

## **Responsible Conduct of Research Case Study Series**

### **Michael LaCour**

In December 2014, *Science* published an article, *When contact changes minds: An experiment on transmission of support for gay equality* co-authored by Donald Green and Michael LaCour. Dr. Green is a prominent political scientist at Columbia University, and Michael LaCour, at the time, was a political science graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

The results of the study went viral as they directly contradicted mainstream thinking at the time about attitude change. Conventional wisdom (based on prior research) was that people do not change their minds easily about their political beliefs; while individuals may be swayed slightly on some issues through discussion, inevitably many revert to their original way of thinking. Green and LaCour (2014), however, reported that a brief conversation with voters in California by a gay canvasser about gay marriage changed voters' minds in a pro-gay marriage direction, with comparatively long-term effects as measured by pre- and post-conversation surveys. The extraordinary results made a huge splash in the national media, and were widely reported with far-reaching impacts. According to Singal (May 2015), "[The research] rerouted countless researchers' agendas, inspired activists to change their approach to voter outreach, generated shifts in grant funding, and launched follow-up experiments."

University of California, Berkeley graduate students, David Broockman and Joshua Kalla, were also impressed by the results and, being interested in the topic, set out to extend the findings. As they did, the study began to unravel; the clues were as follows (Singal, May 2015):

- Broockman calculated the study's price tag to be approximately \$1 million; 10,000 participants each paid \$100. Amazed by where LaCour, a graduate student, would get this amount of money, Broockman asked polling firms to submit a proposal to conduct a similar study; the majority responded that they could not do such a study.
- Broockman obtained the study's raw data; for such a large sample, many of the data appeared to be too orderly and clean. Singal notes, "[T]he results...just didn't include enough of the statistical randomness one would expect in large sample of human opinion."
- In conducting a pilot for a similar study in Miami, Broockman and Kalla experienced a survey response rate of less than 1%; the response rate reported by Green and LaCour was 12% in the first wave.
- When Broockman contacted the firm that LaCour reported using to conduct the study, he found out that not only was there no employee with the name that LaCour reported working with, but the company denied conducting the study.
- Finally, Kalla downloaded from the Web a copy of the 2012 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) dataset (a large political science dataset). After preliminary analyses, Broockman, Kalla, and Peter Aronow, a political scientist at Yale, discovered that it was the dataset that LaCour had manipulated and presented as his own.

In mid-May 2015, Broockman, Kalla, and Aronow wrote a 26-page report (Broockman et al., 2015), and sent it to Green. The report charged that the data were not collected as described in the *Science* paper, detailed the timeline of activities and findings, summarized the irregularities, and explained their inability to replicate the study results. After receiving the report, Green contacted LaCour's advisor at UCLA, Lynn Vavreck. Upon learning that LaCour would not provide the raw data from the study, Green shortly thereafter requested that *Science* retract the article (Singal, May 2015).

LaCour posted online a May 29, 2015 response to the Broockman, Kalla, and Aronow report. In it, he took issue with their claims and stood behind his findings. His response also included screenshots of a Qualtrics survey, which, according to another researcher, are from an earlier pilot study on which the latter collaborated with LaCour (Van Noorden, 2015). LaCour, however, admitted to the following (Carey, May 2015):

1. Misrepresenting his funding sources. He indicated in the *Science* paper that The Ford Foundation, the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, and the Williams Institute funded the study, yet all denied doing so. He admitted he lied about the funding in order to provide the study credibility.
2. Lying about how he paid study participants. In the paper he stated that he paid each participant \$100. Later, he admitted to entering participants into a raffle for Apple products because he could not get funding to pay them.
3. Deleting the raw data. He stated that deleting the raw data was not improper, and that he did so to comply with UCLA's requirements to protect the identity of study participants. UCLA's guidelines, however, allegedly require deleting identifying information, not all data (Carey, 2015).
4. Changing survey companies. He reported using uSamp but later explained that he used another unnamed company.

Further, LaCour did not obtain approval from the UCLA Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study.

Green explained to RetractionWatch (a blog about scientific retractions), “Several weeks after the canvassing launched in June 2013, Michael LaCour showed me his survey results. I thought they were so astonishing that the findings would only be credible if the study were replicated....Michael LaCour and Dave Fleischer therefore conducted a second experiment in August of 2013, and the results confirmed the initial findings. Convinced that the results were robust, I helped Michael LaCour write up the findings, especially the parts that had to do with the statistical interpretation of the experimental design. Given that I did not have IRB approval for the study from my home institution, I took care not to analyze any primary data — the datafiles that I analyzed were the same replication datasets that Michael LaCour posted to his website. Looking back, the failure to verify the original Qualtrics data was a serious mistake” (Oransky, 2015). Green apologized for failing in his supervisory role, explaining he was embarrassed that he did not suspect LaCour fabricated the data, and that he did not adequately supervise the work.

In retracting the article on May 28, 2015, *Science* cited #1, #2, and #3 above as the reasons for doing so. LaCour did not agree to the retraction. UCLA initiated an inquiry into the case, and in late June, 2015 Princeton University rescinded its faculty job offer that it had made earlier to LaCour (Singal, June 2015). In addition to allegedly falsifying research data, scrutiny of LaCour has revealed that he also lied on his curriculum vitae, fabricating a grant received and a teaching award. Broockman is now on the faculty at Stanford University.

In April 2016, Broockman and Kalla published the results of a study they conducted in Miami showing that a short, 10-minute interview by a canvasser can reduce prejudice, this time about transgendered people (Bohannon, April 2016).

#### Sources:

Bohannon, John (April 7, 2016), “For Real This Time: Talking to People About Gay and Transgender Issues Can Change Their Prejudices.” *Science*.

Broockman, D., Kalla, J., & Aronow, P. (2015, May 19). Irregularities in LaCour (2014). Retrieved July 13, 2015, from [http://stanford.edu/~dbroock/broockman\\_kalla\\_aronow\\_lg\\_irregularities.pdf](http://stanford.edu/~dbroock/broockman_kalla_aronow_lg_irregularities.pdf)

Carey, Benedict (May 29, 2015), “Study Using Gay Canvassers Erred in Methods, Not Results, Author Says.” *New York Times*.

Oransky, I. (May 20, 2015). Author retracts study of changing minds on same-sex marriage after colleague admits data were faked. Retrieved July 13, 2015, from <http://retractionwatch.com/2015/05/20/author-retracts-study-of-changing-minds-on-same-sex-marriage-after-colleague-admits-data-were-faked/>

Singal, Jesse (June 22, 2015), “Princeton University Has Rescinded Its Employment Offer to Michael LaCour.” *New York Magazine*.

Singal, Jesse (May 29, 2015), “The Case of the Amazing Gay-Marriage Data: How a Graduate Student Reluctantly Uncovered a Huge Scientific Fraud.” *New York Magazine*.

Van Noorden, Richard (June 4, 2015), “Retracted Gay-Marriage Study Debated at Misconduct Meet-up.” *Nature*.

#### Questions for Discussion:

1. How do you think LaCour was able to publish falsified data in such a prestigious journal as *Science*?
2. If you were in Broockman’s and Kalla’s shoes, would you have handled the situation differently and if so, how and why? What issues does this case raise for people who report misconduct (whistleblowers)?
3. What are the human subjects issues raised by this case? Were human subjects harmed and if so, how?
4. What data management issues does this case raise?
5. What are the authorship issues in this case?
6. Why didn’t the peer review system identify the problems?
7. What are some of the mentoring issues raised by this case?
8. Does this case raise any conflict of interest or commitment concerns?
9. This case features a long-distance collaboration between a faculty member and a graduate student. What issues does the case raise about collaborating with others?
10. What are some of the consequences of LaCour’s behavior? For Broockman and Kalla? For Green? For other researchers in this field? For UCLA? For activists?
11. What are some lessons learned from this case?
12. What are the responsibilities of individuals who co-author papers? What can or should a student (graduate or undergraduate) do when co-author is suspected of falsifying data?