

Reports of Negative Past Experiences with Leverage Research: Sympathy, Transparency, and Support

A letter from the Executive Director

Leverage Research has been a topic of discussion in various communities within Silicon Valley for many years. Over the past month, however, the institute has been thrust more into the public eye, and thus received substantially more public attention and scrutiny.

This came about primarily as a result of [a recent Medium article](#) by Zoe Curzi, a former employee of Paradigm Technology, Inc., about her negative experiences during and after her participation in a research collaboration led by Leverage Research. The pain Zoe experienced is evident in her writing, and for anyone reading this letter who has not yet read Zoe's account, I encourage them to do so.

Zoe's report concerns the last few years of that research collaboration, 2017-2019, and raises important issues pertaining to the workplace environment and the risks and dangers from psychological experimentation. This letter concerns a number of those issues—but before that, I want to express directly, to Zoe, both my sincere regret and my genuine gratitude.

For those who did not see it, here is my [initial reply](#) to Zoe:

Zoe - I don't know if you want me to respond to you or not, and there's a lot I need to consider, but I do want to say that I'm so, so sorry. However this turns out for me or Leverage, I think it was good that you wrote this essay and spoke out about your experience.

It's going to take me a while to figure out everything that went wrong, and what I did wrong, because clearly something really bad happened to you, and it is in some way my fault. In terms of what went wrong on the project, one throughline I can see was arrogance, especially my arrogance, which affected so many of the choices we made. We dismissed a lot of the actually useful advice and tools and methods from more typical sources, and it seems that blocking out society made room for extreme and harmful narratives that should have been tempered by a lot more reality. It's terrible that you felt like your funding, or ability to rest, or take time off, or choose how to interact with your own mind were compromised by Leverage's narratives, including my own. I totally did not expect this, or the negative effects you experienced after leaving, though maybe I would have, had I not narrowed my attention and basically gotten way too stuck in theoryland.

I agree with you that we shouldn't skip steps. I've updated accordingly. Again I'm truly sorry. I really wanted your experience on the project to be good.

Alongside this message of sadness and regret, I also want to add my gratitude:

It may seem impossible in this circumstance that I would feel grateful for someone writing a letter like you did, but in fact I do. I of course still care about Leverage and its future, and my future as well. But I feel like you've shown me something I might not have understood otherwise; the value of people standing up for themselves. Leverage 1.0 was secretive—we cared about responsible information management and we were very focused on our own research—but if we are honest with ourselves we were also hiding. We never really learned to talk about our work or our experiences in ways it felt like others could interact with. If I am honest, I think in some ways I had given up on many aspects of the project ever really being publicly understood. In fighting to break the silence and have your perspective heard, you demonstrated a courage I lacked. So alongside being sorry for the terrible experiences you describe, I am sorry that telling your story was so difficult, but grateful to you for sharing it.

In the rest of this letter, after giving some background, I will discuss support and restitution, learning about dangers from psychological research, efforts to manage the community conflict that has arisen in the wake of Zoe's post, and measures to help more people speak about their experiences with Leverage Research. I am approaching these topics with the spirit Leverage found after the research collaboration was ended and after we reorganized, namely one of engagement, transparency, and belief in the power of right action.

Background

The research collaboration Leverage Research ran from 2012-2019 was marked by a spirit of inquiry, collaboration, and risk. The organization's perspective was that there were serious harms and dangers in the world, that many were not on track to being solved, and that increased knowledge of human nature might be crucially important to finding solutions.

Many of us believed, or worried, that some risks were both catastrophic and might occur soon, and so we sought to prioritize research speed. It might be natural to assume that prioritizing speed would lead to cutting corners, but in my estimation the best way to maximize the pace of research was to create a large, decentralized research environment, with researchers deciding for themselves what to study and how to study it.

I thus sought, even before Leverage Research was officially incorporated, to create a decentralized structure that enabled researchers to set their own priorities, select their own targets, and manage their own level of involvement in any given initiative. Over time I added some structure to the collaboration, but in essence the project remained highly decentralized, and highly voluntary, allowing people to largely make their own decisions about what to opt into and what to avoid.

Our primary focus during the years 2012-2019 was psychology, and during this time many researchers chose to engage in personally risky research. As early as 2012, our researchers interacted with the possibility of helping a person change their own internal beliefs, and thus thought patterns and actions. By 2016, we had encountered cases where the wrong introspective questions could trigger spirals of negative self-talk. The risks were meant, like almost everything else in the collaboration, to be consciously opted into, with real alternatives available for those who did not want to be involved.

Despite this emphasis on voluntary choice, however, it has become clear that at many times during the research collaboration not everyone felt as though they had the liberty the organizational structure was intended to permit. Preferences of key individuals became norms, norms at times may have seemed like rules. Issues could be raised at any time—my door was always open and I do not recall ever refusing a meeting—but even that was a feature of the organization that may have been forgotten amidst what eventually turned into a vast battle over the social space of the organization, complete with tribes, competing narratives, and complex patterns of interpersonal conflict.

The unusual situation, including the unorthodox organizational structure, the complicated social environment, and the content of the research makes the ascertainment of causes and effects difficult. This difficulty is compounded by genuine unknowns, since some aspects of Zoe's report came as a total surprise to both the organization and me personally. Leverage Research has initiated [an inquiry](#) into the circumstance, and we believe that inquiry will bring greater clarity and help us identify actions to take. In the meantime, it is important that the institute also take action now.

Support and Restitution

Leverage Research has not previously touched on the topic of restitution for past harms, either in its research or its practice. Despite this, Zoe Curzi's experiences, and evident suffering, call out for some type of response.

Zoe describes psychological effects and suffering after leaving the research project that we did not anticipate. I also believe that others may have experienced similar effects, or different effects that are nevertheless negative and regrettable. It certainly seems as though it would have been better if members of the Leverage ecosystem had been better supported after the dissolution of the project.

While discussion of restitution is perhaps premature—we are still awaiting information from the inquiry and developing appropriate policies takes time—that need not preclude us from offering some initial support now.

In accordance with this, I hereby pledge to reimburse any employee of any organization in the Leverage research collaboration for expenditures they made on therapy during the year following the end of that collaboration (i.e., from the period June 30, 2019 through June 30, 2020), as well as expenditures on therapy for three months starting from the date of publication of this letter (i.e., November 10, 2021

through February 10, 2021), up to \$500/mo for any given month. This is intended as an act of support, made in good faith, for people who may have suffered and may still be suffering.

We are presently working out the details of this arrangement, including who or what entity should pay, and will reach out to former employees shortly. We expect to construe “therapy” broadly to include a variety of types of palliative or rehabilitative care, and may ask for confirmation of services rendered.

This pledge may be received differently by different people, with some believing it is too little and others too much. Nevertheless, we believe that it is right to offer it to our previous collaborators, and in the spirit of our previous desire to make it easier to transition to other lines of work after people left the project.

We may take further actions as more information comes to light and as we establish new policies. We are also open to input on this topic: if any former member of the Leverage research collaboration believes they have been wronged in a way that might be able to be addressed by discussion or mediation in a manner that protects the interests of all parties, we encourage them to reach out.

Learning About Dangers from Research

Zoe’s essay draws attention to the risks, dangers, and potential deleterious effects of psychological research and novel organizational structures. We believe, and have believed for many years, these effects and dangers are real, and that it is incumbent on us to take appropriate steps given that knowledge.

Our first priority upon receiving word of Zoe’s report was to ensure the safety of our current staff. Leverage Research discontinued its direct psychological research in mid-2019, partially in response to concerns of the type Zoe raises in her report. Subsequently, Leverage Research [professionalized](#), adopting more standard policies and practices for non-profit research institutes, and changed its research direction: its staff now primarily conduct research in the [history of science](#). As such, we were quickly able to ascertain that our current staff are safe, relative to applicable standards.

Our next aim has been to acquire knowledge of the new potential risks, harms, and deleterious effects brought to light by Zoe’s post. From our previous research, we were familiar with many of the risks and possible negative effects of certain types of research, but this report alerted us to further dangers with which we were unfamiliar. As part of distributing tools and methods from our previous psychological research (through our [Exploratory Psychology research program](#)), it is essential to us that we take steps to adequately warn the public and future experimenters about the relevant risks and dangers. It is thus necessary that we include information from this recent report in the cautions we provide to future researchers.

Furthermore, the Medium article makes it clear that there might have been unrecognized issues with our psychological research or our organizational structure that may have resulted in unintended harm. It is the

goal of Leverage Research's present inquiry, and potential subsequent investigations, to bring information about such issues and harm to light.

The above-described efforts fall under previously existing plans or steps already taken, and as such do not by themselves recommend further action. Nevertheless, Zoe's report, and the public reaction to it, have certainly changed our plans for the dissemination of our psychology research. Zoe's account includes statements that may seem somewhat bizarre, such as those about "demons," "magic," and "objects." We believe these may pertain to a part of Leverage's psychology research, conducted primarily between 2018-2019, which we now refer to as "intention research."

Our previous expectation was that we would release information about this research after educating researchers in our research techniques, rather than right away. Given recent events, we now judge it is best to communicate more promptly on this topic to provide context to the interested public. As a result, we will [share information about intention research in the form of essays, talks, podcasts, etc., so as to give the public greater context on this area of our past research](#). We believe this will make it easier to understand more about Leverage's past work, as well as make it easier to identify previous institute missteps and wrongs.

Helping People Come Forward

Since our reorganization in mid-2019, Leverage Research has moved towards greater and greater public engagement over time. Anyone interested in Leverage Research can read all of our history of science research [online](#), learn about our work from our [website](#) and [annual report](#), [listen to podcast interviews](#), subscribe to [our quarterly newsletter](#) (our most recent of which also touched on Zoe's post), or follow us on [Twitter](#) for updates. I myself have a personal website, am active on Twitter, and now host weekly Twitch discussions, some of which pertain to Leverage's [history](#). The institute's outreach efforts, as well as some of my own, has been motivated in part by a desire to correct a previous failing in not communicating about our work, and in part by the aim of having our work be much better understood.

As early as August of this year, we had begun discussing ideas for how to get participants in the previous Leverage research collaboration to tell their stories and give accounts of their experiences on the Leverage project. Zoe's Medium essay and the questions it has raised for those interested in our work make working out how to most effectively and respectfully accomplish this task an important priority.

From conversations with many people, and from the reports of many more, it seems as though many people are afraid to speak up for a variety of reasons and incentives may be tricky to align. Because of the wide array of perspectives we have encountered, [Leverage Research is now seeking information from anyone who believes they were importantly impacted by our previous research about what would make them feel comfortable sharing their story or account or information publicly](#). This includes people who were members of the Leverage Research ecosystem (2011-2019), employees of the affiliated organizations during the transition (2019-2020), and other affected individuals.

As part of seeking information, we have also arranged for a number of intermediaries who have agreed to make themselves available to (1) receive and pass along reports on this topic, and (2) attempt (within reason) to communicate to us relevant concerns or considerations that require discussion. The intermediaries may be contacted anonymously or otherwise, and information passed to us may be anonymized as well.

Please feel free to contact:

- Anna Salamon, in her personal capacity — annasalamon at gmail
- Eli Tyre, in his personal capacity — elityre@gmail.com; see [here](#) for details
- Matt Graves, in his personal capacity — vaniver@gmail.com
- Matt Fallshaw, who is conducting the inquiry — m@fallshaw.me

We are open to requests to find further intermediaries, there may be local community leaders whom individuals may also wish to reach out to, and of course, people should feel free to reach out to me (geoff@leverageresearch.org) or Larissa (larissa@leverageresearch.org) as well. Once we have learned more about individuals' preferences, we will take steps to make it easier for people to share information and accounts about their experiences with Leverage Research.

Conflict and Community Relations

Our efforts to address concerns raised by Zoe's article have been regrettably complicated by the intervention of an online community known as the "Rationality community," centered on the internet forum [LessWrong](#).

Leverage Research has for the past decade endured various forms of antagonism from this community, perhaps stemming from early disagreements between leaders within the Rationality community and Leverage. Mostly recently, the CEO of Lightcone Infrastructure, which manages the LessWrong forum, and some anonymous individuals [set aside \\$85,000](#) to encourage "others [to] write up similar accounts [to Zoe's]."

While in principle it may be possible to use money to offset risks from coming forward and incentivize truthful accounts, in this case the details appear to have been counterproductive. Many people I have heard from believe that negative accounts will be rewarded even if inaccurate and people who write accounts with positive elements will be attacked by an [unruly mob](#) of Rationalists. The intentions of many in the Rationalist community are no doubt good. But it is hard to ignore the fact that this circumstance is occurring in the context of what has clearly become a malignant rivalry. The flurry of online speculation, the rivalry, and the attendant fears of reprisal and escalation have made it harder for information about Leverage Research to be shared publicly and to understand the circumstances surrounding Zoe's account.

We have received communication from many allies urging us to ignore the Rationalists and simply focus on the good work we're doing. This has been our strategy since 2019, and arguably earlier. Recent events, however, have made it clear that this approach is no longer viable. The costs for former and present employees are too high, and there is no sense in revisiting this conflict indefinitely. Leverage Research will thus seek to resolve the current conflict as definitively as possible, publicly dissociate from the Rationalist community, and take actions to prevent future conflict. As part of this, we are [engaging in public discussions](#), seeking mediated conflict resolution, planning a public statement, and looking for long term mediators who can help handle Rationality community concerns going forward.

It is hard to ensure that the efforts at conflict resolution will be successful, but we are hopeful that a peaceful parting of ways can be arranged which allows everyone to return to focusing on the future, and their respective interests therein.

The events of the last month have been tumultuous and emotional for everyone involved, whatever their perspective. It is with the hope that errors can be corrected, wrongs righted, and the truth brought to light that we take our next steps as an institute.

With hope for the future,

Geoff Anders
Executive Director