

BEHAVIORAL MISCONDUCT WITHIN THE RESEARCH SETTING SHOULD PROMPT INQUIRIES INTO POSSIBLE RESEARCH MISCONDUCT

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ABSTRACT

What is new?	Behavioral misconduct (BM), felonious or abusive acts within research settings, are often by definition segregated from research misconduct (RM); with the latter confined to instances of fabrication, falsification or plagiarism (FFP). Some have called for BM in research settings to be included under RM, and even papers coauthored by perpetrators of BM to be retracted. However, this notion is confounded by an apparent lack of a direct link between acts in BM with research integrity violation (i.e. the authenticity, veracity, and reproducibility of research data and publications).
What was the approach?	Here, I posit that even if BM might not be considered RM, suspicions of the latter would arise from confirmation of the former for at least two reasons.
What is the academic impact?	Firstly, BM might be linked to personality and organizational deficiencies that are also important for RM. Secondly, abusive and exploitative behaviors by people in power tend to promote RM. As such, confirmation of cases of BM in research should prompt suspicions if not preliminary inquiries into possible RM.
What is the wider impact?	BM and RM erode discipline and trust in academia. Realising that these transgressions are plausibly connected or could co-occur with or around a perpetrator of either forms of misconduct is important. Investigations could then be conducted, with sanctions delivered, in a more thorough and effective manner.
Keywords	Behavioral misconduct, Research misconduct, Sanctions.

INTRODUCTION

Research misconduct (RM), or scientific misconduct, involves acts of significant departure from generally accepted practices in research that are at odds with core principles of science (US National Academy of Sciences, 1992; 2009). A widely adopted definition of RM is one formulated by the US Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) in 2000 as a federal policy on RM (readily visible at the Office of Research Integrity (Office of Research Integrity, 2025), stipulating principal acts of RM to include fabrication, falsification or plagiarism (FFP) in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results. The All-European Academies (ALLEA) (ALLEA, 2023) also defined RM as fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism (FFP), but included “other violations of good research practice that can distort the research record or damage the research process”. The United Kingdom Committee on Research Integrity’s (UKCORI) Concordat to Support Research Integrity (UKCORI, 2025) likewise stipulates several other forms of violations that are also considered RM. There are other well-reasoned definitions, such as those stipulated by Kuroki (2018), who classified RM under three categories: betrayal of truth (fabrication/falsification), betrayal of trust (plagiarism, irreproducibility), and risk to health/safety. Furthermore, various academic and research institutions (Resnik et al., 2015) may also include violations of animal/human research ethics codes, conflict of interest (Botkin, 2018), vandalism, financial misappropriation of research funding and harassment of research workers as RM.

Behavioral misconduct (BM) in research is not as clearly or consensually defined but would include felonious or criminal acts, as well as abusive behaviors that are in violation of ethical principles, when these occur in research settings. Behavioral misconduct as described here should not be confused with research misbehaviors or questionable research practices, such as inappropriate authorship assignments, malpractices in the use of statistics, citation manipulations etc. (Bouter et al., 2016, Andrade, 2021). Some acts of BM, particularly sexual harassment (Witze, 2018; Johnson et al., 2018; Tenbrunsel et al., 2019; Widmann et al., 2025), have received much attention in the research community. As such, there are calls for such acts to be included as RM (Marín-Spiotta, 2018; Marín-Spiotta et al., 2022). Indeed, some scientific/learned societies, such as the American Geophysical Union (AGU), define sexual harassment as scientific misconduct (Kuo, 2017). There can be no doubt that acts of BM are detrimental to the practice and progress of science and research, some perhaps more than others. However, there are technical and conceptual issues in conflating BM with RM, particularly the principal RM acts of FFP.

In the paragraphs below, I shall first consider any direct link (or an apparent lack thereof) between acts in BM with research integrity violations. I further posit that even in the absence of a direct link, suspicions of RM could arise from confirmation of BM in at least two ways. I elaborate on these and argue that confirmation of cases of BM in research should prompt enquiries into possible RM.

THE APPARENT LACK OF A DIRECT LINK BETWEEN ACTS OF BEHAVIORAL MISCONDUCT WITH RESEARCH INTEGRITY

Resnik (2019) weighed BM against the four conditions for including a behavior in the federal definition of misconduct: behavior is widely regarded as highly unethical, significantly threatens the integrity of science, can be clearly defined and existing methods of enforcement or deterrence are inadequate. He concluded that the acts of BM, unlike all the acts of FFP, meet three of these conditions at best but not all four (Resnik, 2019). For example, there is perhaps no need to include sexual harassment in the definition of RM since existing laws and institutional policies already prohibit and deter this behavior. Although this need not prevent BM from going under the umbrella of RM, it does suggest that the acts of BM are somewhat not on par with FFP as far as integrity in research is concerned.

The notion of BM—RM inequality in terms of research integrity can also be viewed as a disconnection. That BM is bad for science and research is clear based on its consequences to science and research, but there is a discrepancy in terms of the subject of “intent” (Yeo-Teh & Tang, 2024). In acts of FFP, the RM perpetrator’s intent in transgression directly pertains to data, results, and publications. The latter might be fabricated, falsified, or plagiarized in a perpetrator’s errant acts to gain unearned and undeserved gratification and recognition. Acts of BM, however, are usually rather remote from these items or affect them only indirectly. For example, while it is conceivable that BM such as sexual harassment would impact science and research negatively, it is unclear how research integrity per se might be directly violated or otherwise affected by the harassment. In the adjudication of RM, the preponderance of evidence for an intent to violate research integrity is important if not critical (Caron et al., 2023; Yeo-Teh & Tang, 2024). Thus, the disconnect between BM and research integrity violation(s) would confound a seamless inclusion or grouping of acts of BM under the RM.

BEHAVIORAL MISCONDUCT’S POSSIBLE LINKS TO RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND RESEARCH MISCONDUCT

From a different perspective, however, there could be, albeit less obvious, connections between BM and research integrity in at least two ways. Firstly, perpetrators with flawed moral characters are entirely capable of committing multiple different types of misdemeanors or felonies. This is often encountered in crimes in which theft/robbery is accompanied by physical/sexual assaults, or vice versa. Secondly, the BM of a perpetrator might create strains or stresses in people around him. The general strain theory for RM (Haven & van Woudenberg, 2021), based on that developed for crime and delinquency (Agnew, 1992), suggests that strains or stress as well as social injustice impacting upon research workers could promote RM. Such strains could be generated by the behavior of BM perpetrators. I explore these two possibilities below.

BM might be linked to personality deficiencies that might predispose a perpetrator to RM. It is well known that the Dark Triad of personality traits (i.e. narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) are associated with sexual harassment proclivity (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2016), and McHoskey's (2001) findings had earlier suggested an association of Machiavellianism with sexual aggression. Not surprisingly, dark personality traits are also associated with a propensity for RM transgression. Machiavellianism's association with academic dishonesty is well known (Prince and Wang, 2024). Tjldink and colleagues have shown in a study of 535 Dutch biomedical scientists that Machiavellianism was positively associated with self-reported research misbehavior (Tjldink et al., 2016). The above correlations do not of course mean that individuals who are high on the Machiavellistic trait and who engage in sexual harassment will also commit acts of RM, but the potential increase in likelihood of such should not be ignored.

BM could also have been made conducive by organizational deficiencies such as lax rules and poor discipline within a laboratory, research group, an institution or a community. The same deficiencies are conceivably also conducive to RM (i.e. "bad barrels", as opposed to "bad apples" (Sovacool, 2008; Aubert Bonn & Pinxten, 2019). A research group or laboratory in which the highest standard of scientific/academic professionalism and respect for people is not upheld, or an institution or community that does not take the above seriously, cannot be relied upon to sustain research integrity. This does not mean that we are looking at a large number of bad actors, all of whom with ill intentions. In a system that is conducive to bad behavior, there might simply be a small number of perpetrators of BM who remain unchecked or tend to stay aloof from repercussions, sanctions, and punishment. The others, victimized, fearful or disillusioned, tend to steer clear of these and their work, leaving the latter further unscrutinized in terms of research integrity.

Even if a perpetrator of BM does not actively violate research integrity, others associated with him or who have suffered from his acts might tend to do so. Abusive and exploitative behaviors, particularly when exhibited by those in power, could potentially promote RM. In particular, the BM perpetrator might create an ambience of injustice and malicious competition in his immediate research group or laboratory. In desperate attempts to appease, or simply to avoid opportunities for personal contact, those under threat might be forced into transgressions. For example, it is entirely conceivable that a victim of harassment, disgusted by the departure from professional decency and value, suffering alone in fear of losing her career, yet yearning to move on from the current predicament, might resort to acts of RM just for a quicker getaway. Furthermore, others within the group, stressed by the loss of core values in science and perceived injustice, may resort to transgressions to stay competitive. Again, that the above might happen is far from certain, but the increase in likelihood of research integrity transgressions under stress is a real concern.

BEHAVIORAL MISCONDUCT SHOULD PROMPT RESEARCH MISCONDUCT INVESTIGATIONS

The above arguments suggest that BM, if confirmed, should reasonably raise suspicions of RM. As such, a preliminary look into the latter would seem prudent. However, concern for RM might be overshadowed by the sheer gravity of BM, and when perpetrators resign or are dismissed from an institution based on BM conviction, potential research integrity violations might simply fade into the background, buried if not entirely forgotten. A case in point is that of a prominent biologist dismissed for sexual harassment (Grove, 2021). While the perpetrator's work has been highly influential, there are many postings on PubPeer highlighting instances of image irregularities, errors and contradictory data by others in several of his key papers. These might have prompted an institutional investigation, but any follow-up or outcome has remained unclear.

I propose that we should exercise due diligence, and for deliberations on BM in research, such as sexual misconduct, to be accompanied by a preliminary exercise of fact finding or inquiry on possible RM on the part of the perpetrator and his close research associates and underlings. This can be done by an appointed institutional official independently from the BM inquiry panel and should be done even in the absence of any specific whistleblowing with regards to RM. Further and more elaborate investigations should follow if evidence of RM transgression presents itself. It should be borne in mind that RM investigation is important not simply for retributive justice to be served, but more critically for the literature to be corrected and cleaned. Compared to BM, a proper response to RM would be just as important in preserving the reputation and trust of institutions and scientific enterprises by the researchers and the public alike.

CONCLUSION

The arguments presented above suggest tangible connections between BM and RM, centering on the perpetrators as well as a toxic environment created within their vicinity. Realising that these transgressions are plausibly connected or could co-occur would allow investigations to be conducted, with sanctions delivered, in a more thorough and effective manner.

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