

How Diederik Stapel Became A Science Fraud

By [Neuroskeptic](#) | January 20, 2015 5:58 pm

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Two years ago, Dutch science fraudster [Diederik Stapel](#) published a book, *Ontsporing* (“Derailment”), describing how he became one of the world’s leading social psychologists, before falling from grace when it emerged that he’d [fabricated the data in dozens of papers](#).



Stapel wrote *Ontsporing* in Dutch, but now his story **has been translated into English, under the title of *Faking Science*** – thanks to the efforts of [Nick Brown](#). *Neuroskeptic* readers may remember Brown for [his critical analyses](#) of work in the field of positive psychology. I was one of the proofreaders for the translation. (**Edit:** the translation is free to download – so you won’t be supporting Stapel financially by reading the book.)

I’m currently working on a review of *Faking Science* but in this post, by way of setting the scene for my review, I’ll quote two passages from Stapel’s account, representing the two major crises of his career.

First off, here’s how Stapel describes the very first time he faked some data.

After years of balancing on the outer limits [of scientific integrity], the grey became darker and darker until it was black, and I fell off the edge into the abyss. I’d been having trouble with my experiments for some time. Even with my various “grey” methods for “improving” the data [i.e. ‘[QRPs](#)’], I wasn’t able to get the results the way I wanted them. I couldn’t resist the temptation to go a step further. I wanted it so badly. I wanted to belong, to be part of the action, to score.

I really, really wanted to be really, really good. I wanted to be published in the best journals and speak in the largest room at conferences. I wanted people to hang on my every word as I headed for coffee or lunch after delivering a lecture.

I felt very alone. I was alone in my tastefully furnished office at the University of Groningen. I’d taken extra care when closing the door, and made my desk extra tidy. Everything had to be neat and orderly. No mess.

I opened the file with the data that I had entered and changed an unexpected 2 into a 4; then, a little further along, I changed a 3 into a 5. It didn’t feel right. I looked around me nervously. The data danced in front of my eyes.

When the results are just not quite what you'd so badly hoped for; when you know that that hope is based on a thorough analysis of the literature; when this is your third experiment on this subject and the first two worked great; when you know that there are other people doing similar research elsewhere who are getting good results; then, surely, you're entitled to adjust the results just a little?

No. I clicked on "Undo Typing." And again. I felt very alone. I didn't want this. I'd worked so hard. I'd done everything I could and it just hadn't quite worked out the way I'd expected. It just wasn't quite how everyone could see that it logically had to be. I looked at the door of my office. It was still closed. I looked out the window. It was dark outside. "Redo Typing."

And again. For a moment I had the feeling that someone was standing behind me. I turned round slowly, fearfully. There was nobody there. I looked at the array of data and made a few mouse clicks to tell the computer to run the statistical analyses. When I saw the results, the world had become logical again. I saw what I'd imagined. I felt relieved, but my heart was heavy. This was great, but at the same time it was very wrong.

[...] I was fed up with my own inability to produce anything interesting from my research. I was going round in circles, each study much like the previous one. They were just variations on a theme. Complex mediocrity. A small effect here, another one there. I'd had enough of the grind.

Secondly, here's Stapel's account of the moment when he was first confronted with the accusation that he was a fraud –

Maarten, who chairs the social psychology department [at the University of Tilburg], had confronted me with the question I had been dreading for years. "Diederik, I have to ask you: have you been faking your data?"

Of course, I denied it flat-out. It was a Friday evening, and we were sitting in Maarten's bright, modern living room. I went round to his house after an evening out with friends, watching the local pro soccer team play yet another mediocre game. Maarten's house and mine are a stone's throw from each other. We've become good friends, and we like to meet up and talk. Our kids go to the same school [...]

Maarten had sent me a text message earlier that evening to ask if I would come over: "It's important." While watching the soccer match I hadn't thought any more about it, but as we left the stadium I checked my phone and saw that he had tried to contact me again: "Are you coming?", followed by "???" It sounded like something urgent.

What could be the problem? Maarten had been divorced for a few years and his girlfriend had recently moved in with him. Maybe there was a problem between them, or it had upset his children. Maybe he wanted to talk about it and get some friendly advice? I'm always happy to lend an ear. But I was way off base.

As soon as I entered his house, he came straight to the point. "How are you?" I asked, as he stood in the kitchen, making a cup of tea. "This is not good, Diederik. Not good at all." He had just returned from a conference in London where a group of young researchers from Tilburg had taken him to one side one evening after dinner, and told him about their strong suspicions that I'd been playing fast and loose with my research for some time. Nobody knew where I was getting my data from. Had I been making it all up?

I tried to act tough and pretended to be shocked at these terrible accusations. I was nonchalant and dismissive. After all, if nobody's gossiping about your research, it's probably not very good. I asked him for whatever specific details he had and tried to counter them; after all, what evidence did they

have? But inside my head it was as if the flimsy structure of my secret world, the walls and floors that I had casually erected over the previous ten years, was slowly starting to collapse. [...]

The researchers who had blown the whistle on me had clearly convinced Maarten that they were on to something, with a great deal of detailed evidence and not-so-wild accusations. He didn't want to believe it, but he didn't have much of a choice.

He'd spoken to a young PhD student with whom I had coauthored an article that we'd managed to get accepted by one of the top international journals. It had taken two years of intensive research, and lots of writing and rewriting. But now she had lost all sense of pride in her achievement because she didn't believe in the data that I'd given her.

Maarten told me that the gossip about me was spreading in academic circles across the country; from now on, whenever I gave a presentation of my research, there were going to be a lot of raised eyebrows. [...] Maarten carried on talking about the conference, but I'd stopped listening.

What could they have found out? Everything? Surely not. Nobody would believe everything, surely? Nobody believes everything. Maybe I still had a chance? This was too big, too terrible, too weird; too big to fail, as they used to say about the banks. I'll come up with something. I'm a lucky guy. It'll all turn out OK. I can talk my way out of this situation. But it turned out that couldn't.

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