

## Article

# A Re-Evaluation of the *Grievance Studies* Affair

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**Abstract:** During 2018, three academics employed what they referred to as “reflective ethnography” to examine the hypothesis that many disciplines (e.g., sociology, educational philosophy, and critical race theory) are motivated by extreme ideologies, as opposed to generating knowledge. The authors published, or had accepted, seven “hoax” articles in a number of peer-reviewed journals. When the story broke in the *Wall Street Journal*, the authors stated that the articles advocated a number of ludicrous, inhumane, and appalling ideas. For example, one argued that men should be trained like dogs with shock collars. Their acceptance for publication was therefore taken as evidence for the kind of ideas that many academic disciplines will advocate. In the present article, I will show that the central aspects of the hoax articles do not match with how they were later described by the hoax authors and many other commentators (e.g., journalists). Despite the vast amount of media coverage, this has (virtually) gone unnoticed. I will suggest that the widely accepted narrative of the so-called *Grievance Studies* affair is incorrect.

**Keywords:** reflective ethnography; grievance studies; Boghossian; false memory

## 1. Introduction

During 2017 and 2018, three academics, James Lindsay, Helen Pluckrose, and Peter Boghossian, wrote 20 “hoax” articles intended for publication in a number of peer-reviewed journals<sup>1</sup>. The authors used the method of what they called “reflective ethnography” to show that many areas of academia, particularly those in the humanities and social sciences (broadly defined), have become adversely dominated by liberal ideology. These disciplines were said to include, amongst many others, sociology, educational philosophy, feminism, gender studies, critical race theory, and social work. When revealing the project, [Lindsay et al. \(2018a\)](#) argued that these fields are too concerned with perceived grievances and social justice. As [Lindsay et al. \(2018b\)](#) wrote in *USA Today*, there is “a form of political activism that puts political grievances ahead of finding truth”.

The hoax papers, written using pseudonyms and borrowed identities, supposedly presented a number of preposterous ideas. For example, one was said to suggest that the fat acceptance movement could develop a sport in which morbidly obese people show off their large bodies. Other papers went further and were said to present “inhumane” and “appalling” ideas. For example, one argued that white students should be chained to the floor in order to experience reparations and another stated that workplace training should involve men being electrocuted with shock collars in order to adopt feminist ideologies. One of the papers even copied a large section of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and replaced the word “Jews” with “white men”. Another article based on *Mein Kampf* replaced “our movement” or “party” with “intersectional feminism”. Lindsay et al. also took innocuous everyday male behavior (i.e., attraction to females) and “problematized” it by explaining it through the lens of feminism. Four papers were published and three others were accepted for publication before the project was prematurely halted in the summer of 2018.

When the project was revealed in October 2018, by the *Wall Street Journal* and the authors themselves in a separate article ([Lindsay et al. 2018a](#)), the resulting controversy initiated a major debate concerned with the method the authors had used. As well as articles in the peer-reviewed literature (e.g., [Cole 2020](#); [Lagerspetz 2021](#); [Lăzăroiu 2019](#)), every



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major news outlet covered the “Grievance Studies Affair”, including the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Sunday Times*, *BBC*, *Sky News*, and the *Daily Mail*. Supporters of the project included Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker. In a blog, the historian Niall Ferguson wrote that the prank papers were “the greatest hoaxes in the history of academia”. Opponents, however, suggested that Lindsay et al. had acted unethically. They pointed to the fact that the method employed included the reporting of fabricated data.

One of the oddest aspects of the whole controversy, and one that has (virtually) gone unnoticed, is that few people seemed to have read the original papers. The whole debate has been based on what Lindsay et al. *said* their hoax papers stated, rather than what they *actually* stated. Indeed, the standard narrative as to what the authors did came primarily from their own “reveal” article (Lindsay et al. 2018a), which was published on the same day as the *Wall Street Journal* piece. Here, the authors outlined the problems they say are present within academia before describing their project’s method. The reveal article additionally included a summary of what each of their papers argued. Lindsay et al. also relate just how ludicrous and outrageous their papers were and how we should all be shocked at the kind of ideas that are deemed acceptable within academia. There was also a press release and numerous articles for the popular newspapers and magazines that the authors wrote (e.g., *The New Statesman*, *The Australian*). The narrative was therefore very much set by themselves.

In the present article, I will show how the critical aspects of the hoax articles do not match with how they were later described by Lindsay et al. and the many others (e.g., journalists, bloggers, and authors of peer-reviewed papers) who discussed the affair. The articles essentially became exaggerated. These exaggerations were the very ones the media emphasized. Below, I describe a number of the hoax papers, one other central claim of the authors, and show how these were misrepresentations. In terms of the papers, I consider only the most prominent, that is, the ones that gained particular attention. This was either because they supposedly advocated particularly ludicrous ideas or were accepted for publication (or both). The exaggerations are presented below in reverse order of degree. Thus, whereas the *Fat Bodybuilding* and *Progressive Stack* papers were only subtly, but importantly, exaggerated, the notion that such a large number of papers can be generated in the humanities within a matter of months was the largest exaggeration. Although speculative, I will then present a reason as to why the exaggerations occurred.

## 2. “Baldwin (2018)”—*Fat Bodybuilding*

This paper is unambiguously concerned with the phenomenon of being “fat”; the term that fat activists prefer. Indeed, the word appears 185 times, in what is only a short ten-page article. However, when summarizing the paper in their *reveal* article, the authors used “morbid obesity”. This term (or some variant of it) was never used in the paper, and the lesser notion “obesity” was only used twice, being a reference to commonly used discourse. The change from “fat” to “morbid obesity”, or some variant of it, also occurred when Lindsay et al. discussed the hoax in the popular press. For example, “morbid obesity” was used when they wrote for the current affairs magazine *The New Statesman*. Here, they stated, “We denied objective knowledge about morbid obesity too”.

The difference between the terms fat and morbidly obese is important because of how we tend to think of each. A “fat” person is likely to bring to mind someone who is very different to someone who is “morbidly obese” or just “obese”. Indeed, although not a formal category of body size, many of us can be considered fat but not obese. The former is someone who can go about their daily life without too much problem; the latter in contrast, is someone who, for instance, has difficulty walking. The manner in which this paper was framed when the project was revealed suggests that the (supposedly) hoaxed journal supported the manuscript because it advocated morbid obesity as a lifestyle when this was not the case. Had the paper actually been an advocacy of being morbidly obese, it may well have been rejected by the editors. It seems that Lindsay et al. did not make their paper ridiculous enough; this only came later when they later described the work. To be clear, the

present author is not commenting on what the field of fat studies advocates; the issue here is about a method that failed to adequately describe the content of the papers.

The subtle reinterpretation of what was in the fat bodybuilding article was then relayed by the various media outlets covering the story. For example, [Magness \(2018\)](#) stated that this particular hoax paper was “a piece espousing a theoretical framework for the acceptance of obese bodybuilders”. As with the other exaggeration outlined below, the subtle change from fat to morbidly obese very much helped the visibility of the grievance studies project.

### 3. “Gonzalez (Unpublished)”—*Progressive Stack*

The *Progressive Stack* article was described in the Lindsay et al. media release as the “most appalling paper” of the 20 they wrote. Although the method does not seem to have been developed in any meaningful way, a *Progressive Stack* is said to occur in gatherings, e.g., at a political rally, where opinions from people who belong to traditionally marginalized groups are given priority by the convenor or chair. [Lindsay et al. \(2018a\)](#) stated that this paper argued for the method to be used in the classroom in conjunction with students being chained to the floor so that they could “experience reparations” for the past crimes of white people. As stated in their press release, these are “Patently unfair, inhumane, and abusive treatments of students”.

Although the early part of the paper discusses real cases of *stacking*, the article does not advocate anything that is “inhumane” and “abusive”. Nobody is forced to do anything. Consider all the reparations-relevant phrases used in the paper; “experiential reparations in the classroom environment could be effected, for example, by inviting *in an educational context* [original italics] white students to sit on the floor, or, to engage even more profoundly, to wear (light) chains”. Students would be “encouraged to experience *simulated* injustices in the classroom” [italics added]; “entered into *willingly* in a safe environment” [original italics]; “giving them simulated experience of relative oppression through a *safe and voluntary* learning experience” [italics added]; “in professional and educational settings.”

The “reparations” are explicitly “simulated”; they are not real. They also take place within the safe, professional, lawful context of education. The devil is, of course, in the detail of how a teacher treats their pupils, but the way in which the method is described is more akin to, for example, the scenario where school students visit an industrial museum (e.g., a cotton mill) and one is invited to crawl under the machinery to experience the cramped conditions that children who cleaned the machines would have had to work in. It all takes place “in an educational context”. No one is being abused. Indeed, rather than being “made” to take part, the *Progressive Stack* paper explicitly states that the students can opt out (“inviting”, “willingly”, and “left free not to”). There is also the fact that the paper reports feedback (again fabricated) that the students gave the “author”. For instance, “As one student remarked in my end-of-course evaluations, this practice was the one that “changed everything”, and was “initially awkward but highly instructive”. Another student expressed “gratitude”. No person after being treated in an “appalling” and “inhumane” way is going to express gratitude.

The specific way in which the *chaining* aspect of the paper was later described was also subtly changed. When writing about the hoax papers in *The Australian*, Pluckrose stated that one article argued that “white students should be chained to the floor in classrooms”, a notion that has been repeated by journalists (e.g., [Christensen and Sears 2018](#); [Lewinski 2019](#)). The *Progressive Stack* paper only mentions the chaining once. As noted above, here, the paper states that “inviting *in an educational context* [original italics] white students to sit on the floor, or, to engage even more profoundly, to wear (light) chains”. “Wearing” “light” chains brings to one’s mind something very different to being “chained to the floor”.

If anyone is in any doubt as to what exactly this paper is suggesting, if, for instance, the reviewers of the manuscript had concerns and thought that *real* punishment was being advocated, the abstract is unequivocal. The methods suggested occur in an “ethical” manner. This is opposite to what Lindsay et al. later said the paper had stated (“unethical”).

In sum, the actual paper went to great lengths to state that the *stacking* and reparations were simulated, undertaken willingly, ethically, and safely, and was supported by the students. This is opposite to how the article was later portrayed. By the time the authors got to discuss the paper in the media, it became one in which students were treated in an inhumane and abusive manner.

#### 4. “Wilson (2018)”—*Dog Park*

Lindsay et al. (2018a) stated that the ludicrous nature of this paper is in the fact that it argued that dog parks are “rape-condoning spaces” and that such parks can therefore be seen as mirroring the culture and its attitude towards women. Before turning to how this paper was later discussed by the authors, it is worth noting that the notion of non-human animals being “raped” has been discussed for decades, particularly from an evolutionary perspective (see Crawford and Galdikas 1986 for a review). Furthermore, the winner of the prestigious Oxford Uehiro Prize in Practical Ethics (for the best UK undergraduate essay) was awarded to Eskens (2017) for a piece entitled “Is Sex With Robots Rape?” Although many might find this kind of discussion controversial, indeed “ludicrous” as Lindsay et al. stated, it is central to many areas of academia (e.g., ethics, evolutionary psychology). Furthermore, the *Dog Park* paper reported the data showing that human dog walkers are more tolerant of male dogs attempting to have sex with female dogs, as opposed to when they attempt sex with other males. These extremely interesting data (had they been real) clearly needed to be explained somehow, and the paper did so by invoking human attitudes towards sex.

The hoax authors, however, placed greater emphasis on one particularly “unethical” aspect of the paper. It was here that the paper was later misrepresented by Lindsay et al. This was then, of course, repeated by the media. The article was said to advocate a particular type of practical application. During workplace training, men should be “trained like dogs”. As Lindsay et al. (2018a) stated, the authors said to themselves, “What if we write a paper saying we should train men like we do dogs”. This dog training notion has been repeated by Lindsay et al. on many occasions in print and when interviewed. For example, whilst appearing on Britain’s *GB News* in October 2021, Pluckrose stated that the paper said, “we should train men like dogs with something like electric collars”. Similarly, Lindsay stated on the *Rubin Report* show that, “the original point of that paper was to show that rape culture is a big problem and the best way we could intervene upon that is to train men as we train dogs”. As one would expect, journalists were typically shocked that an academic journal would publish a paper advocating this kind of training. Discussion of this has also been repeated in the peer-reviewed literature (Snitko and Varshavskiy 2019).

Despite these repeated claims, no such training was ever advocated in the paper. *All references to dog training are purely metaphorical* and the paper makes this clear on every single occasion that training is mentioned. For instance, the article states, “The ‘dog training’ is purely metaphorical”, “The reining in or ‘leashing’ of men in society, however, can again be understood pragmatically on a metaphorical level with clear parallels to dog training”, and “By properly educating human men to respect women . . . . [men] could be ‘leashed’ by a culture that refuses to victimize women”. Notice how in these quotes, the phrase “dog training” and the word “leashed” are placed inside inverted commas, again to emphasize the fact that this is metaphorical; it is not to be taken literally. This is also the case when the paper explicitly mentions electric collars. Here, the paper states, “human males may be metaphorically ‘shocked’ out of regarding sexual violence, sexual harassment, and rape culture as normative”. There is clearly nothing unethical here.

As with the change from “fat” to “morbid obesity”, Lindsay et al. reinterpreted what their own paper had stated. The paper has gone from training men like dogs in a metaphorical sense to training in which men are electrocuted. As a result, the dog training narrative has now taken on the status of truth. Thus, the *Wikipedia* entry for the journal that published the hoax paper states that it was subject to some controversy when it published a paper suggesting that men should be “trained like dogs”.



### 5. “Baldwin (2018)”—Hooters

The point of this paper was to show that certain fields within academia will even publish papers “that seek to problematize heterosexual men’s attraction to women” (Lindsay et al. 2018a). This part of the project was essentially highlighting the notion, common amongst some people, that, for instance, men now have to be wary of asking a woman out on a date for fear of being labelled a sexual predator. As Lindsay et al. (2018a) stated, the paper is based on the (apparent) liberal notion that we should be “mystified about why heterosexual men are attracted to women”.

The article itself describes the (fabricated) “field notes” of an ethnographic researcher who observed a large number of interactions between customers and waitresses in the *Hooters* chain. These are restaurants in which scantily clad young women serve (mostly male) diners. The Lindsay et al. summary of the paper, however, again misrepresents what the paper actually said. Although it is an empirical question, one can be reasonably confident in stating that many, if not most people, would find the behavior reported in the paper as incredibly problematic. Here are some of the comments, said amongst a group of males, that the “author” reported: “I’d fuck her so hard”, “I’d absolutely wreck her tight little body”, “I bet she’d take it in the ass, just to prove she’d be submissive to me”, “She’s the best pair of tits in here”, “She turns me on so much, I don’t think I could stop myself, and I know she couldn’t stop me”, and “a fundamental part of being a man means seeing at least one person you want to kill and at least one person you want to fuck every day”. There are also comments directly addressed to the waitresses. For example, one male asked if she wants to sit on his lap and another asks if she would hold his penis.

By invoking the “problematizing of male behaviour” principle when later describing this paper, Lindsay et al. made it seem like the reviewers and editors of the (supposedly) hoaxed journal had supported a paper that was critical of innocuous male behavior in which males were simply attracted to females. This was not the case. Indeed, it is odd that the authors situated their experiment in a restaurant chain that is highly controversial because of the way women are treated and represented. To have adequately made the problematize point, the paper needed to describe behavior in which men courted women in a manner that was *unambiguously polite and respectful*. The ethnographer would then have needed to problematize this behavior. An example would be something along the following lines, “I observed many shocking examples of male conquest behaviours in which men would attempt to humiliate, oppress, and subjugate women. For instance, one male asked a waitress if he could take her out for dinner. In another appalling incidence, a male diner asked a waitress if he could buy her a drink. The latter was a clear attempt to intoxicate her in order to commit a serious sexual assault”. We will, of course, never know now, but it is fair to say that this kind of paper would never have been accepted because this would be unambiguously ridiculous.

It is not at all surprising that the reviewers and editors of the journal accepted the manuscript. Whilst some may consider the kind of behavior and comments innocuous, many (perhaps most) working in academia as journal editors would find these problematic and/or sexist. As with the *Fat Bodybuilding*, *Dog Park*, and *Progressive Stack* papers, the article’s conclusion was not ridiculous. It was only said to be so when later described by Lindsay et al. and other commentators.

As mentioned in the present Introduction, the mismatch between the later description of the hoax papers and what they actually stated has gone unnoticed. The only exception to this (in the hundreds of articles on the affair that the present author has read) is a 2018 blog by three PhD candidates, then at the *London School of Economics*. Spruce et al. (2018) wrote, “It turns out that to claim their ‘hoax’ as a success, Pluckrose et al. don’t just have to misrepresent other people’s work, but they also have to misrepresent their own”. Giving the *Hooters* paper as an example, Spruce et al. state that its central argument of sexual objectification and male dominance, “doesn’t really seem that outlandish”, given the behavior described. They also note how the *Hooters* article “is replete with caveats and a keen awareness of its own limitations”. Indeed, it is little surprising that the paper was reviewed favorably and accepted by the editors. Spruce et al. go on to state that “the

current reporting on the hoax overwhelmingly fails to do due diligence. Pluckrose et al. are routinely taken at their word, with media outlets apparently failing to read and make independent judgements about the four articles that were published”.

## 6. The *Mein Kampf* Papers

Lindsay et al. wrote three so-called *Mein Kampf* articles, one of which was accepted. According to the hoaxers, the papers were intended to illustrate how certain sections of the academy will even publish, verbatim, large sections of Hitler’s infamous text as long as a few key words are swapped (e.g., “White people” for “Jews”). This clearly gives the impression that journals will publish shocking tirades against white people. Indeed, this was the media hook that vastly increased the project’s visibility. For instance, Olivia Goldhill, reporting for the global news outlet *Quartz*, described how the paper “replaced the anti-Semitic phrases in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* with feminist buzzwords”.

Lindsay et al. (2018a) stated that one of the papers took, “part of Chapter 12 of Volume 1 of *Mein Kampf* with fashionable buzzwords switched in.” Although they did not state here which words were switched, Lindsay and Boghossian told TV show host Joe Rogan that they “more or less replaced Jews with White Men”. Rogan is clearly shocked and wanted confirmation, “You literally took *Mein Kampf*, the actual words from *Mein Kampf* [Boghossian: “yes”] and put it in this paper and replaced the word *Jews* with the word *White Men* and they accepted it”? Lindsay replies by saying, “What we did was we took the chapter, Chapter 12, we took the chapter where he says this is why we should have the Nazi party and what is expected of people who are going to be part of it and we took out ‘our movement’ or ‘party’ . . . .took that out and put in ‘intersectional feminism’”. This switching of individual words is further emphasized by Lindsay and Boghossian when both use their hands to pantomime the picking up of one thing (i.e., a specific word) and replace it with another. Boghossian does this when he states, “replaced Jews with White Men” and Lindsay does so when stating “. . .took that out and put in ‘intersectional feminism’”.

In the sub-sections below, I evaluate the specific “switching” claim and the “rewrite of *Mein Kampf*” more broadly.

### 6.1. The “Gonzalez and Jones (Accepted)” Paper

Lindsay et al. stated that they undertook the word switching in a 3600-word section of an English translation of *Mein Kampf* (and provide a link to the actual version). Boghossian has argued that this constitutes plagiarism. Indeed, this clearly would be. However, two commercially available plagiarism checkers do not reveal plagiarism; one giving only a 0.2% similarity value, the other zero. Recall that during the Rogan interview, Lindsay, in referring to this paper, did state that “our movement” or “party” was replaced by “intersectional feminism”. One therefore only has to search for the term “Intersectional feminism” in the hoax article and see if the three or four word phrases that appear immediately adjacent to the term also occur in *Mein Kampf*. Rather oddly, however, given the claim by Lindsey et al., “Intersectional feminism” only appears four times in the Gonzalez and Jones paper and none involve the switching of this phrase with “party” or “our movement”.

In the first appearance of the phrase, the text states, “These indispensable contributions to feminism problematize the simplistic notion of women, privilege, and oppression as monolithic entities. For this reason, intersectional feminism has been misunderstood at times through the application of a lens of universal womanhood within materialist and Marxist feminism”. The term “For this reason” occurs three times in Chapter 12 of *Mein Kampf*. None, however, match anything meaningful in the Lindsay et al. article. For instance, Hitler wrote, “I had a hard time putting forward my opinion that we must not dodge this struggle, but prepare for it, and for this reason acquire the armament which alone offers protection against violence. Terror is not broken by the mind, but by terror”. Immediately after the critical phrase, the Gonzalez and Jones paper includes the term “Has been misunderstood”. This phrase does not appear anywhere in Chapter 12 of *Mein Kampf*, neither does “misunderstood”. If we consider other words in the passage (i.e., ones

that are not immediately adjacent to “intersectional feminism”), and ones that are low-frequency words, we find that “Monolithic” does not appear in *Mein Kampf*, and neither does “oppression”.

The second appearance of “Intersectional feminism” occurs as part of a quote by an author from 2017, so there is clearly no need to check whether this passage appears in *Mein Kampf*. In the third appearance, the hoax paper states “Ultimately, the aims and tasks of complex movements like intersectional feminism are so broad that they only have hope of being achieved through shared values against oppression”. Here, the phrases immediately adjacent to the target phrase (i.e., “complex movements” and “are so broad”) do not appear in *Mein Kampf*. This is also the case for the words “values” and “ultimately”. The last occurrence of “Intersectional feminism” is in the passage when it states, “it is equally clear that such a goal cannot be achieved by disparate movements that travel roughly in a similar direction (cf. hooks 2014). That is, mere intersectional feminism may not be enough unless it is reconstituted as solidarity feminism. Again, neither “may not be enough” nor “similar direction” nor “disparate movements” appear in *Mein Kampf*.

### 6.2. The “Miller (Unpublished)” Paper

The second *Mein Kampf* paper, written under the name of Carol Miller, was submitted but rejected. According to [Lindsay et al. \(2018a\)](#), here they replaced “Jews with white people and/or whiteness”. Recall also that Boghossian told Joe Rogan that, “we just more or less replaced Jews with White Men”. He also repeated this claim when being filmed by Mike Naya for a documentary on the project. Here, he states “we just swapped Jews for Whites”. In different interviews and written pieces, we therefore have “Jews” being replaced by “white” or some variant of it, e.g., “whiteness”.

As mentioned above, one only has to search every occurrence of a target word/phrase and see whether any of the adjacent three or four word phrases appear in *Mein Kampf*. An initial search showed that, despite Boghossian’s claim to Rogan, “white men” does not, however, appear anywhere in the Miller manuscript. Indeed, the word “men” only appears once, when referring to “the murder of unarmed Black men by police”. The word “White” in contrast occurs 211 times in the main body of the Miller paper. Only one of these, however, shares any similarity to *Mein Kampf* in any meaningful way. Here, Hitler wrote, “Wherever I went, I began to see Jews, and the more I saw, the more sharply they became distinguished in my eyes from the rest of humanity. Particularly the Inner City and the districts north of the Danube Canal swarmed with a people which even outwardly had lost all resemblance to Germans”. The hoax paper wrote, “Wherever I went I saw not just white people but Whites, mostly of the subtler systemic and thus “soft” hidden kind, and the more Whites I saw the more strikingly and clearly they stood out as a different from People of Color. (The suburbs and surrounding rural areas in particular swarmed with a people who, even in outer appearance, bore no similarity to People of Color)”. There is a clear similarity here. None of the other 210 uses of “white”, however, are related to the Miller text. They are all of the following kind. For example, the hoax paper states, “there were (White) racists and people who happened to be white”. *Mein Kampf* states, “This gentleman, who was certainly otherwise honest, just happened to be convinced that I might be capable of doing certain things, but not of speaking”. Here, “happened to be white” and “happened to be convinced” is the similarity. The first three words constitute a phrase that is bound to occur in both texts. Despite using “white” on 211 occasions, the Miller article did not switch this word for “Jews”.

### 6.3. The “Wilson (Unpublished)” Paper

This paper was a feminist piece written under the name of “Helen Wilson”. The *reveal* document stated that the authors replaced “Jews” with either “men” or “patriarchy”. These two words appear 91 times in the main text. Searching the whole of *Mein Kampf* for adjacent phrases generates only four similarities. None switch “men” or “patriarchy”. All four similarities are again based on common phrases. For instance, both texts use “the great

majority". In this instance, Hitler states, "And the great majority of the embattled army still thought the same", and the Miller paper states, "one small segment of men disparaged the Women's March and the broader feminist movement around it, while the great majority of men people disapproved or repudiated the re-emergence of an open American patriarchy".

#### 6.4. A "Structural Rewrite"?

When discussing the Gonzalez and Jones paper with Rogan, Lindsay stated that they "added theory around it so that it would fly". He added that, "Hitler lays out a 14-point plan of what he would require of people who want to be part of his movement and we changed it to an 8-point plan". This rewrite at the more conceptual level was not, however, mentioned by Lindsay et al. in the *reveal* document, only the "switching".

Hitler's 14 points can be reduced down and essentially state that education is key; there has to be full commitment; opponents must be destroyed; the central problem must be identified; propaganda is critical; political power should be centralized; the movement is anti-parliamentarian; people want the movement but do not quite realize it; there is only one true movement; and all power should reside with one leader.

The two texts share five of these notions. However, they are extremely general. For example, Hitler wrote, "To win the masses for a national resurrection, no social sacrifice is too great". The Gonzalez and Jones hoax paper states, "no accessible sacrifice that abnegates neoliberalism should be considered too great". Another similarity is based on the notion that there can be no "half-measures". Hitler wrote, "The nationalization of the broad masses can never be achieved by half-measures, by weakly emphasizing a so-called objective standpoint, but only by a ruthless and fanatically one-sided orientation toward the goal to be achieved". The hoax paper stated, "though change may come in stages, feminism cannot limit itself to half-measures in solidarity or be selfish". A third similarity occurs when both texts use the term "social uplift". The fourth similarity emphasizes the fact that the movements should recognize the most pressing concerns of the day. Here, both use the term "causal importance". For Hitler, it is the "question of the racial preservation of the nation. In the blood alone resides the strength as well as the weakness of man". For the hoax paper, it is "the matter of understanding and defying oppression in multiple and intersecting forms". The other similarity passage concerns the idea that people are striving for the respective movement without realizing it.

The above paragraph shows that the Gonzalez and Jones paper does indeed share similarities to Hitler's text. Importantly, however, these similarities are extremely general and tenuous, the kind that will always occur when presenting a political manifesto. For instance, all political treatise need to recognize the central issues of the day and educate the population in line with the cause. Of course, the idea that people are already striving towards a goal is particularly unique, but we have come some way from copying verbatim a 3600-word section and "switching" a couple of specific words (e.g., "white men" for "Jews") to a few general similarities.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the article was accepted for publication. There is no reason why any reviewer would have been concerned or had misgivings. Critically, any sinister aspects of Hitler's text does not occur in the paper. For instance, in the "half-measures" similarity mentioned above, Hitler refers to the "ruthless and fanatically one-sided orientation toward the goal to be achieved". In contrast, the hoax paper warns that the feminist movement should not be selfish. This is important because the notion of including Hitler's original text with words switched suggests to the reader that the abhorrent aspects of *Mein Kampf* have been retained. It suggests that feminist writings consider Hitler's ideology as acceptable when applied to white men as opposed to the Jewish population. (As noted above, this suggestion made its way into the mass media, e.g., Olivia Goldhill, reporting for *Quartz*). Indeed, because the central concern of feminism is equality, the Gonzalez and Jones paper argues that the feminist movement should be based "upon its intolerance of oppression in all its forms". This was not, of course, part of the Nazi ideology.



In sum, there was no “rewrite” of *Mein Kampf*, not in any meaningful way. The word “Jews” was not replaced by “white men”. There was only a rewrite in the sense that any document that outlines a point-by-point plan is a rewrite of *Mein Kampf*. Amongst the vast amount of discussion on the grievance studies affair, and with the exception of a small section in [Lagerspetz \(2021\)](#) and a March 2021 piece in an Israeli newspaper, the *Mein Kampf* rewrite claim has gone completely unchallenged by any journalist who covered the hoax. Indeed, the claim is now part of the standard narrative. In an article for the popular *National Review* magazine, [Leef \(2018\)](#) noted that, “Those hoax papers tell us a lot about declining academic standards”. Perhaps someone should rewrite the article and switch the word “academic” with “Journalistic”.

## 7. The Ease with Which Humanities Papers Can Be Written

All the above evaluations concern the later reinterpretation of the hoax articles. In the present section, I will examine a further central argument presented by Lindsay et al. The authors have repeatedly suggested that the academic fields they targeted (e.g., educational philosophy) have such little merit that Lindsay et al. were able to write and publish (or have accepted) seven papers in less than a year. [Lindsay et al. \(2018a\)](#) wrote, “we spent 10 months writing the papers, averaging one new paper roughly every thirteen days”. The authors added that, “Seven papers published over seven years is frequently claimed to be the number sufficient to earn tenure at most major universities.” This aspect of the project was also emphasized by others. For example, [Conway \(2018\)](#) wrote, “In US humanities departments an academic with seven papers published within seven years is awarded tenure, an indefinite academic appointment. The trio completed these seven papers within 10 months”. Similarly, [Schuessler \(2018\)](#) wrote that “seven accepted papers in a single year makes for an impressive resume”.

This publication rate is, however, a large exaggeration of what Lindsay et al. actually achieved. This is because there were effectively not three people working on the hoax project. There was the equivalent of 84.

In a very detailed survey of academic time use, [Ziker et al. \(2014\)](#) reported that on average, each works approximately 61 h per week. Ziker separated these hours into a large number of very specific tasks (e.g., e-mail, phone conversations) and found that 13.4 h were spent on research. Being privately funded, Lindsay has stated that he was dedicating around 90 h per week on the project. Although this seems high, another of the authors (Pluckrose) confirmed this figure to the present author during a Zoom interview. Thus Lindsay was actually equivalent to 6.7 academics. That is, 6.7 full time academics (Full Time Equivalents; FTEs) all working the average number of hours that academics spend on research. Pluckrose also stated that she dedicated approximately “20 to 30” hours per week on the project. If we use the middle value of 25, Pluckrose was the equivalent of just under 1.9 FTEs. Pluckrose also stated that Boghossian contributed around 40 h per week. He was therefore the equivalent of three FTEs.

With only these basic adjustments, we have the equivalent of 11.6 academics, not three, working on the project. That is, the 155 h the authors were collectively spending on the project each week divided by the average number of hours one academic spends on research (13.4). Even this figure, however, is a huge underestimation.

Research does not, of course, just involve writing papers. Data collection alone can take months, if not years. Indeed, the *Dog Park* hoax paper stated that the (fabricated) data took one year to gather and the data from the *Hooters* paper took two years. Then, there is the coding and analysis. Furthermore, and as Ziker noted, research can also involve the time it takes to write grant applications. There is also the obtaining of ethical approval. Experiments also have to be designed and sample sizes sometimes calculated. There is additionally a requirement (or it is at least strongly advised) for all experiments to be pre-registered at an appropriate place, e.g., the *Open Science Framework*. Furthermore, the data reported in an empirical paper can often be based on pilot data in which a design has been developed and honed.

None of these tasks were, of course, undertaken by Lindsay et al., who were fabricating the data.

When all these other research tasks are parceled out, the Ziker study found that the average academic spends three percent of their research time *writing* manuscripts per week, i.e., around 1.83 h. This is in effect to what Lindsay et al. were only having to do; write, submit, and revise their seven accepted papers. Since the three of them were collectively dedicating around 155 h per week to the project, they were the equivalent of 84 FTEs. That is, 84 average academics who manage to spend just 1.83 h per week writing papers. Of course, unless they were already very familiar with the literature, Lindsay et al. would have had to do some non-writing background reading. However, even if we include this correction, the figure will still be well over 50 academics.

To assert that the incredible publication rate of Lindsay et al. is evidence for how poor certain academic fields are was another gross misrepresentation.

### 8. How Did the Exaggerations Occur?

In July 2018, Lindsay et al. discovered that a reporter at the *Wall Street Journal* had become aware of their project and was going to run a story, which appeared in early October. Keen to publish their own account, on the very day that the *Wall Street Journal* article appeared, the authors had to write their *reveal* article in only eight or nine weeks. Substantial preparation was therefore required in a short space of time. Not only does their *reveal* article present the background and rationale for the project, but it also describes all 20 papers they wrote. Alongside this was the press pack and the collation of all their 20 papers together with all the reviewers' and editors' comments for public availability upload (these can all be found at: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/19tBy\\_fVIYIHTxxjuVMFxx4pqLHM\\_en18](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/19tBy_fVIYIHTxxjuVMFxx4pqLHM_en18) (accessed on 21 August 2023)). Under pressure to publish, Lindsay et al. did not re-read their hoax articles. They instead are likely to have had a general (and incorrect) "schema" of what they had done. It is well-known that when remembering past events, we tend to generate not only approximations of what occurred, but also forget awkward details (Anderson and Hanslmayr 2014). The awkward details present in the Lindsay et al. project was the fact that their papers did not, for example, advocate morbid obesity or that males should be trained via electrocution. The fact that Lindsay et al. would have wanted maximum impact seems to have led them to exaggerate what their own papers stated. The upcoming publicity generated by the *Wall Street Journal* was also significant because Lindsay et al. would be fully aware that they would never need to persuade any journalist to cover the project; one of the most prestigious newspapers in the world was going to describe the hoax articles for them, based solely on what Lindsay et al. told them.

It is clear that the authors did not deliberately fabricate the story of what their own hoax papers said. There was no conscious deceit. During interviews, Lindsay et al. are fully confident when (incorrectly) describing their articles. They have no hesitation in stating that, for instance, one of their papers advocated men being electrocuted to increase feminist values. Instead, the present author suggests that Lindsay et al. simply forgot what their own papers stated. This false memory account of the project is supported by other small but very significant exaggerations. For example, Lindsay et al. (2018a) state that the *progressive stack* paper argued that "white males in college shouldn't be allowed to speak in class". The project's press release also states that the paper "insists that the most privileged students shouldn't be allowed to speak in class". However, nowhere in the paper does it state that students should be prohibited from speaking. As the *Stacking* name suggests, the participants are placed in a rank order of "importance". This minor difference reveals how the authors constructed a better story of what their papers had said than what they actually did say. When quickly generating their own account of the project, Lindsay et al. forgot this difference.

Evidence for no-deliberate-attempt to deceive can also be seen in an interview Lindsay gave to the journalist Michele Carroll. When discussing their incredible rate of paper production and success, Lindsay does mention that one has to take into account all the

other tasks academics are required to perform and cites teaching as an example. He, and his two colleagues as academics, are obviously aware of the adjustments one has to make for teaching; Lindsay does not attempt to hide this. However, when constructing their *reveal* article, this fact is simply forgotten. Instead, they only write about how easy it was to publish articles. The misremembering account also explains why Boghossian did not seem to know how many *Mein Kampf* papers had been written when interviewed by Rogan. There were three, not two, as Boghossian stated. This is not the difference of between say 27 and 28, or 18 and 19. This is two and three.

To reiterate, the present false memory explanation is only speculative but does provide a plausible account as to why the project became exaggerated when later described by the authors. This account also gives Lindsay et al. the benefit of the doubt rather than assuming that they intended to deceive.

## 9. Conclusions

In 2017–2018, three academics developed an empirical method in which they had managed to publish a number of hoax articles in various peer-reviewed journals. The authors' stated that their motivation was a desire to show how certain fields will advocate "ludicrous", "inhumane", and "appalling" propositions. However, journalists, bloggers, and authors of peer-reviewed articles all took the story, as told by the project's authors, at face value. None (except Spruce et al. 2018) seem to have read the original articles themselves to see whether they matched with the description given by Lindsay et al. Had they done so, they would have discovered that there was no advocacy of being morbidly obese, no chaining students to the floor, no *stacking* them against their will, no suggestion that men should be electrocuted and trained as one does a dog, no switching of "Jews" for "white men", no problematizing male-to-female sexual attraction, and no paper productivity that would have led to tenure. When later describing their project, either in print or verbally, Lindsay et al. seemed to have misremembered what they had written in their papers. All the exaggerations were due to the promise of huge publicity together with a pressure to publish their own account of the project.

In sum, the standard account of the "grievance studies affair" is incorrect and should be revised.

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