

Three Types of Justification

Often it is necessary to make a specific move or action in the course of a routine in order to satisfy the technical requirements of the effect. In order to justify these actions, magicians have created elaborate schemes and set-ups. I have tried to simplify the thinking in this area by defining the various types of justification, and have discovered three basic categories.

Here then are the three types of justification: logical, physical and emotional. They are all interrelated, and yet each separate and distinct in it's application to a specific situation. In order to understand the difference between them it will be easiest to use examples.

It is often the case that a particular instance may involve more than one of the three types. And in fact the distinction may not always be very clear, but in spite of that it is useful to separate them into components. Often the final definition will be a matter of deciding where the greatest emphasis lies.

Physical Justification:

During a particular routine, it is necessary to blow smoke under a glass sitting on a table. For the example, I happen to be seated. I use a straw to blow the smoke under the glass. I support myself with my right hand on the table's edge and lean over, placing the straw in to my mouth. My left hand tips back the glass and I gently puff the smoke inside the glass. I straighten up and the dirty work is done. In the action of leaning over, I have the opportunity to drop my right hand to my lap and palm a coin, returning it to the table's edge before I finish blowing the smoke.

There are two elements of physical justification in this example. The first is the need to bend over at all. The glass must be kept close to the top of the table or the smoke will escape. I can't physically get the straw under the lip of the glass without bringing it close to the table. This entails bending over and bringing my head close to the top of the table. The second physical element is need for my hand to rest on the table edge. It is obviously needed and stabilizes me as I bend down.

Another obvious example would be a performer who sweeps a hand full of coins off a table onto a plate. The plate must go beneath the table because the coins will fall DOWN. In the course of this action, an entirely new set of props can be introduced, the coins switched, a load picked up, the list goes on.

The basis of this definition is that the action is motivated by physical laws. I set a glass down on a table, instead of letting go of it in mid-air, because, if I don't it will shatter on the floor. But what if there are two surfaces I can set the glass down on? Then the choice I make will be determined by another factor. This leads us along the line to...

Logical Justification:

Logical justification is invoked when an action is motivated by a logical reason. If I have a choice of two tables, and I look, seeing one is already full, and turn to place the glass on the other table, even though it is further away, my action will be justified by logic, not by physics.

In the classic routine of card under glass, there is a moment, where the card is loaded under the glass in the process of moving the glass out of the way. The move precedes a spreading of the deck of cards on the table surface. The move goes unnoticed, as the action is logical. The glass is merely moved out of the way so that the deck can be spread.

The classic example in stage magic comes from Cardini. His monocle drops from his eye during the course of billiard ball manipulation. His hand goes to retrieve it and return it to his eye socket. A simple enough scenario, and the action of the hand highly logical. Yet the retrieval of the glass was cover for a brilliant steal of the next ball! The cord on the monocle had been created in the exact length that it hung in the proximity of the bottom of his vest, and the action grabbing the glass was the same one needed to squeeze the ball into his hand.

But what caused the monocle to fall from its place? Yes, physics describes the direction it will travel when it is released, but the cause of the release is what we are seeking. Cardini was surprised!. His eyes widened in surprise and the monocle fell away from the orbit. It was an emotional reaction that set up the steal. It was emotion that justified the fall of the monocle.

Emotional Justification:

Probably one of the most overlooked forms of justification, it is yet one of the more powerful, contributing to the construction of character and theatrical routining more than the previous and more common other two. It can be used in situations where another method will not suffice, or where the other two rule each other out. Let me give you an example given me by one of the masters of misdirection, Tony Slydini.

One evening we were sitting about after a performance and the subject of difficult moves came up. We were not only limiting ourselves to those that are difficult technically, in a finger busting sort of way, but also those that are difficult to justify making at all. In close-up magic, ever one of us has encountered the moment during a chop cup routine, when it was necessary to jar loose the ball from its comfortable position in the top of the cup. This was how a master handled the situation.

Tony demonstrated a relatively standard set-up which left the ball supposedly in his left pocket and the "empty" cup face down on the table. He said "now, the ball will travel to the cup. Did you see it go?" Which ever answer he received, he confidently reached over and left the cup to show the ball. It, naturally, wasn't there. He was a little confused, then aggravated. "Arghh" he said as he slapped down the cup in annoyance, "this time I'll do it." He gestures between the pocket and the cup and with a sigh of delight and relief, he lifts the cup to reveal the ball.

What carries the moment is his emotion, his being upset that the ball has not traveled, is the very thing that justifies the action of banging the cup on the table and releasing the ball. Yet it is that same emotion that makes the action invisible.

And that is, in the final analysis, the reason we are discussing justification at all. It is the justified move that will be invisible to eyes of the audience. Although the action will be seen, it will not be noticed. It drops back beneath the threshold necessary for notice. In effect, it never happens, or is not associated with anything tricky or underhanded. It will not be associated with the technique necessary to accomplish the mechanics of the illusion.

There are many more examples of these three types of justified move, and several combinations of motives. Try watching other magicians and seeing how the actions are accomplished. Notice how unjustified moves stand out like a sore thumb and how those that are covered have a better chance of succeeding. Let me once again stress that structuring the situation for the move correctly is no substitute for executing it correctly! There are no short cuts here and the demands of both structure and technique must be satisfied.