

Back in 1893, Dessoir noted that magicians have powerful ways of influencing people's decisions, and that these processes provide useful tools to study our sense of free will and agency: forcing techniques. More than one hundred years later, current psychological research highlights that our subjective experience of free will may be an illusion and that instead many of our choices are influenced by unconscious factors. The present project aims to identify effective forcing techniques and use them to investigate psychological factors that contribute to people's illusory sense of free will. The first experiment (N=60) uses the "Criss Cross Force", which involves a free choice from the participants (cutting the deck of cards wherever they want), that has no impact on the outcome (the card they get) thanks to obvious sleight of hand and simple misdirection. We used this force (force condition), as well as a modified version which did not force the outcome and measured the impact these techniques have on 1) participants' experience of actual free choice and 2) their feeling of control over the outcome (i.e. the card they get, forced by the experimenter or controlled by the participant). As we predicted, participants were unable to distinguish between the two situations, and there was no difference in feeling of control over the outcome. The second experiment (N=90) used the same force but manipulated two essential components: time delay and attentional misdirection. We predicted that participants' illusory feeling of control over the outcome was due to attentional misdirection, and to a lesser extent time delay, preventing participants from correctly processing the sequence of events. Contrary to our expectations, no differences were found between the three conditions, suggesting that participants did not understand that their outcome were manipulated, even when this was done very right in front of their eyes, and without time misdirection. Qualitative data collected from debriefings suggested that some participants, because they expected something more complicated, did not realize that they were being manipulated in a such obvious ways and therefore did not notice it. Debriefings suggested that participants who felt a weak sense of control over their outcome attributed their lack of control to simply not being able to see the card they were getting (because they were face down), rather than the force itself. The results are discussed in the context of the sense of agency literature often underlying the role of prediction of an outcome in the feeling of control over our actions.

Also, as the magic force must work reliably, and must enable the prestidigitators to influence a person's choice without them being aware of the manipulation, we discuss how these techniques offer a valuable, and so far underexplored tool to study the illusory sense of free choice.