2-2015

Perceptions of research misconduct: Pilot data from a national survey

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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, Nisbet, & Delviere, 2002; Martinez, Klay, Murphy, Devonport, 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 misbehavior is critical in formulating appropriate preventive structures 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 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 to complete a 30-minute study instrument requesting their perspectives on six scenarios depicting questionable research practices and reported how likely they would be to take those actions under the same circumstances. These descriptive results, along with perceptions of resource allocation in universities, are presented.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, two different types of non-compliance with Institutional Review Board requirements were explored. Vignette 1a in both versions depicted a researcher choosing not to request approval from the IRB for a change in age group in a study sample. As shown in Table 1, respondents reported a mean likelihood of 10-15% that they would do this. Similarly, the social scientists reported in Vignette 2a that there was a 9.5% average probability they would simply reassign a student who breached confidentiality by sending an identifiable dataset to another group of researchers. These results have implications for how IRBs develop procedures and monitor researcher compliance with them.

An apparent striking difference between the biologists and social scientists in this sample was the probability they reported that they would write a self-serving peer review for a journal article. While the biology sample only reported on average a 7.7% likelihood they would do what was presented in the vignette, the social scientists perceived there was a 61.8% chance they would do so. However, given the high standard deviation, a larger sample size may produce different results.

In Table 2, respondent perceptions of distributive and procedural justice in their own working environments are presented. It is clear that respondents felt the allocation of resources in their own departments, as well as the procedures for deciding on the allocations, were more fair and reflective of their contributions, compared to university level allocations. Empirical analyses of these results, particularly with the larger full sample, are needed to determine whether these perceptions may or may not be related to the likelihood of research misconduct.