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RESEARCH ETHICS AMONG FACULTY MEMBERS IN IRAN

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Abstract: Research ethics is one of the ongoing issues of universities. The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize the ethics of research among medical academics in an Iranian medical university. Unfortunately, ethics in research among medical academics pay little attention in Iran. Methodologically, qualitative study 2015 in an Iranian medical university discloses the different aspects of ethics in research. Twenty-two academics participated as the key informants to reflect the different aspects of research ethics. The findings of this study disclose that research ethics were configured by core phenomenon of ethical norms with three subcategories. These subcategories are jealousy, irresponsibility, and dishonesty. Consequently, recognizing the norms of ethics in research are indispensable to develop research culture as to help academics to improve their research outcomes.

Keywords: Research ethics, academic member, medical university, research norms

Introduction

Basically, along with research contextual and research environmental elements, which are important, to form the nature of research (Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006), research culture is the term that frequently mentioned by several authors (Becher & Trowler, 1989, Hill, 1995, Thompson, 2003, Girot, 2010, and Dauber et al., 2012). For instance, Becher & Trowler (1989) declared that besides the interactions of values, social, economic, and political factors the impact of ideas and actions of the academic tribes epitomize the main context of research (Becher & Trowler, 1989). It seems that the rule of culture for creating the context of research should be considered in planning for research development. Essentially, according to some experts (Hill, 1995; Schein, 1985; Girot, 2010; Thompson, 2003), there are bilateral directions between research culture and lecturers' viewpoints about research and their activities for doing research. Forbes and White (2012) stressed that assumed research culture as the imperative need for academics. In associate with them, Schriener (2007) in his study contended that cultural dissonance in medical centers affects academics' values and norms. Based on his findings, cultural dissonance for medical academics can be improved through mentorship, formal training, and socialization.

Basically, the academics' shared values and norms are common opinions and behaviors in each department created the particular clan culture in the faculties. This values and norms can influence the quality of research (Hann et al., 2007). Moreover, according to Pololi et al. (2009) academics' norms and values are vital to further productivity in medical disciplines. They listed several cultural barriers in medical schools such as lack of consideration to the social mission of providing clinical affairs, a paucity of prioritization of excellence in a medical center, a degrading of teaching roles, problematic ethical behavior in management, and the need for self-promoting actions to succeed.

Other scholars showed the impact of managers' viewpoint about research on research culture in medical faculties (Sean et al., 1993; Pratt et al., 1999). For instance, according to Pratt et al. (1999) the change in managers' beliefs, attitudes, and values, can change the organizational culture. Additionally, they noted that in order to construct research culture, the basic factors of time, precise planning, resources, and environment, should be taken into account. However, Reybold (2008) and Yamin, (2010) stress on ethicality that forms the culture of

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faculties. Moreover, they concluded that cultural issues trigger the psycho-violence among academics in faculties. In contrary to this psycho-violence Conner et al. (2014) provided a model for cultural adaptation among academics.

There are many frameworks for organizational culture, but these frameworks came from particular phenomena or context (Tsui, Nifadkar & Ou, 2007). Logically, based on thinking system organizational culture configures by multidimensionality and complexity of different elements (Bertalanffy, 1969). These elements can be ideologies, groups, rules, structures, and environment (Dauber et al., 2012). According to Sagiv and Schwartz (2007), the values and norms of surrounding society and preferences of different members in line with the duties and tasks can influence the culture of an organization. These factors determine the individuals' actions, and also evaluating others through the norms, preferences and accepted regulations. Additionally, Schein (1985) as the first person that proposed the concept of organizational culture counts six meanings of organizational culture, which agreed commonly. These common meanings are values, rules, philosophy, norms, feeling/climate, and observed behavioural regularities. The components such as values, preferences, and norms that are mentioned by the other studies repetitively, support the findings of the first research question. Sometimes values and norms are considered as the ethical behaviours for having ethical faculty. Ethical community for having any professional development is necessary for universities (Beneveniste, 1987; Andresen, 1996; Reybold, 2008).

In Iran, the government extremely stressed on expanding medical boundaries. Markedly, Comprehensive Scientific Map of Iran (CSMI) and Vision 2025 echo this demand in medical research. Successively, some medical universities in Iran planned their own Scientific Maps corresponding to CSMI to achieve Vision 2025. Based on the universities' Scientific Maps, Iran has to be the first country among middle east countries in medical research both in quality and quantity. Even if Iran achieves the acceptable level of research publications, yet there is an immense uncertainty of the quality in research (Balash, 2017). Karimian et al. (2012) in their study brought the obstacles for doing research at medical universities in Iran. Their findings show inefficient human resources and inappropriate research culture impede to achieve a certain number of publications and satisfactory level of research quality. Research culture is the critical factor that can probably bring quality in research. Research culture has different aspects that research ethics can be one of them. In this study, research ethics in general and research norm, in particular, is examined as one of the dimensions of research culture in an Iranian medical university.

Methods

We used various sources for the data collection such as documentation, observation, open-ended questionnaires, and finally interview. We extracted different factors through three levels of open, axial, and selective coding with constant comparison tactic to analysis.

We chose the ground of the study in one Iranian medical state university. Also, we collected the main data through twenty-two interviews and 44 open-ended questionnaires. Regarding the interviews, seven of them roughly 31.81% of the participants, were high managers, includes two research deans (I¹ -19 and I-20), two deans of clinical centers (I-1 and I-12), two heads of research centers (I-14 and I-17), and one dean of a faculty (I-11). We interviewed an equal number of seniors and juniors, which includes twelve senior lecturers (54.54%), four associate professors (18.18%), and six full professors (27.27%). Fortunately, the snowball sampling helped the researcher to have different types of specialties for interviewing. The specialties comprise of four gynecologists, four cardiologists, two oncologists, three otolaryngologists, four ophthalmologists, two pathologists, one anesthesiologist, one neurologist, and one urologist. The distribution of female and male academicians was not equal. Thirteen female academics 59.09% and nine male academics 40.90% are in the age range of 34 to 61 years old. Moreover, juniors' years of experience varied from four months to four-year experience. The coming section outlines the findings from qualitative analysis and configures the connections of different dimensions of research preference.

Results and Findings

From different angles, several participants complained about the ethical issues. The researcher names some of them as to justify the importance of ethical norms, such as taking a critical test on a human before taking on animals (I-8), filling consent letter by patients for being in sample group (I-8; I-22), receiving the costs of tests

¹. I, stands for Interviewee

from patients (I-8), ‘synthesizing²’ research in the fast and dirty manner in data collection and analysis by false and facile actions (I-11; I-7), increasing number of ghost authorship because of over-respecting and dealing (I-4), growing of illegal companies due to generating papers for academics (I-7), and reporting false information of research activities in university e-system (SHOA³) (I-15/159). On balance, the researcher finds three highlighted concepts in order to categorize ethical norm; namely, jealousy, dishonesty, and irresponsibility.

Regarding jealousy, the expectation of this term among professionals like academics seems meaningless. However, more or less the researcher gets feedback from the participants that probably the issue of jealousy exists among the academics. One typical instance of jealousy reflected by a senior. She said, “*Many of colleagues and heads say that the academics that spent time for research are those that cut off from their main duties. Indeed, they don’t like others’ work on research because they don’t have enough numbers of papers. Probably, they have the sense of heat-burning to other academics who are active in research*” (I-21). It is possible to understand that easily those who do not have enough research activities, they do not like the rest active persons do research. Additionally, several pieces of evidence show that some active researchers indignant of jealousy and they had to give some hush activities to keep passive colleagues and heads satisfying (I-1).

Another ethical norm refers to dishonesty. For some academics, the necessity of promotion, a feeling of competition, and loading of other duties, makes the triangle of the need for publication. In order to achieve the targeted publications, some academics go toward unethical behaviour that is interpreted as dishonesty, such as ‘synthesis’ from different papers, ghost authorship, and fake reporting (I-3; I-15). Basically, to achieve certain numbers of publication without honesty in providing the publications show that ethical norms seem not internalized among some academics. The researcher found the need for strict audit and evaluation for submitted research activities. Several subcategories exert to support the dishonesty term such as black market, ‘synthesis’, and assigning authorship.

Regarding black market, when one of the researchers walked around the Book Street (Enghelab⁴) in Tehran⁵. There were some flyers and posters advertised for writing papers and publication services as the way for junior academics to publish in journals. The researcher goes to one of the offices and asks for the price. Upper than two to four impact factor journal they claimed 4000,000⁶ to 8000,000 Tomans depends on the topics and journals. According to one interviewed senior “*Most of the works are repetitions. Unfortunately, when you can buy 1000,000 to 10,000,000 Tomans a paper to get the promotion it is not ethical*” (I-2). Also, one of the key accounts said “*A person, who wants to get promotion from the senior lecturer to associate professor, needs publications. You think how much is a difference between these two just 200,000 Tomans, so it is nonsense. ... You know here in just pay 5000,000 Tomans to write a paper for you. You know that you have 50,000,000 Tomans and 5% ask someone to write a paper for you. The bowl of the research is too small unless for research lovers*” (I-20). Everything considered, having black markets provide easy-accessibility to accomplish the matter of publications.

Regarding ‘synthesis’ the researcher heard the word ‘synthesis’ many times from both juniors and seniors. What the researcher found is that this term is being used for duplication and simulation of the data. Moreover, because of this dominant issue, many academics do not believe on local papers, which are produced by their colleagues (I-6; I-7). For instance, one of the deans said, “*Last week, the junior lecturer came to me and said in my residency, she (the junior) copied her work and synthesized the data. Ethically, I cannot publish their (residents) work as a paper and during my 25 years, I just publish one of the dissertations in the journal. The rest, I don’t believe on*” (I-11). According to the dean, mostly lecturers do not trust each other in research. Interestingly, the point is that they know this unethical norm.

Regarding the irresponsibility, the noticeable point that has been detected seems related to the irresponsibility of managers and seniors for juniors’ research development. For instance, one typical example can be seen in one participants’ expression, she said, “*I go to the hospital ask a senior can I contribute to your research and work for you. Optionally, if she wants, will tell me to come if no, I cannot join her. It depends on connections. So, there is not any systems or regulation to be under mentoring or supervising by seniors*” (I-8). Basically, the major focus on responsibility had been considered for clinical and teaching duties. All the programs for juniors are specified for clinical development and regarding juniors’ research development; the feeling of commitment is paled.

². The issue of ‘synthesis’ is explained in ‘synthesis’ section

³. SHOA is an electronic reporting system that academicians should report all their duties based on given criteria and forms

⁴. Enghelab street is the famous street for book marketing

⁵. Capital city of Iran

⁶. Tomans currency compares to US. Dollars 1 USD = 3000 Tomans

Regarding the last subcategory of dishonesty, several times the issue of authorship or name placing has been marked in this study. It shows the issue looks like a real concern among juniors. Based on different concepts such as expectations (I-1; R -12⁷; I-21; I-14), and power status (I-4; I-18) juniors have to accept the position of seniors, and they accept this ranking for assigning authorship as the norm (See Table 1).

Table 1. Category and subcategories of unethical norms

Category	Subcategories	Sub-subcategories
Unethical Norm	Jealousy	
	Irresponsibility	Managers' irresponsibility
		Seniors irresponsibility
	Dishonesty	Synthesis
		Ghost authorship
Black market		

Regarding research norms, several authors' studies such as Schein (1985), Thompson (2003), and Sagiv and Schwartz (2007) that they mentioned just to the norms as the sign of culture. Also, Thompson believed that research culture is described by several concepts that one of them is the norm. Schein (1985) also counts six meanings to conceptualize organizational culture. He mentioned norms in line with values, rules, philosophy, feeling/climate, and observed behavioural regularities. Moreover, Sagiv and Schwartz (2007) in his study mentioned the norms, preferences and accepted regulations as the scales to determine the individuals' actions, and also evaluating others. The current study similar to Schein (1985), Thompson (2003), and Sagiv and Schwartz (2007) mentioned the norm in order to explain one aspect of research culture or as the main factor in organizational culture. However, the findings of the study are not limited to the term norms to describe one aspect of research culture. Unprecedentedly, the concept of norms in this study is defined by ethical norms. It is mentioned that unethical norms are bunched into dishonesty, jealousy, and irresponsibility. Hence, compared to the other works the dimensions of norms in this study are unique.

Regarding unethical norm as a phenomenon, which is supported by jealousy, dishonesty, and irresponsibility, several sub-factors emerged, that should be considered as the ethical norms. Different reasons such as black market, syntheses, and assigning authorship reinforced the concept of dishonesty. Holistically, all factors have not been mentioned by previous studies as the supportive concepts for research norms in general and ethical norms in particular.

Conclusion

The importance of research norms in order to provide an appropriate condition for academics' research is the main element that research developers and university managers should reflect in their policies for research development. Research is one of the keys of Vision 2025 and CSMI in Iran that research norms accelerate the development of these keys. In order to recognize research norms, bearing in mind the chief constituents of research ethics seem indispensable. Research norms strongly influence the research ethics that are the target component of this study. By dissecting the research norms, the existence of three levels of jealousy, irresponsibility, and dishonesty are noticeable in an Iranian medical university.

Recommendations

On balance, it is suggested that the current unethical norms plan to be seen in the relevant policies for research development. Basically, without attention to ethical issues, the appropriate research culture will not be shaped in Iranian medical universities. Moreover, it is recommended that the evaluation system in medical universities try to give academic freedom to the academic members because by strictly evaluation system the university managers probably encourage to take action for unethical competitions among the faculty members and to generate their publication without considering ethical issues.

⁷. R, stands for Respondent

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