

December 8, 2012

Dear friends and colleagues,

The scientific fraud committed by Diederik Stapel has been a major shock for all members of the social psychology community. As a result, this community was keenly awaiting the publication of the final Levelt report — the coordinated report of the three committees that have investigated Stapel's research activities in the three universities where he was employed over the course of his career. The report was expected to provide a complete account of the publications that should be retracted, but also to uncover the process by which Stapel was able to fabricate data and publish fraudulent research for more than ten years.

The Levelt report¹⁾ was published on November 28, but instead of providing the expected closure and a welcome insight into one of the darkest chapters of the history of social psychology, it brings the discipline as a whole into disrepute. For, in addition to describing Stapel's fraudulent activities, the report characterizes social psychology as a discipline with low academic standards and limited scientific integrity. This is a characterization that the Executive Committee of the European Association of Social Psychology rejects completely. The present statement represents the Executive Committee's official reaction to the Levelt report.

Before delving into the reasons for our strong opposition to the conclusions about social psychology contained in the Levelt report, we must first acknowledge that the work which has gone into this report is extremely impressive in terms both of complexity of the task and the sensitivities of the subject matter. The three committees have worked for more than a year on the challenging task of reconstructing how each study in Stapel's many publications had been designed, conducted and analysed. On this score, the first four chapters of the report are highly informative and allow us to understand the world of deception and influence that Stapel had set up around him and his collaborators' research, and exonerate the PhD students from direct involvement in the fraud. This is a very important outcome of the report and the committees should be commended for this. There are also important problems in scientific research — within and outside our discipline — that this investigation has played an important role in clarifying.

The following two chapters, however, represent a defamatory attempt to present social psychology as a discipline that has facilitated, through its flawed research culture, Stapel's scientific misconduct. Chapter 5 reviews in some details the verification bias that can be consistently found when analysing Stapel's research; however, before doing so, the report attributes this bias to the whole discipline of social psychology: "The discovery of the methodological defects, which constitutes an unintended and unexpected finding of this inquiry, did raise the crucial question for the Committees as to whether this research culture, which is described in more technical detail below, is also rife throughout the field of social psychology, nationally and internationally. Could it be that in general some aspects of this discipline's customary methods should be deemed incorrect from the perspective of academic standards and scientific integrity?" (p. 47). This is presented as a question, but its illocutionary force is quite clear.

Interestingly, just a few lines later, the report notes that "The Committees are therefore unable to make any statement on these grounds about social psychology as a whole." (p. 48). But they immediately make the comment, no less effective than a statement: "It would nonetheless be simplistic to dismiss the findings given below as merely a local aberration. Mr Stapel worked in too many different places and in too many different capacities to support that view" (p. 48). The reader will understand that if it cannot be a local aberration, then it has to be a general problem. This interpretation is reinforced by the following lines: "Furthermore he published in nearly all the respected international journals in his field. It was extremely rare for his extraordinarily neat findings to be subjected to serious doubt, even in the doctoral boards of 'his' doctoral candidates, even in the international review procedures, and even where the fraud was blatant. Taken together all of the above reinforces the picture of an international research community of which Mr Stapel, his PhD students and close colleagues were part, and in which the customary research methods and associated standards and values were mutually shared." (p. 48). The clear implication is that our international community shares its research methods and associated standards and values with fraudster Diederik Stapel.

The Executive Committee of EASP vehemently rejects this conclusion — believing it to be defamatory, unfounded, and false. The report's specification that "(...) the Committees are not suggesting that unsound research practices are commonplace in social psychology." (p. 48) does not mitigate the picture, on the one hand because the suggestion has indeed been made, and on the other hand because the report immediately continues by repeating the same discipline-encompassing remark: "The Committees are unwilling or unable to make any statement about social psychology in general, although they consider the findings of this report to be sufficient reason for the field of social psychology in the Netherlands and abroad to set up a thorough internal inquiry into the state of affairs in the field." (p. 48). Moreover, although one might argue that the above is intended to urge a reform of the field rather than to denigrate it, the concluding section of Chapter 5 is utterly insulting: "A 'byproduct' of the Committees' inquiries is the conclusion that, far more than was originally assumed, there are certain aspects of the discipline itself that should be deemed undesirable or even incorrect from the perspective of academic standards and scientific integrity." (p. 54).

The Executive Committee of EASP denounces the above attacks against social psychology as unwarranted and unscientific. The report, with the wealth of information it has gathered, could have represented a forceful case study likely to contribute to an epistemological reflection of all scientific disciplines on important pervasive matters such as peer reviewing, the nature of proof, the role of methods, the importance of trust, the pressure to publish, and so on. Crises appear in a cyclic way in all scientific disciplines, and sharing information and experiences across disciplines appears to be an invaluable form of cooperation, one that the final Levelt report could have offered to the scientific community at large. Instead, the report argues that the discipline of social psychology has a specific problem because its journal editors, reviewers, grant committees, doctoral committees, senior scholars who have been involved in the assessment of Stapel's work failed to detect his "sloppy science" and fraud. We agree with the committees that in Stapel's case the fraud has been going on for too long. This, indeed, is why we are shocked by the results of their investigations. But, to be able to draw conclusions about a whole, international field of scientific research, one should not focus on the scientific practices and publications associated with one author. Moreover,

one should not focus on only one specific sub-discipline, but compare the research culture of this discipline with the research culture in other sub-disciplines before drawing comparative conclusions.

The report does not provide this analysis, and hence itself seems to be an unfortunate example of the verification bias that it seeks to criticize. Underlining this point, a recent article by Stroebe, Postmes and Spears in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (2012, vol. 7) reveals two significant truths: first, that other sciences have a higher incidence of fraud cases than (social) psychology, and, second that across science as a whole it is very rare for fraud to be detected as a result of peer review. In this article, 40 major scientific fraud cases have been considered, and a look at the results show that only few of them were in psychology. When considering the cases closest to the Stapel case, those of rising stars in the bio-medical sciences or physics who published at an incredible pace data that were "too good to be true", Stroebe and colleagues found that the review process almost never helped to detect the fraud. Thus, importantly, not detecting fraud through the reviewing process is not a peculiarity of social psychology.

Scientific misconduct, then, is a phenomenon that concerns all disciplines. Tackling it also requires the cooperation of the wider scientific community. We believe that the final Levelt report had the additional opportunity to provide the scientific community with an important basis for reflections on scientific misconduct, a problem that causes a great deal of harm to people and institutions in terms of loss of scientific credibility and public reputation. Indeed, rather than focus on the problems of a specific discipline, it might also have reflected on the corporate practices and cultures that put pressure on academics to produce results, and that reward certain models of 'success' rather than others. Unfortunately, this opportunity has been missed. Likewise, the report misses the opportunity to provide inspiring, not condescending, guidelines and hope to a whole generation of young scientists in social psychology. Their confidence in their discipline has been battered by the "Stapel case" and it needs to be repaired through the provision of considered guidance, not rash generalization.

The three committees would be wise to amend the final report so as to redeem the impression that they have made a scapegoat of our discipline in order to avoid some of these more difficult issues. As a community, we repudiate 'sloppy science' in all its forms, and, for that reason, we find the conclusions about social psychology contained in the final Levelt report to be unacceptably flawed.

The Executive Committee of the European Association of Social Psychology

¹⁾ The Levelt report is available on: <http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/nl/nieuws-en-agenda/finalreportLevelt.pdf>