

Big nutrition research scandal sees 6 more retractions, purging popular diet tips

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"Mindless eating" researcher Brian Wansink resigns amid six new JAMA retractions.



[Enlarge](#) / Broken plate with knife and fork on white background.
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Brian Wansink, the Cornell nutrition researcher who was world-renowned for his massively popular, commonsense-style dieting studies before ultimately going down in flames in a beefy statistics scandal, has now resigned—with a considerably slimmer publication record.

JAMA's editorial board [retracted six studies co-authored by Wansink](#) from its network of prestigious publications on Wednesday, September 19. The latest retractions bring Wansink's [total retraction count to 13](#), according to a database compiled by watchdog publication Retraction Watch. Fifteen of Wansink's other studies have also been formally corrected.

Amid this latest course in the scandal, Cornell reported today, September 20, that [Wansink has resigned from his position](#), effective at the end of the current

academic year. In a statement emailed to Ars, Cornell Provost Michael Kotlikoff said that an internal investigation by a faculty committee found that “Professor Wansink committed academic misconduct in his research and scholarship, including misreporting of research data, problematic statistical techniques, failure to properly document and preserve research results, and inappropriate authorship.”

[As Ars has reported before](#), the retractions, corrections, and today's resignation all stem from Wansink's own admission of statistical scavenging to find meaningful conclusions in otherwise messy dieting data. The result is that many common dieting tips—such as using smaller plates to trick yourself into shoveling in less food and stashing unhealthy snacks in hard-to-reach places—are now on the cutting board and possibly destined for the garbage bin.

Prior to the scandal, Wansink made a name for himself publishing studies indicating, generally, that such subtle environmental changes could lead to distinct eating and health benefits. He helped cook up the idea for the now ubiquitous 100-calorie snack packs, for instance. And he served up the suggestion to have fruit bowls placed prominently on our kitchen counters.

Oops

But, [in a November 2016 blog post](#), Wansink inadvertently sank his own fame by noting that he encouraged his graduate students to go on statistical fishing trips, pushing them to net unintended conclusions from otherwise null nutrition experiment results. This is a huge red flag to researchers because such statistical fishing is a well-established method for reeling in false positives and meaningless statistical blips, [like finding a link between cabbage and innie belly buttons](#). Moreover, many researchers see the dubious approach as fueling a crisis in social sciences in which findings from key studies—like Wansink's—are not reproducible by other researchers, calling into question their original validity.

The blogged confession led to several other researchers sifting through Wansink's studies and stats. Prime among those researchers is [education researcher and blogger Tim van der Zee](#) of Leiden University in the Netherlands. By last year, van der Zee and colleagues had identified at least 42 Wansink studies with alleged issues ranging from minor to severe. Those studies had collectively been cited by other researchers 3,700 times, been published in over 25 journals and eight books, and spanned 20 years of research, van der Zee noted.

At the time, [Cornell issued a statement](#) about Wansink's dieting studies and the indigestion it was causing. The statement said that the issues had “not constituted scientific misconduct” but that Wansink would consult with “external statistical experts to validate his review and reanalysis of the papers.”

But since then, things have gotten worse for Wansink.

In *JAMA*'s retraction notice, the network reported that it had asked Cornell to "conduct an independent evaluation of the [six] articles [in question] to determine whether the results are valid."

Cornell responded to *JAMA*, writing: "We regret that, because we do not have access to the original data, we cannot assure you that the results of the studies are valid."

Thus, *JAMA* editors retracted the six articles.

Years of work

[One had appeared in JAMA](#) in 2005. The study claimed to find that large serving bowl sizes at a Super Bowl party were linked to more snack eating.

Three had been published in *JAMA Internal Medicine*. [A 2012 study](#) claimed that hungry people go for starchy foods first over vegetables. Another study in 2013 claimed similarly that [hungry grocery shoppers go for more calories](#) but not necessarily more food. And a study from 2014 was reported as finding that the [more distracting a TV show, the less viewers watched how much they ate](#) and thus ate more.

The last two retracted studies were from *JAMA Pediatrics*. [One from 2008](#) suggested that kids who are told to clean their plates by their moms were statistically more likely to request more food. The other, published in 2013, claimed [that kids made healthier school lunch choices if they pre-ordered their meals](#) rather than made decisions in the lunch line, where they can smell less-healthy entrees.

Check, please

In the statement released today, Cornell's Kotlikoff noted that the University had been investigating Wansink for more than a year but had kept quiet during the media attention and retractions out of an obligation to fairness and confidentiality. Now, with the investigation complete, the university revealed the misconduct finding and that Wansink had tendered his resignation. "He has been removed from all teaching and research. Instead, he will be obligated to spend his time cooperating with the university in its ongoing review of his prior research," the statement read. It went on:

We regret this situation which has been painful to the university community. Cornell University remains committed to the highest standards of academic integrity and we are reviewing our research policies to ensure we can meet this commitment.

Wansink released a statement to BuzzFeed saying: "I have been tremendously honored and blessed to be a Cornell professor and especially to be the first John S.

Dyson Professor of Marketing at the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management.”

This post has been updated to include statements from Cornell.