

Department of Physics
4 Washington Place
New York, NY 10003

Telephone: (212) 998-7729
FAX: (212) 995-4016
E-mail: SOKAL@NYU.EDU

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Professor Mark R. McLellan, Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies
Ms. Cindy Starke, General Counsel

Portland State University
1600 SW Fourth Ave.
Portland, OR 97201

Dear Professor McLellan and Ms. Starke,

It has come to my attention that Portland State University is currently considering disciplinary action — possibly including dismissal — against Professor Peter Boghossian, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at PSU, on the grounds of alleged research misconduct associated to his participation in the so-called “Grievance Studies hoax”.

In this letter I would like to point out some serious inadequacies in the November 27, 2018 report of the Committee of Inquiry — which Professor Boghossian has kindly provided to me — which, I shall argue, entirely vitiate the contemplated disciplinary action. These inadequacies are of two types: a misapplication of PSU’s Research Misconduct Policy based on a gross conflation of two completely different senses of the word “fabricate”; and an accusation that correctly interprets the literal meaning of the Research Misconduct Policy while woefully neglecting its underlying purpose.

The accusation of research misconduct against Professor Boghossian concerns — and is *solely* concerned with — fabrication of research data. Portland State University’s Research Misconduct Policy (hereafter RMP)¹ defines “fabrication” as follows:

Fabrication is making up data or results and recording or reporting them.

I shall adhere strictly to this definition in what follows.

Conflation of two different senses of the word “fabricate”. Although the Committee of Inquiry report alludes repeatedly to possible research misconduct in multiple articles forming part of the so-called “Grievance Studies hoax”, it also states unambiguously that

the Committee of Inquiry evaluated only the “dog park” paper published

¹<https://sites.google.com/a/pdx.edu/research/integrity/research-misconduct>

in *Gender, Place & Culture*, the reviews of that paper, and the Project Summary and Fact Sheet. Our findings detailed below are based on careful evaluation of only those materials.

Therefore, in my analysis I shall adhere strictly to this same limitation.

It is, indeed, uncontested that the “dog park” article contained fabricated research data in the sense of the RMP — an issue that I shall address later in this letter. But the Committee of Inquiry report goes on to assert that

Dr. Boghossian and his collaborators admit to **fabricating entire articles** as part of their methods for studying academics in disciplines they refer to as “grievance studies”. In their Project Summary and Fact Sheet the authors compare their activities to previous academic hoaxes and refer to the uniqueness of their work as “*Distinguishing it particularly from previous academic hoaxes, many of our papers were designed to be quite serious, although all forwarded a variety of intentional flaws and satirical elements.*” **Thus**, the authors have admitted to purposefully **fabricating research data** in this as well as other academic papers. [boldface emphasis mine]

Well, no! The authors have admitted no such thing; and the Committee’s claim rests solely on a gross conflation of two completely different senses of the word “fabricate”. Let me explain.

The core meaning of the word “fabricate” is, of course, simply “to make”: as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it,

- 1a. To make anything that requires skill; to construct, manufacture. Now *rare*.
- 1c. with immaterial object. Also *absol.*
- 1e. To form (semi-finished metal stock or other manufacturing material) into the shape required for a finished product; also with the product as *object*.

In this sense the articles of Professor Boghossian and his collaborators were indeed “fabricated” — as in fact are *all* articles of *all* authors.

A second meaning of the word “fabricate” is:

2. In bad sense: To ‘make up’; to frame or invent (a legend, lie, etc.); to forge (a document).

This is, of course, the sense that is alluded to in the specific definition of “fabrication” employed in the RMP. But, *pace* the Committee of Inquiry, Professor Boghossian and his collaborators did *not* “fabricat[e] entire articles” in the sense of the RMP. What they did was to *write* entire articles (i.e. “fabricate” in sense #1) whose main theses they did not believe, and which indeed they considered absurd, as part of an experiment aimed at testing the intellectual standards of certain sectors of the contemporary academy. One may or may not agree with the ethics of such an experiment, and one may or may not agree with the conclusions the authors drew from it²; but neither the ethics nor the interpretation of this experiment is in any way relevant to the issue of fabrication *as defined in the RMP*. In particular, the aspects of the hoax papers discussed in the sentence quoted by the Committee — namely, that the papers were “designed to be quite serious” but also contained “intentional flaws and satirical elements” — have *nothing whatsoever* to do with the issue of fabrication as defined in the RMP. As a result, the Committee’s conclusion that

Thus, the authors have admitted to purposefully fabricating research data in this as well as other academic papers. [boldface emphasis mine]

is entirely bogus.

The purpose of the prohibition on fabrication of data. As I have stated, it is uncontested that the “dog park” article (and possibly a small number of the others) contained fabricated research data as defined in the RMP. But before blindly applying the letter of the RMP, it might be appropriate to reflect first for a moment on that policy’s *purpose*.

The purpose of the prohibition on the fabrication of research data is, obviously, to protect the integrity of the scientific record. Fabricated research data pollutes the scientific record and potentially misleads future scientific work — sometimes (as in the case of medical or nutritional research) with serious social consequences.³ This is why the fabrication or falsification of research data is rightly considered to be one of the gravest types of research misconduct.

But none of this applies to the case at hand. Professor Boghossian and his collaborators always intended to reveal their hoax within a year or so after publication

²It should be stressed that these are two completely different questions, and all four possible combinations of responses to them are logically tenable. Thus, one may argue that the authors’ methods were fully ethical and that their conclusions were correct; that their methods were ethical but their conclusions incorrect; that their methods were unethical but their conclusions nevertheless correct; or that their methods were unethical and their conclusions incorrect.

³The same holds for grossly erroneous research data; but one cannot, alas, legislate against mere incompetence.

of the hoax articles. (As it turns out, their revelation came earlier than planned because their hoax was detected by a journalist.) Indeed, such public revelation was an essential part of the project, without which it would have been meaningless. And given the arcane (and indeed absurd) nature of the purported empirical research, it is exceedingly unlikely that anyone would have attempted to replicate it or build upon it within the one-year period (or indeed ever). In short: no pollution of the scientific record was intended by the authors, and none in fact occurred.

It furthermore seems to me that Professor Boghossian and his collaborators have a strong affirmative defense on the grounds that their actions were undertaken in the public interest. At no time did they seek to benefit personally — whether financially or professionally — from the hoax. (Quite the contrary, it appears that the fallout from the hoax has had a profound negative effect on their careers and their personal lives.) Their sole aim was to test the intellectual standards in certain sectors of contemporary academia and to draw public attention to any shortcomings they might find. This is a wholly laudable aim — and remains so, *whatever may be* one’s opinions about the ethics of their experiment and about the conclusions they drew from it.⁴

The social and intellectual importance of their hoax is further underscored by the outpouring of public commentary and discussion that it has elicited, including a long feature article in which the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published seven essays, from scholars in a variety of disciplines, commenting on various aspects of the hoax.⁵ Some of the articles fully endorsed both the authors’ methods and their conclusions; some vigorously criticized both; and some offered more nuanced analyses of diverse types. Whatever opinion one may ultimately form on both questions, it seems undeniable that this debate (which is far from completed) has been salutary and that it would not have occurred without Boghossian *et al.*’s public provocation. These facts, taken together, give powerful support to the public-interest defense.

Finally, it should be stressed that most of the 20 hoax articles were purely theoretical essays and therefore completely outside the purview of the RMP.⁶ Only a handful of the hoax articles contained purported empirical data. In my opinion, the decision to include such invented data was a tactical mistake, as it left the authors open to the charge of research misconduct and diverted attention away from the central issues of scholarly standards that they sought to raise. But this tactical error does not vitiate the public-interest defense.

⁴I stress once again that these are two completely independent questions: see footnote 2 above.

⁵“What the ‘Grievance Studies’ Hoax Means”, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 9, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/What-the-Grievance/244753>

⁶With one possible exception: parts of the essay “Our Struggle Is My Struggle: Solidarity Feminism as an Intersectional Reply to Neoliberal and Choice Feminism” were apparently plagiarized (albeit with modifications) from Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.

In conclusion, it seems to me that it would be a grave injustice to punish Professor Boghossian for a violation of the letter of the RMP that did not constitute in any way a violation of that policy's *purpose* and which moreover was undertaken with the goal of serving, and which did in fact serve, the public interest. If anything, Professor Boghossian and his collaborators should be congratulated for raising important issues in a forceful and unconventional manner; and Portland State University should take pride in having such a distinguished public intellectual on its faculty.

Sincerely,



Alan Sokal

Professor of Mathematics,
University College London

and

Professor Emeritus of Physics,
New York University

P.S. In view of paragraph II.6 of the RMP, it seems likely that a Committee of Investigation will be established to consider these allegations further. If this happens, I would request that this letter be transmitted to all the members of that committee and that it become part of that committee's official record.

P.P.S. The Committee of Inquiry report concludes by saying that

While outside the scope of this Committee of Inquiry, we are very concerned that there may be violations of PSU's policies on human subjects research and we suggest that this possibility be evaluated by the Institutional Review Board or other appropriate research compliance committee.

The idea, apparently, is that Professor Boghossian and his collaborators could be charged with carrying out experimentation on human subjects (namely, the human editors and reviewers of the journals to which the hoax articles were submitted) without their informed consent, in violation of PSU's policy on Human Subjects Research (<https://sites.google.com/a/pdx.edu/research/integrity/human-subjects>). Since this remark was added to the Committee's report almost as an afterthought, and not fleshed out, I shall refrain from analyzing it in detail; indeed, the less said about it the better. Suffice it to say that, were PSU to pursue this

ludicrous interpretation of the Human Subjects Research policy, it would not only set itself up as a laughingstock — both in academia and in the public press — but would also be widely and rightly condemned for its misuse of a valid policy as a tool for attacking the academic freedom of one of its faculty members.