

Max H. Bazerman. *Inside An Academic Scandal: A Story of Fraud and Betrayal.* MIT Press 2025. 200 pp. \$32.95 USD (Hardcover 9780262049887); \$19.99 USD (eBook 9780262384094).

Inside an Academic Scandal by Max Bazerman is a first-hand account of the so-called signing-first publication scandal. “Signing-first” refers to the 2012 publication that described datasets showing that individuals who signed their names at the beginning of a form generally gave more honest disclosures than those who signed at the end ([see the study](#)). After repeated failures to replicate the signing-first effect, Leif Nelson, Joe Simmons and Uri Simonsohn provided evidence through their Data Colada blog that two of the signing-first datasets were fraudulent. The signing-first paper was retracted in 2021, and one of the co-authors, Francesca Gino, was fired by Harvard University in May 2025.

Inside an Academic Scandal joins other non-fiction books that address scholarly or research fraud. For example, *Plastic Fantastic* by Eugenie Reich and *Bad Blood* by John Carreyrou also focus on fraud perpetrated by individuals but were written by investigative journalists. Bazerman’s book is different as it is a first-hand account of academic fraud, written by someone who was clearly deeply and personally affected by their experiences.

There are many reasons why the signing-first scandal has received widespread attention. Unlike some fields affected by research fraud, the research topic — honesty itself — is easily understood by lay audiences. The idea of experts committing fraud in a paper about honesty seems so outlandish as to immediately draw attention. The case also involved superstars of the behavioural economics and ethics fields working at universities that enjoy worldwide brand recognition. Finally, the signing-first paper described not one, but two datasets contributed by different co-authors that were subsequently indicated to have been fabricated, giving rise to the memorable term “clusterfake”.

Bazerman joined the signing-first paper through his long-standing collaboration with Francesca Gino, where they were faculty members in the Harvard Business School. As the Harvard authors’ initial manuscript had been rejected by several journals, Gino invited her collaborator and friend Dan Ariely from Duke University to contribute an independent dataset from an insurance company. With the addition of the insurance dataset, the manuscript was accepted by the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

The resulting signing-first paper appeared to describe a simple way to encourage people to disclose more accurate and truthful information in a range of circumstances. Not surprisingly, the paper became highly influential. Bazerman describes how he and other co-authors initially benefited through consultancies and new research opportunities (45-48). However, attempts to reproduce signing-first effects failed to show associations between signing first and more truthful declarations. Bazerman was involved in 6 replication studies, including one study that involved the original signing-first authors, all of which failed to replicate the 2012 results. The signing-first paper was then examined in detail by the Data Colada team. They found that two datasets, one provided by Gino and the dataset provided by Ariely, showed evidence of data fabrication.

Bazerman makes it clear that having previously benefited from the signing-first paper, he did



not write this book for personal gain. In the preface, he declares that all royalties will be donated to the Scientific Integrity Fund (ix). His motives for writing seem to be two-fold: firstly, to help himself make sense of how he became embroiled in a scandal about honest research, and to describe what could have been done differently.

The book provides a detailed account of events, where the narrative moves back and forth within and between chapters. It is therefore helpful that a timeline was included (12-13). The scandal is outlined in the preface, so the subsequent chapters produce few surprises. The first chapter provides an overview and then weaves back to the preparation of the signing-first manuscript. Chapter 2 introduces the main characters, focusing on the article's authors, noting that "relationships and trust are at the heart of this data fabrication story" (15). Chapter 3 then takes a side-step to provide background to psychology research and the replicability failures that led to the so-called crisis in this field, commencing in 2011. Chapters 4-7 describe the impact of the paper, subsequent failures to replicate signing-first effects, concerns about dataset integrity, and finally the lawsuit launched against the Data Colada members by Francesca Gino. Chapter 8 diverges again to discuss other prominent fraud cases in psychology, before Chapter 9 returns to describe the impact of the scandal on Gino's co-authors and colleagues. Chapter 10 describes other reactions, including the GoFundMe campaign launched to support the costs of Data Colada's legal defense (I should declare that like many others, I donated to this campaign). Chapter 11 attempts to answer the question "why people cheat", using fascinating and, at times, chilling extracts from publications authored by Gino and Ariely. Finally, Chapter 12 summarizes what can be learned from the scandal along with Bazerman's personal experiences.

Bazerman recognizes the importance of the close relationships between several of the co-authors. For example, Gino and Ariely were described as friends (6). However, the central relationship is clearly that between Bazerman and Gino. Bazerman was initially Gino's mentor and collaborator, but Gino and her husband also became close friends of Bazerman and his spouse. Bazerman describes enjoyable social interactions, and at one point, the two couples were even considering building neighboring houses together. During this time, Gino experienced a meteoric career rise, eventually becoming Bazerman's head of department in 2018 (21). Yet somewhere around this time, the relationship between Bazerman and Gino soured. Bazerman provides few details, beyond his perception that Gino was "overcommitted", and that the pair had clashed over Gino's management of their shared research unit (21).

Given the importance of the relationship between Bazerman and Gino, I found myself wanting to know more about when and why their relationship changed, and how this might have influenced subsequent events. Although Bazerman was clearly shocked and distressed by the allegations that he received about Gino in 2021, it is conceivable that their impacts might have been greater had Bazerman and Gino still been collaborators and personal friends.

In the final chapter, Bazerman outlines practical steps to reduce opportunities for fraudulent research. While some advice is directed towards academic journals and institutions, Bazerman focusses on the roles of manuscript co-authors. He advises that "at least one additional person should review data and analyses, beyond the person obtained the data or carried out the analyses"

(150). He also states that “when something seems off, we should investigate until we have solid answers” (149).

This is excellent advice in many cases. Reviewing data and analyses will uncover honest errors, and most authors will indeed be “happy to have another set of eyes on their work” (150). However, as the book describes, fraud does not happen by accident. Fraudsters, typically working alone, are likely to provide explanations for data anomalies that trusting co-authors are likely to accept. Bazerman discusses why co-authors might accept unlikely explanations for data discrepancies, through their desire to believe seemingly appealing or important results, or because withdrawing authorship from a manuscript could harm a more junior co-author’s career (10). Bazerman is unflinching in his descriptions of his own conduct, even though he did not shy away from expressing concerns about the insurance dataset to his co-authors, and he advocated for the retraction of the signing-first paper once it was clear that its findings could not be reproduced.

Given the difficulties that Bazerman encountered when raising concerns with his co-authors, he could perhaps have gone further to consider how his advice to co-authors could best work in practice. As the book demonstrates, not all co-authors are created equal. Indeed, power imbalances are likely to be engrained within most multi-author teams. Moreover, co-authors with the time and technical skills to uncover data irregularities may also be students or early career researchers, at the lower end of any power dynamic. Bazerman describes how comments or formal complaints made by different graduate students (in 2012, 2015 and 2018) repeatedly questioned Gino’s research practices and/or publications. As these complaints were seen to be ignored, not acted upon, or actively discouraged, it becomes clear that it is not enough to investigate. To obtain solid answers, junior researchers need to be heard by senior colleagues who believe that another senior academic could commit fraud. Some examples provide reasons for optimism. Diederik Stapel’s fraud was discovered by junior researchers, whose concerns were then heard by a close colleague of Stapel (96). Similarly, concerns about several papers co-authored by Gino were communicated to Data Colada by two individuals in 2021, one of whom was a recent PhD graduate (57). Data Colada then publicized concerns about the signing-first paper in August 2021, several years after the student attempted to raise concerns about Gino’s research through her PhD dissertation (56).

While *Inside an Academic Scandal* will be of clear interest to academics and researchers in business, psychology and ethics, its messages are universal. Surely, if academic fraud can be perpetrated by a prominent honesty researcher at the Harvard Business School, fraud can take place anywhere. *Inside an Academic Scandal* should therefore be compulsory reading for all university administrators and indeed anyone who might receive and investigate allegations of academic fraud or misconduct.

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