

32.2: How Science (Sometimes) Actually Works

Brian Wansink is well known for his books on “Mindless Eating”, and his fee for corporate speaking engagements is in the tens of thousands of dollars. In 2017, a set of researchers began to scrutinize some of his published research, starting with a set of papers about how much pizza people ate at a buffet. The researchers asked Wansink to share the data from the studies but he refused, so they dug into his published papers and found a large number of inconsistencies and statistical problems in the papers. The publicity around this analysis led a number of others to dig into Wansink’s past, including obtaining emails between Wansink and his collaborators. As [reported by Stephanie Lee at Buzzfeed](#), these emails showed just how far Wansink’s actual research practices were from the naive model:

...back in September 2008, when Payne was looking over the data soon after it had been collected, he found no strong apples-and-Elmo link — at least not yet. ... “I have attached some initial results of the kid study to this message for your report,” Payne wrote to his collaborators. “Do not despair. It looks like stickers on fruit may work (with a bit more wizardry).” ... Wansink also acknowledged the paper was weak as he was preparing to submit it to journals. The p-value was 0.06, just shy of the gold standard cutoff of 0.05. It was a “sticking point,” as he put it in a Jan. 7, 2012, email. ... “It seems to me it should be lower,” he wrote, attaching a draft. “Do you want to take a look at it and see what you think. If you can get the data, and it needs some tweeking, it would be good to get that one value below .05.” ... Later in 2012, the study appeared in the prestigious JAMA Pediatrics, the 0.06 p-value intact. But in September 2017, it was retracted and replaced with a version that listed a p-value of 0.02. And a month later, it was retracted yet again for an entirely different reason: Wansink admitted that the experiment had not been done on 8- to 11-year-olds, as he’d originally claimed, but on preschoolers.

This kind of behavior finally caught up with Wansink; [fifteen of his research studies have been retracted](#) and in 2018 he resigned from his faculty position at Cornell University.

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