



SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY

## Fresh Misconduct Charges Hit Dutch Social Psychology

**AMSTERDAM**—“Oh no,” one Dutch psychologist tweeted last week. “Here we go again,” another lamented. Scientists here are still searching their souls about two previous scandals—involving Diederik Stapel of Tilburg University in 2011 and Dirk Smeesters of Erasmus University in Rotterdam a year later. Now they have learned that a national research integrity panel has found evidence of data manipulation in the work of Jens Förster, a social psychologist at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). The university has already announced that it will request the retraction of one of Förster’s articles.

The case is drawing widespread international attention as well, in part because Förster, who’s German and came to Amsterdam in 2007, enjoys a sterling reputation. “He is among the most creative and influential social psychologists of his generation,” says Jeffrey Sherman of the University of California, Davis. In 2011, Förster received the Kurt Lewin Award, a major European social psychology prize, for his “pioneering research in the domains of self regulation, creativity, novelty, embodiment and social cognition.” Adding to the interest is the nature of the evidence. The panel found no smoking gun; as in the Smeesters case, it based its conclusion entirely on statistical and methodological evidence.

Förster did not respond to multiple requests for comment from *Science*, but in a long open e-mail to colleagues, published on the blog Retraction Watch last week, he called the verdict a “terrible misjudgment”

and blamed it on a climate of “hysteria” in the wake of the Stapel affair. “I do feel like the victim of an incredible witch hunt,” he wrote.

The case started in September 2012, when a whistleblower sent UvA a 35-page complaint about three of Förster’s studies. The complainant had been puzzled by the unusually large effects seen in one study, published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science (SPPS)* in 2012. After participants had been “primed” by subtle stimulations—such as smelling scents or hearing poems—their scores on a cognitive ability test went up dramatically.

Intrigued, the researcher asked Förster to send him raw data from the experiments. Förster responded with a limited data set, containing numbers of participants and standard deviations, but not the raw data. The whistleblower also analyzed two papers describing similar experiments, published by Förster in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* in 2009 and 2011. Together, the three papers contained 42 experiments; the means reported were “unusually close to a linear trend” in the vast majority of the experiments, the whistleblower wrote. The chances of this happening were one in 508,000,000,000,000,000,000, he claimed.

A UvA committee that first looked into the allegations agreed that the linearity was “statistically speaking virtually impossible” but said this might have been the result of “sloppy science” or “questionable research practices,” such as leaving out odd data

**Accused.** Jens Förster said he’s the victim of “an incredible witch hunt.”

points. The panel said it could not ascertain whether the data had been manipulated.

Unsatisfied, the whistleblower appealed to the Netherlands’ National Board for Research Integrity (LOWI), which launched its own investigation. The board obtained processed data files from Förster and asked a mathematical stochastics professor to investigate them, which the UvA committee had not done. Its much harsher report, issued on 6 May, says that the “conclusion that research data must have been manipulated is considered unavoidable,” and that this constituted a violation of academic integrity. LOWI blames the authors, in particular Förster.

The report addresses only the 2012 paper, which UvA is seeking to retract; the university says it does not justify retracting the other two papers. UvA declined to say whether disciplinary action might be taken. Förster resigned from UvA before the release of the report; on 1 June, he was slated to start a new, 5-year research project at Ruhr University Bochum in Germany, supported by a prestigious €5 million grant from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. In a press release last week, the foundation announced that it’s postponing the grant—and Förster’s participation in an 8 May award ceremony—“until the matter has been clarified.”

In his e-mail defense, Förster denied ever manipulating data and vowed to fight to get his case reconsidered. “The conclusion that I manipulated data has never been proved,” he wrote. “It remains a conclusion based on likelihoods.” Förster also wrote that his co-author on the 2012 paper, Markus Denzler of the Federal University of Applied Administrative Sciences in Brühl, Germany, had “nothing to do with the data collection or the data analysis” for the study. Denzler did not respond to *Science*’s requests for comment.

Although the whistleblower is known to UvA and LOWI, they have not revealed his identity. He answered e-mailed questions from *Science*, but insisted that his name not be used. “It really doesn’t matter who filed the complaint,” he says. He emphasizes that he knew Förster only by name and holds “no grudges” against him.

The calculations in the complaint, hard to follow for an average reader, have already triggered a lively debate among statisticians

and psychologists. Gregory Francis, a cognitive psychologist at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, who has investigated several cases of misconduct, says he finds them “very convincing.” The complaint “made plain that the reported data are too good to be true. There is little doubt of that,” adds social psychologist Brian Nosek of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Francis and Nosek say more of Förster’s papers should be put under the microscope, as happened with Stapel and Smeesters after the first evidence of fabrication surfaced.

But Sherman says he’s giving Förster the benefit of the doubt. “Even if we all agree that the data are unlikely, that does not

necessarily indicate fraud,” he says. “It is not clear exactly why the data turned out the way that they did. We may understand later what we cannot understand now.” Förster’s Ph.D. adviser, social psychologist Fritz Strack of the University of Würzburg in Germany, also cautions against a rush to judgment. “Jens Förster was an outstanding doctoral student about whose integrity I have never had any doubts,” he says. *SPPS* editor Allen McConnell says UvA has not yet contacted him about the disputed paper.

Dutch scientists, meanwhile, are left to wonder if the string of misconduct cases—there have been several more in fields other than psychology—means there is something

rotten in their science system. LOWI, which handles only appeals, has seen its caseload triple since the Stapel affair, with a record 19 cases in 2013. But LOWI Chair Kees Schuyt, a professor emeritus of sociology at UvA, says the increase just shows that whistleblowers in the Netherlands now know what to do. In a recent interview in *NRC Handelsblad*, Schuyt said: “Because of all the publicity about scientific misconduct, people know better how to lodge a complaint within a university and how to appeal to LOWI.”

—FRANK VAN KOLFSCHOOTEN

Frank van Kolfschooten is a freelance science writer in Amsterdam and the author of two books about scientific misconduct in the Netherlands.

## ARCHAEOLOGY

# New Sites Bring the Earliest Americans Out of the Shadows

**AUSTIN**—The sun was setting as archaeologist Kurt Rademaker climbed past 4500 meters in the Andes Mountains of Peru. His goal was to find the source of the obsidian that ancient people on the coast of Peru had used to make stone tools. But right then, “I was looking for someplace to spend the night,” Rademaker says. “I popped over a ridge, right into a rock shelter”—a natural shelter that promised to be a good campsite. That evening he noticed hundreds of black obsidian and red and gray jasper tools littering the area. He’d unknowingly set up his tent right atop the ancient people’s camp.

Several more trips up the mountain revealed something even better: a piece of human skull buried near the bones of wild vicuña, guanaco, and deer—the remnants of prehistoric barbecues in the rock shelter. At the meeting of the Society for American Archaeology\* here, Rademaker announced that the animal bones date between 12,000 and 12,500 years ago, meaning that the people feasting high in the mountains were among the early inhabitants of the New World. “We have the highest Ice Age site in the Americas with a really successful human occupation,” says Rademaker, an archaeologist at the University of Maine, Orono.

Rademaker is one of a new generation of archaeologists searching high and low for new evidence of early Americans—and finding it. Now that most of the field has accepted that humans settled in America before the famous

Clovis hunters (*Science*, 25 March 2011, p. 1512), young researchers are staking their careers on a new set of questions. Who were these pre-Clovis people, how quickly did they fan out after arriving from Asia, and how did they adapt to new terrains? Clovis hunters were people of the plains of North America, but researchers are now finding traces of Paleoindians atop mountains in the



**Ancient footsteps.** The earliest Americans left tools and bones at multiple new sites (dates in years).

Sierra Madre and Andes and at the bottom of sinkholes in Florida. They are fleshing out the ghostly outlines of these nomadic people, who spread through North and South America 12,000 to 15,000 years ago.

As a procession of young researchers took the podium at the meeting, several older advocates of pre-Clovis settlement stood back and beamed. “This symposium with so many young South American scholars presenting such good interdisciplinary data would have been impossible 10 years ago,” says archaeologist Tom Dillehay of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, who excavated Monte Verde, a crucial pre-Clovis site in Chile. “It’s nice to get beyond the Clovis versus pre-Clovis debate.” Geoarchaeologist Michael Waters of Texas A&M University, College Station, agrees: “There’s definitely a sense of change in the air.”

A generation ago, most researchers thought that the first Americans were the Clovis big-game hunters, who left their distinctive fluted spear points in the open basins and ranges of North America starting about 13,000 years ago (*Science*, 23 February 2007, p. 1067). Few believed the scattered claims for Paleoindians before Clovis, and the doubts squelched funding for research that might have sped the acceptance of older sites.

But over time, the evidence for pre-Clovis sites became incontrovertible. The first to be widely accepted was the ancient campsite at Monte Verde. Now reliably dated by radiocarbon to 14,800 years ago, it is the oldest accepted human site in the Americas. Today almost a dozen sites “provide credible

\*79th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, 23–27 April, Austin.

## Fresh Misconduct Charges Hit Dutch Social Psychology

Frank van Kolschooten

*Science* **344** (6184), 566-567.  
DOI: 10.1126/science.344.6184.566

ARTICLE TOOLS <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/344/6184/566>

RELATED CONTENT <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/sci/345/6196/523.2.full>

PERMISSIONS <http://www.sciencemag.org/help/reprints-and-permissions>

Use of this article is subject to the [Terms of Service](#)

---

*Science* (print ISSN 0036-8075; online ISSN 1095-9203) is published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. 2017 © The Authors, some rights reserved; exclusive licensee American Association for the Advancement of Science. No claim to original U.S. Government Works. The title *Science* is a registered trademark of AAAS.