



Waiting for Godot: What Happens after you Find Fabricated Data?

Michael Spagat

Department of Economics

Royal Holloway, University of London

Presentation given at the conference “New Approaches to Dealing with Survey Data Fabrication” Washington, DC, February 23, 2016.

THE LANCET

Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey

Prof Gilbert Burnham, MD  

, Prof Riyadh Lafta, MD

, Shannon Doocy, PhD

, Les Roberts, PhD

Published Online: 12 October 2006

The New York Times

Iraqi Dead May Total 600,000, Study Says



Khalid Mohammed/Associated Press

From Andrew Gelman's blog:

Statistical Modeling, Causal Inference, and Social Science

A survey's not a survey if they don't tell you how they did it

Posted by [Andrew](#) on 13 June 2011, 11:30 am

Since we're on [the topic](#) of nonreplicable research . . . see [here](#) (link from [here](#)) for a story of a survey that's so bad that the people who did it won't say how they did it.

Gelman was *not* talking about the Burnham et al. study but he might as well have been since AAPOR censured Burnham for not disclosing some of the basics of his survey.

AAPOR Finds Gilbert Burnham in Violation of Ethics Code

Press Release - February 4, 2009

...AAPOR's President, Richard A. Kulka, added "When researchers draw important conclusions and make public statements and arguments based on survey research data, then subsequently refuse to answer even basic questions about how their research was conducted, this violates the fundamental standards of science, seriously undermines open public debate on critical issues, and undermines the credibility of all survey and public opinion research..."

However, John Hopkins University, where Gilbert Burnham works, [appears to take the position that AAPOR has no business demanding that survey researchers disclose their methodology:](#)

“Tim Parsons, a spokesman for the school said: ‘We are disappointed AAPOR has chosen to find Dr. Burnham in violation of the organization's ethics code. However, neither Dr. Burnham nor the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health are members of AAPOR.’”

Message to researchers:

It's OK to hide your methodology as long as you don't screw up and join AAPOR.

I find this disturbing but *widespread indifference to transparency seems to be a reality.*

In my paper [*Ethical and Data Integrity Problems in the Second Lancet Survey of Mortality in Iraq*](#) I argued that Burnham et al. violent-death estimate was inflated by *fabricated data*.

The AAPOR investigation did *not* address this claim directly since the investigation was about *transparency, not fabrication*. Of course, fabrication tends to lead to non-transparency but you can easily have non-transparency without fabrication.

Current AAPOR procedures do not really address fabrication.

Johns Hopkins did, however, conduct [its own investigation](#) of the Burnham et al. study, although the investigation seemed to have a mushy mandate:

“The Bloomberg School’s review focused on various claims about the study in academic forums and news reports regarding data collected for the study, as well as ethical concerns related to both the study’s implementation and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process in approving the research.”

Hmmmm.....what exactly did they investigate? It seems that the main goal was to determine whether the JHU institutional butt was adequately covered.

“IRB REVIEW

The Bloomberg School of Public Health’s IRB acted properly in determining that the original study protocol was exempt from review by the full IRB under **federal regulation** [my emphasis]. The original protocol explicitly stated that no names of study participants or living household members would be collected....”

Translation – Johns Hopkins did not violate federal regulations for the protection of subjects. (They gave Burnham a light touch because he promised not collect the names of his subjects. Hopkins suspended Burnham for breaking this promise, avoiding possible federal intervention.)

Hopkins did take a peek at the fabrication issue:

“DATA COLLECTION

An examination was conducted of all the original data collection forms, numbering over 1,800 forms, which included review by a translator. **The original forms have the appearance of authenticity in variation of handwriting, language and manner of completion.** [my emphasis] ...”

However, we can all agree that looking at the handwriting on the data collection forms is not a serious investigation of the fabrication issue.

They also checked to make sure that the handwritten information was accurately transcribed onto spreadsheets.

“The information contained on the forms was validated against the two numerical databases used in the study analyses....”

OK, I suppose it's possible that someone might, stupidly, just ignore the data entry forms and enter fake data into a spreadsheet but, obviously, this also is not a deep investigation of fabrication.

The Johns Hopkins statement then becomes disingenuous.

“These numerical databases have been available to outside researchers and provided to them upon request since April 2007.”

However, the reality is that you have to sign [a sort of loyalty oath](#) in requesting the data and Gilbert Burnham can still turn you down as he did with me.

Here is the statement you have to sign.

“I declare that I am not part of an organization or group with publicly stated views that would cause reasonable doubt about objectivity in analyzing the data. I agree that the data will remain the property of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and will be provided only on condition that the datasets are not shared with others. I understand that the results from reanalysis of the data can be freely published in the scientific and lay press and will supply the Center for Refugee and Disaster Response a copy of any papers accepted for publication.

_____ Name and Signature Date
_____”

It seems pretty clear that Johns Hopkins was much more interested in protecting one of their faculty members than in upholding the truth.

But JHU's reluctance to clean their own house should not surprise us.

There was outside pressure from the federal government for the protection of human subjects and Johns Hopkins did move vigorously on the human subjects issue.

However, on fabrication there is no such pressure.

As a researcher, what are your options if you think you've found fabricated data?

There is no clear place to report to report your finding.

You can write up a research paper, send it around, publish it, try to get the media interested, etc..

I followed this strategy with [my paper](#) but with pretty limited success – people do not want to cite such thing.

In fact, the situation is much worse than the Burnham experience suggests.

I wrote a different paper about fabricated data in several public opinion surveys conducted in Iraq and distributed it for comment to some of the interested parties.

They responded with a legal threat.

This threat has slowed down the process of getting the material into the public domain.

Conclusions

Like Blanche Dubois, we rely on the kindness of strangers.

On rare occasion someone like Donald Green will do the right thing (retracting his paper with Michael LaCour). Sometimes journalists or bloggers, like Andrew Gelman, will take up a cause.

But usually evidence of fabrication is left in a corner to rot.

But I don't want to end on a negative note so here you go!

