

On the Use of Playing Cards in Mentalism

This is an opinion piece on a perennially controversial topic. I'm not one of those who feels compelled to convert others to my way of thinking, thus am merely offering my opinions for your consideration. In fact, I encourage you to disagree with my thesis, as it reduces my competition!

I am writing here from the perspective of a mentalist, not a magician doing what is commonly called "mental magic". Without wishing to become embroiled in that **other** common controversy, I'll define a mentalist here as an *entertainer* who neither describes him/herself as a magician, nor explicitly disclaims his/her performances as "trickery".

Also, bear in mind that this essay refers specifically to traditional *playing cards*, not Zener ("ESP") cards, Tarot cards, etc.

While playing cards were once ubiquitous in family homes, fewer and fewer people under the age of 40 or so have much experience with them, except in a gambling context. It's not that uncommon to find audience members who don't know how to name them (the three of puppy feet?). So while the magician may believe that they can be safely promoted as "52 common, easily-recognized symbols", a "regular" person wonders why—if you must use cards—you don't use a set with symbols (like a house, a tree, etc.) that truly **are** easily-recognizable. Dealers catering to mentalists sell packs like these, so they're readily available. Picture postcards are another option, even more appropriate due to their familiar nature. And most people find it more credible that someone could "sense" a clearly-defined image than something as abstract as the *nine of clubs*.

In *Playing Cards & Card Games in America*, Laura Munley (Dept. of American Studies, University of Maryland) reports:

Cards today are not nearly as popular as they once were. Although people who lived in the "Era of Great Card-Playing" still play cards today, card playing has truly lost its thrill. When one walks past a school during recess and recreation time, one doesn't see children playing cards with one another. From time to time, children can be found playing with a deck of *Old Maid* or *Uno* cards, but nowadays, cards don't appeal to children. Adults have somewhat lost the love of cards. As a college student, I don't know **anybody** who regularly plays cards. I asked my family members and friends the same question. "Do you know anyone who plays cards regularly?" I received some "grandparents", but for the most part, every answer was "no".

A 1998 Harris poll showed that only 1% of the population listed playing cards as



one of their "three favorite leisure time activities". This was down from 3% in 1995 (a more than 60% decline in this three-year period alone). And it includes the total population, not just those under 40.

A 1999 study by Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam showed that the use of playing cards in America was declining by 10% annually. Professor Putnam only half-jokingly remarked that "the last card will be played in America in 2010". So there's real, objective evidence that playing card usage is decreasing dramatically. Hand in hand with this decline goes, I argue, their suitability for contemporary mentalism.

It's certainly wise these days, when asking for volunteers to assist in a card effect, to ask specifically for people who play cards, or are at least familiar with the names of the cards; doing otherwise can easily result in unexpected problems.

Audiences, when viewing magicians (even if mental effects are being performed), do so in an associated context... it is their expectation that they will be fooled (and, one hopes, entertained) by clever tricks/illusions. Certainly, some will believe "mind reading"... but then some will assume dematerialization when they see "cards across", and some will assume Satanism when they see **any** magical effect. Most, however, will assume trickery.

Contemporary magical fashion places a **huge** emphasis on the use of playing cards (there are likely more published items on this topic than all other conjuring subjects combined). Consequently, for better or worse, there exists a strong association between magicians and card tricks. One of my performance goals (as a mentalist) is to disassociate myself from magicians and their trappings, which is why I choose to make minimal use of playing cards.

Entertainers who work for corporate audiences in particular know that if you introduce a pack of playing cards in such a venue, *especially in a context that does not readily suggest their use*, the association with magicians occurs to a significant number of the viewers. This is detrimental to my ends.

Those audience members who **are** comfortably familiar with playing cards generally associate them with one or more of the following:

1. gambling (e.g., Poker, Blackjack)
2. game playing (e.g., Bridge, Rummy)
3. magicians ("Take a card, any card!")
4. fortune telling (in some cultures, though in North America it's mostly Tarot cards that are viewed in this fashion)

So, as an entertainer, I must decide which of these contexts is appropriate to the effect I wish to perform, and determine how I will ensure that the audience views the performance solely in that context. This is not simple, and is compounded by the fact that, in any context, playing cards are generally viewed as rather frivolous objects. It was not for nothing that Derren Brown observed (in his book, *Absolute Magic*) that "The sight of cards is not conducive to magic that claims to transcend the ordinary."

As for impromptu and walk-around work, why would a mind reader be carrying around a pack of playing cards (as opposed to, say, a pocket chess set)?

In the early years of the *Psychic Entertainers Association*, we ran a couple of workshops where we interviewed audience members following a series of performances by several of our more accomplished members. Almost without exception, they described demonstrations that involved playing cards as "card tricks". Audiences are not nearly so naive as some choose to believe.

None of the above should be construed as an admonition **never** to use playing cards. On the (I would hope) rare occasions when one does, however, the accompanying presentations should be informed by the considerations discussed here. (Those who have my *Mindsights* book can look up the only playing card effect therein, and see how its presentation warrants their use.) It is not at all unreasonable for a mentalist to display skill at gambling, or "card memory", for example, and playing cards are not incongruous in such a demonstration.

That said, it is wise to remember this: when you stand in front of an audience doing amazing things with playing cards, they're very apt to remember **previous** entertainers whom they've seen do amazing things with playing cards... and odds are that your predecessors were magicians!



... Doug Dyment

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