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Method issues in business ethics research: finding credible answers to questions that matter

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Abstract

This article is an essay based on many years of reviewing journal submissions and discussions with business ethics scholars on a range of themes regarding methods. To some extent, it contains condensed thoughts from two experienced scholars in the field, which we hope will be useful, especially to emerging scholars who, to some extent, may be still wrestling with some of the issues raised in the article.

The validity and reliability of research methods in business ethics research is discussed in terms of legitimate methods to employ in the discipline, the epistemic challenges in the discipline, the debate between qualitative and quantitative methods, and some considered comments on 'researching well' in this discipline. Within each theme, we attempt to convey our distilled thoughts in the hope that methods employed in future studies will avoid some of the failures we have observed in the past.

Introduction

One of the characteristics of research in business ethics is that it attracts contributions from a wide range of professional and academic backgrounds. This is both a strength, in that the discussions taking place are wide-ranging and multi-vocal, and also a challenge in that there has been little convergence on a canon of accepted research methods in the business ethics academy. The lack of perceived 'entry barriers' to the field leads many to believe their position, background, beliefs or expertise qualify them to make a contribution, and this has led to a wide diversity of approaches, some of which are more helpful and rigorous than others.

The range of methods employed varies from reflective pieces employing aspects of philosophy, theology or belief, to strongly positivist pieces seeking correlations between variables and the like. There has been less agreement that certain methods are more suited to research questions in business ethics research than others, and perhaps it is ambitious to suggest that such any such convergence is ever likely to materialise. It may not even be desirable.

This paper is intended to be an overview and discussion of some of the prominent issues, as we see them, in considering research methods in empirical

business ethics research. The perceived need for this paper is partly in response to many years of reading and reviewing research in the area, which, whilst often well-conceived in terms of research question, is sometimes suboptimal in terms of methods employed. Put another way, we believe that business ethics has, or should have, an important research agenda – the ethics of business matter – and that agenda needs to be addressed with appropriate academic standards and rigour.

The problems occasioned by suboptimal method employment are concerned with the ability of an otherwise cogent research project to provide reliable, valid or trustworthy findings. The issues of reliability, validity or trustworthiness are key to questions of method selection in any field, but in an emergent field such as business ethics, with so many influences and academic approaches, these are sometimes cast into sharp focus by apparent difficulties in meeting those challenges. To varying extents, all social sciences must wrestle with epistemological challenges, since the method must be capable of reliably answering the research question posed and of delivering valid conclusions. Some otherwise worthy research projects, perhaps conducted by scholars less familiar with epistemological conundrums, fail to do so and it is partly to address this challenge that this paper is offered.

The remainder of the paper considers, first, whether it is possible to converge on a set of methods suitable for research in the field of business ethics and whether this is even desirable. Second, we comment on the debate between quantitative, qualitative and ‘mixed’ methods research. Third, the quality of empirical research in business ethics is discussed. The conclusion draws together the key points of our arguments.

Legitimate methods in business ethics research

Among the range of journals in which business ethics research is published, there is an approximately agreed hierarchy, even if details are contested. Some of the articles most highly cited by scholars, and arguably some of the most rigorous in terms of quality, are published in journals outwith the main business ethics journals themselves. Specifically, work in the highly respected American Academy journals (*Academy of Management Journal* and *Academy of Management Review*) have often been highly influential, as has work in more general management and strategy-type journals (such as *Strategic Management Journal*). What these journals share is that they are American, and with this nationality comes a pedigree of method traditionally associated with the empirical and, indeed, the positivist, at least in the case of research conducted in business schools.

Aspiring scholars are perhaps influenced by this tradition, and because work in these journals is sometimes considered elite, emulation of the methods is common, even when the research questions posed do not necessarily ‘match’ the method selected. Scholars influenced by this approach often see method as a means of determining a ‘truth’ in the rationalist sense of the term. This means that there is an assumption that a ‘truth’ is tractable and accessible, if only a

method can be employed capable of accessing that truth. A selection is then made from a constrained set of permitted or admired methods.

We use the term 'legitimate' in the title of this section advisedly. Each method has some legitimacy and effectiveness in a particular context and epistemic milieu, but when methods are borrowed from one literature and applied to another with insufficient scrutiny of their suitability, then an otherwise legitimate method (in one context) can become less than legitimate in another.

Other traditions have also been brought to bear on ethics questions, however. Scholars trained in the social sciences or in the humanities may not necessarily be 'truth seekers' in the positivist employment of the term. Perhaps more 'explorers' than 'truth seekers', their desire to reflect and 'understand' may supplant the need to 'know'. This approach precipitates a completely different approach to method. Such 'explorers' are more likely to employ methods seeking to gain *verstehen* rather than to provide a finding that possesses a certain level of statistical significance.

Of course, the spectrum of sociological (and social science) paradigms is well understood (Burrell & Morgan 1979) and it is not our intention to repeat those insights and supporting arguments here. Rather, we suggest that method employed must, to be valid, reflect the paradigm or tradition the researcher is immersed in. This is probably uncontroversial, but our experience suggests that it bears repeating. Moreover, the research method must be appropriate to the research question, which itself tends to be embedded within a certain paradigm – or at least may be incommensurate with some paradigms. Perhaps this is less often recognised.

So is there an accepted canon of methods appropriate to the range of challenges encountered in business ethics research? Given the eclecticism of the range of research questions posed in a wide-ranging, ultimately applied field such as business ethics research, we would resist such a suggestion, but strongly reinforce the notion that whilst some research questions are more worthwhile than others, each question necessitates careful method selection. Again, in abstract this assertion might seem uncontroversial, but it runs up against certain positions in social science that appear to be significant and, at times, almost 'tribal' in nature.

Quantitative, qualitative or 'mixed' methods

The debate between qualitative and quantitative method subsists in many fields of social science research. The dominance of the American positivist model for 'respectable' social science research (Cowton 1998), especially those careerist business school colleagues who want to impress American journal editors and reviewers, means that positivist approaches still dominate in many sub-genres of ethics research. A cursory glance at most of the major journals in the field will show tables of numbers, graphs, scatterplots, 'rankings' of various metrics and the like. Some of this work has been contributed by the current authors themselves.

However, it is a curious feature of an academic field such as business ethics – essentially concerned with the moral values in which business activity takes place – that authors seek to use a quantitative toolkit as their primary weapon. The 1990s witnessed a series of papers that sought to concern themselves with empirical research in business ethics (e.g. Cowton 1998, Frederick 1992, Robertson 1993, Weber 1992). One salient point from the discussions at that time, and since, is that the quest to position business ethics research as a serious academic area of enquiry, necessitated, in some people’s minds, a robust method toolkit. And because in other fields of social science, quantitative methods are *de rigueur*, some authors may have made a similar questionable assumption in business ethics research: it has to be quantitative to be robust and legitimate.

This, of course, is a simplistic and reductionist view, as we make clear in the section above on method matching paradigm. It seems self-evident that all of the large, strategic and substantial questions in life are essentially qualitative. This is not to say that quantitative methods are redundant – far from it. But it is to say that quantitative methods are useful only if a simple truth is tractable given the outcome of the quantitative enquiry. It is more likely that truth is intractable in that way or that the variables employed in the method are not as epistemologically ‘hard’ as the method assumes them to be. A statistical test implicitly assumes that the numbers being processed represent meaningfully what they claim to represent. In many cases, the variables involved are themselves proxies, and often soft proxies at that. It is ironic that exclusively – or, rather, exclusivist – quantitative researchers bring to their work a set of values and commitments, about what is important to research and how to research it, which are essentially qualitative in nature while they advocate a supposedly value-free, neutral position.

So if the big questions in ethics are essentially qualitative (such as questions of right, justice, fairness, decency, equality, etc.), why is it so often believed that quantitative variables are capable of describing them, frequently with limited apparent reflection and negligible caveats? Even if truth is tractable with a quantitative method, such an approach would only be capable of answering a limited number of questions and only those ‘put to’ the method. When seen in the context of the larger questions in ethics, the applicability of most quantitative methods is limited. Why is it of interest, for example, if two particular variables are correlated? This, even if demonstrated, would be a phenomenon of meaning only within a certain social and ethical framework. Put bluntly, using a prominent example from the business ethics literature: if ethics doesn’t pay, so what?

It has become increasingly common, in addressing these constraints, to use elements of a range of approaches in research methods: the so called ‘mixed method’ approach. Partly driven by the structures of PhD projects and arising in part from those, mixed methods papers are often more intelligent in their approaches than those employing a single method. Essentially, an author can derive a research question of meaning and then ask, ‘what is the best way to answer this research question?’ It is often the case that some qualitative methods

and some elements of quantitative techniques can be brought to bear on a research problem. A typical approach in this tradition might be a mix of interviews in which attitudes and beliefs are examined, supported by a range of Likert scale type responses, enabling some of the interviewees', or others', responses to be analysed numerically.

In conclusion, business ethics matters, but we have a concern that business ethics research doesn't matter as much as it should because the range and balance of research methods being employed are not what they could or should be. In particular, we are concerned that the research questions and research agenda (Cowton 2008) are being unduly influenced by choice of research method, whereas the principal influence should be in the opposite direction. Some of this seems to reflect a desire to acquire academic respectability. However, such respectability – and anything of substance that a particular piece of research has to offer – depends upon not just the choice of method but how well it is carried out. We offer some thoughts on this issue in the next section.

On researching well

Assuming that a particular research method is legitimate for answering a question that matters, it needs to be carried out competently in order for the outcome to be of value. However, as mentioned earlier, the 1990s saw a series of papers that 'worried' about empirical research in business ethics. Some of these papers discussed the relationship between normative and empirical methods (e.g. Donaldson 1994, Weaver and Trevino 1994), an issue familiar from ethics more generally, principally in the form of Hume's Law or Guillotine (Donaldson 1994) that it is impossible to derive an *ought* directly from an *is* (Hudson 1969). However, many of the concerns were rather more pragmatic; the quality of empirical research in business ethics was called into question, either because it was thought that business ethics researchers were not employing research methods as well as they might or because of the particular challenges of conducting empirical research into sensitive ethical matters. In this section we discuss our own impressions of the current state of affairs and provide what we hope will be some helpful suggestions for empirical researchers in the field.

The fact that business ethics deals with sensitive issues, or should seek to do so, sets up particular challenges when it comes to obtaining good quality data. The first challenge is simply to get any data at all. For example, if seeking to conduct an interview-based study, individuals and, in particular, those who employ them, tend to be very reluctant to provide access. With the increase in profile of scandals and business ethics more generally, this is unlikely to have become any easier in recent years. In other words, the perceived importance of business ethics would be expected to reduce the likelihood of being able to obtain good data – all the more so for high-profile and important or sensitive topics. Similar factors would be expected to be in play in the case of questionnaire surveys also, against a background of increasing difficulty in obtaining satisfactory response rates in social research generally.

Where data has been collected, there remains the risk – and indeed the suspicion – that the responses are not accurate reflections of what the researcher is researching. The issue of social desirability response bias – which Randall and Fernandes (1991: 805) defined as, “the tendency of individuals to deny socially undesirable traits and behaviors and to admit to socially desirable one,” was raised in business ethics research in the 1990s (Randall and Fernandes 1991, Fernandes and Randall 1992). There are means of encouraging candour in research subjects’ responses. For example, assurances of confidentiality and anonymity are often mentioned by authors in reports of their research. Randomised research techniques have also been advocated (Dalton and Metzger 1992, Dalton et al. 1996), though we do not think these have been used widely in business ethics research. We believe that the methodological discussions in business ethics research would be improved by further engagement with the issue of social desirability response bias, not only to reassure the reader of a particular piece of research but also to provide examples for future researchers. Moreover, we are disappointed that not more studies relying upon questionnaire surveys appear to use scales that can help detect social desirability response bias, whether resulting from self-deception or from impression management. It would be desirable for journal referees and editors to be more assiduous in asking about the use of such techniques. Given that this suggestion is based only on our impression of published and unpublished work to which we have had access as researchers and as reviewers, it would make sense for a systematic review of such matters to be undertaken. We would also be interested to see the extent to which non-response bias is considered in business ethics research papers. Again, our impression is that it is a far from universal practice.

Of course, much business ethics research has as an underlying aim, albeit perhaps a very distant one, which is a desire to improve business practice in ethical terms. However, for reasons of access it is very difficult to observe behaviour with regard to ethical issues on the systematic basis necessary for research; and the problem of social desirability response bias, coupled with reluctance to participate if pressed on sensitive issues, means that asking about a person's actual behaviour might be likely to be unproductive in many circumstances. For this reason, many researchers prefer to address the issue of behaviour (or at least attitudes or judgements etc.) through the vehicle of scenarios.

Scenarios can be very useful, but it is important that they are appropriate. One pertinent question has always been whether the scenarios drawn upon are particularly relevant to *business* ethics. Moreover, while it is good to use scenarios that appear to have been well validated by previous research (which also provides opportunities for comparability), it has to be asked whether they continue to be relevant to business ethics today. There is a potential tension between established validity and contemporary relevance, therefore. Moreover, with research being increasingly conducted internationally, it is important to check the appropriateness of scenarios to a particular cultural context. This is not just a question of changing the names of characters or organisations; it is also a question of adjusting the institutional context and assumptions in a given scenario. For example, in a country with free healthcare available, it would make

little sense to use a scenario in which an employee is tempted to act unethically because a member of their family requires urgent and expensive medical treatment; but it might make sense to replace that with some other pressing family need. Thus our recommendation is that researchers do not simply adopt scenarios that have been used in previous studies, but that they consider whether the scenarios need to be adapted for the context in which the research is taking place. Similar points would apply to questions and measurement scales used in questionnaire surveys. Our impression is that there is a growing stock of suitable research instruments available to business ethics researchers, but intelligent application is required.

So far we have been assuming that the research subjects (interviewees or survey respondents) are qualified to provide appropriate research material. However, the challenges of obtaining data have meant that many researchers have been pushed towards using convenience samples. This is often seen as problematic; indeed, it is almost a pejorative term. However, some convenience samples can be very useful; the research subjects are appropriate, but the sample does not match up to the tenets of randomised sampling found in the research methods textbooks. Sometimes this is because it is difficult to obtain such a sample; and sometimes it is difficult to know enough about the nature of the population to even design, let alone obtain, a randomised sample. The degree to which the realised sample provides insights of value will be a matter of judgement, but in a field such as business ethics so much still remains to be researched and discovered, we are not over-concerned with this matter – as long as researchers provide a descriptive account of, and suitable reflection on, what they have done.

A greater concern is where students are used as a convenience sample. Of course, in the case of business ethics education research, students are highly appropriate research subjects – though we do note that many past studies have focused on only one institution (usually where the author teaches – very convenient!), which generally makes the study of very limited value. Our main worry is where students are used as proxies for practising managers etc. Our sense is that fewer studies of this kind are now being conducted, or at least they are much less likely to be published in reputable journals nowadays. However, where they do take place there should be deeper reflection on what the sample can and cannot provide insights into, rather than the rather short defensive justification that is sometimes given.

In the case of quantitative research, which, as we have already mentioned, tends to dominate the empirical research in business ethics, there are not only issues with regard to data collection but also regarding data analysis. These issues are not peculiar to business ethics; once the data has been collected, the issues around analysis are somewhat similar in any social research. Whether or not business ethicists are at the forefront of the analysis of empirical data, our impression is that it has become much more sophisticated in recent years. There are likely to be several reasons for this, including the training that is available in doctoral programs and elsewhere and the widespread availability of statistical software packages – though the latter without the former is likely to be problematic. Of course, the statistical method chosen has to be both appropriate

and applied correctly. However, our major concern is with what takes place either side of the data collection and analysis process.

First, we find that many of the papers that we review for journals have poor motivation and, especially, weak development of hypotheses. It is almost as if the literature review is something to be got out of the way before the authors come up with some hypotheses that, they believe, fit with the data that they have access to. Sometimes the literature review is, on the surface, perfectly competent but then the hypotheses seem to appear, unmotivated, out of nowhere. Our position is that hypotheses and/or research questions need to be developed, not just stated. Moreover, we find that many hypotheses would benefit from closer scrutiny of their wording. Not only should they be parsimonious, but there should be no doubt about what they mean. This is, sadly, far from the case in many papers we see.

Second, once the findings of the research have been presented and the hypotheses (if present in the paper) have been tested, the connection back to literature is often poorly done. To secure a worthwhile contribution, the implications of the findings should be fully considered, which requires a return to, and proper reflection upon, the literature. In other words, findings should be discussed, not just presented. This includes, early in the exposition, interpreting tables and not just repeating their content inefficiently in the text. Authors should seek to draw out the key points. This is not just a question of inserting asterisks to indicate statistical significance. With the key points of the research established, the implications for the relevant body of literature can be developed.

Too often, though, the discussion is perfunctory (it is a good discipline to commit to a discussion section towards the end of a paper). A common approach is to note in the literature review that previous research results have been 'mixed'; for example, some studies might have shown that older workers have a particular attitude whereas other studies did not find this. The authors of the latest research then say which set of papers, cited in the literature review, their own research matches. This adds to the literature, to the body of empirical findings, but that body of findings remains 'mixed'. Of course, this outcome was inevitable from the outset. Very little progress appears to have been made or, indeed, to have been possible. However, the latest findings will often provide an opportunity for the researcher to ponder what might be going on. What might account for the different results to date? Are there any features that the current research has served to highlight that might provide a resolution or, at least, suggestions for further research? This kind of insight cannot be supplied by statistical packages but requires understanding and insight, not to say a little creativity on occasions, on the part of authors.

These critical comments play into earlier worries relating to the role of theory in empirical research in business ethics (e.g. Randall and Gibson 1990, Robertson 1993). Sometimes those worries seem to have been motivated by a commitment to a positivistic, hypothetico-deductive pattern for research. While we do not necessarily object to such research, we believe that a proper conception of theory and theory's role is much richer than this. Indeed, we are not necessarily

against a certain degree of descriptive research, where theory is absent (or barely present), especially where little is known about a subject. Because of our views of what social science can or cannot be expected to do – for example, we are sceptical of attempts to provide powerful causal accounts of ethical behaviour – we are more inclined to a position which advocates that research takes full account of what has been done before and reflectively uses conceptual apparatus appropriate to its task.

Of course, qualitative research tends to have a different relationship with theory, particularly when undertaken in a more inductive manner. We would hope to see more qualitative research in business ethics in the future. Part of the challenge is gaining good access, but equally important is the need to ensure that data collection and analysis are undertaken with rigour appropriate to the research tradition. Only then will findings that seem interesting on the surface also be regarded as trustworthy and reliable (see the paper on focus groups by Cowton & Downs in this issue). We would also like to see more case study research, even single cases. Positivism sometimes casts an unhelpful shadow over the generation and use of case studies for research, because they are believed not to be generalizable. However, this is population generalisation; many other insights of value external to a case study can be generated, depending on the depth and quality of the data and the way in which the case is related to the existing literature.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to reflect upon and discuss some of the pressing issues to have emerged from our experience of many years of reviewing journal submissions and sitting through business ethics presentations at conferences and the like.

We maintain that business ethics research remains an important discipline in the broader corpus of business research, and in pursuit of excellence in that discipline, scholars must be cognisant of the range of issues discussed in this article. We are generally not supportive of the default posture to reach for a positivist method in ethics studies, believing that more carefully and insightfully designed methods will be more powerful and much more insightful – which is not to say that quantitative studies do not have their place.

This paper is intended to be a means of discussing these issues but also to provide an extended introduction to this special edition of *Business Ethics: A European Review*. It is our hope that the academy finds both this introductory issue and the other papers in this issue of value.

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