

ABIA STATE UNIVERSITY, UTURU

CONTEMPORARY ECONOMIC,  
FINANCIAL AND BUSINESS  
ISSUES IN NIGERIA

of

NIGERIAN JOURNAL OF  
ECONOMIC  
AND FINANCIAL  
RESEARCH

Vol.3, No.1

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## **ETHICAL ISSUES IN RESEARCH: THE PREVALENCE OF MISCONDUCT IN RESEARCH ENDEAVOURS**

BY

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The prevalence of fraudulent research behaviours amongst academics and researchers is examined in this paper. The paper x-rays the relevance of ethical norms in research endeavours pointing out its roles in the protection of intellectual property interests while improving collaborations amongst and between researchers. It highlights that the desire to have evidence match the preconceived notions of researchers; plagiarism; publish or perish syndrome and the undue influences of research sponsors as some of the factors implicated in misconduct. The paper recommends that research ethics seminars/workshops should be organized to help academics get a better understanding of these issues, sensitize them on how to make some ethical judgments and decision making.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Fraudulent misdemeanours in research is the ultimate academic gossip in research institutions and citadels of learning all over the world. Most often it is easier to attack than to defend practices. The right to carry out research is a form of a freedom of thought and expression-one of the basic rights of

citizens. However, in exercising this right to carry out research in social science and business management, researchers must be careful to weigh other rights which are important and may be subverted or come into conflicts with one another in the course of a research. These are the right to privacy as opposed to the right of the public to be sensibly and honestly informed about the



*activities in their immediate environment or the world in general.*

Without mincing words social science and management researchers who want to practice their professions unhindered must be aware of incidences of misconduct in research. They want their researches to be seen as contributing to the advancement of knowledge and social progress. Similarly they would like their actions to be free from unobjective attacks based on ethical considerations. These projections cannot happen if they do not pay serious attention to overt and covert issues of ethics in social and management science researches

This paper shall attempt to explain what ethics, ethical norms and research misconduct are. The paper attempts to present the relevance of ethical norms in Business research. It also examines the environmental factors that tend to impinge on research misconduct. Finally it presents suggestions on ways research misconducts can be mitigated in a developing research environment.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Ethics are the moral principles and values that govern the way an individual or group conducts its activities (Churchill, 1999). Ethics apply to all situations in which there can be actual or potential harm of any kind (for instance economic, physical or mental) to an individual or group. Shamoo and Resnik (2009) define ethics as norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Many business management researchers fail to confront the issue of whether it is morally acceptable to proceed in a

*particular way or whether they are acting in a socially responsible manner by doing so. Many take the view that if it is legal, it is ethical. They fail to appreciate that there can be differences between what is ethical and what is legal. Even among those who appreciate the distinction, there is often a reluctance to evaluate the ethical implications of their decisions because they feel ill-equipped to do so. Like most professionals, they simply do not know how or where to start.*

Many societies have legal rules that govern behaviour, but ethical norms tend to be broader and more informal than laws. Although many societies use laws to enforce widely accepted moral standards and ethics, however it should be noted that ethics and laws are not the same. An action may be legal but unethical or illegal but ethical (Shamoo and Resnick 2009). We can also use ethical concepts and principles to criticize, evaluate, propose or interpret laws. Indeed in the last century, many social reformers have urged citizens to disobey laws in order to protest what they regarded as immoral or unjust laws. Peaceful Civil disobedience is an ethical way of expressing political viewpoints (Kukah, 2007:48 – 49).

Another way of defining ethics focuses on the disciplines that study standards of conduct such as philosophy, theology, law, psychology or sociology. For example a “medical ethicist” is someone who studies ethical standards in medicine. One may also define ethics as a method, procedure or perspective for deciding how to act and for analyzing complex problems and issues. For instance in considering a complex issue like global warming, one may take an economic, ecological, political or ethical perspective on the problem. While an



economist might examine the cost and benefits of various politics related to global warming, an environmental ethicist could examine the ethical values and principles at stake. Many different disciplines, institutions and professions have norms for behaviour that suit their particular aims and goals. These norms also help members of the discipline to coordinate their actions or activities and to establish the public's trust of the discipline. For instance, ethical norms govern conduct in medicine, law, engineering and business. Ethical norms also serve the aims or goals of research and apply to people who conduct scientific research or other scholarly or creative activities. Research ethics is a specialized discipline which studies these norms. Actions that nearly all researchers classify as unethical are viewed as misconduct. It is important to observe that misconduct occurs only when researchers intend to deceive. However honest errors relating to sloppiness, poor record keeping, miscalculations bias, self-deception and even negligence do not constitute misconduct. Again, reasonable disagreements about research methods, procedures and interpretations do not constitute research misconduct.

The law usually provides the background and sets the limits on most ethical conducts. In recent years, various legislative actions have been designed to ensure ethical conduct in research (Schlossberg 1994; and Honomichl 1993). Legislation is necessary to curb some forms of abuse but most serious researchers would prefer to set their own high standards of ethical conduct.

#### **THE RELEVANCE OF ETHICAL NORMS IN BUSINESS RESEARCH**

There are several reasons why it is important to adhere to ethical norms in

business research. These are itemized as follows:

- a. Norms promote the aims of research such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error. For instance prohibitions against fabricating, falsifying (misrepresenting research data) and plagiarism (FPP) promote the truth and avoid error.
- b. Since research involves a great deal of co-operation, collaboration and coordination among many different scholars in different disciplines and institutions, ethical standards promote the values necessary for collaboration and network. These values are trust, accountability, mutual respect and fairness. For instance many ethical norms in research like guidelines for authorship, copyright and patenting policies, data sharing policies and confidentiality roles in peer review are designed to protect intellectual property interests while enhancing collaboration. This is because many researchers want to receive credit for their contributions and do not want to have their ideas stolen or disclosed prematurely.
- c. Many of the ethical norms help to ensure that researchers are held accountable to the general public. For instance in United State of America (USA) Federal Policies on research misconduct, conflicts of interest, the human subjects protections, and animal care and use are necessary in order to make sure that researchers who are funded by tax payer's money can be held accountable to the public.
- d. Ethical norms in research also help to build public support for research. People are more likely to fund and participate in research project if they can trust the quality and integrity of research. This is because the conduct of business



research requires the participation of the general public. How business inquiry is conducted can affect the willingness of the public to participate, so it is important to conduct research in an ethical manner (Robin, 1970).

e. Many of the norms in research promote a number of other important moral and social values such as social responsibility, human rights, animal welfare, compliance with the law, health and safety standards in work and research places.

Ethical Lapses (misconducts) can significantly harm human and animal subjects, students and the public. For instance, a researcher who fabricates and falsifies data in a clinical trial may harm or even kill patients, and a researcher who refuses to abide by safety regulations and guidelines may risk his life, the life of other staff and even students.

### ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS THAT IMPINGE ON RESEARCH MISCONDUCT

Research misconduct is quite a prevalent phenomenon in institutions of higher learning. However, there are some environmental factors that tend to accelerate its occurrence. They are discussed briefly as:

a. *The desire to have the evidence match the preconceived hypotheses and notions of the researcher is naturally strong. In some cases the career of the scientist or research may be in the jeopardy unless the results turn out as he or she had expected cases have come to light where the handling of scientific data has been questioned. For instance in the celebrated case on Intelligence*

Quotient (IQ) and Heredity. Cyril Burl's evidence on the correlation between IQ score of identical twins reared apart as compared to identical twins reared together had been used by numerous other researchers as the foundation for argument that hereditary factors are more important than environmental ones in determining intelligence. After Burl's death, other psychologists looking at Burl's evidence more carefully came to question it. Burl had first reported on 21 pairs of twins reared separately in 1955; in 1958, he published evidence on 30 pairs of twins separately reared and in 1966, he had located 53 pairs of identical twins reared apart. What was peculiar was that in every case the correlation he found between the IQ scores of the twins was 0.771. Yet it would be highly improbable statistically to arrive at the exact same correlation. There were a few other strange factors about Burl's material: One was that he gave very little other information about the twins he had studied (their sex, age when tested) or the type of IQ test given to them. In addition, some of his work was coauthored by two women, Margaret Howard and J. Conway, who did not seem to exist. Sir Cyril Burl's was a famous and prominent British psychologist. As Leon Kamin, the psychologist who had first detected the peculiarities of Burl's work proclaimed. "The evidence on the IQ scores of twins was a fraud linked to policy from the word go. The data were cooked in order for him to arrive at the conclusions he wanted" (Wade, 1976 cited in Bulmer, 1982).

b. **Publish to get established mind set:** Most often than not researchers may feel pressured by donor agencies who fund their researcher to produce "exciting" and headline making findings. After all, he who pays the piper

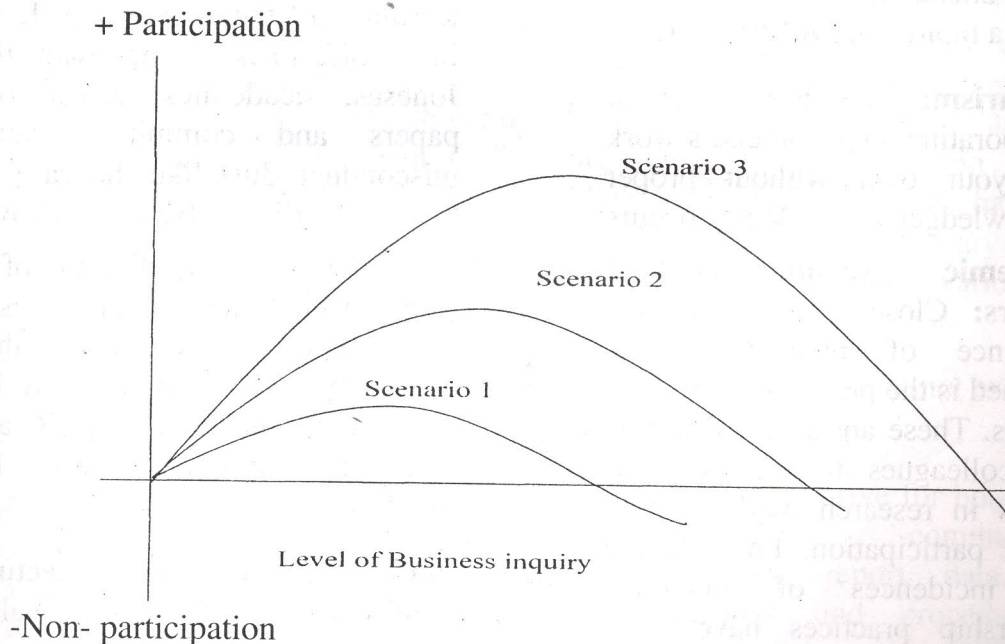


dictates the tunes and suggesting, that is now people became established as scientists. Yet no other unethical activity threatens the sciences as much as this. If scientists commit fraud, if they flagrantly disregard the scientific ethos, not only will the public lose confidence in the value of science, but the institution of science may suffer serious damage.

c. **Conflicts of interest:** Legitimate research interest can create competing responsibilities and lead to what is commonly called conflicts of interest. Researchers' interest can and often do conflict with one another. The advancement of knowledge is usually best served by sharing ideas with colleagues, putting many minds to work on the same problem. It is important to understand that conflicts of interest are not inherently wrong. The complex and

demanding nature of research today inevitably gives rise to competing obligations and interest. Conflicts of interest are financial gain, work commitment, intellectual and personal matters. This is because financial interests can provide a strong incentive to over-emphasize or underemphasize research findings or even to engage in research misconduct. Financial conflicts of interest are situations that create perceived or actual tensions between personal financial gain and adherence to the fundamental values of honesty, accuracy, efficiency and objectivity ([www.aamc.org/members/coif1](http://www.aamc.org/members/coif1)).

The figure below graphically presents the relationship among business inquiry, public acceptance and research participation by the public.



**Figure 1.0:** The effect of Ethical and unethical Business Research on Public Acceptance

**Source:** Davis O, Utts, J and Simon, M. (2002) Statistics and Research Methods for Managerial Decisions, Mason, OH: Thomson Learning Inc. (publishers).



The ethical level of business inquiry is shown in the horizontal axis. Overall public acceptance and subsequent participation are plotted on the vertical axis. In the above model public acceptance may be positive resulting in research participation or negative leading to non-participation. The model suggests that the degree of public acceptance and participation can be attributed to ethical or unethical research behaviours. Three scenarios are presented. In scenario 1, general public acceptance becomes negative. In scenario 2, public acceptance is more positive with participation at a higher level. Scenario 3 is the best case situations with the greatest level of public acceptance and participation. Here overall acceptance is substantially higher because of responsible and ethical conduct of business research. The implications of this model is their public acceptance appears to be positive but leveling off, unethical research abuse is increasing at a rapid rate (Woolf, 1991).

**d. Plagiarism:** This is the act of incorporating someone else's work into your own without proper acknowledgement. This occurs

**f. Academic menopause/Ghost writers:** Closely related to the incidence of publish or be damned is the prevalence of ghost writers. These are academics who beg colleagues to include their names in research work without active participation. For instance the incidences of unethical authorship practices have been going on as tradition in the research community that had not been criticized until recently. Its criticisms now could be attributed to proliferation in the use of internet facilities for sourcing materials, for research purposes.

infrequently in the writing of business and social science researchers. It is also a research misconduct, especially very much prevalent among some students. In the case of students, the action is usually a shortcut to meeting the requirements for the course without actually doing the required assignment. Students don't know that plagiarizing destroys the trust which must be at the basis of the relationships between students and lecturers. If a researcher is suspected of using someone else's material without citation or of cheating in the collection or presentation of data, that persons career can be irreparably damaged.

**e. Publish or Perish syndrome:** This is very common among researchers in the citadels of learning by the authorities there. In a bid to keep up with the Joneses, academics churn out papers and commit research misconduct. Just like the case of Sir Cyril Burt above.

For example if the director of a research laboratory is named as a co- author on every paper that comes from his lab, even if he does not make a significant contribution, could this be misconduct?

**g. Personal and intellectual conflicts:** Researchers are also expected to avoid bias in proposing, conducting, reporting and reviewing research. They are ordinarily to avoid making judgements or presenting conclusions based solely on personal opinion or affiliations rather than on scientific evidence.



Personal conflicts are usually the easiest to identify and resolve. For instance, researchers are to serve as reviewers for grants and publications submitted by close colleagues and students. Their presumed interest in seeing their colleagues and students succeed could conflict with their obligation to make judgments based solely on the evidence at hand. Most granting agencies require reviewers to disclose conflicts of interest including personal conflicts as a condition of service. Intellectual conflicts are even

- h. **Ignorance:** Many of the deviations that occur in research may be traced to ignorance on the part of researchers who simply do not know or have never thought seriously about research ethics.

## CONCLUSION

As the old saying goes "with great power comes great responsibility", researchers need to be held accountable for their work especially material that is published and available to the reading public. It is the opinion of this paper that a major part of science and research is the integrity and honesty of the information that we as academics/professionals are putting forth in society and the public should be able to trust us. Fabricating, falsifying and plagiarisation of data should be taken very seriously.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The research environment plays a significant role in the incidence of misconduct among researchers. It is recommended that series of seminars/workshops should be organized

more difficult to identify and deal with, but are equally essential. For instance if a researcher holds a strong personal view on a specific area of research, or set of research findings, such view should be disclosed so that others can take them into considerations when judging the researcher's statements. The same is equally true of a strong moral convictions that could influence a researcher's scientific opinions ([www.nsf.gov/pubs/stis](http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/stis) 1996).

on Research Ethics to help people get a better understanding of these issues, sensitize them on how to improve on ethical judgement and decision making.

The public is angry about abuses of research, so government should take the bull by the horn to legislate ethical conduct for researchers if researchers cannot regulate themselves. Formal codes of ethics are now common among some professional associations and other organizations involved in research. Shamoo and Resnick (2009) have given a rough and general summary of some ethical principles that various codes address.

These include but not exhaustively the following:

- **Honesty:** Strive for honesty in all scientific communications. Honestly report data, results, methods and procedures, and publication status. Do not fabricate, falsify, or misrepresent data. Do not deceive colleagues, granting agencies, or the public.
- **Objectivity:** Strive to avoid bias in experimental designs, data analysis, data interpretation, peer



review, personnel decisions, grant writing, expert testing testimony, and other aspects of research where objectivity is expected or required. Avoid or minimize bias of self-deception. Disclose personal or financial interests that may affect research.

- **Integrity:** Keep your promises and agreements; act with sincerity; strive for consistency of thought and action.
- **Carefulness:** Avoid careless errors and negligence; carefully and critically examine your own work and the work of your peers. Keep good records of research activities, such as data collection, research design, and correspondence with agencies or journals.
- **Openness:** Share data, results, ideas, tools, resources. Be open to criticism and new ideas.
- **Respect for Intellectual Property:** Honor patents, copyrights, and other forms of intellectual property. Do not use unpublished data, methods, or results without permission. Give credit where credit is due. Give proper acknowledgement or credit for all contribution to research. Never plagiarize.
- **Confidentiality:** Protect confidential communications, such as papers submitted for publication, personnel records, trade or military secrets, and patient records.

- **Responsible Publication:** Publish in order to advance research and scholarship, not to advance just your own-career. Avoid wasteful and duplicative publication.

- **Responsible Mentoring:** Help to educate, mentor, and advise students. Promote their welfare and allow them to make their own decisions.

- **Legality:** Know and obey relevant laws and institutional and governmental policies.

- **Animal Care:** Show proper respect and care for animals when using them in research. Do not conduct unnecessary or poorly designed animal experiments.

- **Human Subjects Protection:** When conducting research on human subjects, minimize harms and risks and maximize benefits; respect human dignity, privacy, and autonomy; take special precautions with vulnerable populations; and strive to distribute the benefits and burdens of research fairly.

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