

NAVIGATING UNETHICAL PRACTICES AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MIDDLE-LEVEL ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP IN PAKISTAN**^{1,*}Shazia Shahzadi, ²Juhary Ali, ³Syed Shoab Shah, ⁴Naureen Munir and ⁵Muhammad Anees Farooque**¹Associate Prof, Faculty of Allied Health & Interdisciplinary Sciences, Health Services Academy Islamabad, Pakistan²Prof & Deputy Vice Chancellor, Asia e University Selangor, Malaysia³Lecturer, Department of Applied Psychology, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan⁴Professor & Dean Health Sciences Quaid School of Medicine (QSM), Islamabad, Pakistan⁵Assistant Prof, FAHIS, Health Services Academy Islamabad, Pakistan**Received 18th May 2024; Accepted 24th June 2024; Published online 30th July 2024**

Abstract

This article presents the qualitative findings of a study investigating the experiences of middle-level academic leaders with unethical practices and ethical dilemmas in their everyday work. An electronic survey was conducted with academic leaders from universities in various cities across Pakistan. The study reveals three key findings. Firstly, the complex environment within universities creates a fertile ground for ethical dilemmas to arise. Secondly, participants identified two primary types of unethical practices: educational deceit and incorrect behavior directed towards workforce team and students. Finally, the ethical dilemmas highlighted in the study centered on the conflict between the academic leaders' strong professional ethics and an ethic of care, as well as their adherence to supervisors' directives and institutional rules and policies.

Keywords: Academic, Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION**Ethics in the University Perspective**

Ethics is broadly defined as it is appropriate thought and behavior, focusing on what individuals ought to do and how they should conduct themselves (Hosmer, 1991). According to ethicists, questions of right and wrong are central to ethical inquiry (Ciulla, 2006). Peter Singer (1994) further describes ethics as a "set of rules, principles or ways of thinking that guide, or claim authority to guide, the actions of a particular group". Ethics also encompasses associations and how individuals should interrelate and coexist through one another (Freakley & Burgh, 2000). In current years, there has been increased media and public scrutiny of unethical behaviors within universities education. Examples of such behaviors include plagiarism by both staff and students, numerous structures of deceitful, sexual harassment occurring both within and outside the classroom, the exploitation of power, and the exchange of sexual favors or gifts for grades (Robie & Keeping, 2004; Ashford & Davis, 2006). Hanson (2009) argues that higher education faces a period where "institutional integrity and legitimacy is under fire" (p. 2), marking "the worst of times" both economically and ethically for the nation. Although Hanson refer these concerns are also relevant to many countries experiencing similar challenges. Margetson (1997) also asserts that the evolving environment in universities is "inimical to ethical quality and conflicts with academic work" (Ashford & Davis, 2006). Academic environment described by Margetson (1997) has undergone significant reform, aligning more closely with managerial practices that emphasize outcomes, key performance indicators, monitoring, measurement, and stringent accountability measures.

This transformation has led universities to adopt private-sector practices, where performance indicators are used to rank institutions, with those achieving higher rankings receiving more funding (Currie & Newson, 1998; Currie & Vidovich, 1998; Macfarlane, 2009). This competitive environment has commodified education, turning it into a product to be marketed, while many university staff are employed on temporary contracts, considered expendable by management. Such changes threaten to detach universities from an ethical perception (Fitzmaurice, 2008). These system-wide reforms have shifted significant power to executive leadership, giving senior managers more control over universities and diminishing the authority of academic staff (Doyle, as cited in Meek & Wood, 1997). Research by Currie and Vidovich (1998) found that many academics in both Pakistan and the United States reported declining consultation on major decisions, with power increasingly centralized among a few senior managers, such as vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors (Currie & Vidovich, 1998). The trend towards enhanced managerialism has led to the "micromanagement of academic work," resulting in academics losing autonomy and control over their professional activities (Currie & Vidovich, 1998, p. 169). Given the ongoing trend toward managerialism, these issues may be even further pronounced nowadays. A significant result of this managerialism has been the loss of ethical standards (Samier, 2008). This decline is credited to a focus on administrative rather than ethical answerability. Samier, drawing on Menzel, describes the recent environment as fostering "morally mute managers" who, while neither moral nor immoral, are "seduced by a sense of duty as competent purveyors of neutral information" (Menzel, as cited in Samier, 2008, p. 3). Samier also discusses the "passive evil" exhibited by managers who fail to address unethical behaviors or support others who challenge unethical practices within their organizations (Gottlieb & Sanzgiri, 1996). Moreover, leaders may engage in unethical conduct by pressuring staff to act against their ethical beliefs (Campbell, 2003; Helton &

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Ray, 2005). For example, in the perspective of schools, school psychologists in Jacob-Timm's (1999) study felt that directives from superiors to conduct inadequate assessments or withhold information from parents conflicted with their ethical beliefs about student welfare (Helton & Ray, 2005). This literature suggests that the evolving context within universities has created an environment where ethical issues are becoming more visible and challenged

Emergence of ethical dilemmas

Ethical dilemmas are well-defined as verdicts that necessitate choosing among opposing moralities, often within composite and valued environments (Ehrich, Cranston, & Kimber, 2005). The rise of such dilemmas is unsurprising given the pressures and complexities inherent in contemporary organizations (Whitton, 1998). Universities, in particular, are environments where academic leaders face conflicting strains and burdens in decision-making that impacts various stakeholders, including students, colleagues, the local public, companies, employees and business partners (Cerych et al., 1997) highlight several tensions within higher education, such as the need to balance excellence with egalitarianism, reconcile individual demand for education with labor market requirements, and manage the differing aspirations of those involved in higher education against socio-economic constraints and resource availability. A substantial body of literature has discovered the ethical issues faced by academics (Robertson & Grant, 1982; Robie & Keeping, 2004; Strom-Gottfried & D'Aprix, 2006; Fitzmaurice, 2008). Strom-Gottfried and D'Aprix (2006) recognized four categories of dilemmas expected to rise for academic staff in their research, teaching, and provision roles: authorship credit, conflicts of interest, handling underperforming staff, and students' right to privacy. Robertson and Grant (1982) noted dilemmas such as balancing support with rigorous student evaluation, maintaining neutrality versus indoctrination in teaching, and managing conflicting demands between research and teaching. Fitzmaurice (2008) argued that university teaching provides fertile ground for ethical dilemmas, as it often involves complex judgments where no straightforward solutions exist. Research by Cranston, Ehrich, Kimber, and Starr (2012) found that two-thirds of 174 academics across three Pakistani universities had encountered or observed ethical dilemmas, suggesting these issues are relatively common. However, according to Wilson (1982), ethical considerations in research receive more formal oversight compared to teaching, where ethical concerns may not be as frequently addressed. Wilson (1982) advocates for prioritizing ethical questions in teaching to ensure the best decisions are made for students. The following section examines three ethical perspectives relevant to academic decision-making: professional ethics, an ethic of care, and institutional ethics.

Professional ethics

Professional ethics extend everyday ethical principles into the specific practices of a profession (Campbell, 2003). It encompasses values and beliefs that guide professionals in their communications with others, such as clients (Wesley & Buysse, 2006). Discussions on professional ethics often focus on formal codes of ethics, which provide guidelines for appropriate behavior within a specific field. These codes outline principles that establish standards for ethical conduct and behavior. According to Baumgarten (1982), university teaching is a different professional activity with exceptional

purposes and obligations, which include maintaining standards, fairness, and a commitment to assisting others. The American Association of University Professors' (1987) Declaration on Professional Ethics emphasizes five core standards: scholarly competence, ethical evaluation of students, fairness in student assessment, respectful treatment of colleagues, and support for academic freedom (Gottfried & Aprix, 2006). In Pakistani, university codes of practice are often based on the Public Sector Ethics Act 1994 (Queensland Parliamentary Counsel, 2010), which summarizes moralities such as respect for law and persons, integrity, diligence, and efficiency. While codes of conduct provide general guidance, they may be perceived as restricted in addressing the complexities of everyday dilemmas (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). Nonetheless, many scholars argue that ethical codes are vital for fostering an ethical culture within organizations (Whitton, 1998; Gregory & Hicks, 1999; Pajo & McGhee, 2003).

Ethic of care

The ethic of care, rooted in activist scholarship, is a form of feature ethics that emphasizes relationships and personal interactions (Freakley & Burgh, 2000). Feminist theorists like Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1992) highlight the importance of love, respect, and sensitivity towards others, positioning these elements at the center of ethical decision-making. Advocates of this approach emphasize "situational sensitivity" and prioritize the relational dynamics in ethical considerations (Dempster, Carter, Freakley, & Parry, 2004). This perspective is particularly relevant in teacher-student relationships, where responsiveness to the changing needs of others is crucial (Campbell, 2003). Fitzmaurice (2008) analyzed statements from lecturers completing an advanced certification in higher education, revealing that the views on good education included a focus on honesty, respect, and care. A key theme was "professional values and morality," emphasizing fairness and personal commitment to integrity (Fitzmaurice, 2008). According to Nixon (as cited in Fitzmaurice, 2008), academic practice should embody truthfulness, respect, and authenticity.

Institutional Ethics

Institutional ethics emphasizes on how persons navigate ethical issues inside organizations (Preston & Sampford, 2002). It posits that ethical behavior is influenced by the organizational culture; acting ethically is more feasible in an ethical environment than in one (Preston et al., 2002). Building institutional ethics involves integrating ethical practices into the core measures and decision-making procedures of organizations. Initial steps include implementing codes of conduct and policies outlining acceptable behavior, which should be part of a broader approach to foster ethical institutions. However, Preston et al. (2002) discuss for a comprehensive "ethics regime" to transform institutions into more ethical entities. Leaders play a crucial role in setting an ethical tone and fostering a culture of open dialogue and diverse viewpoints (Gottlieb & Sanzgiri, 1996; Ciulla, 2006). Ethical leadership involves balancing integrity with respect for differing interests and values (Maak & Pless, 2006). This paper explores leadership in universities and examines middle-level academic leaders' experiences with ethical dilemmas and unethical practices. The following section details the research methodology.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a wider plan to investigate the perceptions of ethical dilemmas among academic leaders across various Pakistani universities. The study targeted academic leaders in course coordination roles at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. These individuals, considered middle-level leaders, were chosen due to their position between senior managers (like deans) and non-leadership faculty, which likely exposes them to a range of ethical challenges in their interactions with students and staff. Participants voluntarily completed an e-survey, assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The survey included two main prompts: (a) comments on the prevalence of ethical practices and dilemmas in their work situation, and (b) a description of a specific ethical dilemma encountered and its resolution. Out of 174 responses, many participants provided detailed feedback, reflecting their engagement with the topic. Data analysis involved identifying, coding, and categorizing responses to uncover themes related to ethical practices and dilemmas, guided by categories discussed in the literature review (Patton, 1990). The results and subsequent discussion will be presented in the following sections.

FINDINGS

The e-survey revealed that approximately two-thirds of participants had either experienced or observed ethical dilemmas in their professional settings. Their feedback highlighted various examples of ethical issues and unethical practices, reflecting on how their university's organizational culture influenced these experiences.

Organizational culture

A minority of participants expressed satisfaction with their university's ethical standards, attributing this to a robust organizational culture that fostered ethical behavior. One participant described their workplace as "a very collegial and supportive environment where community values and commitment are highly valued," noting a vigorous culture of ethical practice towards both associates and students. In contrast, the majority identified significant issues affecting their work environment, such as the commodification and corporatization of higher education, which they felt undermined ethical standards. One participant contrasted corporate and academic goals, highlighting a conflict between the pursuit of cost efficiency and maintaining excellence in teaching and research. The shift towards viewing education as a commodity was noted as particularly problematic, with pressures on faculty to expedite student progress and accommodate international students struggling with language barriers. One participant remarked, "The conceptualization of university education as a commodity places significant importance on results rather than learning," reflecting concerns over the quality of education. Participants also pointed out resource limitations leading to increased responsibilities for junior staff and challenging decisions about program sustainability. As one participant observed, "We are constantly having to choose between two equally necessary elements... forced – mainly through resource impoverishment – to jettison necessary things." Many comments indicated a "closed culture" where questioning unethical practices was discouraged. A participant highlighted how staff concerns were

"ignored/devalued by senior staff," suggesting a lack of open dialogue about ethical issues. Additionally, issues of power misuse were noted, such as in cases where "the previous Head of the School departed under ambiguous circumstances," implying procedural shortcomings and a lack of natural justice. Overall, the findings underscore a need for improved ethical discourse and support structures within universities to address the identified challenges and foster a more ethical academic environment.

Unethical Practices

Participants in the survey provided detailed insights into the unethical practices they perceived within their universities, which were categorized into 2 main areas: academic dishonesty and unethical conduct or behavior. These areas were further divided into specific sub-categories, revealing a broad spectrum of issues.

Academic Dishonesty

The predominant concern under academic dishonesty was the erosion of academic standards. One participant highlighted the issue, noting, "There is too great an emphasis on shifting standards to meet the (in) capabilities of students in order to keep failure rates low... This amounts to a compromising of standards" (Participant, as cited in study). Many respondents reported that lowered standards allowed students who did not merit passing grades to advance, with one noting, "Pressure was exerted to give students passing grades when the quality of their work did not warrant it" (Participant, as cited in study). There were also instances where the pressure to pass fee-paying international students was perceived as an issue, with comments such as, "The culture of the unit dictated that failing an international student was seen as cultural insensitivity, while domestic students faced no such scrutiny". Plagiarism emerged as a significant concern, often noted when detected but inadequately addressed. One participant recounted, "A student was accused of plagiarism, which he admitted. The lecturer failed the student, but this decision was overruled by the Dean" (Participant, as cited in study). Additionally, there were reports of dishonesty involving both students and staff. Students were noted for falsifying information and submitting work late, while staff were occasionally dishonest about authorship of academic materials, as illustrated by one case where "a lecturer claimed to have created several 'new' courses, which were later discovered to have been developed by a previous lecturer who received no credit".

Unethical Conduct or Behavior

Unethical conduct was classified into seven main types, including exploitation of junior or sessional staff, bullying, prejudice, sexual impropriety, neglect of strategies plans, or guidelines, absence of professional ethics or care, and breaches of confidentiality. Among these, the most frequently reported issues were bullying, exploitation of junior staff, and failure to adhere to institutional guidelines. For instance, many participants described experiences of bullying or personal disputes affecting the work environment, and noted that the exploitation of sessional staff often went un-addressed. Additionally, instances of staff ignoring established guidelines were commonly cited, reflecting broader issues within institutional culture (Table 1).

Table 1. Types of Unethical Practices and Examples Provided by Candidates

Type of Unethical Practices	Examples from Candidates
Exploitation of junior staff	"Early career academics, eager for financial support and research opportunities, are frequently exploited."
Bullying or personal disputes towards staff	"Some staff engage in bullying to exert control over students, threatening failure if demands are not met."
Favoritism	"An academic was seen giving preferential treatment to a family member, including bypassing formal assessments."
Sexual impropriety	"At a previous job, a staff member was involved in inappropriate relationships with students."
Non-compliance with policies and guidelines	"As a course coordinator, I observed staff often bypassing official manuals or Codes of Conduct, relying instead on informal advice and making decisions on the fly."
Lack of professional ethics or care	"Lecturers sometimes avoid discussing marked papers with students, trusting the evaluations of less experienced team members without review."
Confidentiality issues	"There were instances of inappropriate discussions regarding job applicants and hiring decisions."

Nature of ethical dilemmas

The answers indicated that many samples experienced significant anxiety and stress once confronted with ethical dilemmas. One participant described the process as causing considerable distress, emphasizing its difficulty and the effort involved. Participants encountered various dilemmas, including conflicts of interest, plagiarism, and issues with underperforming staff and students. These dilemmas often pitted their professional ethics against conflicting values. From the feedback, three primary types of dilemmas emerged.

Professional ethics versus supervisor's directives

Participants frequently described situations where conflicts arose among their professional ethics and their supervisor's directives. The pressure often centered around being instructed to compromise on standards or pass certain students, which went against their professional judgment. For instance:

"I have seen course coordinators, along with both part-time and full-time staff, being pressured to increase students' marks contrary to their own evaluations." "I was explicitly told by the Head of School to 'lower my teaching standards, just like everyone else has had to do.'"

Professional ethics versus ethic of care

Around numerous instances where academics faced a conflict between their professional ethics and the ethic of care. For example, one participant described the dilemma of deciding "whether to pass a student who is borderline." Another example involved a student who unsuccessful his final supplemental exam; the dilemma was whether to pass this student, an international student whose family was traveling to another country for his graduation. The following account highlights one participant's struggle to equilibrium the benefits of a colleague (reflecting the ethic of care) with the needs of the students in the package (encompassing both professional ethics and the ethic of care). "My colleague was going through an exceptionally challenging time due to chronic illness and a family tragedy, which significantly impacted her teaching effectiveness and overall performance. She requested to coordinate a specific foundational subject that required a unique orientation and strong rapport with the students. At that moment, I doubted her ability to fulfill that role effectively. I felt torn between the responsibility to treat and support my colleague fairly and the obligation to address the needs of the students."

Professional ethics versus rules and policies

Several examples highlighted conflicts among professional ethics and the university's directions and rules, which often

mandated a specific course of action. The following statement illustrates the tension an academic leader might feel when institutional policies encounter with what they believe is in the greatest interest of the students: "Faculty frequently asks us to implement initiatives that do not necessarily align with the pedagogical needs of the majority of students. "Some apprehensions were raised regarding rules on additional assessments. In some cases, the conflict was so significant that it led to resignation: "Being required to provide supplementary assessments for students who have shown a complete lack of commitment to their studies, just to give them a chance to pass. The current policy regarding supplementary assessments for students earning a grade of 2 or 3 was one of the main reasons for my resignation."

To encounter or not to encounter? is the problem

A significant subject emerging from the facts was the dilemma of whether to confront unethical practices. Many participants expressed a reluctance to challenge such practices, providing reasons like "fear of legal action," being "too busy," perceiving it as "too difficult and time-consuming," or having learned from past experiences that challenging the status quo could lead to adverse effects. The initial example demonstrates a result to address student plagiarism, while the another reveals a participant's decision not to address it due to the "personal cost": "Several students were caught plagiarizing on an assignment. There were two options: (a) follow the university's procedures and report the misconduct, or (b) overlook it and assign low marks. The university process required extensive paperwork and detailed documentation, making it far easier to ignore the issue and simply grade the assignments. Nonetheless, our team chose to adhere to the formal procedure to ensure fairness to all students." "In cases where staff reported student plagiarism, the students were not penalized. In response, the students made unrelated accusations against the staff, leading to a highly unpleasant situation."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this research align with existing literature, which identifies various forms of misconduct, such as plagiarism, cheating, dishonesty (Woody, 2008), sexual indecency (Robie & Keeping, 2004), and misuse of power (Ashford & Davis, 2006), as prevalent issues in university settings. This study similarly highlighted these concerns, particularly the ethical challenges faced by academics in maintaining professional standards during the evaluation of student work. This issue is unsurprising, given that assessing student performance is a core aspect of academic responsibilities (Robertson & Grant, 1982). Many participants viewed the practice of inflating grades as fundamentally unfair, violating the principle of academic honesty and undermining

professional codes of conduct that emphasize fairness and integrity in dealing with students (Campbell, 2003; QUT MOPP, 2012). Similar to the findings in Colnerud's study (as cited in Campbell, 2003), where teachers reported anxiety when asked to punish undeserving students, some academics in this study expressed distress when instructed to overlook or not penalize inappropriate student behaviors such as cheating and plagiarism. While a few academic leaders described their institutions as having a supportive, collaborative culture that fosters ethical behavior, most participants reported otherwise. They observed unethical practices being ignored or even encouraged by supervisors or senior management, reflecting a concerning trend. This raises the critical question of whether to challenge unethical behavior or remain passive. Most participants opted not to confront these behaviors, citing reasons such as fear of repercussions or perceived futility, suggesting a growing tolerance for ethical violations, which supports to a culture of misconduct (Preston et al., 2002). Participants recognized broader factors influencing the university environment, particularly the tension between corporate and academic goals. This research identified three main types of ethical dilemmas: conflicts between professional ethics and supervisors' directives, between professional ethics and the ethic of care, between professional ethics and institutional rubrics, rules, strategies and policies.

Professional ethics contrasted with ethics of care

A key subject in this research was the conflict between academic leaders' desire to maintain professional morals and the ethic of care they felt toward students and staff (Fitzmaurice, 2008). This conflict emerged when decisions required balancing fairness and professional ethics against empathy or concern for individuals. Similar tensions were noted in study on school teachers (Campbell, 2003) and leaders (Cranston, Ehrlich & Kimber, 2006), where educators faced dilemmas between supporting underperforming colleagues and prioritizing student wellbeing. Campbell (2003) highlighted this challenge, citing cases where compassionate educators struggled with failing students who had made earnest efforts. This study found academic leaders faced similar dilemmas regarding grading decisions.

Professional ethics against rules and policies

Academic leaders often encountered conflicts between their professional values and university policies they considered unfair. For example, one leader resigned as course coordinator because she could not support the university's plan, policies on additional assessments. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) describe a tension between 'responsibility' (commitment to professional values) and 'accountability' (adherence to institutional mandates). While some leaders in the study felt that ethical dilemmas were uncommon due to clear rules, others suggested that understanding and following these policies is preferable to inconsistent decision-making. As Thompson (2004) notes, codes of conduct provide essential guidance for ethical decision-making, though they cannot resolve all dilemmas.

Professional ethics against supervisors' directives

Statements from numerous academic leaders highlighted that universities are inherently political institutions where power dynamics play a significant role in influencing decisions,

protecting interests, and achieving specific objectives (Blase & Anderson, 1995). Some participants noted instances where supervisors or senior management misused their authority to coerce or pressure course coordinators into actions that conflicted with their professional ethics. This reflects an authoritarian style of leadership (Blase & Anderson, 1995), characterized by minimal dialogue or cooperation with staff. Several academic leaders reported being directed to comply with instructions that contradicted their ethical values. Samier's (2008) concept of 'passive evil' and 'mute managers' aligns with participants' descriptions of supervisors who ignored or dismissed their concerns about unethical practices. Instances of pressure from supervisors have been observed in other studies as well (Campbell, 2003; Helton & Ray, 2005). Moreover, some academic leaders found their supervisors unsupportive when they raised questions about ethical issues. However, as Gottlieb and Sanzgiri (1996) argue, speaking out is crucial in addressing unethical behavior within organizations. They emphasize the importance of open dialogue and discussion to challenge and redefine ethical assumptions, fostering a culture of integrity.

The ethical dilemmas presented in the study underscore the requirement for ethical decision-making processes not just for persons and superintendents but also at the institutional level within universities (Preston et al., 2002). For educational institutions to genuinely embed ethical practices, leadership at all heights must play a pivotal role (Cranston et al., 2006). Leaders are instrumental in shaping organizational culture and promoting ethical decision-making by setting a positive example (Gottlieb & Sanzgiri, 1996). This study aligns with Strom-Gottfried and D'Aprix (2006), who advocate for opportunities that allow academic leaders to reflect on ethical dilemmas and how best to resolve them. Mahoney (2008) and Shapiro & Gross (2008) suggest that ethical reasoning should be an integral part of leadership training, incorporating case studies or real-life scenarios. Similarly, Robie and Keeping (2004) recommend training new staff using methods like role plays and simulations, while Woody (2008) stresses the need for university educators to learn how to apply ethical principles in complex academic settings. Despite these recommendations, ethics in university teaching has not received as much attention as ethics in research, which benefits from dedicated committees overseeing ethical compliance (Wilson, 1982; Mahoney, 2008). The findings of this study show that ethical challenges frequently rise in university education (Baumgarten, 1982; Wilson, 1982), indicating a need for professional development opportunities focused on ethics. A troubling aspect of this study is the apparent logic of ineffectiveness that many academics feel when faced with ethical issues in their practice. Even if academic leaders are better equipped for ethical dilemmas, meaningful change is unlikely unless the prevailing culture of universities evolves to prioritize institutional ethics. Leaders at all levels must foster open discussion and exchange from treating ethical decision-making as a friendless action (Norberg & Johansson, 2007).

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