

Meet the ‘data thugs’ out to expose shoddy and questionable research

February 15, 2018

In 2015, Nick Brown was skimming Twitter when something caught his eye. A tweet mentioned an article by Nicolas Guéguen, a French psychologist with a penchant for publishing titillating findings about human behavior, for example that women with large breasts get more invitations to dance at nightclubs, or blond waitresses get bigger tips. Now, Guéguen was reporting that men are less likely to assist women who tie up their hair.

Brown, a graduate student in psychology at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, sent an email about the study to James Heathers, a postdoc in behavioral science at Northeastern University in Boston whom he had met a few years earlier. The description alone triggered a laughing spell in Heathers—not an uncommon reaction to science he finds risible.

Once the chuckling stopped, Brown and Heathers took a deeper look at the findings reported by Guéguen, who works at the University of Southern Brittany in Vannes, France. Many failed the duo’s homegrown test for statistical rigor. The pair also found odd data in nine other articles from Guéguen.

Soon, Brown and Heathers were asking Guéguen and the French Psychological Society about the numbers. The pair says Guéguen failed to adequately address their questions, and the society agreed that their critique seemed well-grounded. So late last year, the men did something that many scientists might find out of bounds: They went public, sharing their concerns with a reporter for *Ars Technica*, [which published a story](#), and posting their critiques on a blog. (Guéguen declined to discuss the matter with *Science*; the society says a university panel is examining the papers.)