University faculty perceptions of research practices and misconduct

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Recommended Citation
Gordon, Anita M. and Harton, Helen, "University faculty perceptions of research practices and misconduct" (2015). Faculty Publications. 5.
https://scholarworks.uni.edu/swk_facpub/5

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Studies have shown that serious misconduct in academic research is uncommon, whereas questionable research practices (e.g., courtesy authorship) occur on a fairly regular basis (Fanelli, 2009; John, Lowenstein, & Prelec, 2012). Yet limited research has been undertaken to understand why researchers engage in these behaviors (Martinson, Anderson, Crain, & DeVries, 2006; Mumford, Connelly, Murphy, Deavenport, Antes, Brown, et al., 2009), in spite of the critical attention that misconduct cases bring from scientists, policymakers, and the public. As in other areas of human endeavor, understanding the complex causes of misconduct is critical in formulating appropriate prevention strategies or remedies.

This study was designed to explore the influences that drive faculty investigators when making the challenging ethical decisions that arise in the course of their research activities. Researchers were invited to share their perceptions of what they would choose to do in certain circumstances, including those that involve high pressure (e.g., when evaluation for tenure is looming and publications are needed to ensure success). Other factors, such as the role of perceptions of organizational justice and external funding expectations, were also explored. In this study, for the first time, masters/comprehensive universities were targeted to allow comparisons with research-intensive universities on possible differences in research cultures and environments. The study focuses on regular, full-time university faculty in the social science disciplines—biology, psychology, sociology, and social work, the latter of whom have not previously been studied in regard to ethics in research.

RESULTS

Studies have shown that serious misconduct in academic research (e.g., data fabrication) is uncommon, whereas questionable research practices (e.g., courtesy authorship) occur on a fairly regular basis (Fanelli, 2009; John, Lowenstein, & Prelec, 2012). Yet limited research has been undertaken to understand why researchers engage in these behaviors (Martinson, Anderson, Crain, & DeVries, 2006; Mumford, Connelly, Murphy, Deavenport, Antes, Brown, et al., 2009), in spite of the critical attention that misconduct cases bring from scientists, policymakers, and the public. As in other areas of human endeavor, understanding the complex causes of misconduct is critical in formulating appropriate prevention strategies or remedies.

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