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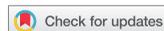
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Malaysian researchers talk about the influence of culture on research misconduct in higher learning institutions

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ABSTRACT

Based on a previous survey by the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) in the USA, a considerable number of foreign research scientists have been found guilty of research misconduct. However, it remains unclear as to whether or not cultural factors really contribute to research misconduct. This study is based on a series of interviews with Malaysian researchers from the local universities regarding their own professional experiences involving working with researchers or research students from different countries or of different nationalities. Most of the researchers interviewed agreed that cultures do shape individual character, which influences the way that such individuals conduct research, their decision-making, and their style of academic writing. Our findings also showed that working culture within the institution also influences research practices, as well as faculty mentorship of the younger generation of researchers. Given the fact such misconduct might be due to a lack of understanding of research or working cultures or practices within the institution, the impact on the scientific community and on society could be destructive. Therefore, it is suggested that the institution has an important role to play in orienting foreign researchers through training, mentoring, and discussion with regard to the “does” and “don’ts” related to research, and to provide them with an awareness of the importance of ethics when it comes to conducting research.

KEYWORDS

Academic culture; ethical decision-making; research ethics; research in developing countries; research integrity

Introduction

Culture is a notoriously difficult term to define, and there are various available definitions of culture. Briefly, culture is defined as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group” (Merriam-Webster, 2002). According to Spencer-Oatey (2008), “culture” is a fuzzy set of base assumptions and values, orientation to life, beliefs, policies, procedures, and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence, but do not determine, each member’s behavior and his or her interpretations of the “meaning” of other people’s behavior. Culture may play a role, albeit a limited one, in the etiology of research misconduct (Davis 2003). This is not surprising because

research is a global endeavor with regard to which researchers from different countries with different research cultures and practices are working together in multiple research projects. Due to the fact that different research communities may have different research practices, individuals who experience changes in research culture usually carry the norms of research practices from their previous working environment (Davis, Morris, and Diaz 2007), and they are more susceptible to deviation from the normal practice of science. This consequently increases the probability that an instance of research misconduct will occur (Amin et al. 2012). Research misconduct can be defined as fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism, and giving false representation of research admission letter during the making of a proposal, and while conducting, reviewing, or reporting research (DHHS 2005). When a group of individuals from different cultural backgrounds works closely together for the first time, there are bound to be conflicts in term of their work ethics and research practices. This situation can best be described using Sellin's (1938) theory of culture conflict in which, when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come in contact with one another, there are bound to be misunderstandings due to differences in terms of values and social practices. Jesilow, Pontell, and Song (1992) used this theory in their study of Vietnamese physicians in the United States. They found that deviant practices which were in violation of California Medi-Cal law, could be traced back to practices common in Vietnam. These Vietnamese physicians might not engage in misconduct intentionally, but because of a lack of understanding regarding the differences in terms of medical practices between the two countries (Davis 2003). Differences in culture might also view the rights of women and children differently, in that in some cultures, women and children may not be allowed to participate in any activities outside the family or social circle, this including becoming a participant in a clinical trial. For some, this situation might be viewed as being unethical and a direct violation of a woman's rights. However, this might not be the case for those who have previously conducted trials in such circumstances (Momen and Gollogly 2007).

According to a survey conducted by Fanelli, Costas, and Lariviere (2015), the socio-cultural background is a significant determinant of responsible and irresponsible practices. This showed that an individual's socio-cultural background, besides other external factors such as poor training or lack of good institutional practices, contribute to the ethical or unethical decisions that a researcher makes in terms of research. Using a theory proposed by Lee and Schrank (2010), they argued that when countries prioritize economic growth over policy and regulations related to scientific research, they face a high risk of scientific misconduct. Lee and Schrank categorize these countries as "developmental states." Previously, Melton also argued that when a society places a differential emphasis on socially-desirable ends and the means of achieving them, members of that society have the tendency to display deviant behavior. Therefore, if the research practice in a particular research community places a priority on socially-desirable goals rather than on the legal

methods to achieve them, the breach of ethical or legal practices may become the norm in that society. Both theories argue that a socio-cultural background that emphasizes social and economic growth could lead to deviant behavior that results in misconduct in terms of research practices.

Some believe that differences in term of culture, which results in research misconduct, can be overcome through good supervision or mentoring. This is because mentoring relationship helps individuals to recognize, highlight and overcome the tensions that may arise due to different way of conducting research resulting from the individual's different background (St Claire-Ostwald 2007). However, it is still debatable as to whether or not cultural differences can be overcome through continuous supervision or mentoring. Therefore, mentoring and its relationship to research misconduct and to academic integrity is a potential research area (Gray and Jordan 2012). According to Sambunjak et al. (2006), although mentorship is recognized as an important element in education, it might not appear to be important among members of the faculty. This is because, despite acknowledging the importance of good mentoring relationships to education, the reactions on the part of faculty members may be insufficient (Calkins and Kelley 2005), and other structural pressures, either from the institution, department, or fellow researchers, may restrain mentorship practices (Roberts, Kavussanu, and Sprague 2001). Some previous studies have highlighted the importance of "good" mentorship in promoting and increasing awareness of research ethics (Hollander 2001), while others have attempted to explain how dysfunction in terms of mentorship could lead to misbehavior that leads to ethical conflicts (Johnson and Huwe 2002). Having a good mentoring culture is not only about teaching mentees about necessary and important matters in their respective disciplines, but also about the norms of professionalism and expectations in various fields, as well as teaching mentees about the many unspoken and unwritten regulations and expectations that exist in research fields (Gray and Jordan 2012).

Although there has been a great deal of speculation about the possible influence of cultures on research misconduct, few of these observations are empirically grounded. One of the few is a study of cultural factors in terms of scientific misconduct by Meyer and Bernier (2002) in the United States, who analyzed 16 cases in which misconduct had been alleged. They found that foreign personnel were overrepresented among the accused. Though their sample was small and admittedly not representative of research misconduct cases in general, they found a greater number of subjects from outside the United States. With a dearth of studies on the influence of culture in research misconduct, we feel the need to conduct research on this topic. The purpose of this study is therefore 1) to examine the role of cultures in research misconduct, 2) to draw attention to the need to address research misconduct related to cultural factors via participants' opinions, and 3) to contribute to the existing data and analysis of the topic of research misconduct.

Methods

This study used in-depth interview and semi-structured questionnaires, and the design of the questionnaires was guided by a previous study by Devlin and Gray (2007), but it was modified based on previous research on issues related to research misconduct. It was subsequently pilot tested. However, during the pilot test, some pertinent questions did surface, and these questions were then incorporated into the new set of interview questions as deemed appropriate. The interviewer's questionnaires, which were prepared in English, included the following questions:

- (1) Do you think cultural factors contribute to research misconduct?
- (2) If yes, in what way do you think that they might influence individuals in terms of engaging in such misconduct?
- (3) Have you had any experience of working with researchers from other countries and facing a clash of cultures in terms of conducting research?
- (4) What should we do to reduce such culture differences in order to avoid research misconduct?
- (5) Do you know if your institution has any reorientation program to educate researchers or research students from other countries with regard to the research norms in your institution?

The answers to these interview questions would indicate the participants' opinions as to the role of cultures in research misconduct, how cultural factors might influence researchers in terms of engaging in misconduct, their experience with regard to research misconduct that may be related to cultural differences, and the current existence of steps or programs available in their institution to reorientate foreign researchers on the research norms or practices in their institution. Such responses could also highlight some of the suggestions from the participants on the role of the institution in terms of promoting a culture of integrity in the academic community.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours, and were conducted either in English or Malay, depending on which language the participants were most comfortable using. The interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis and informed consent was given. The participants were selected based on their experience in research fields, in terms of conducting research and supervising research by students or fellow researchers. A set of interview questionnaires, together with the informed consent forms and a brief description of the research objectives were sent by email to the selected participants. When they agreed to be one of the participants, the date, time, and venue were decided, based on the participant's availability. The participants consist of 20 researchers from different universities, different research disciplines, geographical areas, career levels, and

years of conducting and supervising research in Malaysia and elsewhere. There were nine male and eleven female respondents, six of whom were junior researchers with less than 10 years' experience in research, and 14 senior researchers with more than 25 years of research experience. Nine were from the field of social sciences and humanities, while 11 were from the field of natural sciences.

The interviews were tape-recorded, and were subsequently transcribed. The analysis was conducted in conjunction with another researcher in order to compare and define the major findings as a means of testing the validity of the research findings. No new data or information emerged during the final interviews, indicating that data saturation had been achieved. It is important to note that the opinions expressed by the participants involved in the study cannot be generalized to the entire research community in Malaysia.

Results

Our findings showed that half of the researchers involved in this study think that culture is one of the factors that could influence researchers when it comes to engaging in research misconduct. Our findings suggest that cultures do influence the way in which individuals make decisions, both personal and professional, and could influence their thoughts or way of thinking, in addition to their style of writing. At the same time, the working culture involving practices within different institutions could vary, and thus play a role and influence how researchers conduct their research, including the process of obtaining consent from participants with regard to being involved in a study. However, the participants do agree that although differences in terms of working culture and socio-culture backgrounds may play some part in research misconduct, they do not ignore the possibility that the researcher's decision to engage in misconduct could be a combination of several other external factors.

Influence of the working culture of the institution on research misconduct

The working culture of an institution might influence the working styles of researchers or research students, or the way that they conduct their research. When researchers work in an environment that places an emphasis on the quality of work and are very meticulous regarding working ethically, then such an environment tends to have good work ethics.

If the individual is exposed to a negative culture of doing research, the person is so used to it that they do not see anything wrong with it. And this is going to have a negative effect on the mentoring system, because researchers who are exposed to this negative culture will more or less teach the wrong things to the younger generation of researchers, and this cycle will continue. Such is the impact of a negative culture on our research community. (P6)

However, when researchers operate in a work environment that places particular emphasis on outcomes rather than on how these are achieved, there is a tendency to engage in misconduct in order to achieve the set target.

Some researchers here are not used to this pressure to write and to survive because, previously, promotion or receiving research grants or recognition was not based on publication records. So now, with all these pressures to 'publish or perish', some researchers might be willing to do anything just to fulfill the institution's requirements, which is also used as the evaluation set for the researcher's future career. (P10)

In the case of another participant, he also agreed that the working culture plays an important role in shaping how researchers conduct their research, and this shapes their views of research misconduct:

When researchers work in an environment that is very strict and really lays a lot of stress on the ethics of conducting research, the practice will be ingrained within them, and they will take this attitude everywhere they go. (P19)

P16 also mentioned that different working cultures also influence research practices in his institution. For example, with regard to obtaining informed consent to conduct research, he stated:

When I did my PhD in Australia, I had to go through the Ethics Committee and they required a lot of documentation from me. I think that here, if I am not mistaken, you do not need ethics committee clearance for interviewing participants. But in Australia, we needed clearance. It is not just about signing an informed consent form or providing the participants with an official letter from the institute or university in which you explained the research and why and what we needed. Sometimes I think that some researchers just approach the participant without even obtaining their consent. It will be misconduct if we do that in a country like the U.K. or Australia etc. but not here. (P16)

Culture influence on writing style

This study highlights two different types of misconduct that are associated with the writing style of foreign researchers who come to Malaysia, either as research students or as post-doctoral researchers. In the case of one participant, she found that some foreign students do not think that quoting others works without paraphrasing or citing them is misconduct.

I have foreign students who really think that paraphrasing is unnecessary, particularly when they have already mentioned the original source of the work that they are referring to. For them, it is enough. No need to paraphrase. I have a hard time explaining to them that it is still considered to be plagiarism when you quote and mention your source but do not paraphrase. (P14)

For another participant, he found that culture differences do influence researchers' referencing styles and this would result in misconduct or plagiarism.

Although the culture of writing might differ from one country to another, when they enter our university I believe they tend to make unintentional mistakes. For example, in the case of my Indonesian students who normally read books instead of journals, the way they do their referencing will be different from how local students do it. They sometimes just take the whole paragraph and name the source at the end of the paragraph. For them this is normal because that is how they normally do it. But actually it is their culture of writing back in Indonesia. But here, we are so used to taking our sources from journals rather than books. So we just take one sentence and paraphrase it and name our source. We don't take one whole paragraph. For us, what my Indonesian students did is an example of misconduct, but not for them. This is what I mean with regard to the role of culture in research misconduct. They do not do it intentionally. (P16)

Culture influence on ethical decision-making

Individual characters are partly influenced by their culture, which indirectly shapes their thinking and the decisions they make, personally or professionally. Based on our findings, the participants agreed that conflict between researchers from different cultures could lead to research misconduct.

Although it might not be a big contribution, but yes, differences in culture could lead to research misconduct because the way of conducting research might be different in some countries as compared to here. Therefore, it is possible to have conflict when researchers from different countries work in the same research team. (P1)

P6, states as the follows:

“Yes, I agree, because culture shaped the person's mentality and this shaped the way they do their work, and the decision they make regarding their research. This is because researchers react differently when placed under stress and pressure, and whether they make ethical or unethical decisions, it's all up to the individual and how they are shaped as a person. (P6)

Discussion

Davis (2003) defined culture as the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group, and this might influence an individual's decision as to whether or not to engage in research misconduct. Since culture has a great influence in the lives of most individuals, it is not surprising that it has an influence on the individual, both on the personal and the professional level. This study has yielded several findings about our participants' perceptions on the influence of culture on research misconduct. It sheds some light on how culture could influence individual decision-making, how culture might influence the way in which one gains knowledge, the writing style of the individual, and the way cultures could influence a person's research practices. However, it might be important to highlight that, although our findings suggest that cultural factors have some role to play in research misconduct, our participants do not ignore the

possibility of the possible influence of other factors that lead researchers to engage in research misconduct.

Culture has been associated with ethical decision-making, and this has been shown in several studies conducted previously by other scholars (Auer-Srnka 2004; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, and Trevino 2010; Oumlil and Balloun 2008; Vitell, Nwachukwu, and Barnes 1993; Thorne and Saunders 2003). Hofstede (1983) represented one of the more popular typologies of culture, in which he classified countries depending on their position with respect to four parameters that he considered important in defining culture: power distance; individualist versus collectivist; whether the society emphasizes and values masculine versus feminine attributes; and uncertainty. Bartel (1967) was one of the first to note the importance of the role of culture in ethical decision-making. He identified cultural factors such as values and customs, religion, law, respect for individuality, loyalty, and rights of property, as influencing ethics. The findings in our study suggest that culture more likely than not, influences the decisions that researchers make regarding their research, and this supports Bartel's theory (1967). This is because what one culture considers as misconduct might not be considered as misconduct in another culture. It might be easier to reach an agreement that misconduct such as fabrication of data, or falsification of results, is breaching ethical conduct of research, because it is very obvious that such misbehavior is a violation of the universal moral principles of truthfulness and trustworthiness. However, for other types of misconduct, trying to judge and decide whether or not it is a serious or minor form of misconduct is very much dependent on how the culture views it (Momen and Gollogly 2007). For example, in terms of plagiarism, there is also a range of opinions regarding the seriousness of the offense. In a previous discussion between members of the World Association of Medical Editors, there is a large difference of opinion between the editors as to whether or not self-plagiarism constitutes as scientific misconduct (Momen and Gollogly 2007). This goes to show that even editors in the same field have different opinions as to what is considered as misconduct.

Culture could also influence an individual's writing style, which could lead to research misconduct such as plagiarism. This is because, in some countries, the style of writing an article differs from that in another country, particularly in the way author(s) are referenced. In fact, based on the cultural perspective, plagiarism is viewed as a cultural phenomenon that is conceptualized differently in different cultures (Lei and Hu 2014). Comparing perceptions of plagiarism on the part of individuals from different cultural backgrounds revealed that their understanding of plagiarism is ambiguous (Ehrich et al. 2016; Rinnert and Kobayashi 2005; Shi 2006). Our findings supported these previous pieces of research in that some of the researchers interviewed mentioned that some of their foreign students were found to plagiarize, not because they were doing so intentionally, but due to the fact that their understanding regarding methods of referencing is different from that of local students. Previous research also highlighted that causes of student

plagiarizing vary, including a lack of knowledge in terms of citing and referencing (Bennett 2005; Devlin and Gray 2007; Park 2003; Song-Turner 2008).

The working culture could also influence the way researchers conduct their research. When researchers are exposed to a working culture that emphasizes rewards for their achievement without really taking into consideration the methods used to achieve it, researchers will focus more on the outcomes rather than on the means of achieving them. This is highlighted by one of the participants in the study, who argued that institutions indirectly create an unhealthy culture within the research community when they place priority on outcomes rather than on the methods to achieve such outcomes. Therefore, supporting Merton's theory (1938), where he argued that if in a particular culture there is greater emphasis on socially-desirable goals than on the legal methods of achieving an outcome, some members of that culture will tend to engage in misconduct (Davis 2003). The findings in this study also highlighted that different working cultures contribute to different research practices. In most countries, conducting medical research without obtaining ethical clearance from the ethics review board or ethics committee, particularly when the research involves the participation of human subjects, is considered as serious research misconduct. However, in countries where there are few practicing clinical researchers, and where mostly these committees have only theoretical knowledge of the issues at best, obtaining approval from the ethics committee would become a bureaucratic hurdle (Bhutta 2004).

One of the major highlights of this study is identifying the importance of the role of the supervisor in encouraging integrity among supervisees or junior researchers in term of conducting research responsibly. This study found that although most of the participants agreed that cultural factors do influence individuals when it comes to engaging in misconduct, they also argued that it could be avoided if the supervisor really takes charge and takes full responsibility for taking care and shaping the supervisees under their care. Thus, the research highlights the importance of good mentoring in order to create a culture of integrity within the research community in Malaysia. According to Anderson, Shaw, Steneck, Konkle & Kamata (2013), mentoring, as a component of the research environment is associated with misbehavior, but it is also an important part of efforts to promote integrity. Most of the participants in this study had not been involved in any formal classes or courses in research ethics as they mainly learned about ethics through job experience, and it is something they learned from their seniors or previous supervisor. Mentors play a significant role in socializing young researchers as responsible scientists (Anderson et al. 2013). A study based on results from a national survey of doctoral students in psychology showed that imparting research ethics to students through interaction with faculty mentors is better than instruction through responsible conduct of research (RCR) courses (Fisher, Fried, and Feldman 2009). This concurred with our findings in that one of the participants felt that conducting seminars, workshops, courses, or classes in research ethics or RCR is a waste of time,

because although researchers or research students attended these courses, they might not practice what is preached to them. No doubt actively participating in ethics education could create awareness and educate researchers with regard to conducting research ethically, but mentors or supervisors are well positioned to play a formative role in developing such an awareness and understanding through implicit and explicit examples of professionally acceptable behavior.

Another highlight of this study is the participants' opinions on the roles of organizational leaders in creating a culture of integrity within an institution. One of the suggestions is to include ongoing training in research ethics for all levels of researchers, including support staff. According to Heitman et al. (2007), ongoing training is important throughout a researcher's career as rules and policies are updated and new technologies give rise to new ethical complications. They argued that socialization in graduate school is a classic mechanism for deterring misconduct, particularly given the evidence that incoming graduate students have inadequate knowledge of the responsible conduct of research. Secondly, the participants highlighted the need to enhance reorientation programs for researchers or research students who come from different countries. Such individuals need to be educated and trained as to how research is done ethically in institution of higher learning in Malaysia. For example, when writing styles differ due to different methods of referencing in their home country, educating them on how referencing is done ethically would avoid the risk that they would engage in plagiarism or authorship misconduct. According to Davis (2003), due to the absence of strong empirical research connecting culture and research misconduct, the recommendation by Meyer and Bernier (2002) that scientific researchers from outside the United States be offered education and training in how science is competently and ethically done seems appropriate. Thirdly, we would emphasize the need to create an awareness program within institutions in Malaysia through various methods such as printing brochures, which would be made available everywhere, online awareness programs, which would be accessible for current students or researchers who are techno-savvy, or through continuous seminars or courses on ethics education. Finally, some participants highlighted the need to establish a centralized neutral body as an oversight mechanism in order to ensure the integrity of research within the research community in Malaysia. Institutions also need to educate their members about this body, and how it can be used as a visible, thorough, and functioning system to handle reports of possible research misconduct. The establishment of such a monitoring mechanism can be undertaken by referring to established guidelines such as the Declaration of Helsinki (DoH, 2013) or the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE, 2014) when developing standard research ethics for their respective institutions, since they are applicable regardless of culture. The relevant bodies responsible for

handling research ethics or procedures, including ethics committees or review boards in the institutions should adhere to these universal guidelines to reduce the discrepancies among different research ethics or practices, which lead to the negative intervention of cultures.

Conclusion

Culture is a great influence in the lives of most individuals, and those within and outside the scientific community should acknowledge the numerous ways cultural differences impact on our lives. Culture may not be a strong factor for researchers in terms of engaging in research misconduct, but we cannot deny its influence on how researchers conduct themselves within or outside the scientific community. Although some of these misconducts might be unintentional due to cultural differences or practices, the impact of these mistakes could be detrimental to the scientific community as well as to society. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of providing extensive and proper orientation programs for foreign researchers or research students, to help them understand research ethics. The mentor–mentee relationship is not only about creating awareness with regard to cultural differences, but also acknowledging and valuing these differences. At the same time, institutions as a whole could continuously support the awareness of the community with regard to the importance of our knowledge of ethics and how it is understood through discussion. It is recommended that a clear definition of research misconduct is established and that researchers should be provided with codes of good practice. Rather than simply providing a list of bad practices to be avoided, and to warn against dishonesty, it is more important to teach integrity.

Limitation

This study however, has limitations because it is based on the perceptions of Malaysian researchers in terms of their professional experience in conducting and supervising research. Future studies on the role of culture in research misconduct could include a consideration of the views of researchers from different countries, in order to help shed light on how different cultural norms help shape researchers' approaches to research in both their native countries and abroad.

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