

## **‘The Grievance Studies Affair’ and Accusations of Data Fabrication: A case study analysed by the method of REalistiC Decisions**

### **Introduction**

In October 2018, Peter Boghossian, James Lindsay and Helen Pluckrose informed the readers of *Areo* magazine that they had produced 20 academic papers spanning several subdomains of ‘grievance studies’. According to the authors, these papers ‘featured radically sceptical and standpoint epistemologies rooted in postmodernism, feminist and critical race epistemology rooted in critical social constructivism as well as psychoanalysis’. Their ‘method’ involved beginning each paper with ‘something absurd or deeply unethical (or both) that we wanted to forward or conclude’. They, subsequently, ‘made the existing peer-reviewed literature do [their] bidding in the attempt to get published’. Their aim was to undertake ‘a kind of reflexive ethnographic study’ and ‘audit’ in order to demonstrate that the language and customs of ‘grievance studies’ could be successfully learned, leading to publications of peer-reviewed papers in top journals (Lindsay et al. 2018).

### **Description**

With the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) and other journals demanding that the authors prove their identities, they ‘came clean’ to the *WSJ* in August 2018 (with several papers still under review) (Melchoir 2018).

Of the 20 papers submitted, seven were accepted, seven were progressing through the review process and six were ‘retired as fatally flawed or beyond repair’. Furthermore, one paper, ‘Expression of Concern: Human Reactions to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity at Urban Dog Parks in Portland, Oregon’, was recognized by *Gender, Place, and Culture* as a leading piece in feminist geography during the journal’s anniversary celebration (Lindsay et al. 2018).

‘The Grievance Studies Affair’ has garnered international media attention with support and criticisms both inside and outside of academic circles (“Grievance Studies Affair” 2019).

Boghossian, an Assistant Professor at Portland State University ('PSU'), is the only member of the collaboration employed by a higher education institution. In a letter dated 12 October 2018, Mark McLellan, Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies, informed Boghossian that a Committee of Inquiry would be convened to determine whether he had engaged in research misconduct. McLellan also referred the case to PSU's Institutional Review Board ['IRB']. The IRB was asked to determine whether or not the audit should have required ethical approval and whether Boghossian had 'intentionally either falsified or fabricated research data' (Lindsay & Pluckrose 2019). Although none of the 20 papers involved actual human subjects, the IRB was required to determine whether the editors and peer reviewers for the targeted journals should be considered the subjects of the audit.

In a letter dated 27 November 2018, the Committee of Inquiry stated that it had 'unanimously agreed that the "dog park" article represents an unambiguous example of research data fabrication'. In a letter dated 17 December 2018, the IRB informed Boghossian that he had failed to secure the necessary IRB approval to participate in the audit. The IRB determined that the project 'met the federal definition of "research" (45 CFR 46.102)' and 'federal definition of "human subject" (45 CFR 46.102)' (Lindsay & Pluckrose 2019).

The IRB's investigation into purported fabrication of research data is still ongoing. Now let's suppose:

- You are a member of PSU's IRB.
- You are required to cut through the noise of global and social media attention and the raging culture wars with which this case is enmeshed, and determine whether Boghossian has either fabricated or falsified research data.
- You are required to use the method adapted from Davies' model in order to reach an informed judgment, which you will communicate to the other members of the board (Davies 2018a; 2018b; n.d.).

## Analysis

### ➤ *Early View*

You have produced a synopsis of the case (introduction section).

- *'What do I think?'*

Your Early View is that Boghossian has neither falsified nor fabricated research data.

- *'What are my reasons for thinking this?'*

You have read the paper, 'Expression of Concern: Human Reactions to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity at Urban Dog Parks in Portland, Oregon', and acknowledge the authors' claim that they examined 10,000 dogs' genitals before interrogating their owners about their sexual orientations. You acknowledge the authors' admission that this did not take place.

You acknowledge that the previous IRB had determined that the project consisted of the 'audit', that is, the submission of 20 papers to peer-reviewed journals with the aim of demonstrating that the language and customs of 'grievance studies' could be successfully learned, leading to publications of peer-reviewed papers in top journals. Furthermore, you acknowledge the previous IRB's determination that the audit 'met the federal definition of "research" (45 CFR 46.102)' and 'federal definition of "human subject" (45 CFR 46.102)'.

On that basis, you believe that the papers themselves are not the results of the audit. The results of the project are constituted by the judgments elicited by the submitted papers. The judgments made by editors and peer reviewers seem to have been reported without distortion or embellishment. Furthermore, you recognize that the results of the audit have not been formally published in a peer-reviewed academic publication.

In your view, the submitted papers, and the 'dog park' article in particular, are merely the method for eliciting judgments from the editors and peer-reviewers. You consider these papers to be analogous to the real and hypothetical cases used to elicit and identify judgments in the social and behavioural sciences.

As you believe that these papers constitute the *method* of the audit and not the *results* of the audit, your Early View is that Boghossian has neither fabricated nor falsified research data.

➤ *Initial IRB Deliberation*

All members of the IRB present their respective Early Views. There is a lot of disagreement.

As a result, you and your fellow board members are required to assess your respective Early Views against the following standards:

- Normative Standards (*'How do normative frameworks help us?'*)
- Experience (*'How have we approached this issue before?'*)
- Expertise (*'What expertise has been applied to this before?'*)
- Empathy (*'What views and opinions do other parties have?'*)
- Evidence (*'What evidence is there on this issue?'*)
- Expediency (*'What is possible or realistic in the circumstances?'*)
- Escape (*'What other ways are there to manage disagreement?'*)

➤ *Normative Standards*

You acknowledge that PSU adopts federal standards of research conduct established by the U.S. Public Health Service ('PHS'). According to the PHS's Policies on Research Misconduct (42 CFR 93):

- Fabrication is making up data or results and recording or reporting them;
- Falsification is manipulating research materials, equipment, or processes, or changing or omitting data or results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record.

Although you believe that the submitted papers constitute the *method* of the audit and not the *results* of the audit, the PHS Policies do not distinguish between the fabrication of results and the fabrication of methodological information. Based on the PHS's criteria, what matters is that Boghossian made up data and published it in a peer-reviewed journal article.

Conclusion: Normative standards reveal that Boghossian fabricated data.

➤ *Experience*

You access the IRB's database to locate cases of fabrication. You observe that this is PSU's first 'hoax' case involving accusations of fabrication. All other cases of fabrication have involved data invention in the context of *actual* empirical studies.

The novelty of this particular case leads you to look for precedent elsewhere. You investigate the case of the 'Sokal Hoax'. However, you acknowledge that this case seems to be normatively different because Sokal did not make up empirical data in the context of a fictional study.

You believe that the invention of empirical data for a completely fictional study may be normatively relevant.

You consider the following distinctions between 'fabrication' in a hoax study and fabrication in an empirical study:

- Fabrication in empirical studies tends to involve the *results* of the study. Boghossian did not make up the results of the *study* (when the study is taken to refer to the '*audit*'). Rather, Boghossian made up content that went into the study's *method* for eliciting judgments from editors and peer reviewers. Fabricated *methodological* information like this is normal in the behavioural and social sciences.
- Fabrication in empirical studies tends to make a real difference to the truth-values of hypotheses, theories, and assertions as well as the internal and external validity of the research. If fabrications did not make substantive differences to the relationship between certain empirical phenomena and theories, hypotheses, and assertions, then there would be little reason for them. As the 'dog park' study is fictional, employed as a premise for a conclusion the authors had drawn in advance by making 'the existing peer-reviewed literature do [their] bidding', the invention of data does not make a difference to the truth-value of the fictional results or the truth of the theoretically-presupposed conclusion.
- On the basis that fabrication in empirical studies makes a substantive difference to the truth of theories, hypotheses, and assertions, it is not usual for a researcher who commits such fabrication to intend to reveal the fabrication. By contrast, not only did Boghossian and his co-authors intend to present the 'dog park' study as a fabrication, they also intended to reveal the fabrication when they commenced the '*audit*' (Lindsay & Pluckrose 2019).

Conclusion: Although **Experience** does not allow you to firmly conclude that Boghossian did or did not fabricate data, you judge that this is a novel case and that there may be differences between this case and usual cases involving fabrication. However, you are also aware that exceptionally good reasons are needed if a university is to set a precedent whereby they deem

that it is acceptable to *publish* fabricated data under certain conditions. You are unsure whether your reasons are good enough.

➤ *Expertise*

You engage with the cited sources and observe that experts from all fields have been discussing this case in public. You observe that Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Jonathan Haidt, Jordan Peterson, Steven Pinker, and Alan Sokal have all defended Boghossian's actions. You observe Pinker's claim that finding Boghossian guilty of research misconduct is a misuse of the idea, an affront to academic freedom and fodder for critics of academe (Flaherty 2019). According to Dawkins, Boghossian should not be found guilty of research misconduct because the Grievance Studies Affair should be construed as satire; 'it is the essence of satire that it is not literally true' (McWilliams 2019).

It is likely that these experts have been quoted in the international media because they have actively engaged in the 'culture wars' with which this case is enmeshed. On that basis, you identify some reactions of research ethics and research integrity experts (Singal 2019).

According to Elisa Hurley, Executive Director at Public Responsibility in Medicine and Research, 'false data was knowingly submitted for publication and was in fact published'. For Hurley, it does not matter that the authors intended to present the 'dog park' study as a fabrication. She claims that the question of fabrication could have been dealt with had Boghossian sought ethical approval from PSU prior to conducting the audit (Singal 2019).

According to Celia Fisher, Director of the Fordham University Centre for Ethics Education, 'they [the authors] allowed this to be published, and therefore, I do think it's appropriate to look at fabrication of data'. Even though the 'dog park' article was retracted, it is still 'misleading to those who would take the data as being valid data' (Singal 2019).

For Ivan Oransky, co-founder of *Retraction Watch*, the key point is that the 'dog park' study was published. If the authors had had 'the foresight to prevent accepted studies from being published, there wouldn't have been a huge difference between their fabricated data and, say, a fabricated résumé for a more traditional audit study' (Singal 2019).

Conclusion: You acknowledge that research ethics and research integrity experts tend to agree that Boghossian's 'dog park' constitutes data fabrication. You also acknowledge Oransky's point that it constitutes fabrication precisely because the article was published.

➤ *Empathy*

Due to the amount of international attention this case has received, it is impossible to come up with an accurate picture of the public's views concerning the purported data fabrication.

You are aware that the complainant's view is that 'the "dog park" article represents an unambiguous example of research data fabrication'.

You are aware that Boghossian shares the views of his fellow co-authors. They claim that their papers 'present very shoddy methodologies including incredibly implausible statistics ("Dog Park")'. The data was 'clearly preposterous', intended to be 'clearly preposterous' and intended to be revealed as such (Lindsay & Pluckrose 2019).

They claim that accusation of data fabrication misses the point. They go on to argue that the ethical rules about fabrication are 'meant to act as a safeguard against and a sanction for researchers who contrive to promote their own advancement directly by passing off and maintaining bogus data with no intention to reveal the truth'. Consequently, they conclude that the rules governing data fabrication should not apply in this instance (Lindsay & Pluckrose 2019).

Conclusion: You acknowledge the disagreement between the different parties. You observe that those who accuse Boghossian of fabrication appeal to the **Normative Standards** discussed above. However, you also observe that Boghossian and his co-authors appeal to the differences between their case and typical cases of fabrication, differences you articulated based on **Experience**.

➤ *Evidence*

You undertake a Google search to look for published research concerning hoax articles that include made-up data. Due to time and resource constraints, you are unable to undertake a *systematic* review. Consequently, you are reliant on the 'relevance' of the items generated by the search. All the published research pertaining to cases of fabrication seemingly involve *actual* empirical studies.

Conclusion: Although you acknowledge the limitations of your online search, the results seem to affirm the tentative conclusions you came to from **Experience**; specifically, that this is a novel case and that there may be differences between this case and usual cases involving fabrication.

➤ *Expediency*

Based on the tentative conclusions reached when considering **Experience**, **Empathy** and **Evidence**, you think that the **Normative Standards** cited by a number of commentators may not be a suitable means for assessing this case, bearing in mind that it is *hoax* employing made-up data to elicit certain judgments as part of a broader audit study.

You think that your **Experience**-based claim seems intuitively right; specifically, that fabrication in *actual* empirical studies tends to make a substantive difference to the truth-values of hypotheses, models and theories. On that basis, you arrange a Skype meeting with a retired professor in biomedical research. She is considered to be an expert in experimental design and scientific methods.

You are careful not to disclose any of the particulars of the case. You ask why data fabrication and falsification might be important in the context of research misconduct.

She informs you that although fabrication is distinct from falsification, both should be viewed in the context of *falsifiability* in general. The reason fabrication and falsification are so important is because *falsifiability*, that is, the notion that a theory, hypothesis, or assertion can be experientially shown to be false, has traditionally been employed to demarcate science from non-science. She provides you with details of Karl Popper's falsifiability thesis, specifically, the idea that if a theory, hypothesis, or assertion is incompatible with possible empirical observations, then it is scientific. By contrast, a theory that has been modified to accommodate, or is consistent with, *all* empirical observations is unscientific.

You acknowledge the reason why fabrication and falsification are so important in the context of science. Fabrications and falsifications in scientific studies manipulate the relationship between empirical phenomena and scientific hypotheses. Such manipulations, therefore, impinge upon the compatibility of empirical observations and scientific claims, leading to a distortion of the 'real' relationship between scientific claims and the empirical phenomena. Fabrication and falsification of data, therefore, affect the falsifiability of a scientific theory, hypothesis or assertion. It seems to



you that fabrication and falsification undermine the scientific pretensions of the studies in which they occur. Furthermore, fabrication and falsification damage the reputation of science.

By contrast, Boghossian's 'dog park' study is unscientific. Firstly, the hypothesis is supported by a broader theoretically-driven approach that can accommodate all empirical observations, and is, therefore, protected from falsifiability. Secondly, because the study is entirely fictional, there is no way to demonstrate whether his hypothesis, the theory that supports it, and the presupposed conclusion, are incompatible with certain possible empirical observations. As a result, the made-up data relating to the genitals of 10,000 dogs does not affect the compatibility of empirical observations and scientific claims. Furthermore, as the 'dog park' study is not intended to be scientific (in Popper's sense), the made-up data does not damage the scientific integrity of the study.

Conclusion: Your deliberations lead you to affirm the tentative conclusions reached when considering **Experience**, **Empathy** and **Evidence**. Consequently, you reasonably conclude that those accusing Boghossian of fabrication might be setting unrealistic standards when assessing this case.

➤ *Deliberation*

You recognize that each question leads to reasons to justify (or refute) a position, no single answer can provide a firm base for judgment, your judgment will involve balancing between the answers to the different questions. Based on your judgments, you conclude that Boghossian did fabricate data for the 'dog park' study. Had he not published the article, but withdrew it once it had been accepted, he would not have committed data fabrication. It seems to you that acceptance alone would have been sufficient to prove the point of the broader audit study. However, you deem that there are significant normative differences between typical instances of fabrication in empirical studies and fabrication of methodological information for the purposes of the broader audit study. Although the 'dog park' study is *technically* an instance of fabrication (on the basis that the data was published), you judge that the normative standards by which this case is assessed are primarily concerned with accounting for fabrication in scientific studies. This study is unscientific and intended to be a 'hoax'. Based on **Experience**, **Empathy**, **Evidence** and **Expediency**, you conclude that fabrication in this case is substantially less unacceptable than those cases of fabrication that take place elsewhere.

You communicate your judgment and reasons to the rest of the IRB. The rest of board does the same and, together, you seek to come to a consensus.

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