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Exploring Moral Tension between Academic Integrity and Institutional Survival in Neoliberal Higher Education

Abdul Azis Muslimin [1]*, Sitti Nadirah [2], Syamsiah Depalina Siregar [3]
[1,2] Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia
[3] Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Mandailing Natal, Indonesia
[1]abdazizm@uin-alauddin.ac.id *, [2]sitti.nadirah@uin-alauddin.ac.id, [3]syamsiahdepalina@stain-madina.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Higher education has increasingly been shaped by neoliberal governance, managerial accountability, and performance-driven cultures that reconfigure academic work and professional ethics. Within this context, ethical issues in academia have largely been examined through normative frameworks and institutional policies, leaving limited attention to how such issues are experienced in everyday academic life. What remains insufficiently understood is how academics subjectively experience and interpret ethical dilemmas arising from tensions between moral integrity and institutional survival. Drawing on a hermeneutic phenomenological framework informed by Heideggerian notions of lived experience and moral agency, this study conceptualizes academic ethics not as a set of external rules, but as an interpretative and meaning-laden practice embedded in institutional lifeworlds. This study addresses this gap by employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived ethical experiences of academics working in contemporary higher education settings. Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews and reflective ethical narratives with academics who had sustained experience of institutional pressure. The data were analyzed using hermeneutic thematic analysis to identify meaning structures that reveal how ethical dilemmas are lived, interpreted, and negotiated over time. The findings show that ethical dilemmas are experienced as ongoing processes characterized by moral distress, ethical silence, negotiated integrity, and continuous meaning-making within institutional constraints. Specifically, participants described recurring tensions between performance metrics and pedagogical commitments, strategic compliance as a survival mechanism, and moments of reflexive resistance that reasserted personal moral identity. These findings demonstrate that ethical practice in higher education is shaped less by formal codes than by situated interpretative judgments formed within power-laden institutional contexts. These findings deepen understanding of academic ethics as a lived and interpretative phenomenon and suggest that future research and policy development should attend more closely to the experiential dimensions of ethical life in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has undergone profound transformations over recent decades, shaped by the growing influence of neoliberal policies, managerial governance, and market-oriented logics. Universities are increasingly positioned as competitive institutions driven by performance indicators, efficiency metrics, and measurable outputs such as publications, grants, and rankings (Lahmar, 2020). Within this context, academic work is no longer understood solely as a pursuit of knowledge or intellectual inquiry, but also as a form of regulated labor embedded in systems of accountability, evaluation, and institutional control. These structural shifts have significantly altered the social and ethical landscape of academic life, influencing how academics understand their roles, responsibilities, and professional identities. However, while these macro-level transformations are widely discussed in higher education scholarship, limited attention has been given to how such structural pressures are experienced at the level of everyday academic life. In particular, the connection between institutional

reforms and the lived ethical experiences of academics remains insufficiently articulated in the literature.

Within this evolving landscape, ethical issues have become an integral yet often underexamined aspect of academic practice (Sismarwoto, 2020). Discussions surrounding academic integrity, professional ethics, and moral responsibility have largely focused on normative frameworks, institutional policies, and codes of conduct. While such approaches contribute to defining ethical standards, they frequently overlook how ethical challenges are actually lived and experienced by individuals within academic institutions. As a result, ethical dilemmas are often treated as abstract problems to be managed, rather than as deeply personal experiences that shape emotions, identities, and everyday decision-making.

The relevance of this phenomenon extends beyond institutional concerns to the level of human experience. Academics routinely encounter situations that require balancing personal moral convictions with institutional expectations, professional survival, and career advancement (Geest et al., 2025). These situations can evoke feelings of moral distress, internal conflict, silence, and ethical compromise, all of which unfold within specific social, cultural, and organizational contexts (Hastuti et al., 2025). Such experiences are not merely individual struggles; they reflect broader tensions within contemporary knowledge production and the moral conditions under which intellectual labor is performed (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Understanding these experiences is therefore essential for grasping how ethics operates as a lived reality rather than a purely theoretical construct. Yet, despite acknowledgment of these tensions, empirical investigations rarely foreground academics' own narratives as primary sources of knowledge about ethical life.

Given the complexity and depth of these experiences, there is a clear need for approaches that move beyond surface-level explanations and engage directly with the meanings individuals attribute to their ethical lives (Gunagama, 2025). Phenomenology offers a framework that prioritizes lived experience and subjective meaning, enabling an exploration of how ethical dilemmas are perceived, felt, and interpreted by those who encounter them. By focusing on experience as it is lived, phenomenological inquiry provides a way to illuminate the human dimensions of ethics within contemporary academic contexts, revealing aspects that remain obscured in policy-driven or normatively oriented accounts.

In recent years, research focusing on the lived experiences of academics has emerged as an important area of inquiry within humanistic studies, particularly in relation to ethics, identity, and professional life in higher education (Sitaresmi et al., 2025). Scholars have increasingly acknowledged that ethical issues in academia cannot be fully understood through institutional policies or normative frameworks alone, but must also be examined through the perspectives of those who experience ethical tension in their daily professional practices (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). This growing body of work has drawn attention to how academics navigate moral responsibility, professional expectations, and personal values within increasingly complex and regulated institutional environments.

Despite this growing interest, significant methodological challenges remain in capturing the depth and complexity of ethical experience (Sumarwati & Saddhono, 2025). Much of the existing literature relies on quantitative surveys, policy analyses, or critical discourse approaches that prioritize measurable indicators or textual critique . While these methods offer valuable insights into structural conditions and dominant narratives, they often struggle to access the subjective, emotional, and interpretative dimensions of ethical life (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). Ethical dilemmas, moral distress, and experiences of silence are frequently internal, tacit, and situational, making them difficult to articulate through standardized instruments or detached analytical frameworks.

These methodological limitations have resulted in a fragmented understanding of ethical phenomena in academic contexts (Sukmawati, 2025). Previous approaches tend to identify ethical problems without fully illuminating how such problems are lived, felt, and given meaning by academics themselves. As a consequence, the essence of ethical experience how individuals make

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sense of moral conflict, negotiate integrity, and sustain moral identity over time remains insufficiently explored (Chamdan, 2025). This gap underscores the need for research designs capable of engaging directly with lived experience and interpretative meaning, positioning phenomenology as a particularly relevant approach for advancing understanding in this sub-area. By explicitly centering lived experience, research can bridge the divide between macro-level institutional critique and micro-level ethical meaning-making.

Current responses to ethical challenges in higher education have predominantly relied on practical and managerial solutions, such as the implementation of codes of conduct, compliance frameworks, performance regulations, and institutional ethics training (Lusianti & Widodo, 2024). These approaches are designed to standardize ethical behavior and provide procedural guidance for academics operating within complex organizational environments. While such measures are valuable for establishing formal norms, they tend to conceptualize ethics as a matter of rule adherence or professional compliance rather than as an experiential and meaning-laden dimension of academic life.

However, these prevailing approaches exhibit clear limitations in capturing the depth of ethical experience as it is lived by academics. Practical and policy-driven solutions often fail to account for the internal struggles, emotional tensions, and interpretative processes through which ethical dilemmas are experienced and negotiated (Salavati et al., 2025). As a result, phenomena such as moral distress, ethical silence, and gradual compromise remain insufficiently understood, despite their centrality to everyday academic practice. The reliance on surveys, policy analysis, or normative reasoning produces a form of knowledge that is structurally informative yet experientially thin, offering limited insight into how ethical challenges are felt and given meaning by individuals within institutional contexts.

This gap points to the need for an alternative approach capable of engaging with the essence of ethical experience beyond surface-level descriptions (Matthew et al., 2025). Phenomenology provides such an alternative by foregrounding lived experience and subjective meaning as primary sources of understanding (Vahali & Vahali, 2024). Through phenomenological inquiry, it becomes possible to explore how academics experience ethical dilemmas from within their own lifeworlds, how they interpret conflicts between integrity and survival, and how these experiences shape moral identity over time (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The absence of phenomenological investigations in this area represents a significant gap in current scholarship, limiting our ability to develop a holistic and human-centered understanding of ethics in contemporary academic life. Thus, this study responds directly to the identified research gap by examining how ethical challenges in higher education are lived, interpreted, and meaningfully constructed by academics themselves.

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined ethical issues in higher education through studies on academic identity, moral responsibility, and institutional governance. Research has highlighted how neoliberal reforms shape academic labor, often generating tensions between professional values and managerial demands (Hirsto & Hjerppe, 2025). Other studies have explored ethics through normative theories or critical analyses of policy and discourse, offering important structural insights into ethical regulation in universities. While these contributions clarify institutional conditions, they provide limited access to how ethical dilemmas are experienced in everyday academic life (Deneulin, 2021). As a result, the subjective and experiential dimensions of ethics remain underdeveloped in existing literature.

This study addresses these limitations by adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived ethical dilemmas of academics. Phenomenology is employed to examine how ethical conflicts are experienced, interpreted, and given meaning within specific institutional contexts. By focusing on lived experience, this approach directly responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier, where practical and normative solutions fall short in capturing ethical meaning (Bahauddin et al., 2025). The method allows ethical dilemmas to be understood as ongoing experiences rather than isolated incidents. In doing so, the study provides a human-centered account of academic ethics grounded in participants' own narratives.

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The article is structured to guide readers through the development of this phenomenological inquiry. It begins with an introduction that outlines the broader and specific contexts of ethical experience in higher education. The methodology section then explains the phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures. The results section presents thematically organized findings that articulate the essence of lived ethical experience. Finally, the discussion and conclusion elaborate the implications of these findings for theory, practice, and future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived ethical experiences of academics navigating integrity and survival within neoliberal higher education contexts. Phenomenology was selected as it enables a deep engagement with subjective experience, allowing meanings to emerge from participants' own interpretations of their ethical worlds rather than from predefined theoretical categories (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The approach is particularly suited to inquiries concerned with values, moral tension, and existential meaning, as it foregrounds how individuals experience, interpret, and live through complex phenomena in everyday contexts.

More specifically, an interpretative (hermeneutic) phenomenological approach informed by Heideggerian philosophy was adopted. This approach emphasizes understanding experience as always already situated within social, institutional, and historical contexts (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Rather than seeking to bracket interpretation entirely, hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that meaning is co-constituted through interpretation, making it appropriate for examining ethical dilemmas as lived, interpreted, and continuously negotiated experiences within academic institutions. To ensure methodological rigor consistent with interpretative phenomenology, the study incorporated reflexive researcher positioning (via ongoing analytic memos), iterative engagement with the data (re-reading and re-interpretation across analytic cycles), and systematic documentation of interpretative decisions to strengthen transparency and credibility.

Participants

Participants consisted of academics working in higher education institutions who had direct experience with ethical dilemmas related to institutional pressures, performance expectations, and professional integrity (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants possessed rich experiential knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation.

Inclusion criteria comprised:

(a) active employment in higher education institutions,

(b) a minimum of five years of academic experience, and

(c) direct exposure to ethical challenges associated with academic work under managerial or neoliberal conditions.

Participants whose roles were purely administrative or who lacked sustained academic responsibilities were excluded.

The final sample included 12 academics, representing a range of disciplinary backgrounds and career stages (mid-career to senior). Participants varied in age, with an approximate range of 35–60 years, and included both male and female academics (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). These characteristics provided sufficient contextual diversity to illuminate shared experiential meanings without aiming for demographic representativeness. Sample size was determined through an information power logic and iterative assessment of analytic sufficiency: recruitment continued until interviews yielded dense, experience-near accounts and the developing themes were adequately

elaborated across variation in discipline, gender, and career stage, with no substantively new meaning structures emerging in the final interviews. This process supported the adequacy of 12 participants to capture a diverse range of lived ethical experiences while maintaining the depth required for phenomenological interpretation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews complemented by reflective ethical narratives. Interviews were conducted in settings chosen to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality, including private offices or secure online platforms. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, allowing sufficient time for participants to articulate their experiences in depth.

An interview guide was used to prompt reflection on ethical dilemmas, moral conflicts, experiences of silence or compromise, and processes of meaning-making within academic life. Questions were open-ended and flexible, enabling participants to guide the direction of the conversation based on what they perceived as most significant (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Reflective narratives were invited following interviews to allow participants additional space for contemplation and articulation of ethical experiences that might not have surfaced verbally.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve the richness and nuance of participants' expressions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a hermeneutic thematic analysis consistent with interpretative phenomenological principles. Transcripts were first read repeatedly to achieve immersion and holistic understanding. Meaning units were then identified by focusing on statements that revealed ethical tension, moral reflection, and lived experience.

These meaning units were coded and clustered into preliminary themes through an iterative interpretative process. Themes were continually refined by moving back and forth between individual accounts and the emerging thematic structure, allowing deeper meanings to surface. Attention was given not only to what was said, but also to how participants articulated their experiences, including moments of ambiguity, contradiction, and emotional emphasis.

Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was used to support data organization and traceability; however, analytical interpretation remained grounded in close textual engagement. The analytical process culminated in the articulation of essential thematic meanings that captured the core structure of the lived ethical experience under study. Rigor was strengthened through (1) an explicit audit trail (coding notes, theme development logs, and decision points), (2) peer debriefing or collegial review of a subset of coded transcripts and theme definitions to check coherence and challenge interpretative leaps, and (3) selective member reflection in which participants were invited to comment on the resonance and clarity of synthesized thematic accounts (without treating agreement as "validation," but as an additional credibility check). Triangulation between interview data and reflective narratives further supported dependability by allowing convergence and contrast across two forms of first-person accounts.

RESULTS

Moral Distress as a Persistent Lived Experience

Participants consistently described moral distress as a pervasive and enduring aspect of their academic lives. This distress emerged when personal ethical convictions conflicted with institutional demands such as performance metrics, publication pressures, and managerial expectations. Rather than appearing as isolated moments, moral distress was experienced as a continuous inner tension that shaped participants' sense of self.

One participant reflected:

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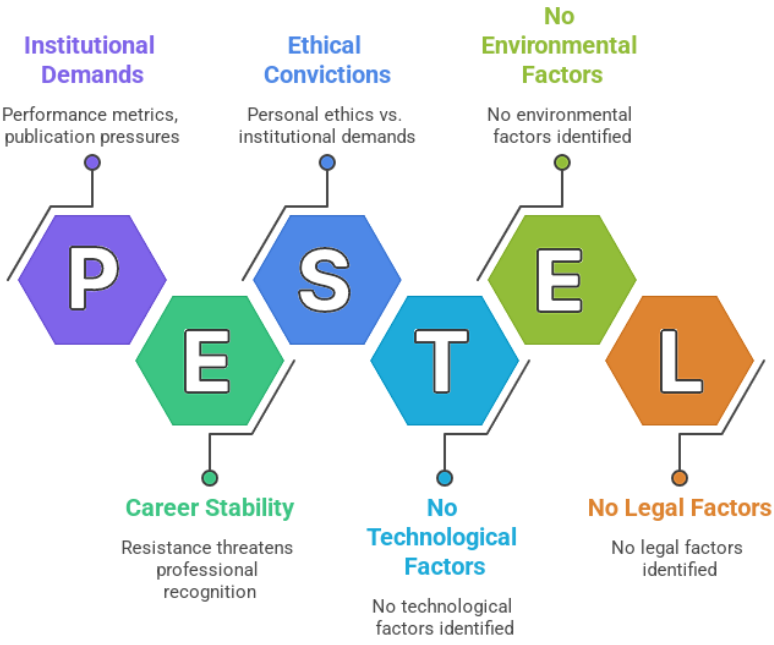
"I often feel torn. I know what I believe is right as an academic, but the system pushes me in another direction. That tension doesn't disappear; it stays with you." (P4)

Moral distress was not merely emotional discomfort but was articulated as a profound ethical unease. Participants described feelings of guilt, frustration, and self-questioning, particularly when they perceived themselves as complicit in practices they morally questioned. This directly illustrates the core dilemma posed in the introduction: the clash between academic ideals (autonomy, integrity, critical inquiry) and managerial performance regimes. This distress was intensified by the awareness that resistance could threaten career stability or professional recognition.

Another participant noted:

"It's not that I don't see the ethical problem. I see it very clearly. But seeing it and acting on it are two very different things in this environment." (P9)

Moral Distress in Academia



Ethical Silence as a Strategy for Survival

A prominent theme across narratives was ethical silence an intentional withholding of ethical critique or dissent. Participants described silence not as ignorance or indifference, but as a conscious and often painful choice shaped by fear of professional consequences.

Ethical silence was framed as a survival mechanism within hierarchical and competitive academic cultures. Speaking out against questionable practices was perceived as risky, potentially leading to marginalization, stalled careers, or reputational harm. This finding demonstrates that ethical dilemmas do not necessarily lead to open resistance; instead, they frequently produce strategic withdrawal as a means of self-preservation.

As one academic explained:

"I knew it was ethically wrong, but silence felt like survival. Speaking up would have cost me more than I was prepared to lose." (P2)

This silence was accompanied by internal moral negotiation. Participants spoke of rationalizing their silence as temporary or necessary, even as they acknowledged its emotional and ethical costs. Ethical silence thus emerged as an embodied experience, marked by internal conflict rather than passive compliance.

Negotiating Integrity Between Ideals and Institutional Demands

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Participants described integrity not as a fixed moral trait but as something continually negotiated. Academic integrity was experienced as fragile and situational, shaped by the ongoing struggle between personal ideals and institutional imperatives.

Several participants described redefining integrity in pragmatic terms, adjusting their expectations to what they perceived as "possible" within the system:

"Integrity used to mean staying true to certain principles no matter what. Now, it feels more like choosing which battles I can afford to fight." (P6)

This shift illustrates how ethical dilemmas transform integrity from an absolute principle into a strategic practice. Rather than abandoning moral commitments, academics recalibrate them within institutional constraints. This negotiation often led to ambivalence. While participants did not abandon ethical values entirely, they described making compromises that altered how they understood themselves as moral agents. Integrity became a process rather than a stable state, continually reinterpreted in response to institutional realities.

Institutional Pressure and the Normalization of Ethical Compromise

Institutional pressure was experienced as pervasive and normalized, embedded in everyday academic practices such as performance evaluations, funding competition, and publication requirements. Participants described how these pressures subtly reshaped ethical boundaries over time.

One participant observed:

"What once felt unacceptable slowly becomes normal. Not because you change your values overnight, but because the pressure is constant." (P11)

This normalization process explains why ethical dilemmas persist rather than resolve: repeated exposure to institutional pressure gradually recalibrates what is perceived as ethically tolerable. Ethical compromise was rarely framed as a dramatic decision. Instead, it emerged gradually, through small concessions that accumulated and redefined what participants considered ethically tolerable. The normalization of such compromises contributed to feelings of resignation and ethical fatigue.

Meaning-Making and the Reconfiguration of Moral Identity

Despite experiences of distress and compromise, participants actively engaged in meaning-making processes to preserve a sense of moral coherence. Reflective practices such as teaching, mentoring students, or private ethical reflection were described as ways to reclaim moral agency.

One participant shared:

"I remind myself why I entered academia in the first place. Teaching students ethically feels like a way of holding onto something meaningful." (P1)

Through reflection, participants reconfigured their moral identities, acknowledging contradictions while seeking continuity in their ethical self-understanding. Moral identity was thus experienced as dynamic, shaped through ongoing interpretation rather than moral certainty.

Collectively, the findings reveal that ethical dilemmas among academics are experienced as complex, lived phenomena characterized by moral distress, ethical silence, negotiated integrity, institutional pressure, and continuous meaning-making. These experiences do not represent isolated ethical failures but reflect an ongoing process of ethical self-interpretation within neoliberal academic contexts. The essence of the phenomenon lies in how academics live with, rather than resolve, ethical tension as part of their professional existence.

DISCUSSION

Summary of the Main Findings

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This study reveals that ethical dilemmas in academic life are lived as ongoing, meaning-laden experiences characterized by moral distress, ethical silence, negotiated integrity, and sustained efforts of meaning-making within neoliberal higher education contexts. These findings directly address the central question posed in the Introduction by illuminating how academics experience and interpret conflicts between moral integrity and institutional survival in their everyday professional lives. Beyond identifying these experiential patterns, the study also demonstrates that ethical tension is not merely a personal burden but a structurally mediated condition that calls for institutional recognition and collective response.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Questions

The findings contribute to the research questions by demonstrating that ethical dilemmas are not discrete events resolved through policy compliance, but enduring experiences that shape academics' moral self-understanding over time (Warmoth et al., 2025). By foregrounding lived experience, the study shows how moral distress emerges when personal values clash with institutional demands, how ethical silence is strategically adopted as a means of survival, and how integrity is continually renegotiated rather than simply upheld or abandoned. These insights advance understanding by revealing the experiential processes through which academics interpret and live with ethical tension, thereby offering a more nuanced account of academic ethics than approaches that emphasize rules, behaviors, or outcomes alone. The study thus reframes ethics as a dynamic and interpretative dimension of professional life, responding directly to the call for experience-based knowledge articulated in the Introduction.

Relationship to Prior Literature and Theory

The findings align with and extend existing scholarship on neoliberal higher education that highlights precarity, managerialism, and identity negotiation among academics (Crosson, 2024). While prior studies have documented structural pressures and institutional constraints, this study complements them by revealing how such conditions are experienced ethically from within the lifeworlds of academics. The emphasis on moral distress and ethical silence resonates with Lynch's (2015) critique of audit cultures, yet adds depth by showing how these dynamics are internalized and interpreted at a personal level. Moreover, the findings support phenomenological perspectives that view meaning as situated and interpretative, consistent with Heideggerian notions of being-in-the-world, where ethical understanding emerges through lived engagement rather than abstract reasoning (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). In this way, the study bridges normative discussions of ethics with humanistic accounts of moral experience, offering a grounded contribution to ethical theory and higher education research. By integrating phenomenological insight with critical analyses of governance, the study further suggests that ethical agency in academia must be understood relationally—shaped by institutional discourse, performance metrics, and power asymmetries—thereby reinforcing the need for structurally embedded ethical support mechanisms.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry important implications for both scholarly understanding and professional practice in higher education. At a theoretical level, the study reinforces the view that ethics in academic life cannot be fully captured through normative frameworks or institutional regulations alone, but must be understood as a lived and interpretative experience shaped by social and organizational contexts. By revealing how moral distress, ethical silence, and negotiated integrity are experienced in everyday academic practice, the study highlights the ethical consequences of neoliberal governance structures for individual moral agency (Harb, 2025).

At the level of policy and institutional governance, the findings suggest that universities should move beyond compliance-driven ethics management toward the cultivation of dialogical ethical cultures. Concretely, this could include the establishment of structured "ethical reflection forums" within faculties, where academics periodically engage in facilitated discussions about real ethical tensions encountered in teaching, research, and administrative work. Such forums could be embedded into regular departmental meetings or professional development programs, ensuring that reflective dialogue becomes a normalized practice rather than an exceptional event.

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Institutions might also develop confidential peer-dialogue circles or ethics mentoring schemes, pairing early-career academics with senior colleagues trained in reflective facilitation. These initiatives would provide safe spaces to articulate moral distress, counteract ethical silence, and collectively explore value-based decision-making without fear of managerial repercussions.

In addition, higher education policies could incorporate ethical well-being indicators into quality assurance frameworks, recognizing moral distress as an organizational issue rather than an individual weakness. For example, annual climate surveys could include measures of perceived ethical voice, psychological safety, and integrity alignment between personal values and institutional expectations. The results could inform targeted interventions at the faculty or institutional level.

Professional development programs may also integrate reflective dialogue methodologies—such as guided narrative reflection, case-based ethical deliberation, or phenomenological workshops—into academic training. By engaging academics in structured reflection on lived ethical experiences, institutions can strengthen moral agency, reduce normalization of silence, and foster collective responsibility for ethical culture. More broadly, the findings are relevant to academic communities across diverse higher education systems, as similar pressures and ethical challenges increasingly characterize global academic labor.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the phenomenological design prioritizes depth of experience over breadth, which limits the extent to which findings can be generalized across all academic contexts. The study focuses on a specific group of academics within particular institutional settings, and experiences may vary across disciplines, cultural contexts, or national higher education systems (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2025). Second, the reliance on self-reported narratives may be influenced by participants' reflective capacities and willingness to articulate ethical experiences. Rather than weakening the findings, these limitations underscore the situated nature of phenomenological knowledge and point to the importance of contextual sensitivity in interpreting ethical experience.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. Subsequent studies could extend phenomenological inquiry to different academic populations, such as early-career scholars or academics in non-Western contexts, to explore how ethical experiences are shaped by varying institutional and cultural conditions. Comparative studies may also illuminate similarities and differences in ethical meaning-making across higher education systems. Additionally, future research could integrate phenomenological insights with critical or organizational perspectives to further examine how lived ethical experiences interact with structural conditions, thereby enriching understanding within humanistic studies and applied ethics.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived ethical dilemmas of academics as they navigate the tension between moral integrity and institutional survival within neoliberal higher education contexts. The findings demonstrate that ethical challenges are experienced as ongoing and meaning-laden processes characterized by moral distress, ethical silence, negotiated integrity, and sustained efforts of meaning-making. By adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the study addresses limitations of prior research that relied primarily on normative or policy-oriented frameworks and therefore overlooked the experiential dimension of academic ethics. The results contribute a humanistic understanding of ethics by showing how moral experiences shape professional identity and everyday

decision-making in academic life. This contribution advances ethical scholarship by bridging abstract ethical theory with lived experience in institutional settings.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study highlights the urgent need for institutional reforms that recognize ethical vulnerability as a structural issue rather than an individual weakness. Universities should develop transparent governance mechanisms, independent ethics support systems, and safe reporting channels that protect academics from retaliation when voicing ethical concerns. Policies promoting academic freedom, workload balance, and fair performance evaluation must also be strengthened to reduce conditions that generate moral distress and ethical silence. By integrating lived ethical experience into policy design, higher education institutions can foster environments that sustain moral integrity alongside institutional accountability.

Future research should move beyond descriptive accounts by examining how specific institutional policies, leadership models, and evaluation systems either exacerbate or mitigate ethical dilemmas. Comparative cross-cultural studies are needed to explore how neoliberal pressures manifest differently across regulatory and socio-cultural contexts. Longitudinal research could also investigate the long-term impact of sustained moral distress on academic well-being, professional identity, and knowledge production. Such directions will not only deepen theoretical understanding but also inform evidence-based policy interventions aimed at strengthening ethical practice in academia globally.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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