

'Toward a Theory of Exposure' - Response to Commentaries

Brian Rappert, University of Exeter, b.rappert@exeter.ac.uk

Dr Gustav Kuhn, Psychology University of Plymouth, gustav.kuhn@plymouth.ac.uk

In this commentary, we respond to the feedback on our previous paper, 'Towards a Theory of Exposure', and reflect on its implications for the practice of exposure in magic, as well as potential directions for future research and theoretical development.

KEYWORDS: Magic, Exposure

'TOWARD A THEORY OF EXPOSURE' - RESPONSE TO COMMENTARIES

In writing 'Toward a Theory of Exposure' (Rappert and Kuhn 2024), our aim was to stimulate discussion among individuals from diverse backgrounds on a topic of enduring importance. By treating the exposure of methods as a contestable issue, we did not seek to deliver a definitive account of what is right or wrong. Rather, our objective was to encourage critical reflection on the assumptions and consequences embedded in prevailing conceptions of disclosure.

We are therefore grateful for the time and thought that commentators have devoted to engaging with our article. In this response, we highlight several themes from those commentaries to underscore the stakes involved in exposing methods and to consider how to advance the study of exposure.

One notable pattern across the commentaries—as well as in the survey and focus group findings reported in 'Toward a Theory of Exposure'—is a general permissiveness toward exposing. While none advocated an “anything goes” stance, exposure was often viewed as not only permissible but even desirable. Evaluations tended to hinge on context and intent, opening the door for a wide range of disclosures to be considered acceptable. Morgado's (2025) concept of “constructive exposure”—defined by integration, ownership, and choice—provides one justificatory framework.

In these commentaries – as in some of the written codes of prominent professional societies that allow for exposure in some circumstances -- assumptions were made about what would benefit audiences (e.g., instruction in authentic methods). This raises the important question of when and how such audiences would concur with those assessments. Equally important is consideration of how exposure impacts people's experience of magic (Putnam 2025).

While these are valuable lines of inquiry, it is important to stress that there are rarely straightforward answers. Laue (2025) and Kohler (2025) raise critical methodological questions, including how audiences are defined and engaged. Laue raises an important question regarding individual differences in how permissible magicians consider exposure to be. Specifically, he speculates that younger magicians may hold more relaxed views on exposure compared to older counterparts. In response to this suggestion, we revisited our data from the quantitative survey in 'Toward a Theory of Exposure' to examine the relationship between participants' age and their overall acceptance of exposure (averaged across all categories). Our analysis revealed a significant negative correlation: older magicians were less accepting of exposure ($r = -0.21$, $p = 0.003$).

These findings suggest that systematic group differences may underlie divergent individual attitudes toward exposure. Measuring expertise in magic is notoriously difficult, and we used a rather crude measure – performance years. This measure is very tightly correlated with age, which makes it difficult to statistically unpick the contribution that experience makes. Anecdotally, we have observed times in which more experienced magicians often express more relaxed views on exposure. Novice magicians may place greater value on the secrecy of a trick, as knowing the method can feel like a direct threat to their perceived skill. In contrast, seasoned magicians typically have a broader repertoire of techniques and greater improvisational ability. For them, the appeal of their performance often extends beyond mere deception. As such, the exposure of a method may feel more consequential to hobbyist or less experienced magicians, potentially leading to stronger opposition. Future studies may want to unpick the complex dynamics related to age, experience and expertise.

Interestingly, while we have encountered individuals who are strongly opposed to exposure in informal discussions, such perspectives were not prominently reflected in the written comments we received. This raises the possibility that magicians who engage with academic discussions about exposure may be more open to it. Overall, these observations point to a clear need for further research into individual differences—including experience level, professional identity, and underlying motivations—in shaping magicians' attitudes toward exposure.

As with moral questions more broadly, judgments about the acceptability of exposure vary over time—what is acceptable today may not be tomorrow, and vice versa, as Kohler (2025) explores. More than simply noting that norms change, we argue that exposure is a dynamic and recursive process. Each act of exposure not only reflects but reshapes understandings of past and future disclosures. A forthcoming article in the *Journal of Performance Magic* will consider how large language models (such as ChatGPT) are accelerating this interplay (Laue, in press).

Audience responses to exposure are also highly context-dependent. Much hinges on the specific circumstances of a performance, but also on the relationships between performers, audiences, and other parties. As Phiel (2025) illustrates, for example, perceptions of exposure shift significantly when the interaction is framed as a teacher-student relationship.

Moreover, the same revelation of a magic secret can affect individuals very differently, depending on their beliefs and prior experiences with the performance. Predicting how someone will interpret a piece of exposure is far from straightforward—it requires understanding not only how people experience the magic trick itself but also how they use information to make sense of that experience.

Despite these complexities, Putnam (2025) offers a helpful set of guiding principles grounded in robust evidence on the limitations of human reasoning, perception, and memory. While our paper mainly addresses the challenges involved in defining and explaining exposure, Putman insightfully suggests that the key may lie in understanding how human cognition shapes responses. Putman emphasizes that cognitive biases—in perception, memory, and reasoning—influence how knowledge of a secret method alters the interpretation of a performance. This view is supported by extensive empirical research demonstrating the powerful role cognitive biases play in shaping responses to exposure. For example, our own studies have explored how performing mentalism—often perceived as genuine paranormal phenomena—affects participants' beliefs. Even when the secret methods behind these effects are revealed, many participants disregard this information (Kuhn et al., 2023; Lan et al., 2018; Mohr et al., 2015). These findings consistently show that prior beliefs, such as those in the paranormal, strongly influence how people experience magic and how they discount contradictory evidence. Just as someone who believes in a flat Earth may ignore scientific evidence about the planet's shape, individuals' cognitive frameworks mediate their responses to exposure.

This cognitive perspective reorients the discussion of exposure from rigid rules toward understanding the nuanced impact that revealing a secret has on an individual's experience of a magic performance. As with exposure, as well as evidence-based practice more generally, applying general research findings to specific cases is an enduring challenge (Rappert 2022). In the case of magic—a performance art with diverse artistic aims—this challenge is further complicated. For that reason, we believe it is more appropriate to speak of evidence-*informed* rather than evidence-*based* magic.

These challenges extend beyond individual performers to professional magic organisations. As noted in 'Toward a Theory of Exposure', those representing the profession must navigate moral concerns that go beyond individual interests. These include protecting the Art itself and safeguarding practitioners' livelihoods. Historically, such concerns have led many professional societies to adopt categorical stances against exposure—stances arguably out of step with the practices of their members. As Laue (2025) observes, when those outside the Art who are respectful of magic refrain from exposing, they often leave the field open to those with less concern.

In light of these tensions—and the important insights raised in the commentaries—we invite readers to continue engaging critically with the question of exposure: how we understand it, how we practice it, and what questions we need to ask in doing so. Exposure is not a one-time or one-size-fits-all undertaking, nor can it be resolved through fixed guidelines alone. Rather, it is an ongoing process that invites negotiation, reflection, and ethical deliberation. It raises fundamental questions about the purposes of performance, the nature of professionalism, and the

responsibilities owed to both audiences and fellow practitioners. The issues at stake are not simply practical matters but ethical and social ones that call for collective discussion and accountability. We hope this conversation will remain open—marked by lively disagreement, curiosity, and mutual respect.

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