The Ethical Impact of Business and Organisational Research: the Forgotten Methodological Issue?

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Abstract: In recent years, relatively little business or organisational research has focused on personal welfare detached from economic or organisational performance. Similarly, the mainstream management literature has tended to overlook the social effects of undertaking academic research, in particular those that relate to the researchers' ethical obligations to participants. This paper discusses some of the ethical issues associated with research on business and in organisations, using as its framework the ethical principles of justice, beneficence, and respect for persons.

Keywords: Research ethics, justice, beneficence, respect for persons, informed consent

1. Introduction

It is expected that most consultants and academics undertaking business and organisation research would view themselves as professionals with standards for proper and ethical conduct, and accept that such standards distinguish them from non-professional groups (Gellerman, Frankel and Ladenson, 1990). Many would also believe that their research should promote the welfare of individuals and the performance of organisations, and would agree with Kakabadse, Kakabadse and Kouzmin (2002, p. 105) that their research "advances and shapes organisational objectives, culture, individuals and societies as it provides new insights that inform premises upon which decisions and judgements are based". This view of academics and internal and external consultants undertaking business research is of people who are trying to make the world a better place for those within it. The research changes organisations for the better, and this positively influences the lives of all who work in them. But is this the case? Is research the shaping force, with the positive values of researchers influencing directions research will take, and thus providing benefits to individuals, organisations and society? Or are organisational or other objectives shaping research, and has this softened the focus on the research's effects on individuals and society, in particular the study's participants? Are these individuals "advanced" by the research? And how do researchers manage the issues and tensions associated with trying to concurrently "advance … organisational objectives, culture, individuals and society" (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Kouzmin, 2002, p. 105)? Is it possible to concurrently advance individual and organisational objectives, or are these objectives sometimes inherently contradictory? And how well do researchers recognise these tensions, and how do they manage them?

Jones (2004) touches upon these questions and suggests that differing researcher values and attitudes create four different and contradictory motivations for conducting research in organisations, and that each of these creates a different relationship between researcher, organisation, participants, and society. She calls these motivations consultancy, instrumental academic, co-consultancy, and academic research pro bono publico. The consultancy approach, she argues, is focussed on achieving a brief, and relies on objectivity tempered with impression management, in which relationships are transactional and the "human subjects studied are liable to contribute only as a collection of objects of interest" (p. 114). In contrast, the instrumental academic research orientation involves interest in the subject matter, but the primary focus is on academic recognition. She argues that academic research of this kind is "willingly tailored" to the requirements of sponsors or editors, and human participants are seen to contribute only as a means to an end. Although she suggests the co-consultancy approach hopes to provide some improvement to the organisation, it may not always be to participants, and any effects are not known until the change process has been completed. Finally, her view is that only traditional academic research pro bono publico, which looks to serve the public good and generate knowledge that benefits society, involves "deep concern for those participating in and informing the research" (p. 116) . Simply put, she argues that the effect of the research on participants largely depends upon the type of research undertaken, and this is based upon the "professional ambitions and/or comfort zones" (p. 116) of the researcher. If research is driven by a desire to meet goals of the sponsoring or collaborating organisation or academic achievement, then it is difficult to provide benefits to participants.

An alternative way of viewing the relationship between participants, research, and researchers is to return to the view of researchers as professionals with standards for ethical conduct. The effect on participants as then seen not merely as a consequence of the values of the researcher, but as an interaction with

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independent requirements and specific moral principles. This parallels the way the relationship between researchers, research participants, and society in medical research is framed as an ethical issue that overrides such considerations as the “professional ambitions and comfort zones” of the researcher. This paper will therefore use ethical principles to review some of the issues facing academics and consultants conducting research in business and organisations. In particular, it will relate these principles to issues associated with research participation. Unfortunately, a reading of the business and organisational research journals provides little guidance on ethical responsibilities toward research participants, which should be considered when formulating, and undertaking organisational research. Although the general business and research literature, particularly texts and other monographs, provides a commentary on ethical issues such as misrepresentation, and advises specific actions such as those leading to informed consent, seldom are there detailed discussions of the ethical principles that guide interaction with research participants. This journal is too new for an analysis of space given to such issues in a business research methods publication, but the articles published in the past six years in the journal Organisational Research Methods can be taken as an example. A search of the 120 authored articles in that journal from January 1999 to January 2006 brought up 31 articles, which contained the words “ethics”, or “ethical” somewhere in the text. Deletion of book reviews, citations of journals with ethics in the title, reference to “protestant work ethic”, the ethical behaviour of business or managers, and ethics as an interest of the authors left 7 articles, which referred to research ethics. Two references were less than a sentence in length; two were a paragraph. Two articles (Simsek and Veiga, 2001; Stanton and Rogelberg, 2001) devoted just over 2 pages to the ethical implications of online research, and Wray-Bliss (2002) devoted several pages to the ethics of the critical interpretive approach of labour process theory.

The absence of such discussion in journals devoted to business and organisational research methods is interesting, and it certainly contrasts with the space given to such issues in the medical and psychology research methods literature. However, it can be argued that the nature of human participants requires the effect of the research on participants and other persons be given the same consideration in business and management research as is accorded to those affected by medical and other research. Issues surrounding this consideration are discussed below.

2. Ethical principles in research involving humans

The first issue is which ethical principles are relevant to business and management research. In many Western countries formal ethical guidelines have been developed for medical and nonmedical research involving humans. These include the United States Belmont Report (1988), Australia’s National Statement on Research Involving Humans (NHMRC, 1999), Canada’s Code of Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Tri-Council of the MRC, NSERC, and SSHRC, 1997), and Great Britain’s Research Ethics Framework (ESRC) and publications of the Medical Research Council. These attempt to ensure participant rights are respected, and describe researcher responsibilities. At the core of these are three ethical principles that the Belmont Report specifies are “particularly relevant to the ethic of research involving human subjects”. These principles of justice, beneficence and respect for persons are described in the next section of this paper, and applied to the framing and collection of data in organisational and management research.

2.1 Justice

The first principle, justice, is developed from the writing of Aristotle (1982, p. 257), who noted that justice is “that which is lawful and that which is equal and fair”. The principle of justice requires the burdens and benefits of research to be equally and fairly distributed such that particular groups not bear the burden of research participation while other groups receive the benefits. Arguments for such fairness in research have been made by the United States Belmont Report (1988), for example, which states the “principle of justice is that equals ought to be treated equally”, and follows this with a statement that “the selection of research subjects needs to be scrutinised in order to determine whether some classes are being systematically selected simply because of their easy availability, their compromised position, or their manipulability”. The principle of justice may be applied to employees, and requires they are not exploited because of membership in any organisation under study. They should not be required to bear the burdens of research in terms of time, energy, or disclosure of personal information while other groups, such as employers and researchers, reap the benefits.

Historically, the American Academy of Management was built upon a philosophy of management in which the public interest was paramount, although recognition was also given to the “legitimate interests of capital and labour” (Editor’s preface, Journal of the Academy of Management, 1958, cited in Walsh, Weber and

Margolis, 2003, p. 859). Consistent with this would be a research output that focuses upon the welfare of organisational members and the public interest, and are not merely used because of their “easy availability or their compromised position”. However, an analysis of articles published in the Journal of the Academy of Management, the Academy of Management Journal, and the Academy of Management Review between 1958 and 2000 by Walsh, Weber and Margolis (2003) found only 227 of the 1738 articles studied human welfare without examining performance, 115 studied both welfare and performance, 383 studied performance with no reference to welfare, and 996 studied neither performance or welfare. They also found interest in welfare was declining: in 1999 only 19% of articles included reference to some aspect of welfare, down from the 35% of articles in 1978. Not only did citation analysis show studies of performance received more citations than studies of welfare, but fewer than 2% of the studies considered the effect of organisational practices outside the boundaries of the firm. Furthermore, their analysis demonstrated that most research involved some form of economic framing, or paid little attention to the firm’s role in society. Very little research focused on personal welfare detached from economic or organisational performance. At a simple level this does not appear just, and appears to suggest that the benefits of research may go to organisations, whilst the burden is borne by employees and other individual participants.

Furthermore, unlike medical research it cannot be argued that, in general, organisational or management research is designed to lead to specific, immediate, or large benefits to humankind, or to the prevention of serious harm. Researchers and their employing organisations, research participants and their employing organisations, and society all have a stake in research outcomes, and these stakes are based upon different, and potentially competing, interests (Germeroth, 1994). Similarly, the subject areas chosen for business and management research reflect the interests of its stakeholders, and the areas chosen for any research project may potentially reflect the power differences of particular stakeholders. Researchers generally have an interest in seeking and transmitting new knowledge, and in advancing their careers. If they are academic researchers, their employing organisations have an interest in attracting research income and increasing research output. Business and government organisations are interested in improving performance. Potential participants may be most interested in issues related to their welfare at the individual, group, or organisational level. The interests of society are complex and multidimensional. However, given the absence of a demonstrated direct benefit to humankind, on a macro level there seems little societal obligation to undertake, or participate in, such research. Moreover, researchers’ knowledge seeking can only be undertaken with the co-operation and support of employing organisations. More than half the studies reported in the Journal of Applied Psychology between 1992 and 1997 used research survey participants from a single organisation (Ostroff and Harrison, 1999). Similarly, an analysis of the research published in the top three American management journals (Academy of Management Journal, Administrative Science Quarterly and Journal of Management) between 1985-87 and 1995-97 found not only did field studies predominate over other methods such as surveys and experiments, but there was an increase in the number of field studies over the period (Scandura and Williams, 2000).

As a consequence of this need for organisational support, it may be difficult to ensure fairness and justice. The relationships between researchers, participants, and organisations present special challenge if those with lesser power – usually the employees who are the participants in the research – are not to be exploited for the gain of the organisation or researcher. An example of such exploitation is a requirement for employees to provide information, time or energy to a research project they would not otherwise wish to be involved in. This is especially so when the relationships are a result of a formal collaboration between universities and industry or the result of a consultancy agreement. Universities have a financial and public relations interest in obtaining sponsored or collaborative research. They see industry as a source of research funds, and actively encourage collaboration by rewarding researchers for industry-funded or collaborative grants. A positive view is that new problems are identified, researchers are intellectually stimulated, publications are increased, and student education is enhanced – and earnings are generated for university research. A negative view is that such relationships narrow the range of research to topics supported by particular organisations, and researchers lose their independence, focussing on short-term or commercially profitable products that promote specific interests of industry rather than the interests of individuals or society (Rule and Shamoo, 2001; Rynes, Bartunek and Daft, 2001). Researchers’ interest in undertaking the research and accurately transmitting the findings may conflict with other interests such as the desire of the sponsoring or co-operating organisation not to have negative findings published (Rule and Shamoo, 2001). Negative findings may also be suppressed within the organisation, or ignored by key organisational stakeholders. Additionally, pressure may be placed upon researchers to interpret material in a particular manner. This possibility is heightened in those situations where contractual agreements require the organisation to “sign off” on any publication coming out of the collaboration.

It appears, then, that academic researchers can find themselves with an unrecognised conflict of interest. Such conflict occurs when two or more of the interests held by, or entrusted to, a single person are considered incompatible or breach prescribed practice. It occurs when a person's "judgement regarding the primary interest (such as a ... [participant's] welfare or the validity of research) tends to be unduly influenced by a secondary interest, such as financial gain" (Thompson, 1993, p. 573). Such conflicts clearly include investigators holding collaborative or consulting agreements with the firms sponsoring the research, employment of one or more of the researchers by the organisation under study, or the researcher's professional interest in ensuring a strong research publication record. In each case investigators may formulate and undertake research that has been shaped by organisational objectives rather than participant welfare. In such cases it may be difficult to ensure that employees do not only bear the burdens of research, but also achieve some benefits. Some conflicts, such as those resting on collaborative financial agreements, are normally recognised and disclosed to participants, although, again, the topic has failed to receive the same space in the management literature as it has in medical journals. However, the effect of other conflicts, such as the pressure exerted on universities to undertake funded research, and the subsequent pressure placed on investigators to obtain grants and undertake sponsored and collaborative research, are seldom recognised or discussed as ethical issues. In contrast, the effect of research sponsorship on the shaping of research is frequently discussed in the medical literature, and prominence is given to the potential bias in research topics or programs.

There thus appear to be issues of justice in the chosen topics and methodology of much business and management research. Each reflect a situation in which the research appears to relate to upholding the economic interests of business rather than the public interest at individual, group, or societal level, and supports the view of recent commentators who have suggested that management research is neglecting issues of public interest and public policy (e.g., von Glinow, 2005; Rynes and Shapiro, 2005), and should be reframed to ensure participants benefit from the research process (e.g., Wray-Bliss, 2002). Taken further, the inequality inherent in much research is consistent with a view that conventional organisational research may subordinate social life at work to technological rationality, implicitly serve the accumulation of wealth by investors, promote careerism in managers, contribute to excessive surveillance and control by viewing work in terms of certain values or interests, support managers with ideas for managerial control as the norm, implicitly encourage submission to workplace power sources, and minimise the position of stakeholders other than capital and managers (Alvesson and Deetz 1996). It is puzzling that the issues of justice and bias in research topic selection are not raised more frequently in the management research literature.

2.2 Beneficence

The second ethical principle, beneficence, requires that researchers should make efforts to secure the well being of participants. It rests on a utilitarian framework which views research as acceptable if it creates benefits and does not cause harm, or minimises risks of harm or discomfort and maximises possible benefits and the well being of participants. In Australia, the National Statement on Research Involving Humans specifies where "research is undertaken solely to contribute to knowledge, the absence of intended benefits to a participant should justly be balanced by the absence of all but minimal risk" (NHMRC, 1999, p 12). Similar statements occur in the guidelines of many other western countries. Serious attention to the principle of beneficence requires that researchers assess the probability and magnitude of benefits and the many potential dimensions of harm, and ensure robust procedures that anticipate and confront possible harms. As organisational and management research is normally designed to benefit stakeholders other than the participants, usually the researcher or organisation(s), the absence of specific benefit to participants requires that all but minimal risk should be absent. However, although there is seldom a risk of physical harm, as Levine (1986) points out in a discussion of clinical research, research participation also carries the risk of psychological risk such as stress; social risk such as ostracism; economic risk such as loss of promotion or career opportunity; and occasionally legal risk. There are also times when responses raise other issues, such as when participants comment upon inappropriate or illegal organisational practices or individual behaviour, express worries, or seek advice.

Moreover, the most common organisational research project is based upon a one-shot, cross-sectional design. Within this, participants are viewed only as sources of information or data, rather than as stakeholders. The involvement of the researcher usually ends with data collection, and participants receive no explicit consideration or follow-up. The researcher's commitment is normally seen to be production of a research publication, or conclusion of the consulting or research contract. The consequences for individual employees or groups of employees of participation in the research or publication of research findings are seldom explicitly considered, and provision is normally not made to resolve any issues raised by participants during the research process (Wright and Wright, 1999). In contrast, the effect of research on participants is frequently discussed in the medical literature, and follow-up of participants is the norm, with prominence given to the effect of the research upon participants. Moreover, studies of work stress, for example, may show the health of a participant requires intervention. Ensuring beneficence would seem to require the researcher to act on this information in order to minimise harm to that participant. However, this seldom appears to be done, and there is rarely any commitment to follow up the research by undertaking any changes the research suggests are beneficial, or addressing the needs of participants. Similarly, the rights of people not directly involved in a research project are seldom explicitly considered, and may be overlooked. These people also require beneficence, as they may be affected by a study's publication or findings. For example, qualitative research may find, and report, information relating to an identifiable person's behaviour. Even if pseudonyms are used, it will not protect the third party if the participant – or their organisation – and thus the third party, can be identified. Not only is there the risk of legal proceedings for defamation, but also publication of this information does not demonstrate recognition of the rights of the third party.

2.3 Respect for persons

The third core ethical principle, respect for persons, is demonstrated by viewing individuals as autonomous agents, and protecting those with diminished autonomy. This principle rests on the deontological framework, which operates from the foundation, that individuals have rights – such as for autonomy and privacy – and these cannot be violated without causing harm. Developed from the ethical theory of Immanuel Kant (1969), who argued "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (p. 44), this respect for persons principle rests on the foundation that these independent moral rights that all people possess are independent of any potential benefit to the individual or those around them. An example of the application of this principle to organisational and management research is the section of the Academy of Management's Code of Ethical Conduct (2002) which states "Research should show respect for the rights of individuals and organisations" (p. 291) and "It is the duty of Academy members to preserve and protect the privacy, dignity, well-being and freedom of research participants. This duty requires … informed consent from all participants… Informed consent means explaining to potential participants the purposes and nature of the research so they can freely choose whether or not to become involved. Such explanations include warning of possible harm and providing explicit opportunities to refuse or participate and to terminate participation at any time. Because students and employees are particularly subject to possible coercion, even when unintended, special care must be taken in obtaining their informed consent…" (p. 292). Despite this, there has been little discussion in the business research literature on the nature of this "special care", and upon how researchers can ensure voluntariness and informed consent. Many work situations lack the contractual individualism necessary for informed consent because organisations may have strongly supported a research project, or because the organisation's culture requires acquiescence to desires expressed by management. In addition, research in some countries involves participation by people for whom human rights issues such as autonomy and informed consent are irrelevant to social and cultural norms (Macklin, 1999). They thus have had no concept of any rights they may have over participation in research, even when they are told that participation is voluntary. Moreover, increasing use of open-ended qualitative research means that it is often impossible for participants to give informed consent to the use of their contribution, as they do not know in advance what themes may emerge, or how their words will be interpreted (Richardson and Godfrey, 2003). Participants may also introduce topics they did not intend to introduce, or the supportive climate of an interview may lead them to reveal details they did not intend to reveal. Yet, again, there has been little discussion of such issues.

3. Ethical issues in business research methodology

The above discussion has discussed the three core ethical principles generally given to apply to research involving humans, and touched upon several ethical issues that should be explicitly addressed. One is the shaping of management and organisational research by funding opportunities and the requirements of sponsoring or participating organisations. Not only does this bias project selection and favour projects that are short-term or commercially viable, but the lack of researcher independence may be associated with a potential conflict of interest if a program developer or presenter is also acting as evaluator or researcher. These factors increase the possibility that the research will not be specifically designed to benefit participants, or may involve some social or emotional risks. This possibility is increased if the research and its intended outcomes are less than transparent to potential participants, and can involve stress or ostracism, breach of privacy, or restriction of promotion or career opportunity. A related issue is how to ensure that employees do not bear the burden of research, and that their welfare is considered in the research design phase. One way is to ensure voluntariness and informed consent. This shows respect for individual participants and their right to autonomy, and allows them to opt out if they believe there may be negative consequences of participation. However, this requires some transfer of control to the potential participant from the researcher and participating organisation (Alderson and Morrow, 2006). There may be objections to this from the sponsoring or participating organisation, and researchers may fear a diminution of their sample size, and resultant lack of validity. There are also issues in ensuring voluntariness when the research is associated with an activity that is required as part of the employee's work role, such as an evaluation of an organisational change process. Similarly, it can be hard to ensure informed consent when the researcher is unable to predict the effect release or publication of the research findings will have within the organisation. The short-term nature of most organisational research, and absence of follow-up, also raises issues of beneficence, and makes it hard for researchers to address the needs of participants. Yet the research process is a human activity built upon relationships (Hallowell, Lawton and Gregory, 2005), and as such is a moral activity built upon opposing interests and options. The ethics of these relationships should be considered.

4. How has this occurred?

The above discussion suggests that there are issues related to justice, beneficence, and respect for persons involved in the methodology of business and organisation research, and there is not always be direct consideration of these in the literature. This may be because the implicit values of some researchers may emphasise high research output or the interests of sponsoring or participating organisations, rather than societal or participant health (Jones, 2004). Furthermore, it seems that participants have become "the proverbial 'invisible' men and women of organisational research" (Wright and Wright, 1999, p. 1110). How has this occurred? One explanation may be that management researchers hope that research that benefits business or organisations will benefit society. Friedman's (1962) shareholder theory of corporate responsibility argues that organisations have a moral obligation to maximise shareholder wealth. Any research that leads to such profit maximisation could therefore be argued to be in the best interests of society. For example, Vermeulen (2005, p. 981) argues "in defence of research that attempts to help companies make more money…. Fuelling the economy by aiding companies to increase their profits is a potent way to contribute to society and human well-being". Other management researchers may hold such a view. Alternatively (or additionally), researchers may believe the absence of physical harm from data collection means that all management research is ethical, and there is no risk of any negative consequence. Another possibility is that researcher training in management is different from that which occurs in medical or other research disciplines, and does not sensitise researchers in our field to the potential for bias in selection of topics for funded research, or for the consequences of research for participants to include either benefit or harm. Researchers are trained in ethical behaviour relating to the correct attribution of sources, and honesty in dealing with others, but not in other areas. Individual researchers – whose focus is on the research itself and achieving a publication record - may therefore sometimes not be aware of broader ethical issues involved in the framing and conduct of their research. Alternatively, for some reason, such as pressure to publish, management researchers may have become desensitised to the effects upon participants of their research.

Additionally, even if researchers are aware of ethical issues and consider research outcomes as within their responsibility, harm is difficult to predict (Richardson and Godfrey, 2003). It requires judgement about individual sensibilities, an understanding of the current situation, and knowledge of future conditions. Researchers seldom have the resources to gather the data necessary to predict all possible outcomes. Moreover, people differ in their assessment of harm in a given situation. For example, Sparks and Hunt (1998) found that experienced marketing researchers recognised more of the ethical issues embedded in research scenarios than did students. Even so, almost a quarter of the researchers did not identify any of the ethical issues in cases described to them. Similarly, Ilgen and Bell (2001) reported that Human Resource professionals, who typically are responsible for providing consent to undertake research in organisations, were less sensitive to issues surrounding consent and potential risk to participants than were members of Human Ethics Institutional Review Boards. The Human Resource professionals also believed employees were more likely to react negatively to the organisation if given the full information necessary to allow informed consent. Thus the traditional organisational gatekeepers may not always act in the interests of research participants or other employees. This means that the interests of participants are not best served by moving responsibility for the consequences of the research from the researcher to the sponsoring or participating organisation. In addition, given the pressure to publish, spending time on ethical issues such as participant autonomy or the effect of bias on research topic selection could be seen as bothersome, adding only unnecessary complexity to the research process. This is particularly likely to be the view when researchers believe that organisation and management research is "no risk" to participants.

5. Conclusion

As Jones (2004) suggests, researcher values may lead to research, which does not always serve the public good or involve deep concern for participants. The above review suggests that research may also not always fulfil the ethical requirements of justice, beneficence, and respect for persons. Moreover, there is some evidence that the emphasis in research is now upon ensuring rigor, rather than relevance (Vermeulen, 2005), and that practitioners do not normally turn to academic literature in seeking resolution for problems (Rynes, Bartunek and Daft, 2001). There thus seems a need for researchers to reflect upon their own values, and to become as engaged in the ethics of the research as they are in its other components. Such consideration is important, for at least two reasons. The first is that the nature of human participants requires they are given the same rights in business and organisational research as are accorded to human participants in other research. The ethical requirements for research are based upon the nature of the human participants, not upon the research discipline. One cannot therefore argue that as business research is "different" to other research then different requirements should apply. The second reason care should be taken with ethical issues is that it runs the risk of being exploitative. It is normally initiated by the researcher or the employing organisation, not by participants, and is frequently not designed to directly benefit participants, improve their welfare, or reward them for their contribution. It is thus often inherently burdensome. Researchers should therefore take the same care with issues related to voluntariness, informed consent, and bias in topic selection as we hope that medical researchers take when undertaking research funded by drug companies. I accept that the above may be an unduly "black" view of organisational and management research, and researchers. I am sure there are many researchers who struggle to find support for academic pro bono publico and other research programs that are designed to benefit their participants and society, and ensure participant rights are upheld. However, I also believe that we do need to engage in robust dialogue about the relationship between research funding and potential bias in our research topics, issues of voluntariness and informed consent, the consequences of research participation, and the values we hold and how these are reflected in the research we undertake.

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