

University of Northern Iowa  
**UNI ScholarWorks**

---

Faculty Publications

Faculty Work

---

5-2015

## University faculty perceptions of research practices and misconduct

Anita M. Gordon

Helen Harton

Copyright ©2015 Anita M. Gordon and Helen C. Harton

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.uni.edu/swk\\_facpub](https://scholarworks.uni.edu/swk_facpub)

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

---

# University Faculty Perceptions of Research Practices and Misconduct

Anita M. Gordon (Dept. of Social Work) and Helen C. Harton (Dept. of Psychology)

Center for Academic Ethics, University of Northern Iowa

## ABSTRACT

This poster presentation shares preliminary results from a national survey, funded by the U.S. Office of Research Integrity, to investigate the perceptions of research misconduct by faculty researchers from four disciplinary areas (biology, social work, sociology, and psychology). About 4,500 faculty from 107 randomly selected research-intensive and master's universities were invited to participate. Respondents assessed scenarios depicting more and less serious researcher misbehavior and reported how likely they would be to take those actions under the same circumstances. They also rated their perceptions of how wrong the actions were, how likely the actions were to become known to others, and what sanctions might be applied if the actions were to become known. In addition, respondents reported their perceptions of organizational justice in their own research environments and the level of funding they are expected to garner to support their own salaries.

## INTRODUCTION

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, Devenport, 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 prevention 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 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 institutions on possible differences in research cultures and environments. The study focuses on regular, full-time university faculty from four disciplinary fields: biology, psychology, sociology, and social work, the latter of whom have not previously been studied in regard to ethics in research.

## PARTICIPANTS

A total of 4,556 faculty researchers from 107 universities in the U.S. were invited to participate in the study using a mixed-mode methodology involving postal mail and email, known as The Tailored Design Method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2008). The universities were randomly selected from the Carnegie Endowment Classifications for research intensive and masters-large institutions, and then a differential proportion of the regular, full-time faculty from each of the four disciplines were randomly selected for the project (33% from the Biosciences, 50% from Psychology, & 100% from the Social Work & Sociology/Criminology departments). Contact information was drawn from university websites.

Approximately 39% of the sample responded - 31% returned paper surveys & an additional 7% completed the instrument on Qualtrics. After removing records with insufficient addresses, ineligible participants (e.g., non-researchers), etc., data is available for 1,697 faculty respondents.

About half of the respondents were from R1 universities ( $N=897$ , 53%), and half from Masters Large/Comprehensives ( $N=795$ , 47%), with virtually equivalent response rates. The mean % time spent engaged in research was 37.4% ( $S.D.=21.1$ , Range 0-100,  $n=1,603$ ).

### Disciplinary field:

Biology ( $n=388$ , 23.1% of R's)

Psychology ( $n=495$ , 29.5%)

Sociology ( $n=435$ , 25.88%)

Social Work ( $n=258$ , 15.4%)

Other or Combination ( $n=105$ , .06%)

### Primary position:

Asst Prof ( $n=453$ , 26.8%)

Asc Prof ( $n=532$ , 31.5%)

(Full) Prof ( $n=668$ , 39.6%)

Other ( $n=34$ , 2.0%)

## RESULTS

Table 1. Perceived Probability of Misconduct <sup>1</sup>

Scenario/Vignette	n	Mean %	S.D.
<b>Biologists</b>			
1a. Agrees student can skip IRB approval for adding sample to study	418	6.8	16.8
1b. Quietly deletes suspicious data received from senior collaborator	420	13.4	52.3
1c. Reneges on promise of student lead authorship	421	7.9	18.5
2a. COI: Encourages hiring of needed collaborator's wife	419	17.1	54.0
2b. Overlooks collaborator's potential overbilling for clinical services	414	17.0	54.0
2c. Writes peer review to personal advantage	413	13.9	25.0
<b>Social Scientists</b>			
1a. Agrees student can skip IRB approval for adding sample to study	1252	6.3	16.0
1b. Quietly deletes suspicious data received from senior collaborator	1245	13.8	22.3
1c. Reneges on promise of student lead authorship	1246	11.9	23.6
2a. Reassigns student, w/ no report to IRB, after id'd data sent to others	1252	9.5	18.7
2b. Writes peer review to personal advantage	1251	11.2	19.4
2c. Publishes suspicious data from collaborator	1239	46.6	39.7

1. Respondents' estimates of the likelihood they would take the same action as depicted in the scenario., 0-100%

Table 2. Perceptions of Distributive and Procedural Justice

1=Strongly Disagree to 7=Strongly Agree	In your department			In your university		
	n	Mean	S.D.	n	Mean	S.D.
Resource allocation has reflected:						
your effort in your work	1679	4.3	1.9	1668	3.7	1.9
your contributions to dept or university	1678	4.3	1.9	1666	3.8	1.9
accomplishments in career	1678	4.3	1.9	1667	3.9	1.9
Allocation has been fair	1681	4.6	2.0	1666	3.5	1.8
Mean of distributive justice items	1675	4.4	1.8	1666	3.7	1.8
Procedures for allocations have been:	n	Mean	S.D.	n	Mean	S.D.
bias free	1674	4.1	2.0	1662	3.3	1.7
applied with consistency	1677	4.3	2.0	1665	3.3	1.8
based on accurate info	1673	4.5	1.9	1659	3.5	1.7
ethical	1674	4.8	1.9	1659	4.0	1.7
well managed	1671	4.4	2.0	1660	3.4	1.8
You had an influence in these decisions	1676	3.8	2.0	1664	2.6	1.7
You could appeal these decisions	1669	4.0	2.1	1661	3.0	1.9
Mean of procedural justice items	1658	4.3	1.7	1650	3.3	1.5

## METHOD

Participants completed a 30-minute study instrument regarding their perspectives on six research practice situations, structured as three hypothetical scenarios which each included three vignettes. Scenarios were adapted from the Ethical Decision-Making Measures developed by Mumford, et.al. (2006). All vignettes depicted a researcher taking actions that were ethically questionable. Respondents shared their perceptions of the likelihood they would take the same action, and rated the likelihood of detection and sanctions if they did take those actions in their own institutions. They also assessed the wrongness of each action and their colleagues' likely view of them. In addition, respondents reported the external funding expectations and fairness of resource allocation in their own departments and universities.

Two survey versions were used, one for the biology sample and one for the other three social science disciplines. The two versions shared one scenario with three of the same vignettes (listed as the first three vignettes in Table 1), slightly modified to reflect the nature of the research being conducted. The other scenario was different between the instrument versions, but did share a similar vignette regarding a conflict of interest in peer review.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vignette 1a 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, both biology and the social science respondents reported a mean likelihood of about 6% 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 result was the probability the social scientists reported that they would proceed with publishing data that they suspected might be compromised in order to avoid problems with a collaborator. Further analysis is needed to confirm this preliminary result.

In Table 2, respondent perceptions of distributive and procedural justice in their own working environments are presented. Although the results are comparable between the allocation of resources at the department versus the university level, respondents believed that the procedures for deciding on the allocations in their own departments are more fair and reflective of their contributions, compared to university level procedures. Regression modeling will be performed to determine whether these perceptions may or may not be related to the likelihood of research misconduct.

## REFERENCES

- Dillman, D.A., Smyth, J.D., & Christian, L.M. (2008). *Internet, mail, and mixed-mode surveys: The Tailored Design Method (3rd ed.)*. New York: Wiley & Sons.
- Fanelli, D. (2009). How many scientists fabricate and falsify research? A systematic review and meta-analysis of survey data. *PLoS ONE*, 4(5), 1-10. Retrieved from doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0005738
- John, L. K., Lowenstein, G., & Prelec, D. (2012). Measuring the prevalence of questionable research practices with incentives for truth telling. *Psychological Science*, 23(524), 524-532.
- Martinson, B. C., Anderson, M. S., Crain, A. L., & DeVries, R. (2006). Scientists' perceptions of organizational justice and self-reported misbehaviors. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 1(1), 51-66. doi:10.1525/jer.2006.1.1.51
- Mumford, M. D., Connelly, M. S., Murphy, S. T., Devenport, L. D., Antes, A. L., Brown, R. P., et al. (2009). Field and experience influences on ethical decision making in the sciences. *Ethics & Behavior*, 19(4), 263-289.
- Mumford, M.D., Devenport, L.D., Brown, R.P., Connelly, M. S., Murphy, S.T., Hill, J.H., & Antes, A.L. (2006). *Ethics & Behavior*, 16(4), 319-345.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by the Office of Research Integrity, Department of Health and Human Services, grant # ORIIR140009-01-00. Contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Department of Health and Human Services or the Office of Research Integrity. The authors are also grateful to Director Mary Losch, Ph.D. and the staff of the UNI Center for Social and Behavioral Research for their efforts in administering the survey process.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

For further information, contact

[anita.gordon@uni.edu](mailto:anita.gordon@uni.edu) or [helen.harton@uni.edu](mailto:helen.harton@uni.edu)