Book Review

Book Review: Promoting a Culture of Integrity – A Critical Review

A Guide to Responsible Research
Ana Marušić (Ed.), 2023
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Introduction

Integrity in research is often overlooked as mere formality and the focus is laid entirely on building the actual findings and interpretations in research. Despite its seeming simplicity and absolute dependency on researcher's personal moral high-ground, research integrity is becoming increasingly critical due to growing cases of misconduct in research, ethical lapses and crisis of reproducible findings. Universities, funding agencies and journals are now calling for transparency in research with emphasis on accountability, open science (which refers to making research/knowledge openly accessible to everyone) and trustworthy scholarship. Responsible research practices have become central to academic excellence. A famous quote by Samuel Johnson, "Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful" remains a profoundly relevant reflection across time.

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Responsible research has multifaceted dimensions ranging from standards of ethical research to environments that facilitate such research. Ana Marušić's (2023) edited volume *A Guide to Responsible Research* addresses those dimensions through its multiple chapters that have been crafted by experts in their fields with discussions on a wide array of topics including research environments, data management, peer review, authorship, mentoring, misconduct, and open science. This book is a part of the Collaborative Bioethics series and, much like many other books in the series, it blends ethical inquiry with practical guidance for researchers. Early-career researchers, research supervisors and ethics committee members may find this book particularly useful, whereas institutional leaders may draw references from this book to prepare research integrity training and academic policy formulation. My aim in critically reviewing this book is to evaluate its effectiveness in addressing contemporary research challenges and its applicability in the context of higher education and research institutions.

Key Takeaways

The authors in each chapter of this guide have very cleverly woven theory into practical tools such as checklists, case studies, and policy recommendations. The guide advocates for a system-wide commitment to embedding integrity, transparency, and trust in global academic practice while challenging the traditional "publish or perish" mindset. The key idea is that research integrity is both an individual responsibility and an institutional obligation.

There are nine chapters in this book each of which covers specific areas of responsible research. In this section, I discuss some of the common themes across authors and provide my analysis.

Research Environment- Why Should Institutions Care?

The very first chapter of this guide brings to light one of the key elements of research integrity that often goes unnoticed- Research environment. Barać (2023) frames the research environment as being prerogative in ensuring academic integrity and places the accountability of research institutions in drawing awareness on this issue among its researchers. She draws a clear distinction between *organizational culture*, which she defines as the underlying values, assumptions, and shared meanings in a research institution, and *organizational climate*, which refers to how these policies and

structures are perceived and experienced by researchers. The crucial argument in this chapter is the growing need for institutions to move beyond symbolic commitments to integrity by formulating policies and start embedding ethical infrastructure such as Research Integrity Promotion Plans (RIPP) with relevant officers and ombudspersons, active ethics committees, and transparent codes of conduct. In Nepal, I believe Barać's emphasis on institutional responsibility is especially relevant because most of our institutions have neither dedicated integrity officers nor pro-active mechanisms to enforce research integrity (Dhakal, 2016, 2023; Rijal & Dahal, 2022). Ultimately, early researchers end up struggling to understand the integrity criteria and may unwittingly breach those criteria.

Despite her focus on the role that institutions play in maintaining research integrity, Barać still places the onus on researchers to navigate through complex systems to meet integrity criteria. I, however, believe she could have analyzed institutional accountability more forcefully considering the role it plays in resource-constrained environments that may push researchers to "either publish or perish" (Barać, 2023, p. 11).

Effective Mentorship- Etching Integrity Into the Veins of Early Researchers

Mentorship has been seen as a cornerstone of research integrity, and Tokalić (2023) explores the pivotal role of mentorship and supervision in shaping responsible researchers. The author sees responsible supervision not just as a guidance in academic performance but also a model that shapes ethical behavior in emerging researchers. The case scenario she provided was very relevant in our local context. Situations where doctoral (or any degree per say) student's struggle with an absentee mentor resulting in not just compromise to academic quality but also adding mental load and ethical underdevelopment in emerging researchers is rather common. Lack of resources, limited supervision and/or mentorship structures and inadequate institutional training and development for research aspirants have been listed as key barriers to responsible research in the guide.

To mitigate the silent but obvious gap between researcher and supervisor, Tokalić advocates for a mentorship culture where a mentee's autonomy is respected by clearly communicating and mutually agreeing upon expectations. She suggests having written agreements that clarify goals, timelines and roles for both parties. Cultivating such

culture would not only encourage mentors to engage in continuous professional development of themselves and their mentees but also require institutions to recognize and reward mentorship in promotion criteria.

Tokalić takes her examination of mentoring and supervision beyond formal training into what she calls the "hidden curriculum" which she describes as the unspoken expectations, norms, and values transmitted through academic relationships. This is what shapes the culture of integrity into new researchers, and the author argues that good mentorship can cultivate research integrity across generations of scholars. Adding to this human-centered approach, Viđak (2023) examines collaborative research and the need for trust, mutual respect, and shared expectations across disciplines and national boundaries. These relational dynamics are portrayed not as soft skills but as ethical obligations.

Despite addressing such visible and invisible aspects of mentorship, the idea of diversity and inclusion is not directly discussed in the guide. Including the role that intersectionality and cultural/ ethical diversity plays in the mentorship dynamics might have made the guide universally relatable.

Transparency as the Foundation of Research Lifecycle

While talking about the safeguards in research environment, which includes codes of conduct, guidelines, and other types of regulation, the authors highlight transparency as the best safeguard for responsible research. Viđak, who authored the fourth chapter of this guide describes transparency as a foundational value that should guide every phase of the research process. The role of transparency in disclosure is especially focused on during discussions on conflicts of interest to maintain public trust and institutional credibility.

In a similar manner, Roje (2023) sees transparency in research process as a critical aspect of responsible data management. For her, the entire process must be built around the FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable). She highlights transparency in data management, which includes both field based and literature based data, as both technical requirement and moral responsibility. Furthermore, she talks about following accurate citation and copyright protocols when using open access resources, and encourages institutions to require/ support open science through training and allocating resources. Yet, I feel this guide could benefit with some discussions

around the practical limitations that researchers or institutions may face in ensuring transparency such as conflict between open data policies and funding limitations or technological barriers.

Apart from transparency in disclosure and data management, Matas, who authored the seventh chapter of this guide finds transparency necessary in peer review systems and calls for impartiality, constructive critique, and respect for confidentiality during the process. These systems play a critical role in analyzing vulnerabilities such as bias, reviewer misconduct, and lack of accountability, and the entire process must be open, transparent and recorded. Overall, transparency is seen (in rather simple terms) as the glue that holds ethical research together.

From Field Notes to FAIR Principles

The credibility, transparency, and reproducibility of research hinge on effective data management. Roje emphasizes the importance of clear, feasible, and ethically sound data collection methods, including obtaining appropriate consent and using reliable collection tools. She advocates for Data Management Plans (DMPs) that are regularly updated, include comprehensive metadata, and ensure secure data disposal and storage. Matas highlights the significance of careful publication and dissemination practices in maintaining research integrity, asserting that publication is part of an ongoing ethical commitment. He warns against practices like selective reporting and data manipulation, which can compromise the trustworthiness of research.

Disputes regarding authorship of the research is also very common, and one way this can be mitigated, according to Matas, is by agreeing in ownership and contributions at the start of the research process and acknowledging contributions from non-authors (technical staff, advisors, etc.) The report dissemination process must be broad and abide by open science, and it should reach relevant stakeholders, practitioners, and communities.

Safeguarding Integrity Through Ethical Reporting and Fair Inquiry

Research misconduct, often understood as fabrication, falsification and plagiarism undermines trust in researchers and their work. The guide emphasizes the importance of institutional culture in promoting ethical research behavior and addressing questionable practices proactively. Whistleblowing is highlighted as a vital safeguard for research

integrity, despite the personal risks it poses to individuals, including potential retaliation. To foster an environment that encourages reporting of unethical behavior, the guide recommends protective measures for whistleblowers such as confidentiality, clarity in reporting channels, and accessibility, thus promoting a culture that values integrity over stigma.

In cases where institutions receive allegations of misconduct, they must ensure the case is handled fairly, and due process is followed with transparency. According to the authors, the best way to achieve this is by first establishing independent investigating committees and ensuring that inquiries are timely and impartial. There must be clear communication with all parties involved and no undue blame should be placed before the investigation is over. Institutions must recognize the difference between honest errors and questionable research practices or deliberate misconduct. Following the investigation, all necessary sanctions must be transparent and consistent with the institution's established policies.

My Reflections on Balancing Ideals and Realities

A Guide to Responsible Research is a remarkable and timely endeavor in providing a holistic view of research integrity and its greatest strength is that it integrates institutional policies, individual responsibilities and community-wide norms in an engaging manner. Its multi-author approach has given this guide diverse perspective, and the use of practical examples in clear and comprehensive sentences, case studies, and conceptual frameworks makes this guide accessible to a wide range of readers. The chapters are well-organized, practical, and act as ethically grounded roadmap for fostering research integrity. The themes covered in this guide fit its purpose of making its readers understand that integrity exists neither in isolation nor in mere principle, but rather in the interconnected system of practices.

Throughout its chapters, the guide consistently emphasizes both ethical and technical dimensions of integrity, and holds both researchers and institutions accountable. The authors are able to bring instances of unintended misconduct into perspective through their case studies and ask reflective questions that makes readers think more carefully about situations where they might have violated ethical integrity without knowing or intending.

Despite such strengths, this guide is limited in its practicability due to its assumption of the presence of adequate institutional resources, supportive governance systems and implementation of policies. For a developing country like Nepal that is not only resource- constrained but also lacks strong institutional policies and structures this guide may not be fully applicable. Further, Nepal is a diverse country, and it's institutional and research practices are rooted in deeper cultural and socio-political factors that ultimately share and define research behavior. This guide's focus on compliance and procedural safeguards does not cover the intricacy of such diversity.

Overall, it is a resourceful reference for researchers and institutions that combines practical guides with theoretical standing. Although the guide emphasizes structured policies and well-resourced systems which may not be applicable in all contexts, its core idea of transparency, accountability and ethical integrity are universally relevant. This guide is a unique blend of policy, practice and ethical reflection and so, it offers a timeless framework for cultivating a research culture that is rooted in trust and accountability.

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