

[Psychologist admits to faking dozens of scientific studies](#)



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Every branch of science has its share of "sexy" studies—so called for their supposed tendency to provoke media attention, even in the absence of strong or conclusive findings—but investigations in the field of social psychology are often especially popular targets of the "sexy" label.

Now, prominent social psychologist Diederik Stapel (who earlier this year reported that [something as trivial as litter can promote discriminatory behavior](#)) has been outed as one of the biggest frauds in scientific history. Will social psychology be able to recover?



Read: [Urban decay causes ethnic prejudice](#)

<http://io9.com/5789623/urban-decay-causes-ethnic-prejudice>

A [preliminary investigative report](#) issued on Monday by Tilburg University has concluded that dozens of research papers authored and co-authored by Stapel contain fabricated data.

"We have some 30 papers in peer-reviewed journals where we are actually sure that they are fake, and there are more to come," says Pim Levelt, chair of the committee that investigated

Stapel's work. If all of these papers are withdrawn, Stapel's will become one of the worst cases of scientific misconduct in history.

Stapel is the researcher behind a number of eye-catching studies which, *prima facie*, seem to offer provocative insights into human nature. His research topics range from [the effects of beauty product ads on consumer self-esteem](#), to how urban decay (like littered streets) [promote stereotyping and discrimination](#) — [the latter being a study we reported on here at io9](#).

Whether these studies are included in the 30+ papers known to contain fraudulent data remains to be seen. Tilburg University has yet to provide a list of which studies contain fudged results, though Stapel's paper on the tie between urban decay and discrimination, published in April in the journal *Science*, has already been flagged with [an expression of concern](#) by the journal's publishers.

Stapel is believed to have acted alone, deceiving colleagues, collaborators, and even PhD candidates for years by providing them with fictitious data. Given Stapel's prominence within the field of social psychology, (not to mention the sheer volume of publications already identified as tainted), it's safe to say that the effects of his outing will be far-reaching.

"This is absolutely horrifying," said Laura King, a social psychologist at the University of Missouri in Columbia. "We are talking about research that has major impact in the field of social cognition."

"Our field is one where a great deal of currency is placed on surprising you," says University of Connecticut psychologist Hart Blanton, who expects to have to retract two papers written in co-authorship with Stapel. In an interview with *New Scientist*, Blanton said that he was concerned about how the field may foster a dynamic that encourages researchers to progress from ""counter-intuitive, to cute, to provocative, to 'defies gravity'".

In [a statement issued on Monday](#), Stapel admitted that he has been committing scientific fraud for years, and expressed regret for casting the field of social psychology—which he describes as "big, interesting, beautiful and strong"—in such an unbecoming light.

"Ik heb gefaald als wetenschapper, als onderzoeker" writes Stapel. "I have failed as a scientist, as a researcher."

News like this is enough to make you sick to your stomach. When research becomes a part of the scientific literature, it enters into a conversation with other research that must strive for truth in order to operate effectively. When a study (or thirty) based on fraudulent data are allowed part in that conversation, it not only pollutes the scientific pool of shared information, it treads all over any meaningful information that may have been gained from the study in the first place.

Those of you who are curious about how something like this could happen despite well-established peer-review practices, or if you're simply looking for an incisive exploration of what the peer review process is, what it isn't, and what it's for, [check out this timely piece by Scientific American's Bradley Voytek](#).

[Via [New Scientist](#) + [Nature News](#)]

Source: <http://io9.com/5855733/psychologist-admits-to-faking-dozens-of-scientific-studies>