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How transparent should institutions be about research misconduct?

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Background. The requirement for transparency in investigating research misconduct is supported by ethical principles outlined in the ALLEA European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. Reliability ensures the quality of research through transparent investigations that prevent errors and reveal the truth. Honesty involves conducting misconduct investigations with integrity and truthfulness. Respect entails treating all parties involved in investigations with dignity and fairness, ensuring impartiality and justice. Accountability holds individuals and institutions responsible for their actions, demonstrating commitment to ethical standards through transparent processes.

Methods. The study utilized a public consultation approach involving two methods: an anonymous online survey with multiple-choice and open questions, and semi-structured interviews. The survey was aimed at three groups: those directly involved in research practice, students, and the general public and was completed by 205 participants from 32 countries. Additionally, 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Atlas.ti.

Results. For the question “How transparent should an investigation of research misconduct cases be?” participants provided a broad range of views. In general, respondents emphasized the fundamental value of transparency and its positive implications for investigations of research misconduct cases, e.g., they suggested publicizing investigation reports, at least in the form of executive summaries, to drive up standards and change mentalities within the research community. However, respondents directly involved in research were more cautious, advocating for a nuanced approach to avoid negative consequences such as increased mistrust in science or unfair presumptions of guilt. They highlighted the need for transparency for involved parties while protecting the accused to prevent undue harm. Several interviewees emphasized that transparency is crucial for building and maintaining public trust in science and the investigative process. They advocated for institutions to be transparent about research misconduct cases to demonstrate a commitment to ethical standards and enhance accountability.

Potential solutions offered by participants included a tailored and proportionate approach, depending on the case, while respecting the public’s right to be informed. Some participants suggested separating the investigation process from its results, with limited publicity during the investigation to protect the work of investigators and broader transparency for the results.

Conclusions. The results indicate that while transparency is fundamentally valued for its positive implications, a balanced approach is necessary to avoid potential negative consequences such as mistrust in science or unfair presumptions of guilt. Reflective equilibrium can be used to find the right level of transparency by iteratively balancing the diverse views of stakeholders with ethical principles.

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