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Rational and Moral Perceptions of Research Misconduct

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PURPOSE

Previous research has shown that a variety of factors may be implicated when researchers engage in misconduct, typically falling within three broad categories of personal background or disposition, immediate situational factors, and environmental variables related to peers, departments, fields, universities, or larger scientific systems. The goal of this project was to examine how faculty researchers elect to engage in more or less serious forms of misconduct, grounded in two theoretical frameworks: a) Rational Choice Theory, which posits that individuals are rational beings who select options that promise the greatest rewards and fewest drawbacks possible (Tittle, et.al., 2010); and b) the Rest, et.al., four-component model of moral decision-making which focuses on moral sensitivity, judgment, intention, and action (Rest, 1984).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do rational choice factors predict the intention to commit research misconduct?
2. To what extent does the awareness of and judgment regarding a moral component predict the intention to commit research misconduct?
3. Are moral sensitivity and judgment associated with rational choice assessments?
4. To what extent is the ambiguity of a given research decision (e.g., QRP versus FFP) associated with the relative importance of moral and rational choice factors in the determining the course of action?

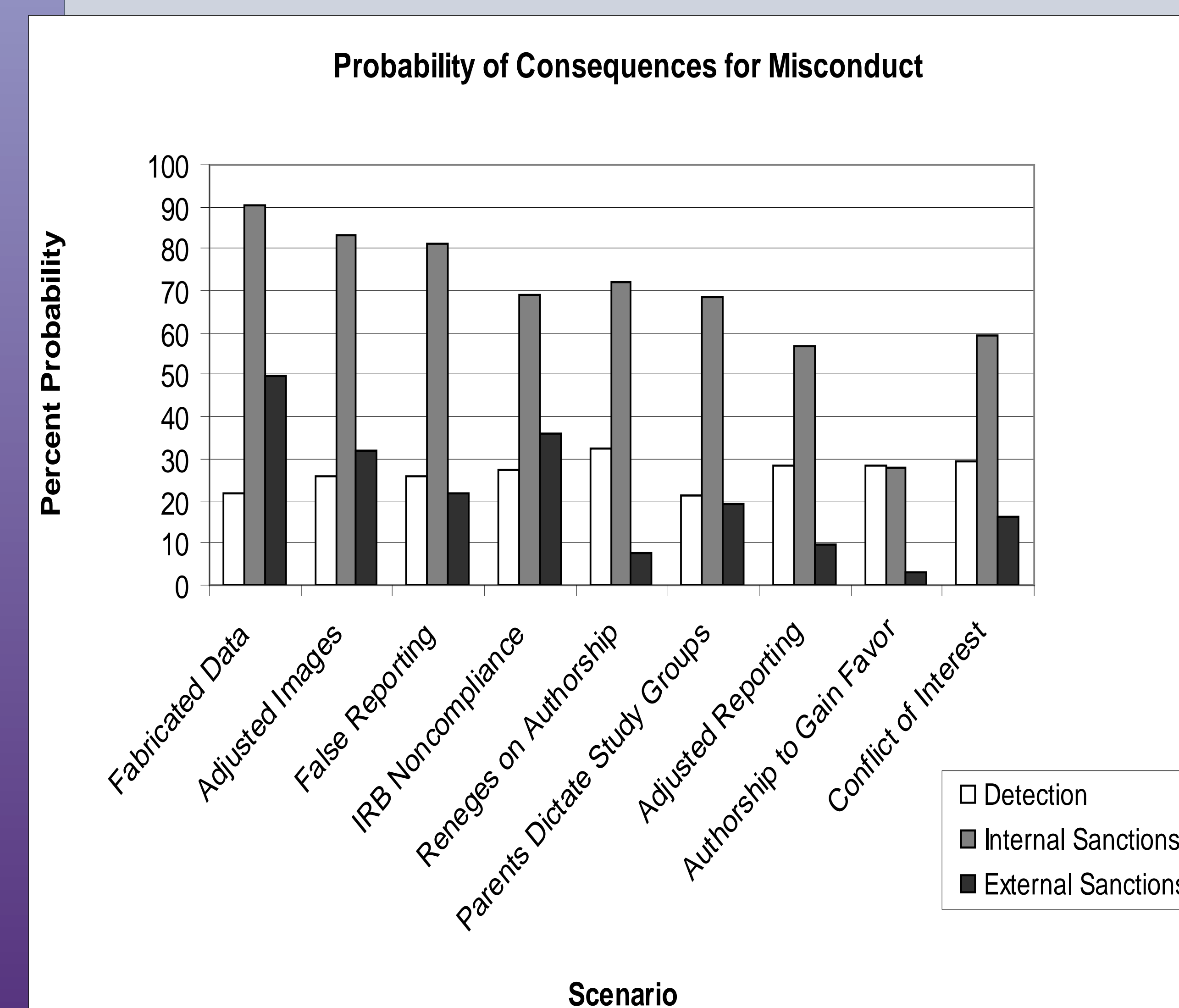
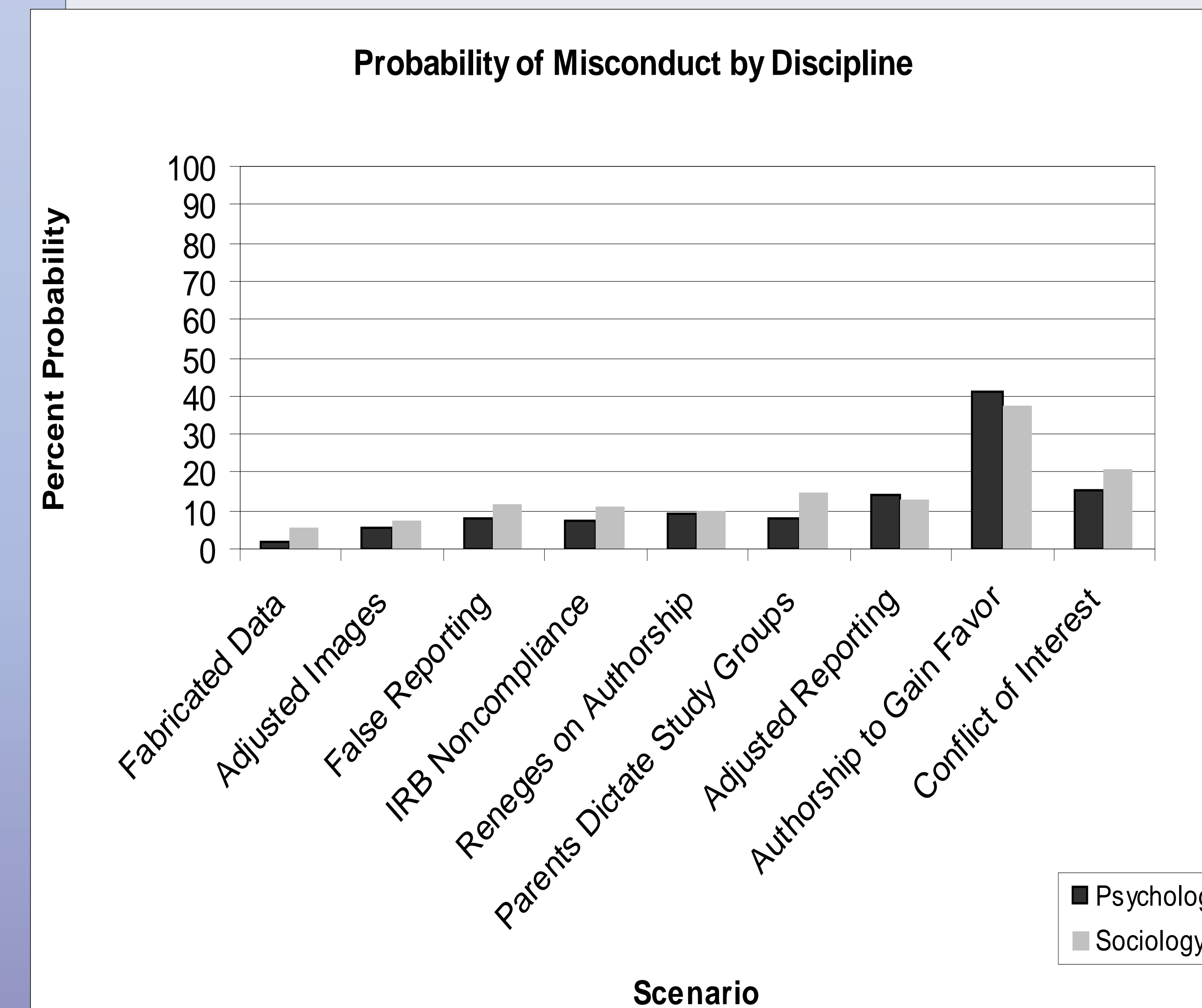
METHOD

Over 2,000 Psychology and Sociology faculty from 40 randomly-selected research-intensive institutions were invited to complete a survey instrument on ethical decision-making in research, using one of three methods. In the pilot phase, materials were sent/received by postal mail-only, with multiple mailings, reminder postcard, stamped return materials, and \$ 2 token incentive. In the primary phase, individuals were randomly assigned to either: a) email invitations and online survey data collection; or b) a mixed method beginning with postal mail and moving to online procedures for non-respondents. Response rate on average was 28%. The survey instrument included nine scenarios, developed by Mumford, et.al., (2006), adapted to depict actions taken by assistant professors under pressure to publish and obtain tenure. Respondents rated each hypothetical action on the following items: 1) how likely they would be to take the same action under the same circumstances (0-100%); 2) to what extent a moral dimension was present in the scenario (on a Likert scale of 1-no moral dimension to 5- moral dimension clearly present); 3) if a moral dimension was present, how wrong the action taken was (on a Likert scale of 1-not at all wrong to 5-very wrong); 4) ratings 0-100% on the likelihood of the action being detected by various others; and 5) ratings 0-100% on the likelihood of the individual experiencing “internal” sanctions of shame or embarrassment and/or “external” sanctions by a committee, university administrator, or others.

SAMPLE

N=581. 78.7% White, 42.4% Female
19.8% Asst Prof, 20.3% Assoc, 41% Full
46.1% Psych, 41.7% Soc.
Mean % Time Spent in Research, 54.9%

RESULTS



Estimates of Perceived Probability of Misconduct

Variable	FFP Scenarios			QRP Scenarios					
	Fabricated Data	Adjusted Images	False Reporting	IRB Non-compliance	Reneges on Authorship	Parents Dictate Study Groups	Adjusted Reporting	Authorship to Gain Favor	Conflict of Interest
Constant	43.32	55.68	60.41	39.92	46.71	45.00	43.08	79.95	79.32
Moral Judgment	-8.19 ***	-10.88 ***	-8.73 ***	-7.03 ***	-7.00 ***	-5.78 ***	-7.66 ***	-11.86 ***	-14.92 ***
Detection	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.09	0.09 *	0.01	-0.02	0.07	-0.01
Internal Sanctions	-0.09 *	-0.08 *	-0.16 ***	-0.14 ***	-0.15 ***	-0.23 ***	-0.17 ***	-0.15 *	-0.07
External Sanctions	-0.50 **	-0.40	-0.64 *	-0.39 **	0.68	-0.24	-0.22	1.18	-0.43
Moral Judgment x	0.10 **	0.09	0.13 *	0.09 *	-0.14	0.07	0.09	-0.23	0.10
Sociology	3.10 *	3.09 *	3.37 *	5.21 **	3.65 *	5.98 **	-0.08	-2.63	6.00 **
Associate Professor	-0.49	0.41	-1.58	-6.37 *	-3.27	-1.12	3.85	-4.91	1.29
Full Professor	-0.75	-0.38	-4.86 **	-2.01	-4.25 *	0.28	-0.68	-8.87 **	-1.28
Administrator	2.86	2.13	-4.63	-2.42	-3.99	-1.06	7.62	-15.40	-1.48
Non TT Faculty	-2.82	-3.49	-5.26	-3.56	-4.81	4.01	-4.47	-9.23	-2.54
Other Position	-4.58	-1.78	-8.01	7.73	-2.75	-11.05	-3.31	1.45	5.61
Male	1.19	1.78	-0.24	4.16 *	2.49	0.68	2.17	-1.30	0.89
Black	3.73	1.83	6.58 *	-1.04	2.58	5.44	-1.21	3.78	-3.97
Hispanic	-0.63	3.56	5.04	1.62	-2.31	-4.23	5.71	-2.00	1.42
Asian	0.26	1.84	15.58 **	9.22	8.68	1.74	9.87	-1.14	17.73 *
Other	2.18	16.74	10.82	3.89	6.04	-3.68	-3.10	16.65	39.84 *
% Time Spent in Rese	0.08 **	0.03	0.02	0.06	-0.02	-0.02	0.09	-0.02	0.02
Adj. R ²	0.22	0.39	0.39	0.21	0.32	0.34	0.36	0.30	0.39

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001.

Results revealed that sociologists were more likely to report they would engage in certain types of misconduct compared to psychologists, and that assistant professors thought they would be more likely to engage in unethical authorship-related practices than full professors did. Regression showed that moral judgment and internal sanctions may deter misconduct, but the effect of perceived likelihood of external sanctions is conditioned on moral judgment.

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