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PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS UNDERLYING UNETHICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract: This study is to cast a light on psychological factors, which force faculty members toward conducting unethical research. Since psychological factors are the key factors to control human behavior, in this paper, they are highlighted as the main purpose of the study. Methodologically, a qualitative approach was applied to reveal the factors. Thematic analysis assisted the researchers discovering the main factors. Ten faculty members were interviewed as to understand the ways that factors could deploy around the phenomenon. By considering Kurt Lewin's force field theory, the factors were directed based on their iterations. Results show that lack of self-control as a result of faculty members' self-interest, lack of moral awareness, self-justification, and negative self-image would lead to a paucity of research ethics.

Keywords: Research ethics, faculty members, psychological factors

Introduction

During the last two decades, ethical misconducts have worried academic world, especially higher education institutes, universities, and research institutions due to the increasing statistics on plagiarism, data fabrication, cheating, and unauthorized help (Gulik & Benette 2014). Ethicality promotes collaboration and cooperation among faculty members, result in advancement in the goals of research, fulfill social responsibilities, and minimize damaging scandals such as a production of remarkable amounts of invalid scientific works and deterioration of authors' reputation, which are caused by unethical behavior (Shamoo & Resnik, 2009). The mentioned crisis can be tackled, through considering many factors, which could be elicited from different contexts.

In that order, the field of social psychology is mainly concerned with the way people's feelings, thoughts, beliefs, intentions and goals are built and how such psychological factors, in turn, affect their relations with others. Among psychological scholars, Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) known as the father of social psychology in his 'field theory' suggests that behaviour is the result of the interaction between a person and his environment: $B=f(P, E)$. He believed that the social environment is a dynamic field, which has an interaction with human consciousness. Consecutively, the person's psychological condition affects the social field. In the field approach, Lewin believed that we need to take a whole situation into consideration in order to make change happen. Consecutively Kurt Lewin's (1951) force field analysis theory illustrates the dynamics at work in the change process. Movement from the present level of performance to the desired level is facilitated by driving or encouraging forces, while at the same time, it is hindered by restraining (or resisting, discouraging) forces. The present situation usually represents a state of equilibrium or balance between these driving and restraining forces (Earle 2002).

Reportedly in Iran, faculty members are faced with a number of difficulties. On the one hand, a remarkable increase in the number of university branches calls for an excess in recruiting a lot of university instructors. On

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the other hand, several strict rules and regulations are enacted to elevate the quality of academic work among faculty members. For instance, Under the rule of 'academic decline', faculty members have to produce a fixed amount of research within three consecutive or four alternate years, to be able to obtain any promotions or they will have to leave their jobs. As such time limitation and a heavy load of work put the members of the faculty under a lot of stress. A large number of faculty members strive to make ends meet, despite their academic position. Moreover, the occupation of key positions by insufficiently academic managers has spread a spirit of frustration instead of competitiveness among faculty members. Lack of enough academic knowledge and subsequently lack of ethical awareness in research could namely be of the faculty members' professional intricacy.

Many claim that unethical academic system in universities are also among the motives of academic misconduct among faculty members. Therefore, to be able to face such difficulties, a lot of faculty members set out to pave their ways. Understanding the factors that facilitate wrongdoing as the goal of this study helps to design policies and interventions that work against them, stress high moral standards, and tip the scale of people's internal conflict toward ethical behaviour (Beshears & Gino, 2015).

Methods

This study aims to uncover psychological factors, which underlie academic dishonesty. For efficiently analyzing the factors found in complex problems, such as challenges that faculty members face, we drew on 'Force Field Analysis' developed by Lewin (1951) as a general means to frame problems in terms of factors or pressures that support the status quo as restraining forces and those pressures that support change in the desired direction as driving forces.

Data collection was accomplished through interviews' recording. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten faculty members; three males and seven females; one professor, three associate professors, and six assistant professors. Regarding key features and pattern of psychological capacity in the confrontation with academic challenges, thematic analysis was drawn on. 'Thematic analysis' enables the researcher to get acquainted with and be able to arrange patterns in content and meaning in qualitative data. Also, the thematic analysis supports most other methods of qualitative data analysis. Thematizing meaning has been described as a standard ability, which forms the basis of much, if not most qualitative research (e.g. Holloway and Todres, 2003; Joffe, 2012). Three key steps of reduction, selection and simplification were employed as to develop the emerging themes and to link them together (Creswell, 1994; Milles & Huberman, 1994; Hodder, 2000; Yin, 2003). Ultimately, the main themes and sub-themes were constantly compared as to saturate the data.

Results and Findings

The outcomes of the analysis reveal that faculty members need to produce a specific amount of academic work in a limited period of time in order to be able to maintain their positions or get a promotion. Moreover, the information obtained from interview analysis reveals that the unjust system deployed by managers brings about a lot of defect among faculty members academic performance. Performance pressure increases unethical behaviour (Moore & Kouchaki, 2015). Consecutively, it is claimed that academic misconduct has become epidemic among faculty members in order to compensate for all the above-mentioned complexities.

The followings are among the many driving forces that lead faculty members towards academic misconduct and against each a force that might restrain it is introduced:

Self-interest vs. self-control

According to the findings of this study, many Iranian faculty members choose to bypass the ethical rules of research since they restrain them from monetary gains or higher positions.

"The irrational crave for success and improvement would lead to self-control depletion. Many faculty members want to have a rapid rise to stardom. They would ask their students to take care of heavy projects and use their works in their own research without mentioning their names."

Self-interest is an individual's tendency to choose short-term profits over long-term achievements. To decide to behave unethically people need to weigh two divergent forces: the desire to get the most out of self-interest and the desire to maintain a positive moral self-image and future relationships (Gino et al, 2011).

To resolve the internal conflict between the short- and long-term benefits of dishonest acts, individuals must exert self-control (Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009). Self-control is the psychological capacity that enables people to enact behaviours that are consistent with their long-term goals (e.g., of being an ethical person) and refrain from engaging in behaviours that are driven by short-term motives. These findings seem to generalize to the faculty members. Many common stimuli deplete self-control resources (Vohs & Baumeister, 2004), for example, working under a tight deadline. These experiences increase the probability that faculty members will cross ethical boundaries (commit plagiarism, fabricate data, seek unauthorized help).

Negative self-image vs. positive self-image

Based on the interview findings, the inefficient atmosphere of universities and educational institutes brings about a sense of anxiety, bitterness, and shame for several faculty members. Such feelings which lead to negative self-image, in turn, give rise to the probability of taking unethical actions to retrieve their mislaid positive self-image.

“There is an unfair competition aboard universities among the members of faculties. That is the unfair attention of the managers towards a few faculty members, brings about negative self-image along with feelings of shame and inefficacy among the rest. These feelings would consequently lead an individual to look for bypasses to gain back their positive self-view”.

Self-image has been defined as the "total subjective perception of oneself, including an image of one's body and impressions of one's personality, capabilities, and so on (Coon, 1994).

Lack of moral awareness vs. self-awareness

When conscious attention is focused on the self, one is said to be in a state of “objective self-awareness;” that is, the self is the object of its own conscious attention (Davis & Brock, 1975). Gino and et al (2011), claim that self-control depletion promotes unethical behaviour and weakens individuals’ self-awareness that is the ability to recognize that their behaviour is unethical. Results obtained from the interviews were evidence for faculty members’ self-awareness shortcomings.

“A number of faculty members are not aware of ethical dos and don’ts in the field of academic research. For instance, they might assume that translation might be the same as authoring”.

Though they claimed they were aware of ethical codes and abide by those rules, many didn’t attribute their academic misconducts to immorality. Many faculty members are at risk of failing to recognize the moral issue involved in the situations they face that is regarded as self-awareness.

Self-justification vs. self-concept maintenance

A number of faculty members who were interviewed with tried to show some of the academic misbehaviors less immoral by trying to justify themselves. They believed that what is called academic misconduct, doesn’t seem as dishonest, when a majority of the member of the academic system is doing the same wrong thing.

“Many faculty members have come to the point to believe that in a system where every member is following his/her own interest it wouldn’t do any harm to go after your own interest. They would believe if they don’t take part in this race, they will fall behind.”

Bandura (1986), in his social cognitive theory, suggests that having justifications in access leads to unethical behaviour due to an increased ethical disengagement. This happens because justifications make conducts look less immoral; consequences of the bad behaviour are underestimated, weakened or misconstrued, responsibility for the dishonest act is defused or displaced (Bandura, 1999). In this view, many faculty members downgrade the aftermaths of their wrong-doing by justifying themselves. Self-concept maintenance theory (Mazar, Amir and Ariely 2008) suggests that justifications for unethical performances cause unethical behaviour by allowing individuals not to update their self-image as honest and good (Belle and Cantarelli 2017).

Faculty members’ psychological confrontation with job complexities is a multidimensional combat. It can be explained by the conflicting and struggling of diverse forces at different levels. The extracted psychological factors in this study are listed as *self-interest, self-control, self-image, self-awareness, and self-justification*.

On the other hand, based on Lewin's force field analysis, interactions among various forces should be considered to conceptualize the psychological factors. Results from the analyses of the interviews revealed a number of psychological factors that influence the decisions to behave unethically. However, in order to have broad conceptualization, the results are categorized under overarching dimensions and properties. The outcomes from the interview analysis can be classified into two groups of driving Forces vs. restraining forces. Driving Forces for unethical research conduct can be subcategorized to negative attitudes namely self-interest, negative self-image, lack of moral awareness, and self-justification, which consequently oppose positive attitudes such as self-control, positive self-image, and self-awareness, self-concept maintenance as restraining forces (See Figure 1).

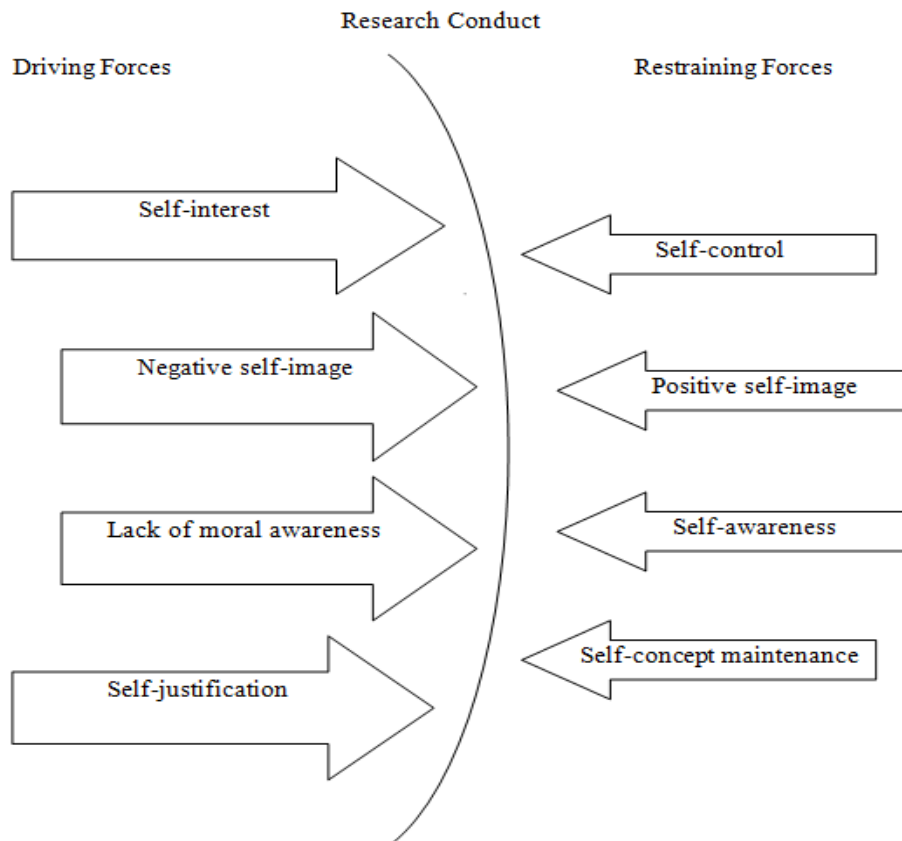


Figure 1. Driving and restraining forces

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to investigate psychological factors among Iranian faculty members which lead to academic misconduct. Different psychological aspects were discussed which were categorized as restraining vs. driving forces. Based on Kurt Lewin's force field analysis when the forces of both are equal individuals move less without any action. When the restraining forces are more than driving forces, there is not any positive or significant action. On the contrary, when the driving forces are stronger than restraining forces, individuals put effort to achieve the goals (Clegg, 1999). Basically, based on the force field analysis, two forces of driving and restraining forces come together in order to give negative and positive reactions. Driving forces that encourage unethical research were negative factors that consist of self-interest, negative self-image, lack of moral awareness and self-justification. On the other hand, restraining forces which impede academic misconduct comprise self-control, positive self-view, self-awareness, and self-concept maintenance.

Recommendations

According to the findings of this study the interactions and interfaces of all finding factors have resulted in academic misconduct. What needs to happen, in the present situation of academic conduct, is a decrease in forces that drive unethical research and an increase in the ones that restrain academic misconduct. Hence future research can be conducted to investigate possible strategies to empower faculty members psychologically and

lead them towards academic honesty which in turn will help with the betterment of the quality of future academic products.

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