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From 2015 to 2023, eight years of empirical research on research integrity: A scoping review

Baptiste Vendé

OFIS and Sorbonne Université, France

Research on research integrity (RI) has grown exponentially over the past several decades. Although the earliest publications emerged in the 1980s, more than half of the existing literature has been produced within the last five years. Given that the most recent comprehensive literature review is now ten years old, the present study aims to extend and update previous findings.

We conducted a systematic search of the Web of Science and Constellate databases for articles published between 2015 and 2023. Additionally, we used the previous scoping review as a benchmark to identify emerging trends and shifts. To structure our overview, we addressed the following seven questions about the field:

- What topics does the empirical literature on RI explore?
- What are the primary objectives of the empirical literature on RI?
- What methodologies are most prevalent in the empirical literature on RI?
- What populations or organizations are studied in the empirical literature on RI?
- Where are the empirical studies on RI conducted?
- Where is the empirical literature on RI published?
- To what degree is the general literature on RI grounded in empirical research?

Our search yielded a total of 3,282 studies, of which 660 articles met our inclusion criteria. Notably, we observed a significant shift in methodologies: the reliance on interviews and surveys decreased from 51% to 30%, whereas the application of meta-scientific methods increased from 17% to 31%. In terms of theoretical orientation, the previously dominant “Bad Apple” hypothesis declined from 54% to 30%, while the “Wicked System” hypothesis correspondingly increased from 46% to 52%. Furthermore, there has been a pronounced trend toward testing solutions, rising from 31% to 56% at the expense of merely describing the problem, which fell from 69% to 44%.

Two gaps highlighted eight years ago by the previous scoping review remain unresolved. Research on decision makers (e.g., scientists in positions of power, policymakers, accounting for 3%) and the peer review system (0.3%) continues to be underexplored. This study found a third gap, as the low number of research on the private research sector and patents (4.7%) is also concerning. The gaps on decision makers and the private sector are increasingly problematic. The rise of the “Wicked System” hypothesis put heighten importance on the decision makers. The private research sector is roughly three times larger than the public research sector [1] and current dynamics to bring closer the private sector and universities create the risk for RI research to lose in relevancy if it does not take more into account the private research sector.

[1]. OECD, OECD Publishing 2023, Volume 2022 Issue 2, (2023).