

Gay and Transgender Issues: Can You Actually Change People's Minds on Them?

The irony is delicious. For once, it might justify optimism rather than cynicism.

Consider carefully the facts reported in [this story](#) by Katie Palmer in the April 7 online issue of *Wired* magazine:

In December 2014, researchers Michael J. LaCour and Donald P. Green published a report of their [study](#) in *Science* magazine, purporting to show that having persuasive conversations with survey subjects improved the subjects' attitudes about "gay equality" and reduced "homophobia." When another pair of researchers, David Broockman and Joshua Kalla, examined the study's raw data, as preparation for trying to replicate those results, they discovered that LaCour had "made it all up." So he and Green duly [retracted](#) their fraud in July 2015.

Embarrassing, and pretty much career-ending for two men. End of story, right? Not quite.

Other researchers remained intrigued by what what LaCour and Green had proposed to do. For as Palmer notes:

"The overwhelming opinion in psychology and political science was that persuasion—real, substantive change of entrenched opinions—was pretty much impossible. Political strategists preferred to mobilize supporters, to get out the vote, rather than convert people on the other side of an election. 'Those people who are 90 percent likely to vote for your candidate but only 50 percent likely to vote, you call them up 3,000 times,' says Andrew Gelman, a statistician and political scientist at Columbia. LaCour and Green's results contradicted that established knowledge. That's why [Broockman](#)

[and Kalla](#) *wanted to follow up on it in the first place.*”

So Broockman and Kalla weren't content with just having exposed scientific fraud. They decided to gather *real* data to test the hypothesis that people actually can be persuaded by canvassers to change their minds about an important and controversial subject.

The subject was “transphobia” rather than the original, fraudulent study's “homophobia.” Now I dislike such terms, because those who use them generally assume that a negative view of homosexuality or transgenderism is always motivated by fear (‘phobia’ means ‘fear’). That is unproven and may well be untrue. But my dispositions aside, it's quite evident that [the new, honest study](#) got essentially the same results that the original, fraudulent study had only faked.

It's not just ironic that the new pair of researchers replicated in reality results that the original pair had only made up. More important for social science is what Broockman and Kalla have shown: It's quite possible to change people's minds *en masse*, through door-to-door canvassing and focused, one-on-one conversations, even though social scientists had generally assumed otherwise.

Even more important, argues Palmer, Broockman and Kalla are part of a new generation of social scientists who take greater care about “data transparency” and “replication” than has been customary in the past.

At a time when social science has been [suffering](#) a “replication crisis,” that can only be welcome news.