkened auditoriums might have limited possibilities for looking at or gauging audiences.

they struggle to make sense of what they witnessed. As magicians such as Suzanne have advocated, at the culmination of a trick, audiences let their emotional guard down. To respect others, it is better therefore for magicians to look away for a beat, and then re-establish a connection after the audience has had a moment to recompose themselves.<sup>44</sup>

Acting in relation to the needs of others is also not straightforward because of alternative conception of the end goals of magic. As noted above, Jon Allen advocates a relaxed attitude when things go wrong because mess-ups provide a basis for developing a personal connection with audiences. And, for Allen, connection is the point. In contrast, Ortiz has called for minimizing regard for such moments in order to get on with producing strong effects:

When something goes wrong in a performance, your job is to make the audience forget it as quickly as possible. Whining and self-indulgently dwelling on the matter will only impress the screw-up more strongly on their memory. If, instead, you treat the matter as of little importance, they will too.<sup>45</sup>

Such orientations offer highly contrasting ways to think about the place of vulnerability and mutuality.

Another source of trouble in caring relates to audience feedback. While magicians might be motivated to act in relation to the audience's needs, previous chapters outlined many of the reasons that experienced conjurers have identified for why this can be challenging: settings might not easily allow for anything but coarse and undependable forms of feedback (for instance, clapping); audiences can be too polite to voice criticisms directly or not be bothered enough to raise them at all; disapproving remarks can be discounted by magicians because of their pre-existing beliefs; and so on.<sup>46</sup> In certain respects, it is the very interpersonal considerations leading audiences to go along with someone playing the conjuror role that cast doubt on the wisdom of taking audiences' overt behavior as a reliable guide to their inner feelings. Yet, without a way to gauge participants' experiences, it is difficult for

---

44 Comments from Suzanne in Regal, David. 2019. *Interpreting Magic*. Blue Bike Productions: 424–425.

45 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 432.

46 For a discussion of many such considerations, see Brown, D. 2003. *Absolute Magic* (Second edition). London: H&R Magic Books.

magicians to be receptive to them. Today, whilst social media enables refined techniques for soliciting feedback that are not conditioned by face-to-face interactional considerations, their trustworthiness and representativeness remain open to doubt too.<sup>47</sup>

In my personal experience, cultivating conditions that enable meaningful feedback can be demanding. For instance, the first venue where I put on paid-for shows regularly solicited comments from audience members through a post-event questionnaire.<sup>48</sup> Such comments were invariably brief and positive. Although they might have bolstered my confidence as a fledgling magician, I felt I could not invest too much weight in such responses as a guide to audiences' experiences because of concerns about their readiness to criticize (see pages 69–72). Similarly, in my own experiences with others watching magic (or going to the theater, a yoga class, a restaurant, etc.), how audiences act during an event (for instance, engaged) can be markedly different from how they recount their experiences afterwards (for instance, bored). I might have even engaged in this kind of duplicitous behavior from time to time! When feedback is unreliable, it cannot serve performers to think or act in relation to others' needs.

As with other activities, caring in the case of magic is not only realized by individuals coming together. It is also constituted through an assemblage of objects: coins, handkerchiefs, chairs, tables, boxes, lighting and much besides. How care extends to such items is another matter for consideration. Many scholars working with the notion of care have sought to question commonplace tendencies to relegate the material world into a set of mere objects. In relation to promoting ecologically sound ways of living, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa argued that environmental agendas need to depart from treating soil as a productive resource that can be used according to human whims. Instead, soil should be respected as a living world with its own ecology. In this way, calls to care aim to promote considered forms of attention.<sup>49</sup>

---

47 Owen, Anthony. 2019, April 15. *The Insider*. <https://www.vanishingincmagic.com/blog/the-insider-anthony-owen>

48 All the proceeds from all the shows I have put on have been donated to charities, because that is a manifestation of caring too.

49 See Puig de la Bellacasa, M. 2017. *Matters of Care*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

In contrast, in relation to their ultimate ends, conjurors of modern magic often expend a great deal of labor to achieve the opposite orientation to the material world. As explored in Chapter 4, getting audiences to take coins, rings, ropes and other props as ordinary, off-the-rack, uninteresting and so on is often highly desired.<sup>50</sup> One objective of enabling you to inspect a coin, box or rope is for that object to be rendered into a genuine but still mere object: that is, a thing not worthy of much need for further scrutiny, let alone looking after. Instead, it is given, stable and transparently understood.<sup>51</sup>

Such attempts to render the items of magic into mere objects, though, are not without their recognized troubles as well. A danger is that audiences might act on this basis. Clients that pay for the services of magicians, for instance, might expect to keep a signed playing card, Rubik's Cube, or coin as a souvenir. If these are, in fact, specially designed props, the show might end up costing the magician.<sup>52</sup> In addition, rendering props into mere things is problematic because, as noted above, conjurors often advocate using objects with symbolic resonance to make the magic meaningful.<sup>53</sup> As a result of these kinds of competing considerations, the place of caring for the objects in magic is a delicate matter.

## Care Through Promoting Discussion

In line with the overall approach in *Performing Deception* of conceiving of magic as an interplay of co-existing but contrasting considerations, the previous sections proposed some of the ways control and care get entangled. In general, to imagine the conjuror — as carer suggests the

---

50 As elaborated in Hopkins, Charles. 1978. *Outs, Precautions and Challenges for Ambitious Card Workers*. Calgary: Micky Hades: 51; and Smith, Wally. 2016. 'Revelations and Concealments in Conjuring', Presentation at *Revelations Workshop* (Vadstena) 8 April.

51 Alongside this orientation, other have used historical or personal objects as a basis for deception. See Landman, Todd. 2020. 'Making it Real'. In: *The Magiculum II*, T. Landman (Ed.). [n.p.]: Todd Landman: 48.

52 As conveyed by Allen, Jon. 2019, June 19. *Day of Magic Presentation*. Leamington Spa.

53 Another issue in orientating to the materials of magic as mere things is the way material apparatus can tune performers. As noted in Chapter 4, prominent figures have warned against rehearsing in front of a mirror because it can condition unintended, unappreciated and, ultimately, undesired ways of acting.

importance of appreciating how conjurors and audiences are dependent on one another, being receptive to audiences' experiences, and attending to any troubles experienced for the lessons they might hold. Within the dynamics of deception that constitute magic as an activity, caring for your audience can serve as a means of fooling them, and fooling them can be an expression of regard—and even, some contend, love.<sup>54</sup> Deception itself, though, is typically achieved through efforts of control.

To further appreciate how care and control can get entangled, the remainder of this chapter turns to strategies whereby I, as an individual novice, sought to integrate control and care in my routines. These were overt performance settings in which I played the role of an 'academic magician'; that is to say, a conjuror that sought to use magic to raise questions about the human condition,<sup>55</sup> in large part through referring to scholarly ideas and concepts. Instead of seeking to re-enchant the world through demonstrating wondrous feats, the overall intention that emerged was to foster an appreciation of the mundane, 'seen but unnoticed',<sup>56</sup> and tacit ways we act together.

Let me elaborate how by starting with the overall design. As developed in Chapter 3, the basic focus group model adopted for my recorded sessions and public shows was intended to take engagement with audiences beyond the typical affective responses that follow acts of magic (for instance, displays of surprise, curiosity, incredulity). Participants were asked to reflect on our interactions as they unfolded and such reflections helped constitute those very interactions. In part, this was done by posing questions to the audience after the culmination of each effect. Those present then offered reflections for group discussion. In both my recorded sessions and public shows, this overall design served as a central basis for engaging with others in the moment and thus being responsive to what was arising for them. The conversation also served as the basis for subsequently revising the content and delivery of the sessions. Through doing so I sought to tailor the magic around others.

---

54 See comments from R. Paul Wilson comments in Regal, David. 2019. *Interpreting Magic*. Blue Bike Productions: 544.

55 For one elaboration of this notion, see Landman, T. 2018. 'Academic Magic: Performance and the Communication of Fundamental Ideas', *Journal of Performance Magic*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.5920/jpm.2018.02>

56 To adopt an expression from Garfinkel, Harold. 1984. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity.

However, as discussed in Chapter 3, while our interactions generated group dialogue, treating the resulting conversations as unadulterated expressions of inner thoughts and feelings would be problematic. This is so, in part, because of the points made in the previous section about the unreliability of feedback. During the delivery of these shows, questions also sprang in my mind from more generic concerns about the pervasiveness of ‘impression management’ in exchanges. Fields such as social psychology and sociology have long suggested that interpersonal communications are pervaded by defensive mindsets in which individuals attempt to avoid themselves or others being threatened.<sup>57</sup> This can lead to covert attributions of motives, the orientation to one’s thinking as obvious and correct, the use of face-saving expressions and so on.

Another source of caution related to how the discussions in my sessions were managed. One claimed advantage of focus groups as a method of research is that they enable those moderating the dialogue ‘both to direct the conversation towards topics that you want to investigate and to follow new ideas as they arise’.<sup>58</sup> How moderators reconcile the desire to steer and be steered, though, is a conundrum that has to be worked out in practice. Frequently. The basic need to reconcile these desires undercuts any notion that a focus group format simply enables participants to express themselves in their own terms.

In short, the magic sessions involved a doing together, but this took place in highly managed and mediated interactions in which questions can be asked about how deception, truth and caring comingled. The remaining sections of this chapter turn to such questions through examining how the intent to be responsive related to how attention was directed, how manipulation was achieved and how interactional troubles still emerged.

### Discussing Attention and Challenge

Let me start by reviewing additional aspects of the focus group format, through which I tried to solicit and be responsive to the audiences’

---

57 See, for instance, Argyris, C. 2006. *Reasons and Rationalizations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199268078.001.0001>.

58 Morgan, D. 1998. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. London: Sage: 58.



experiences. As with magic in general, the focus group-type dialogues in my sessions were acts of directing regard. As mentioned already, one of the ways I directed attention was to ask participants to consider how magic was something we achieved together through mundane actions and inactions that might well be 'seen but unnoticed'.<sup>59</sup> Through making what was taking place between us into a topic for joint consideration,<sup>60</sup> I sought to cultivate the possibility to be moved by and to respond to others.<sup>61</sup>

Take matters of attention and challenge. Before I started performing magic, I had worried about how closely audiences would attend to my actions and how often they would intervene to disrupt them. As I soon concluded, though, attention and challenge were not forms of audience behavior that I had to minimize in order to ensure effects could be pulled off. Instead, I needed both. Audiences had to follow along closely enough to be able to be amazed at the final outcome. Similarly, audience interventions during magic effects heightened the sense of their improbability. And yet, if pursued too robustly, attention and challenge would have made the effects impossible to pull off.<sup>62</sup>

Having derived these observations throughout the initial sessions I conducted in 2018, I began asking groups in subsequent sessions to offer accounts of how they were attending and challenging. As previously noted in Chapter 3, participants often accounted for their lack of interventions by contending that they were deliberately working to contribute toward the success of the effects. After hearing such justifications, in subsequent sessions I asked participants to reflect on how they were (and were not) attending to and challenging my actions through referencing the prior justifications given by other participants in earlier sessions.<sup>63</sup> Thus, instead of simply seeking to gather accounts

---

59 To adopt an expression from Garfinkel, Harold. 1984. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity.

60 Zimmerman, Don H. and Pollner, Melvin. 1971. 'The Everyday World as a Phenomenon'. In: *Understanding Everyday Life*, J.D. Douglas (Ed.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 80–103.

61 Hendriks, Ruud. 2012. 'Tackling Indifference—Clowning, Dementia, and the Articulation of a Sensitive Body', *Medical Anthropology*, 31(6): 459–476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2012.674991>

62 A tension explored in-depth in Hopkins, Charles. 1978. *Outs, Precautions and Challenges for Ambitious Card Workers*. Calgary: Micky Hades.

63 In promoting this kind of situated telling, I was able to de-individualize my questioning of participants conduct.

from participants about their behavior there and then, I introduced my observations and reflections derived from previous experiences. This was done to promote group inquiry.

### Discussing Eye Contact

Take another example. With the spread of Covid-19 in the spring of 2020, like many magicians, I pivoted toward offering Zoom-based online shows. Sixteen sessions were held through the Ashburton Arts Centre and the Exeter Phoenix arthouse up until February 2021.

Such technologically mediated forms of delivery raise many questions about how those present meet one another. For instance, eye contact is vital for establishing rapport and trust in many inter-personal relations. Platforms such as Zoom both enable (the appearance of) eye contact between magician and individual participants, and frustrate contact. They enable it in the manner each participant can see the magician directly in front of them, no matter the audience size. They frustrate eye contact because magicians are drawn to look down at the people on the computer screen so as to view their reactions, rather than up into the camera lens so as to be seen to be looking at audiences (from the latter's perspective). In response, some conjurors have proposed various solutions to establish the pretense of eye contact. This pretense is secured through compelling magicians to look into the camera lens rather than at the computer screen. These solutions include shielding the computer screen, positioning the participant image window as near to the camera as possible, and reconsidering whether this delivery platform is appropriate.<sup>64</sup>

In my online shows, I adopted a different orientation. Rather than seeking a solution for how to look, I sought to make the conditions for eye contact into a topic for discussion. The impetus for doing so stemmed from the first time I practiced for others on Zoom. In this session, I used a camera that inclined down onto my card table for participants so that audiences could closely scrutinize my card handling. A friend suggested the camera view needed to change. One reason she cited for doing so

---

64 Houston, Will and Thompson, Steve. 2020, June 7. 'Are You a Prioritisationist?', *Video Chat Magic*. See <https://videochatmagic.substack.com/p/are-you-a-prioritisationist>

was that seeing my eyes enabled her to imagine I was addressing her directly. What proved particularly interesting for me was what she then went on to say: that by seeing my eyes looking at her she could experience a one-to-one connection with me even as she recognized full well that I was rarely directly attending to her image. In other words, when I showed my face and looked into the camera, she felt an affective bond despite the conscious recognition that we were almost assuredly *not* making 'eye-to-eye' contact.

Based on this feedback, I made the constitution of inter-personal connection into a topic of group conversation. I typically did so in this way: at the end of one effect, I asked participants whether they were confident that they were seeing all that they needed to see in an online delivery format. Since virtual shows do not allow for the same kind of scrutiny as face-to-face interaction, I wanted to hear whether participants thought online delivery offers any additional possibilities for magicians to deceive. However, I then asked them if they were seeing *more* than what was taking place. I did this by relaying the participant's comments in the previous paragraph and then illustrating how the scene appeared to them as I varied my gaze between the recording camera and my computer screen. In making the conditions for eye contact into a topic of group conversation, I sought to open up a space for discussing participants' ongoing experiences regarding how we as a group made the activity of magic happen together online.<sup>65</sup>

In short, a kind of 'meta-magic' was sought by making the basis for our interactions into topics for discussion. Audiences were asked to consciously step back from and monitor their conduct and beliefs. The lines of questioning for doing so were developed through iterative cycles of action, consideration, preparation and revised action that sought to devise interactions responsive to others.<sup>66</sup>

---

65 In support of promoting wider reflection about such topics, in late 2020 I produced a website featuring recorded routine clips and accompanying text entitled *The Magic of Social Life*. See <https://brianrappert.net/the-magic-of-social-life>

66 As part of my experimentations in directing attention, for three online shows conducted through the Ashburton Arts Centre in 2020 entitled 'Magic: Who Cares?', care in magic was taken as the principal substantive focus.

## Care Through Manipulation

Connection, attention and challenge were not only topics for reflection in our dialogue, though. Regard for them also served as a resource for accomplishing trickery.

For instance, dialogue was used to condition subsequent interactions. To elaborate, with experience I began to place discussions about the limited extent of audience challenge before effects that were enhanced by animated physical participation by the audience. By making challenge into a topic for group reflection at one point in time, I sought to encourage challenging forms of behavior at the next point. My inspiration for doing so was an experience in the 13th recorded face-to-face sessions discussed in Chapter 3. As part of this event, I described the limited extent of challenge I had experienced in prior sessions. During the next effect, the person I was working with went on to select a card other than the ones spread out close to her, thereby disturbing the sequencing of cards that underpinned the methods for the effect. Some minutes later she justified her actions to the group by citing the previous discussion about the limited challenge as extending an invitation for her to do so:

Excerpt 7.2—Session 13

No	Direct transcript
1	P4: But can I ask you? Because I feel really terrible, because I sort of ruined your last trick. And, and when we came here we sort of we were talking that we had a contract, almost that we were going to watch you and we were going to be amazed by your tricks and we were not going to destroy them. But then you told this story about people who <u>had</u> challenged you
2	BR: Yes, yes
3	P4: Yes, and then this it sort of opened up the
4	P4: [possibility
5	BR: [Yes, yes
6	P4: myself for me to. Is that also part of your project? Have you seen that before?

Up until that stage, the kind of openness P4 spoke to in Lines 3, 4 and 6 was not part of my project. Based on her comments, though, I started deliberately to position the group discussion of challenge so as to promote physical interventions by the audiences: interventions such as mixing up cards in an animated and thorough fashion. The purpose of doing so was to enhance the experience for audiences.

Another dimension of how the discussion of attention and challenge served as a manipulative resource was the way both functioned as forms of misdirection. Toward the end of the 30 recorded sessions, I positioned the discussion of attention and challenge before effects with methods that were resistant to being foiled by close attention or audience disruption. However, in my patter and mannerisms, I portrayed the effects as reliant on the precise control of cards and the choices of audiences. Pre-framing effects in this way also encouraged our subsequent group discussion to return to themes about attention and challenge.

Still another manner in which regard to attention and challenge served as a resource was by using my verbal patter about attention and challenge to provide a cover for the control of cards. For instance, in one face-to-face session the following interactions took place:

## Excerpt 7.3—Session 14

No	Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
1	P1: other than doing what we are told, I think we are pretty (0.5) passive (3.0) players in the (.) magic.	<i>BR picks up deck</i>
2	BR: Hum, hum. One of the things I am interested in is attention and the way attention kind of gets negotiated in these sort of settings. So did, did you bring up attention before, right?	<i>BR spreads the deck</i>
3	P1: Hmm.	
4	BR: Okay, so, I mean, I could be going through the deck like this or something like that and, umm, you might be at times really focused, okay. Other times maybe looking around,	<i>BR leans in</i> <i>BR leans back and completes a card sleight</i>

No	Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
5	BR: [right?	
6	P1: [Hmm.	
7	BR: So it has been interesting for me cos this is the first time I have done <u>these</u> tricks in this way. But then we had, I did have people around before and did a different kind of routine ((inaudible)) And, you know, there are like two extremes. One extreme like was this guy (2.0) on his mobile phone for most of the evening going like this.	<i>BR pretends to be using a mobile phone slightly under the table</i>
8	P1 and AU: ((laughter))	
9	P1: That's really edifying.	
10	((laughter, side conversation))	
11	BR: And then the other extreme was, was when uhm, uhm I was doing these and someone said, umh, she said, oh Brian, I'm (.) watching you and the cards and I am watching. And then she kind of leans in like this. Okay, she did not watch the whole night, obviously, but you know for quite a bit of it she was just like this.	<i>BR leans forwards</i> <i>BR leans back</i> <i>BR leans forward and peers downward</i>
12	P2: I'm watching you pretty hard actually.	
13	BR: Okay=	
14	P3: =He has not seen the movie yet, so he has not noticed yet ((laughter))	
15	BR: But, it is not, you are not totally watching me. I mean you ar- are talking	
16	BR: [to	
17	P1: [Yeah	
18	BR: P1 or P2.	
19	P2: I'm watching you pretty hard actually.	
20	P1, P3 and BR: ((laughter))	

No	Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
21	BR: You are watching me pretty hard. I can feel the heat coming out.	<i>BR shakes hands</i>
22	P1, P3 and BR: ((laughter))	
23	P1: That's mildly threatening ((P2))	
24	((side conversation))	
25	P1: ((P2)) has slight paranoid tendencies.	
26	P2: I am always interested in looking for the angles on things	
27	BR: Hmm	
28	P2: And I really dislike being a mug.	
29	P1 and P3: ((laughter))	
30	P2: And I have a slightly flawed relationship to this sort of thing. Because it plays into that a little bit.	
31	P1, P3 and BR: ((laughter))	

In this exchange, under the guise of spreading the deck out in my hands and inviting participants to witness my doing so, I was able to spot a card needed for the next effect (during Line 4). Then I was able to control it to the desired position through a hand movement during my subsequent gross bodily movement of leaning back from the table (Line 8). My verbal remarks pointing toward what was taking place at that moment (Line 4) and the accounts of previous participants' attention (Lines 7, 11) functioned to preoccupy those present and thereby curtail their ability to later reconstruct what had taken place. It was through such actions I was able to achieve inexplicable feats for audiences.

## Caring About Troubles

As outlined in the previous section and Chapter 3, a consistent part of the rationale for my shows was to foster dialogue with participants

regarding their experiences as we interacted together under the label of doing magic.

As some have advocated, 'understanding requires an openness to experience, a willingness to engage in a dialogue with that which challenges our self-understanding. To be in a dialogue requires that we listen to the other and simultaneously risk confusion and uncertainty both about ourselves and about the other person we seek to understand'.<sup>67</sup> Through the overall design, I sought to achieve a format that provided the basis for exchange that made my understandings and uncertainties into topics for dialogue. Through doing so I sought to fashion shows in accordance with the responses of others.

As suggested previously, care as a relational practice of attention requires a willingness to acknowledge ethical troubles. I turn now to some such troubles.

For a start, to be sure, the shows did not realize an idealized form of freely open dialogue. The philosopher Martin Buber, for one, contended that authentically being with others requires the absence of deception.<sup>68</sup> In stark contrast, the routines were constituted through deception.

Likewise, while I sought to devise effects and exchanges that would be responsive to my emerging understanding of others' concerns, it was me who steered this development. I regularly realized an asymmetrical influence over what was discussed, who spoke and for how long. As such, the exercise of care and control came bundled together. As indicated by the quote at the start of this chapter from my first public show, not everyone found the type of coordination taking place appropriate.

Other interactional troubles can be identified as well. For instance, despite my initial 30 recorded sessions examined in Chapter 2 taking place (largely) between known acquaintances as a form of research-entertainment, they were not without ethical knots, binds and discomforts. In an early session, one person became agitated to the point of repeatedly getting up from the table because the effects reminded him of childhood experiences of being humiliated by magicians. His action was verbally sanctioned by his partner. Various participants offered apologies during and after the sessions for behavior which they

---

67 Schwandt, TA. 1999. 'On Understanding Understanding', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(4): 458. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049900500401>.

68 Buber, Martin. 2018. *I and Thou*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.



thought fell short of what was expected of them. Lines 28–30 in Excerpt 7.3 regarding being ‘mugged’ also hint at some of the fraught ethical and affective dimensions of trickery. This includes the potential for individuals to feel defensive, duped, demeaned and so on. Along these lines, in the last of my 30 recorded sessions, an effect involved one of the participants orchestrating the other participants to eliminate all the cards from a face-down deck one-by-one until only a single card remained. I proposed that the remaining card would be a card previously signed by a participant. The person coordinating the selection process did so with an extraordinary degree of meticulousness—the selection process lasted over five minutes. When it became apparent this process was just an extraneous set-up for a follow-on effect I undertook, she commented that she felt ‘cheated’ because the selection was ‘all for nothing’. While these comments were jokingly delivered, I certainly felt awkward at the time and openly commented so.

Additional kinds of ethical troubles emerged in the recorded sessions because they were not only magic displays. Instead, I was undertaking formal research. As such, the researcher-participant relationship became entangled with the magician-audience one. In this regard, consider a basic distinction in how we attend to one another. The philosopher Nel Noddings juxtaposed *projection* and *reception*. *Projection* involves efforts to analyze and establish what another is experiencing. As such, it entails a form of objectification. Such objectification is routinely built into social research. *Receiving* the other, in contrast, requires a motivational shift. It calls for becoming engrossed with the other to attempt to feel for and become sensitive to their wants and needs, even as it is recognized that it is not possible to straightforwardly access their experiences. Noddings argued that reception is not about making another person into an object, because reception is not driven by a desire to make claims to knowledge. Instead, it entails an openness to be transformed by others.<sup>69</sup> In making the case for the importance of reception in caring relations, Noddings did not seek to exclude other forms of attending. Analytical forms of projection to derive knowledge still have an appropriate place. ‘What

---

69 To offer a different language, the distinction between projection and reception brings to the fore the question of whether we treat our interactions with others as ends in themselves, or as a means to some agenda.

seems to be crucial' she argued 'is that we retain the ability to move back and forth and to invest the appropriate mode'.<sup>70</sup>

Concerning the recorded sessions, initially I was highly indebted to forms of attending based on projection. That is to say, I engaged audiences in order to analyze their experiences. I did so, not least, to formulate research findings such as those given in *Performing Deception*. I pressed participants to give accounts of their experiences that could serve as data and experienced the inability to gather such data at the time as a failure on my part. Adopting this orientation risked reducing mutually responsive interactions into an effort to extract data from research subjects. With my gradual recognition of how I was tied to relations of projection, later I refrained from recording some pre-arranged magic sessions so as not to get wedded to projection.<sup>71</sup>

While attempts to reconcile projection and reception caused tension felt throughout my recorded sessions, additional aspects of my relationship with others on matters of care underwent distinct development. For one, when I first began doing magic for others, I invested a great deal of effort in ensuring that the intended outcomes (for instance, card identification) were obtained. That was my working sense of what it meant to think and act concerning others. As I developed, however, the goal of 'getting it right' gradually gave way to the goal of engaging with and responding to others. Such relations could be accomplished even if the effects failed by some conventional performance measure. 'Botched tricks' brought their opportunities for reflection relating to the matters that were of interest to me and others.

Noteworthy too, in many instances where something had 'gone wrong', participants frequently blamed themselves for not having acted correctly.<sup>72</sup> In such ways, those being 'cared for' overtly contributed to creating a caring environment. Eventually, I incorporated effects into my routines in which I could not fully control the outcome. When the

---

70 Noddings, N. 2013. *Caring* (Second Edition). London: University of California Press: 35. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520957343>.

71 And in a number of instances, I refrained from performing magic so as not to treat friendships and other relations as opportunities for practice and training.

72 Failure also brought opportunities for manipulation. Even for effects where I should have been able to control the outcome, when things went awry I sometimes went on to prompt group reflection and their responses to the blunder, as if I had planned all along that the effects would not work out.

intended outcome was achieved, the magic on display was arguably very strong. When the outcome was not achieved, I used the failure to prompt group reflection on how participants responded to the failure (for instance, offering apologies for their behavior, looking away, changing the topic<sup>73</sup>). Promoting group reflection in this way provided a basis for considering magic as a joint accomplishment.

Likewise, to understand the demands participants felt when playing the role of an audience member, I came to ask them as part of my questioning about the vulnerabilities they experienced and the kinds of emotional labor they undertook in playing the 'audience member' role.<sup>74</sup>

In such ways, I was able to make vulnerability into a topic of conversation. Other kinds of vulnerability proved less adaptable. My most emotionally charged moments came, not from when the effects went awry, but rather when I felt participants attentionally disengaged while I was trying to engage them. Side conversations, stares into the distance and scrolling on mobile phones were some examples of what I took to be disengagement. In other words, the strongest affective charge was associated with conditions of responsiveness rather than the content of specific actions. When participants were no longer concerned with undertaking the kind of work needed to sustain and coordinate our relations, our time together could no longer be understood as interaction. This is something I cared about maintaining. As I have come to understand my reactions, they stand as further evidence for the mutual dependencies between conjurers and audiences.

## In Close

Against the frequently aired contentions that magic requires conjurers to remain in control, this chapter has asked how its undertaking can be approached through the notion of care. As initially argued, while 'care' is not a word often heard in gatherings of conjurers, they often ask how they should act in relation to their audiences.

In line with prevalent academic theorizing, care has been understood as a willingness to think and act in relation to the needs of others. More

---

73 For a discussion of this point see *The Magic of Social Life —Vulnerability* at <https://brianrappert.net/the-magic-of-social-life/vulnerability>

74 See *ibid.*

than this, to care requires posing questions about how caring takes place, what it means to be responsive to others, how the cared-for contribute to caring, the power asymmetries in who defines care as well as varied other issues. As contended, conjurors frequently attend to such matters in thinking about how they ought to go about manipulating their audiences.

A central preoccupation of this chapter has been to characterize how control and care are bundled together in complex ways in the relations between magicians and audiences. Those ways underscore a theme that has run throughout *Performing Deception*: the importance of treating the performance of magic as a form of reciprocal action.

More than just bringing together professional and academic arguments related to care and control, this chapter has examined the evolving manner whereby I sought to bring control and care together in my performances. It has mapped out how I sought to develop my responsiveness to audiences across my initial 30 recorded research sessions as well as my face-to-face and online public shows. To become more responsive, I fostered certain kinds of attentiveness by:

- soliciting feedback on the performances by directly asking participants about their thoughts and feelings. With this feedback, I was able to modify my subsequent performances;
- offering accounts of the actions of past audience members to encourage inquiry into the current actions;<sup>75</sup>
- marshalling questions and observations so as to enable deception and to shape participants' actions.

Through these strategies, I sought a form of magic that was self-referential on two levels. Firstly, like with many other forms of entertainment magic, I portrayed the tricks as tricks. In other words, rather than being down to genuine extraordinary powers, I openly acknowledged the operation of secreted methods at work in the accomplishments of

---

<sup>75</sup> The first two of these were in line with Chris Argyris' notions of single- and double-loop learning; see Argyris, C. 1999. *On Organizational Learning*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

effects.<sup>76</sup> Secondly, though, I also sought to promote reflection on how magic was accomplished together by magicians and audiences. This consideration about what was taking place there and then between us, in turn, served as a basis for accomplishing our interactions.

---

<sup>76</sup> That is, after my initial round of recorded sessions which were themed around embodiment.

