

What Do University Professors Know About Research Misconduct? A Causal-Comparative Study

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Abstract

Purpose: The main purpose of the present study was to examine and compare university professors' awareness of research misconduct.

Methodology: A descriptive causal-comparative design was employed. The study population consisted of all faculty members at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz. A sample of 275 assistant, associate, and full professors participated and completed the Research Misconduct Scale (RMS).

Findings: Results indicated that faculty members with training in research integrity performed considerably better in identifying research misconduct compared to their colleagues without such training. There was no significant difference between faculty members in various disciplines (Humanities and non-Humanities) in terms of their ability to identify research misconduct. Analyses also revealed that assistant and associate professors outperformed full professors in this regard.

Conclusion: The importance of institutionalizing training in research integrity within academic settings is emphasized. The lack of a significant difference among disciplines suggests that ethical awareness in research is more strongly influenced by experience and education than by disciplinary background. The findings further highlighted the greater sensitivity or more up-to-date awareness of assistant and associate professors toward research misconduct.

Value: This study examined and compared faculty members' ability to identify research misconduct. The use of a scenario-based instrument (RMS) enhanced the validity of the results and enabled a more realistic assessment of participants' knowledge of research misconduct.

Keywords: *Research misconduct, scientific honesty, academic integrity*

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Extended Abstract

Introduction: With the remarkable growth of scientific publications in universities, increasing attention has been directed toward the integrity of research findings (Ataie-Ashtiani, 2017). Unethical practices such as data fabrication, plagiarism, and falsification are recognized as serious threats to research integrity, leading countries to identify related factors and devise preventive strategies. Among these factors is how university professors identify, evaluate, and judge instances of research misconduct.

Studies show that the ability to identify research misconduct varies among individuals and may be influenced by age, gender, academic seniority, publication pressure, and other personal or contextual variables (Gopalakrishna et al., 2022; De Vrieze, 2021; Fanelli et al., 2015). Other factors affecting this ability include prior education or training in research ethics, academic discipline, and academic rank. The importance of misconduct awareness among faculty members stems from their central role in guiding and evaluating scientific knowledge, as they serve as role models for students and young researchers. Thus, their ability to identify unethical practices not only helps prevent research misconduct but also promotes academic integrity, enhances the credibility of research findings, and strengthens public trust in research outcomes.

Purpose: The primary aim of this study was to assess and compare faculty members' ability to identify research misconduct. It aimed to compare two groups of university teachers: those who had received training in research integrity and those who had not. Additionally, the study aimed to compare faculty members of different academic ranks (assistant, associate, and full professors) and those from various disciplines—namely Humanities versus non-Humanities (including Basic Sciences, Engineering, Agriculture, and Veterinary Medicine)—in terms of their awareness of research misconduct.

Methodology: The present study employed a descriptive causal-comparative design to examine the faculty members' awareness of research misconduct. To this end, 607 faculty members at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz were asked to complete the Research Misconduct Scale (RMS), a 33-item researcher-developed instrument. Within four months, 275 faculty members completed the questionnaire. This scenario-based instrument assesses participants' awareness of various instances of research misconduct. The scenarios cover a wide range of unethical practices, including but not limited to plagiarism, data fabrication and falsification, contract cheating, duplicate publication, collusion in student assignments, and other forms of academic fraud. A distinctive feature of this tool is that, unlike conventional attitude-based measures, it simultaneously assesses respondents' knowledge and judgment regarding whether a given act constitutes misconduct. Responses are scored on a three-point scale: "Is misconduct" (2 points), "Is not misconduct" (0 points), and "No opinion" (1 point). A higher total score indicates a greater ability to detect research misconduct. The validity and reliability indices of the scale were confirmed prior to its use.

Findings: The mean and standard deviation of total scores for identifying research misconduct were as follows: faculty with prior training in research misconduct ($M = 49.15$, $SD = 7.37$); faculty without prior training ($M = 46.49$, $SD = 8.79$); faculty in Humanities ($M = 49.49$, $SD = 7.51$); faculty in non-Humanities (Basic



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Sciences, Engineering, Agriculture, and Veterinary Medicine) ($M = 47.98$, $SD = 7.99$); assistant professors ($M = 49.01$, $SD = 7.79$); associate professors ($M = 49.34$, $SD = 7.14$); and full professors ($M = 45.75$, $SD = 8.63$).

As shown in Table 1, the Mann–Whitney U test revealed a significant difference between faculty members who had received training in research misconduct during their studies or professional careers and those who had not. Faculty with prior training performed significantly better in identifying research misconduct. However, no significant difference was observed between Humanities and non-Humanities faculty members regarding their awareness of research misconduct. Results further indicated that assistant and associate professors outperformed full professors in detecting research misconduct, while no significant difference was found between assistant and associate professors.

Table 1. Results of the Mann–Whitney and Wilcoxon Tests for Comparing Group Performance in Detecting Research Misconduct

Variable	Research Groups Compared	Mann–Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	p
Identification of research misconduct	Trained vs. Untrained	6523	9683	-2.04	0.04
	Humanities vs. Non-Humanities	6746	27047	-1.18	0.23
	Assistant Prof. vs. Associate Prof.	5444	12584	-0.33	0.73
	Assistant Prof. vs. Full Prof.	2944	4897	-2.22	0.02
	Associate Prof. vs. Full Prof.	2189	4142	-2.62	0.009

Conclusion: This study aimed to assess and compare faculty members' awareness of research misconduct. Faculty with prior training on research misconduct performed significantly better in identifying misconduct scenarios than those who had not, which aligns with previous authors' emphasis on the importance of training in reducing research misconduct (Rodrigues et al., 2023; Marusic et al., 2016). A possible explanation is that training in research integrity increases individuals' awareness of various forms of misconduct and strengthens their sensitivity to fraudulent cases.

Analyses also indicated no significant difference between faculty members in Humanities and non-Humanities in detecting research misconduct. This finding contrasts with Gopalakrishna et al.'s (2022) report of a higher prevalence of questionable research practices (QRPs) among medical sciences faculty compared with other disciplines, and with Xie et al.'s (2021) finding of disciplinary differences in research ethics awareness. University professors in Humanities were expected to demonstrate stronger detection skills due to their frequent engagement with texts and citations (Gopalakrishna et al., 2022). However, the results of the current study suggest that overall exposure to research misconduct is relatively similar across disciplines. This lack of difference may also be attributed to unified institutional policies and ethical guidelines applied across Iranian universities, which may have balanced awareness among faculty members.

Another key finding was that assistant and associate professors performed significantly better than full professors in identifying research misconduct. This difference may stem from the more up-to-date knowledge of early- and mid-career faculty, who are likely more familiar with contemporary discussions and training in research integrity. In contrast, senior professors may be less exposed to recent



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developments in research integrity, possibly due to their greater involvement in administrative, supervisory, or large-scale research responsibilities.

However, this study faced certain limitations. The findings are based on data from Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz and may not be generalizable to other universities or research institutions. Conducting studies at a national level would provide a broader understanding of the state of research misconduct awareness among university faculty. Moreover, this study focused solely on identifying research misconduct and did not examine the factors contributing to it. Future research should explore variables such as publication pressure, familiarity with ethical guidelines, attitudes toward research integrity, and oversight mechanisms. Qualitative investigations, including in-depth interviews with individuals involved in misconduct, could yield richer insights into prevention procedures and corrective mechanisms.

Value: This study contributes to the literature on academic integrity by adopting a comparative approach to analyze faculty members' ability to detect research misconduct. The use of a scenario-based instrument (RMS) enhances the validity of the findings by providing a more realistic and context-sensitive measure of ethical awareness and judgment.

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