

# Why the “Hoax” Paper of Baldwin (2018) Should Be Reinstated

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/smr](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/smr)**Geoff G. Cole**<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

In 2018, a peer-reviewed article was published under the name of Richard Baldwin in which the author presented a critique of fat exclusion and advocated “fat bodybuilding” as a sport. Some months later, it became apparent that the article was intended as a hoax written to raise awareness to, or “expose”, a certain ideology promoted by some academics. As a result, the editors retracted the article. Using the principles of *methodological behaviorism*, and other hoax or hoax-like articles, I will argue that the thoughts and opinions held by any author are not important to the argument they present. I will also argue that this form of reflexive ethnography is too problematic to serve as a method of enquiry. I will therefore conclude that the Baldwin article should be reinstated.

## Keywords

cultural studies, hoax papers, grievance studies, critical theory, reflexive ethnography

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In 1996, Sokal published an article in the journal *Social Text* that was mostly, and deliberately, comprised of nonsense. The hoax was intended to expose what the author considered to be a lack of rigor and ideological biases within the field of postmodern cultural studies. The resulting affair was successful in that it focused attention on some of the ideas being advocated within the discipline. In what can be seen as a variant and continuation of the Sokal paradigm, James Lindsay, Peter Boghossian, and Helen Pluckrose published four hoax papers in 2017 and 2018 also with the aim of exposing some of the ideas in critical theory. One of these appeared in the journal *Fat Studies*, being published under the name of Richard Baldwin. In the words of Lindsay, Boghossian, and Pluckrose (2018), the article argued, “That it is only oppressive cultural norms which make society regard the building of muscle rather than fat admirable and that bodybuilding and activism on behalf of the fat could be benefited by including fat bodies displayed in non-competitive ways.” The article thus suggested that “fat bodybuilding” should become a part of fat activism. When later explaining the real motivation of the article, Lindsay et al. stated that they aimed “To see if journals will accept arguments which are ludicrous and positively dangerous to health if they support cultural constructivist arguments around body positivity and fatphobia.”

While we all should welcome practices that enable us as academics to reflect on our disciplines, in the current article, I will present a critique of the so-called grievance studies hoax. I will focus on the Baldwin article to argue, or perhaps more accurately present a reminder, that the notion of something being “ludicrous” is too subjective to be really meaningful. The central aspect of my critique however will be the argument that any thoughts, intentions, or beliefs that an author might have about their own work are not relevant to any ideas or theory they present. Thus, the fact that Lindsay et al. intended the Baldwin article to be a hoax is not important as to whether fat bodybuilding should be considered a legitimate endeavor. The “hoax” (or perhaps genuine) work of Cole and Wilkins (2013), McDowell (1994), and Ramachandran (1997) is provided as evidence for this view. After making some general observations on the hoax methodology, what Lindsay et al. referred to as “reflexive ethnography,” and other papers in the grievance studies series, I will recommend that the Baldwin article be reinstated.

## The Baldwin article

As a cognitive neuroscientist whose expertise is in brain function (i.e., the human visual system) and uses vastly different methods (e.g., functional near-infrared spectroscopy) to those employed in the humanities, I only recently

became aware of fat studies. A student informed me that the use of the word “fat,” to describe a certain body type, was returning because “overweight” was not a description of a person but a judgment. I was somewhat skeptical because unlike many other modern terms that are intended to be neutral, the word fat has many negative connotations not apparent in other possible descriptors that could be used, for instance, “large.” I then became aware of the grievance studies hoax because of the publicity generated, read the Baldwin article, and saw that it addressed the issue raised by my student. The important point here is that after reading the paper, I am now in agreement with many of the arguments this field puts forward. Furthermore, I now inform others and can even add to the discourse. For instance, although not a novel point, from an experimental science perspective, fat people and bodybuilders form two almost perfect experimental (and control) groups. Both are nontypical in that they occur at the tail end of the normal distribution of size and both in the same way, that is, they are large. It is this, of course, that makes the vastly different societal views of each group particularly interesting.

One of the most striking aspects of the Baldwin article is that there is nothing particularly ludicrous about large parts of it. This is partly because most of it presents factual material in the form of background literature and references to societal discourse surrounding body shape. It’s perhaps easy to argue that the typical critical theorist is bound not to see anything particularly ludicrous in the idea that fat bodybuilding should exist. Indeed, this was the point of the hoax: the idea that the field will publish anything that conforms to a certain ideological worldview. However, as stated, the present author is not a critical theorist.

Excepting the general advocacy of fat bodybuilding, the first obvious hoax point is not until almost halfway through the article when the authors state that “The prevailing notion that the bodybuilder’s body has been built whereas the fat body has not is one that requires consideration.” (p. 5). Although it is very much in the context of the paper’s argument, this statement is unlikely to be correct. By definition, the bodybuilder’s body has been built and by very hard work. In contrast, there will be very few individuals who consciously decided that they would prefer to be fat and worked hard to undertake measures to make it happen, although there may of course be some people who decided to be fat. Apart from a couple of sentences concerning “thin privilege” and the author being a professional bodybuilder, which no reader could know about, its’ then eight paragraphs later before the next obvious hoax point is made: Fat bodybuilding is “already a sport.” But here a problem arises for the hoax. The authors present a definition and criteria of

a sport, the result of which is that fat bodybuilding falls within the criteria. Of course, this is the very point that Lindsay et al. are making, that is, the ludicrous notion of fat bodybuilding already being a sport. However, it is inevitable that if one choses an extremely broad definition of sport, as the authors did (in which “athletes seek personal meaning”), it will be no surprise that fat bodybuilding will be incorporated. The same could be said about, for instance, the sport of walking on one’s hands for 30 minutes each day while singing Beatles songs.

Aside from these individual points, the central aspect of the Baldwin hoax concerns the advocacy of being fat. As noted, Lindsay et al. stated in their explanation of the hoax that they were interested to see whether a journal will accept ludicrous and dangerous arguments if they conform to an ideology. Of course, being very fat is dangerous, but if a person wants to be a fat bodybuilder and perhaps be part of a like-minded community, then it is up to them. There are of course related issues such as certain societies having to pay for the resultant health care costs, but aside from these, it simply comes down to a matter of opinion as to whether fat bodybuilding is ludicrous.

If the Baldwin article had truly been ludicrous, it would not have received favorable reviews. To have made it a “real hoax” would have been, for instance, to have written about “blue-car-ing.” For instance

Although not particularly well reported, drivers of blue cars have found themselves increasingly subject to verbal and sometimes physical abuse. This is often said to be the result of “red car privilege” and neoliberal hegemony. It has led to some blue car owners attempting to reclaim the term “bluey” and are currently organising the “blue-car Olympics” in which owners will compete in track and field events. In the present article . . . etc . . . etc.

The paradox is this: If a phenomenon is genuine, such as the moral judgment of the fat body, then it is likely to be the subject of critical theory and published papers. If, by contrast, the phenomenon is truly ludicrous, such as “blue-car-ing,” it is unlikely to survive the peer-review process, even by the critical theorists. Importantly, it will definitely not survive as a cultural idea. Indeed, this began to happen with another paper in the grievance studies series of articles when a website, critical of some postmodern theorizing, drew attention to the article. As is sometimes said, the peer-review process begins once an article has been published.

The central point here is that the Baldwin article was able to be published because it is perfectly feasible that fat people would like the fat body to be normalized even if in a way that is extremely bizarre to most people. The fact

that it is dangerous is irrelevant; smoking was acceptable, normalized, even cool, until very recently. Furthermore, it is the authors' own definition of a hoax article that enabled them to claim they actually wrote one: "By hoaxes, we meant papers featuring at least one of the following: clearly ludicrous and/or outrageous theses, visibly amateurish construction, a transparent lack of rigor, and that clearly demonstrate little understanding of the field" (Lindsay et al. 2018). Most articles I read and review have at least one of these! Usually lack of rigor. Lindsay et al. simply set a very low threshold for what they consider a hoax to be. This enabled them to claim that they actually wrote a hoax paper.

Of course, this definition of a hoax paper, in particular the outrageous theses, simply means an idea that departs from currently accepted orthodoxy. This would preclude many seminal ideas from being published including the work of Darwin and Copernicus. If the reader is somewhat averse to those two examples because both were ultimately proved to be true, we can take Bem (2011), perhaps the most ludicrous paper ever published in a mainstream peer-reviewed journal. Unlike the subjectivity of the Baldwin thesis, the ludicrous nature of the Bem work is based on empirical evidence; no cognitive scientist has ever managed to show that humans can look into the future, and there is no known mechanism by which it could happen. Although Bem argued for precognition based on his own empirical data, these data do not concur with virtually all previous work. Does this therefore make the Bem paper a hoax? He could have argued (and could still) that it was indeed a hoax. He could now claim that the paper was intended to show precisely what it is now used for; a good example of why "psychologists must change the way they analyse their data" (Wagenmakers et al. 2011:426). That is, a hoax aimed at exposing the problems of data analysis inherent in the vast majority of research that employs Fisher-based models of analysis. Notice that the only difference in these two alternative accounts (i.e., an honest attempt to show precognition on the one hand and exposing limitations in data analysis on the other) is *what was inside Bem's head when he designed the experiments*. The issue of author motivation, intention, and thought is central to the present critique and is where I now turn.

## Methodological Behaviorism

In 1965, the philosopher Carl Hempel raised the difficulty of asking the question of what the heart is for. What we do know is that it pumps blood. The problem is that it does many other things such as make a noise. Subsequently, many philosophers, and sometimes behavioral scientists, make the

distinction between what something is *for*, that is, its function, as opposed to what it *does*. What something does is relatively easy to determine; it is simply a question of measurement. But what is any object for? This is solely a question of opinion, preference, or need. Even when something has a designer with an intention, the issue remains. Thus, the original designer of the hammer had a clear function in mind. However, your hammer may be for securing nails into a wall whereas mine is for preventing paper from blowing away.

This issue occurs in a vast number of everyday situations and can create much debate and argument. One of the criticisms of many elected officials is that they are a “career politician.” The direct assumption here is that an individual became a politician for some personal gain. That was its function and what it is *for*. It may well be for some, or indeed not. This however is very different to what the person *does* as a politician, the important thing. One can even imagine the following scenario in which there are two politicians. One is only “in it for themselves.” Their intention (or function) is solely to make lots of money, be famous, and maybe even have an easy life of doing little. The other by contrast is extremely altruistic and is motivated by the desire to improve everyday lives. The former turns out to be a brilliant and popular figure who achieves a great deal politically, particularly, let us say, for those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. The latter, diligently working away, is opposite and achieves little for anyone. Who would people rather see returned in an upcoming election? It has to be the former, who does not care about anyone but themselves. The critical point is that it is irrelevant what this politician privately thinks; it is only their behavior output that is of importance. Of course, their intentions will determine what they do, but again, it is only their behavior that matters and should be judged, not what they thought before they acted. It is simply irrelevant what a person privately thinks and what motivates them. A further example concerns the notion that the European Union is trying to “punish” the UK for voting to leave the union. Behaviorally (i.e., their negotiating stance), punishing the UK will look no different than if the European Union had a different intention or thought, that is, to dissuade others from leaving. One does not have to be a relativist in a humanities department to acknowledge that intentions are purely relative and furthermore not important when judging an outcome.<sup>1</sup>

The notion that thoughts and intentions are unimportant to how the world works has been around for a long time and continues in academia today. For example, it is central to the critique of Darwin’s theory of evolution put forward by Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini (2010) and is the very basis of the famous Turing test. The most explicit expression of this notion, with respect

to psychological theory, comes in the form of *methodological behaviorism*. In the first half of the twentieth century, before the cognitivist revolution, the behaviorist school of thought dominated psychology. Its basic tenets were that human behavior is best explained by a form of learning theory in which a stimulus is encountered, registered by various physiological systems, and results in a reflective response. Not only was this a theoretical view on why humans and animals do what they do but it also, and necessarily, advocated a certain method of empirical research. Specifically, an organism (typically a rat or pigeon) is presented with a stimulus, and the experimenter measures the resultant behavior. Importantly, the motivations, feelings, and what the organism may think are not relevant to its behavior and should not therefore be under consideration.

These principles can also be applied to any academic paper including the Baldwin article. As noted above, there is just too much in the Baldwin article that makes it a “real” nonhoax article. It is rather like an academic paper Turing test. By generating an article that is no different to every other paper published in the fat studies field, Lindsay et al. have effectively contributed to the very literature they aimed to undermine. Its ludicrousness is in the eye of the beholder. Even *Postmodern Generator* occasionally produces conceptually meaningful sentences. In their explanation of the hoax, and the other hoax papers in the grievance studies series, the authors do explicitly make the point that the papers were written to fit with the intended literature. Lindsay et al. state that they intentionally made the papers “blend in almost perfectly with others in the discipline” to “fully participate in their culture.” Indeed, the Baldwin article does just that. In other words, if it acts like a critical theory paper and quacks like a critical theory paper, it *is* a critical theory paper.

The single most revealing aspect of their explanation however is when Lindsay et al. stated that “The biggest difference between us and the scholarship we are studying by emulation is that *we know we made things up*” (italics added). This is the very crux of the issue; the paper is a “hoax” *solely on the basis of what the authors privately thought; what they knew*. As with intentions, brilliant but career politicians, and *methodological behaviorism*, it is simply unimportant what the authors thought when writing the article. That is, what the article is “for” as opposed to what the article does. The article, as with any paper, simply presents a number of ideas. It is only these that can be evaluated for merit not private thoughts.

It is not uncommon for an academic to propose ideas that they do not believe in. Many fields of enquiry are both empirical and theoretical (e.g., cognitive science and evolutionary biology). Experimenters within these

disciplines are expected to generate ideas and theories to explain what they have observed; it is deemed insufficient to simply report that a particular phenomenon occurs. Often however, it is very difficult to know why an effect happens and authors will generate theories, often reported near the end of an article in which they are sometimes said to be “hand-waving,” that is, generating possible explanations and thus theory. The result is that authors often present ideas that they do not believe. In effect, they make thing up. As above, the important point is that it does not matter what an author privately thinks; a theory is suggested which can then be tested in future experiments. The hypothetico-deductive model of theory generation and hypothesis testing is agnostic as to what one thinks.

The fact that author intentions are not relevant can also be seen in the following thought experiment concerning what could have been an outcome of presenting the “ludicrous” fat bodybuilding notion. Imagine the following letter is sent and somehow received by Lindsay or one of his co-hoaxers.

Dear Professor Baldwin. I just wanted to thank you for your work on fat bodybuilding. I am a fat person who has suffered dreadful abuse throughout my life. I think your work is important because fat studies has become tarnished with some of the ludicrous nonsense that is coming out of some university departments. What is now needed is other university work that presents the reasonable face of large body research. As well as thanking you, I am writing to ask if you would consider giving a 30-minute talk at the annual gathering of the Fat Society in downtown Los Angeles? I am the current president and can tell you that many of our members are dying to meet you in person. Approximately 500 people attend. We do not have the funds to pay you but could generously cover all expenses and would arrange a two-night stay at the Hilton where the meeting is held. Furthermore, we have a promise from a Fox News journalist to attend. As you might expect, this journalist has written a number of pieces very critical of some “postmodern thinking” and has stated that this theorising has been doing damage to real social causes.

We can take the thought experiment further. Imagine one of the authors, for reasons of reflexive ethnography, then attends and speaks, and publicity results, including the Fox critique of some cultural studies. Offers of grant money follow (it can happen without applying!) and editors of more “prestigious” journals that are less critical theory oriented ask Lindsay et al., or any author in the thought experiment, to submit papers. The authors then become respected figures in the field as did happen to Lindsay et al. (i.e., review requests). Who knows, in this thought experiment, a Nobel Prize can



follow. What would the authors or average academic do in this situation? Come clean? Note that this is not a comment or challenge to the integrity and honesty of the authors. It is not unlikely that these positive consequences would change the mind of a theorist. Such an author may just come to realize that their own original view of fat bodybuilding was actually in the minority. Even if Lindsay et al. are to argue that their minds could never be changed with respect to fat studies, this is not important. As stated, it is not relevant what anyone privately thinks about their own work. Thus, if the authors continued in their reflexive ethnography experiment all the way up to and including their Nobel Prize-winning lecture, while still laughing to themselves, their work has passed the academic paper Turing test.

This is the basic conundrum and paradox of a “hoax” academic article that is no different to a nonhoax article with the sole exception of the private thoughts of the authors. The fact that Lindsay et al. fully intended to make those private thoughts public is similarly irrelevant. In the thought experiment, people would likely state that they don’t care what the original motivation was, only that an important consequence (e.g., fat acceptance) followed.

## **The Trypophobia “hoax”**

Of course, Lindsay et al. would correctly argue that this actual series of events could not occur with the fat bodybuilding idea. However, one can assume that something similar to this thought experiment does occasionally occur. Indeed, it happened to the present author. In 2013, myself and a colleague published a paper in a high-ranking general psychology journal in which we were the first to describe, in the peer-reviewed literature, the bizarre phenomenon in which certain people feel uncomfortable and/or even nauseous when looking at holes/circles clustered together (Cole and Wilkins 2013). As part of this work, myself and Wilkins examined the stimuli that induce “trypophobia” with respect to their spectral composition. This mathematical analysis showed that the images have an extremely unique spectral property that very rarely occurs in the natural environment, that is, high contrast a midrange spatial frequencies. One class of stimuli that does possess this property is the aposematic patterns and coloring of many poisonous animals. We therefore made the argument (“hand-waving”) that the human brain, including the visual system, has been selected for its sensitivity toward the spectral property possessed by noxious animals. The result of this is that any stimulus that just happens by coincidence to possess this feature will be aversive to view. As a result of this work, the present author has been invited to

speak at conferences and departmental seminars, obtained promotion, and been interviewed on live radio numerous times, and the original paper has initiated an abundance of follow-up work (but no Nobel Prize). I have also received approximately 100 e-mails and letters from tryphobic individuals wanting to share their experience. As with many seemingly bizarre conditions, the typical comment is that the individual thought they were the only person suffering from the condition.

Before the article formally appeared, it was put to me on a number of occasions that tryphobia is not real and even ludicrous. Even now, a Google search for "Is tryphobia real" suggests that it is not real. For instance, the website Medical News Today state that "Some researchers question the validity of tryphobia as a condition." After presenting the work at a meeting of the *Experimental Psychology Society* in the UK in 2013, I was genuinely asked whether I had heard of the Sokal affair and whether the tryphobia work was itself a hoax. Furthermore, a number of journalists, including the first one to report the phenomenon (in the *Washington Post*) following publication, wanted assurance from myself that it was not a hoax. It could well have been and the large amount of skepticism that still surrounds the phenomenon would very much have aided this perfectly. Even the most frequently cited image that induces the phenomenon sounds part of the hoax; the lotus seed pod is a flower, an object usually associated with a pleasant emotion. Thus, tryphobia has all the hallmarks of a hoax. My coauthor and I could now say, "OK, it's clear from a simple Google search that the game is up. It was all a hoax. We were perhaps too unsubtle when we suggested that a popular selling flower could make people feel sick." We can also assume that there are many critical theory academics who relish the thought of a paper being published, based on mathematical analysis from a "harder science," turning out to be a hoax. This would of course make the point that it is not just critical theory that is susceptible to ludicrous ideas.

As with the Baldwin article, the important point is that it is irrelevant whether Wilkins and myself intended the work as a hoax. We simply described a (somewhat bizarre) phenomenon and posited a theory as to why it occurs. It is irrelevant what our intention or motivation was. It is tempting to tease the reader and suggest it was indeed intended as a hoax. There is however one fundamental reason why tryphobia *cannot* be a hoax, and it is exactly the same reason why fat bodybuilding cannot be a hoax or at least only a hoax in the minds of Lindsay et al. Whether one considers it ludicrous or not, 15 percent of the adult population feel "uncomfortable or even repulsed" at the site of holes clustered together. It simply cannot be ludicrous

if 15 percent of the population say it is not. To put this another way, Wilkins and myself would not get away with now claiming that tryphobia was a hoax because enough people (at least 15 percent) would see through it. To argue otherwise would lead to the odd situation in which we, the original authors, were stating that it was all a hoax and yet others (correctly) stating that it simply exists. This is the same situation faced by fat bodybuilding. There are likely to be enough people who are of the opinion that fat bodybuilding is not actually “ludicrous.” We may not like the fact that some notions are not considered ludicrous by large sections of society but so be it. Many may not like the fact that up to 25 percent of the population do not believe that man landed on the moon, but it’s a question of winning the argument.

To reiterate the central contention, consider the hoax, or at least hoax-like, write-up of a series of lectures given by the philosopher John McDowell in 1991. Unlike Cole and Wilkins (2013), this work includes no empirical data that allow a firm judgment to be made on whether *Mind and World* (McDowell 1994) was indeed a hoax. The work is (I think) concerned with the perceptual system of human and nonhuman animals, the research field of the present author. Part of the reason to suspect it is a hoax is because too much of it makes no sense. It is an unobvious parody of philosophical theorizing and phrasing. For example, it is incredibly difficult to unpack what is actually being stated; this is despite the fact that the issues addressed should not be difficult to describe and follow.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, a lot of it reads like *Postmodern Generator*. For instance, jumping from one idea (e.g., the human visual system) to a totally unrelated idea buttressed with a famous theorist (“consider the richness of a normal adult human being’s visual field, which is far beyond anything that could matter for a capacity to cope with merely animal needs. Marx says ‘according to the laws of beauty . . . ,’” p. 119). There is also reference to somewhat bizarre resemblances. Thus, the difference between the experience of the “animal life” and the “human life” is said to coincide “strikingly” with Marx’s notion of alienated labor. This may well be true, but as Chomsky (2002) stated, one could compare a child with Bin Laden. The suspicion of a hoax is further aided by a later revised edition in which McDowell, perhaps sensing that it was going to be exposed, remarked, “I have been made to realize that it is harder to understand than I thought” and thus provided a new introductory chapter “omitting some detail in order to focus on the central theme.” The new chapter is less clear than the original text. However, again, whether McDowell, myself, or anyone consider it to be a hoax (or not) is simply not important; it is irrelevant to the ideas put forward. Indeed, aside from the many bizarre statements and extreme

obfuscation, there are many interesting ideas, and as with Baldwin (2018) and Cole and Wilkins (2013), these are ideas that can be judged irrespective of any motivation.

The problematic issues of author motivation and intent have become central to another hoax article, published within months of Sokal's paper. The field of evolutionary psychology has perhaps attracted more criticism for its advocacy of what many consider ludicrous ideas than any other field (e.g., Buller 2005). This discipline attempts to determine which aspects of human behavior have been shaped by Darwinian selection pressures. The central claim of its opponents is that it relies too heavily on post hoc explanations of behavior, rather than hypothesis testing. As Stephen Jay Gould famously said, these explanations are little more than "just so" story telling. In this context, Ramachandran (1997) published an article in which he argued that the reason males are particularly attracted to blonde females, as opposed to for instance brunettes, is that infestation with intestinal parasites is easier to detect on the former. This would have resulted in a selection pressure for blonde attraction. He then revealed that it had been a hoax, or in his own words "spoof." Ramachandran and Blakeslee (1998) added that "if you think my theory is silly, then you should read some of the others" (p. 291). An odd situation then arose, the same one that would have arisen had I claimed that trypophobia was a hoax; others questioned its status as a hoax (e.g., Symons 2000). Even Ramachandran (1997) wrote that "this idea is at least as viable as many other theories." Was it a hoax or not? It does seem to be intended that way, but to reiterate, it simply doesn't matter what the author or any of us think. An idea was presented that is the subject of critical analysis and in this case can be empirically examined.

One important aspect of the Ramachandran hoax is how the article has influenced lay public thinking. In May 2014, the *SnowBrains* Internet magazine provided a summary of the original paper. That is, the actual article, not the hoax aspect. Furthermore, one hundred and seventy-eight people have now (January 2020) commented on the piece in a "comments" section. Nowhere, in the article or comments, is there any reference to the Ramachandran paper being a hoax. Indeed, the vast majority of posts are positive, for example, "this explains a lot." This is one of the serious problems with hoax science. Many thousands of people (the magazine's Facebook site has 64,000 followers) now believe in an idea that most evolutionary theorists would consider ludicrous. This is precisely because Ramachandran's article quacked like an evolutionary psychology paper; thus, *it was* an evolutionary psychology paper.

## Let the People Decide

Unlike many areas of academia in which experts are in a good position to judge claims (e.g., evolutionary psychology), the idea that fat bodybuilding should be an endeavor is an opinion. The problem with judging another's opinion is clear. One of the central charges made against people who describe themselves as being of a left-wing persuasion is that they too often assume others are too ill informed, uneducated, and ignorant to make judgments on important issues concerning culture and society. The idea that the general population cannot adequately judge whether an idea coming from progressive academics, such as fat bodybuilding, is an expression of this. The extreme version of this notion came from Breitbart news founder, the late Andrew Breitbart. He stated on numerous occasions that he had identified the central problem with American society (e.g., Breitbart 2011). He argued that the Marxist philosophers of the Frankfurt school of thought, who moved to the United States in the 1930s, had shaped the minds of young people with their ideology of critical theory ("How did it trick so many millions of people?"). Although propaganda is by definition very effective, and it is certainly true that this school has had access to many thousands of minds, it would require sci-fi levels of thought control to assume that a handful of academics can have had this much influence. The fact that postmodern ideas have become so prevalent outside of the university campus can only be because people broadly accept them, unless we assume that people are too dumb to consider what is best for themselves. The same has to be true on the other side of the political divide. One may not like the free market economics espoused by Hayek and the Chicago School of Economics, but again one must assume that the people, perhaps for reasons of personal freedom, have broadly accepted this view. Thus, while Lindsay et al. are correct when they state that professors "cite and teach" these ideas which are "spreading rapidly into culture," one must presume that the population is not in some kind of false consciousness. One can argue that ideas should be put out there and the people can decide. Recall that we are dealing with philosophy here not empirical science.

The fat bodybuilding hoax paper is as much a reflection of Lindsay et al.'s ideology as it is critical theory's. This is also evident in their other hoax articles. For example, one paper argued that if a man privately fantasizes about a women in a sexual way, without her consent, he commits "metasexual" violence against. Lindsay et al. state that their purpose was to see "if the definition of sexual violence can be expanded into thought crimes." Many have become increasingly concerned at the number of times a

person is accused of a thought crime. The problem however is that these people, including Lindsay et al. and myself, are in the minority. Although there are no empirical data on the subject, society does like to punish people for thought crimes. In October 2018, the Manchester United football manager, Jose Mourinho, was seen mouthing some words after a match close to a television camera. The sport's governing body, the Football Association, employed a lip reader to determine what he had said, then charged him with using abusive language. Of all the social media discussion that ensued, I cannot find one reference to Mourinho effectively being charged with a thought crime. It would be no different had the Football Association (FA) requested he take part in a brain imaging session to uncover what he thinks about certain officials at the FA. In fact, this would not have been as bad since it would need his consent, unlike the lip reading. Similarly, when the ex-football professional David Beckham was the victim of a crime which resulted in the public discovering a thought he had (he was cross at not being awarded a knighthood), he was vilified for this thought. Again, I cannot find one reference to him being effectively convicted of a thought crime. It's worth noting that we can also apply *methodological behaviorisms* here; irrespective of what people explicitly state, society acts as if thought crimes should be punished. The notion of such a crime may be ludicrous to both myself and Lindsay et al., but this is only our opinion; it's our ideology. It appears not to be unreasonable to society as may well be the case with fat bodybuilding. If an academic has a problem with thought crimes, it would be far better to make the argument via the publication of a "real" paper in which the author points out that society is sleepwalking into a situation where thought crimes are becoming normalized.

Although the idea that something is ludicrous is subjective, it's worth noting that it can be examined in an empirical manner. Lindsay et al. did state that the Baldwin article "should not be mistaken for the real thing." As previously, I see no difference between it and the real thing, just like the readers of *SnowBrains* did not with respect to the Ramachandran article, and it's likely that I would have not done so if I had not known about the authors' intentions. Empirically, we simply get a sample of people to indicate whether fat bodybuilding is ludicrous or not. Furthermore, although one may be forgiven for thinking that this experiment is best carried out on the nonstudent population (i.e., those not so exposed to critical theory), this is only the case if we consider the student population not clever enough to judge fat bodybuilding. I suspect that enough people will respond such that it is deemed not ridiculous. I am however guessing. It partly depends on how many people hold libertarian values. As the evolutionary biologist Haldane

famously quipped, scientific ideas go through a number of phases from “this is nonsense” to “I always said so.” If 1 in 20 U.S. citizens believe that the U.S. government “actively planned” 911 (Zogby International Poll 2007), then all bets are off with respect to what is ludicrousness. If the human condition is to hold ludicrous views, then so be it.

## The Reflexive Ethnography Paradigm

One feature of any academic discipline is that a person immersed within a field will occasionally write about some of the practices the discipline employs. The most notable of what may be termed *classical reflexive ethnography* concerned the protection of human participants in experimental psychology. Perhaps motivated by Milgram’s (1963) *Obedience to Authority* experiment and the *Stanford Prison* experiment (e.g., Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo 1973), psychologists decided to require peers to evaluate each other’s experimental designs to ensure that participants will not be coerced, embarrassed, or placed in danger. (One can add that many current ethics applications have broadened “participation” to include any person involved in the work including the researchers themselves, this may come to include editors.) In more recent years, the most significant change to have occurred as a direct result of classical reflexive ethnography is the way in which researchers employ statistical testing. Central to this is the notion that analyses relying solely on a “ $p$  value” to determine significance is inadequate. Put simply, if a phenomenon is true (i.e., the null hypothesis can be rejected), the probability of observing the effect is largely down to how many data points (e.g., participants) one has. In other words, how hard the experimenter works. The *size* of the effect observed has thus become as important, if not more so, as the  $p$  value. These are two clear examples of how successful reflexive practice can be.

In the Methods section of the Lindsay et al. (2018) explanation of the grievance studies hoax, the authors refer to their approach as “a kind of reflexive ethnography” in which they immersed themselves within the critical theory discipline in order to critically evaluate it. In the present section, I present what I feel are the central problems with reflexive ethnography in the form that Lindsay et al. advocate.

The most fundamental limitation of the Baldwin article, and the others in the grievance studies series, is the absence of a control condition (i.e., a noncritical theory paper). Such a condition would have tested whether there is another factor generating the effects Lindsay et al. observed. This is a basic principle of experimental science. A common critique or comment on the

Sokal affair, and the Lindsay et al. work, is that it says more about the limitations of the peer-review system than it does about cultural studies. A control condition would have allowed an assessment of whether critical theory is particularly prone to espousing ludicrous nonsense. One does however have to note that in some sense, a control condition would not have been needed to determine whether ludicrous ideas get through the peer-review system. This happens all the time. Indeed, I would predict that a larger proportion of academics judge at least one theory in their discipline to be “ludicrous” than the lay public would judge fat bodybuilding to be.

If the Lindsay et al. work is not solely an effect of the peer-review system, peer-review limitations certainly helped the reflexive ethnography method. Although not always stated, trust is a major aspect of peer review. Academics will often receive a personal request from an editor in which he or she acknowledges that the paper is not quite in the academic’s area of expertise but he or she is having trouble finding reviewers, especially for a method and findings that are particularly novel. The reviewer has to trust that they will not deliberately be made to feel a fool by reviewing a paper they will not be confident with. Thus, in the Methods section of one of the reflexive ethnography articles, Lindsay et al. stated “this study is best considered mostly qualitative in nature and did not make use of rigorous statistical analysis.” A reviewer is likely to trust such a statement, particularly one not confident with statistics, and so not comment on the analysis in their review. When later describing the reflexive ethnography method, Lindsay et al. (2018) stated that this very paper included “incredibly implausible statistics.” It is not therefore surprising that the reflexive ethnography paradigm is going to be successful if it persuades reviewers to be lenient on one aspect of a manuscript, which is then used as an example of how poor the paper is.

Another central problem with the form of reflexive ethnography advocated by Lindsay et al. is the difficulty of evaluating the merits of the reflexive ethnography itself. This is because the reader cannot know what parts of a manuscript are “real” and what parts are intended as the hoax. Of course, the point is to make manuscripts as ludicrous as possible without “being caught,” but any method still has to be evaluated. For instance, when a reflexive ethnography paper is particularly poor, is this because it is intended that way or is the *real* reflexive ethnography itself just poor? This has actually arisen with the Lindsay et al. work. One of the hoax papers includes the classic undergraduate error of using the word “data” as singular rather than plural, that is, incorrectly using “This data” or “The data was.” When reading the paper, the present author genuinely assumed that this was part of the hoax, that is, poorly written grammar that includes a classic error never



seen in journal articles. However, in one of the follow-up “real” articles in which Lindsay and Pluckrose (2019) described and defended their project, the authors continued this error. Thus, this Lindsay and Pluckrose article satisfies their own definition of a hoax paper, that is, “visibly amateurish construction.” To be clear, this is not a comment on fellow authors’ writing ability (we could all do this); it’s about knowing which parts of an article are the intended hoax. In the extreme, the methods and writing of a paper may be so bad precisely because the authors are such incompetent reflexive ethnographers as opposed to great hoaxers.

Perhaps the most cited issue for reflexive ethnography is its advocacy of data fabrication. It’s difficult to think of any situation in which it is appropriate to include such data in an article. No empirical scientist would advocate a paradigm in which the data are fabricated, even if the intention is that authors eventually reveal this. Data are sacrosanct because they reveal how the world works; they cannot be disputed (as long as all agree on the appropriateness of the method). Furthermore, other researchers could even attempt to replicate the original data, including, for example, an “anti-critical theory” experimenter who was skeptical of the original claims and the data. At risk of dancing on a pinhead, the silliness of, for instance, examining dog genitals (in the context of critical theory, see their *Dog Park* hoax paper) is the very idea, not the actual data themselves. Data are data; how the world actually works. If a researcher wants to undertake reflexive ethnography, in order to evaluate the basic merits of a field, then this should not include the fabrication of data. Thus, the data collection should have been part of the Lindsay et al. hoax. One can fairly assume that if the data presented in the *Dog Park* paper were somehow easily and quickly generated (which of course those were not), then they would have been included; the reason that Lindsay et al. did not include real data is the same reason why any academics fabricate data—to save themselves the bother of collecting them. Moreover, there is an unwritten rule when peer-reviewing empirical work. As the amount of data increases, the threshold for acceptance decreases. This is because no matter how unlikely or ludicrous an interpretation of data is, the data are always there for others to reinterpret; something has been uncovered about the world that was not known before. While this may not be the case in the *Dog Park* paper, it could be the case for future reflexive ethnography papers.

The importance of method and data honesty can be seen in perhaps the most notable case of possible data fraud. Gregor Mendel is well known because of his discovery of the principles by which genetic inheritance occurs. Following the claim of the British geneticist and statistician R. A. Fisher in 1936, it has often been asserted that Mendel fabricated his data.

This is based on the observation that his reported approximation to the critical three-fourth ratios in the “F2” generation were far too close to what should be actually observed (but see Hartl and Fairbanks 2007; Novitski 2004, for counter claims). One might be forgiven for thinking that this is a “justifiable” case of data fabrication. Mendel was simply reaffirming what he had discovered and what he knew to be the truth, a truth, now well established, that pertains to one of the most important findings in the history of biology. However, this has clearly not excused the (possible) fabrication, and his scientific integrity remains challenged by some. The point with respect to the grievance studies project is this: If one of the most important figures in the history of biology cannot be excused from data fabrication, when presenting one of the most important findings in science, then Lindsay et al. cannot be excused when they wanted to highlight/expose some of the ideas in critical theory. We could all fabricate data in order to persuade others of a particular position.

In sum, the lack of a control condition, not being able to evaluate the quality of a paper, and its advocacy of data fabrication make reflexive ethnography as a method of assessing the merits of a field too problematic to serve as an adequate tool of investigation.

## **Conclusions**

What we are left with is this: (1) a “hoax” that is only so in the minds of Lindsay et al. and anyone else who wants it to be and (2) an idea whose merit is solely based on opinion—an opinion that is not likely to reach the threshold of what many people would consider as being outlandish and/or ludicrous. “Hoax” is therefore a meaningless concept when we are dealing with nonempirical science. Indeed, perhaps the present article is a hoax or maybe the Lindsay et al. explanation articles are part of a different hoax, including the grammatical mistakes, aimed at exposing the idea that anti-critical theory journalists and academics are so gullible and receptive to criticism of that field they will even criticize attempts to eradicate the constant judgment of the fat body. Furthermore, the authors argument that fat activism is not about real social justice is also an opinion; it is an expression of the “Donkey charity principle”—that donating to such a charity is not as worthy as, for instance, donating to breast cancer charities. The point is not to argue for animal–human equivalence, only that it’s OK to support one cause, even when we know there are more deserving causes out there. We simply cannot donate to every charity just as we can’t only support the most pressing social injustices.

With respect to the Baldwin article, it is fortunate that although retracted, it is still available and can therefore be critically analyzed; society, perhaps not clever enough to judge its merits, does not need to be protected from anything it advocates. *Fat Studies* currently state: “Following an investigation across *Taylor & Francis* journals, we have confirmed this is a hoax paper, which was submitted under false pretenses. As such we are retracting it from the scholarly record.” The present author recommends that this retraction should be retracted, as it were. I suggest the following replaces the current text, “It has now come to light that the authors of this article do not believe in some of the ideas they wrote.” This is a factual description of the paper and, critically, is the central problem with the “hoax.” It does not matter what an author believes but only what they write or propose. It is these ideas that should be, and can only be, the subject of critical analysis.

Finally, if a fat person, tired of being constantly judged “morally, aesthetically, physically, emotionally, economically, and in other ways that undermine their dignity” (Baldwin 2018:1), wants to support radical fat activism and fat bodybuilding, then so be it. As Baldwin correctly pointed out, for those opposed to this “Who are they to judge?”


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### **Notes**

1. This is not to say that intent should never be considered in daily life. For example, it is a cornerstone of the legal/justice system. A person may not have intended to take another person’s life but did so through negligence.
2. See the page or so following the phrase “It is supposed to show something like this” on page 112. I defy any perception scientist to understand what is being stated.

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