

Psychologists suggest using magic tricks to learn more about how the minds of animals work

September 18 2020, by Bob Yirka



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A small team of psychology researchers at the University of Cambridge has published a Perspective piece in the journal *Science* suggesting that

magic tricks be used by researchers seeking to learn more about how the minds of animals work. In their paper, the group proposes that researchers seek to learn the answer to three main questions: Are animals fooled by such tricks? Which part of a given trick is responsible for a reaction by an animal, and how do animals internalize such tricks?

As the authors note, scientists trying to understand how the human brain works have in recent years been looking at magic tricks as a possible tool. How is the mind fooled, for example, and what impact does witnessing a [magic trick](#) have on the person watching it? Studying the ways that magic tricks fool the brain may also shed light on so-called blind spots in perception. In their paper, the authors suggest the same should be true for [animals](#) exposed to magic tricks.

Fooling animals with magic tricks is nothing new, of course, as the authors readily acknowledge. YouTube has a never-ending stream of videos demonstrating the humor of watching as animals try to comprehend how a food treat could somehow simply disappear. What is missing from such videos, they note, are efforts to understand what the animals think, or whether they are truly as awed by such magic acts as their reactions might indicate. The authors suggest that it might be time to look a little deeper, and in the process, perhaps learn more about the brains of other creatures.

More specifically, the authors suggest that researchers first try to determine if animals besides humans really are fooled by magic tricks. For example, is a dog's look of surprise at a sleight-of-hand trick due to confusion, or annoyance at finding its treat suddenly missing? They note that for an animal to truly "get" a magic trick, it has to have some fundamental understanding of how things in the world work; objects should fall down when dropped, for example, or remain in existence unless something forces them to disappear. They also suggest that if some animals do get that "magic" is at play, which elements of a given

magic tricks are the factors that make it happen? And finally, what actually happens with an animal that is tricked by [magic](#)? Are they angry, annoyed, surprised, etc.? Learning such things, the authors suggest, could open up whole new areas of animal research.

More information: Elias Garcia-Pelegri et al. An unexpected audience, *Science* (2020). [DOI: 10.1126/science.abc6805](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abc6805)

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