Ethics and international business research: Considerations and best practices

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ABSTRACT

Research integrity matters. It enables researchers to trust each other and their findings, and provides a basis for society's trust in our research. We explore research integrity using the lens of international business (IB) research, focusing on IB research methods. We narrow the topic further by focusing on ethical issues associated with a single project by a single author. We examine the methodological challenges involved in conducting research in the complex IB environment and propose best practices for both quantitative and qualitative IB research methods. In some ways, this is a "back to basics" message; in other ways, we draw attention to the heightened complexity of the IB environment and the need to invest in rigorous methods and ethical practices in our unending pursuit of truth.

1. Introduction

Ethical research matters. It matters for scholars in all disciplines and international business (IB) scholars are not exempt. Ethical research has been defined as research that complies with ethical, legal and professional standards of behavior (Kolstoe & Pugh, 2023; Research Integrity Concordat, 2019). Ethical research is consistent with and promotes principles of research integrity, such as accountability, honesty, open communication, rigor, and transparency (Research Integrity Concordat, 2019: 6).[1] The benefits of ethical research include, for example, safeguarding the foundations of science and scholarship, encouraging public confidence and investment in research, fostering innovation and economic growth, and protecting the reputation and careers of scientists (Science Europe, 2015). Simply put, engaging in ethical research enables scholars to trust each other and their findings, and provides a basis for society's trust in our research.

The purpose of this paper is to address ethical research methods with respect to international business (IB) scholarship. Our goal is to help IB researchers avoid some common ethical pitfalls and promote best ethical practices. We identify ethical considerations (mistakes and bad habits)

that can occur when applying quantitative or qualitative research methods that involve collecting and analyzing data in IB research. We also identify ethical best practices for data collection and analysis. We start with quantitative methods and then move to qualitative methods commonly used in IB research. Our paper builds on recent work on the methodological challenges faced by IB researchers, advances in IB research methods, and practical "rules for the road" as discussed in Delios, Welch, Nielsen, Aguinis, and Brewster (2023); Eden and Nielsen (2020); Eden, Nielsen, and Verbeke (2020) and Nielsen, Eden, and Verbeke (2020). We contribute to this literature by focusing explicitly on ethical research methods for both quantitative and qualitative research in international business. Our paper also adds to the growing literature on research ethics and research integrity, as summarized in Kolstoe and Pugh (2023).

2. Defining ethical IB research

Defining what is ethical research, in general and for IB scholars, can be quite confusing given the "lack of clarity" of the fundamental concepts of research ethics and research integrity (Kolstoe & Pugh, 2023: 3).

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[1] See also Bretag (2019), Peters (2019), Eden, Lund Dean, and Vaaler (2018) and ICAI (2021).

We know that ethical research involves achieving research integrity and research ethics but their current definitions are somewhat conflicting and overlapping (see, e.g., Arnold, 2021; Braun, Ravn, & Frankus, 2020; Kolstoe & Pugh, 2023; Research Integrity Concordat, 2019; Steneck, 2006). We propose definitions that are consistent with Kolstoe and Pugh (2023) but also build on the international regime literature's hierarchical definitions of principles, norms, rules, and procedures (e.g., Eden & Kudrle, 2005; Krasner, 1983).

We define *research integrity* as the set of over-arching ethical principles (e.g., honesty, openness, objectivity, fairness, and accountability) that should guide ethical scholars with respect to their research. We define *research ethics* as the set of ethical norms (i.e., standards of behavior) that flow from these ethical principles. Thus, the principles of research integrity should guide our behavior as scholars and researchers in academia; the norms of research ethics set out the appropriate standards of behavior that reflect those principles with respect to our research. Scholars must comply with research ethics norms in terms of both prescriptive and proscriptive standards of behavior. Research ethics therefore has two components: (i) prescriptive ("should") norms – i.e., the adoption of the best available and most appropriate research practices; and (ii) proscriptive ("should not") norms – i.e., the avoidance of unethical research practices. The norms of research ethics are then made more concrete and put into practice through formal and informal rules and procedures that are established by individuals and organizations (e.g., ethical codes of conduct, editorials on ethical practices).[2]

The purpose of our paper is to provide practical advice on research ethics for IB scholars, specifically with respect to research methods. What should IB scholars do in order to meet today's prescriptive and proscriptive norms for ethical IB research methods?

In terms of prescriptive norms, we argue that researchers are expected to implement sound scientific methods and processes in both their quantitative and qualitative IB research. Researchers are expected to select state-of-the-art research methods that promote research ethics and minimize errors in terms of issues such as sampling, measurement, analysis, and interpretation of results. The need for ethical, high-quality research methods is as important for international business (IB) research as it is for other disciplines. Nearly all scholarly journals in all fields, including IB journals, now require that their authors use the best available and most appropriate research methods.[3]

In terms of proscriptive norms, all scholars including IB scholars are expected to refrain from unethical research practices as defined by current ethical, legal, and professional standards of behavior. Unethical research corrupts the research process, damages public trust in academic research, and generates significant negative financial and personal costs and ripple effects throughout the academy.

The business disciplines – and international business is not exempt (Arnold, 2021) – are littered with examples of "scientists behaving badly" (Eden, 2010; Hopp & Hoover, 2017). Several studies have produced disturbing evidence about the replicability and reproducibility of scientific research in various business disciplines (Aguinis, Cascio, & Ramani, 2017; Bergh, Sharp, Aguinis, & Li, 2017; Bettis, Helfat, & Shaver, 2016; Camerer et al., 2016, 2018; Honig et al., 2018). The growing chorus of concern has reached journal editorial teams. For instance, Cuervo-Cazurra, Andersson, Brannen, Nielsen, and Reuber (2016) ask whether the academic community can "trust your findings"

and note that "inclusion of the wrong controls, or exclusion of relevant controls, may seriously affect empirical results and cast in doubt the validity of a study" (2016: 889).

Scientists behave badly when they engage in (i) research misconduct (i.e., fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism)[4] and/or (ii) questionable research practices (QRPs).[5] QRPs are the ambiguous "gray area" between ethically acceptable and unacceptable practices (Edwards & Roy, 2017; Hall & Martin, 2019). These practices range from "honest mistakes" (e.g., honest errors and differences) to "sloppy science" (e.g., not being sufficiently careful or knowledgeable of best practices) to "deliberate abuse" (e.g., selecting (hiding) evidence that favors (contradicts) the researcher's hypotheses to increase the likelihood of publication).[6] While the percent of scientists engaged in research misconduct appears to be relatively small, QRPs are believed to be much more widespread.[7]

3. IB research: pitfalls for the unwary

Meeting the dual tests of complying with both prescriptive and proscriptive norms for research ethics is not easy. We believe that IB research provides many methodological "pitfalls for the unwary" that can make both prescriptive and proscriptive norms for ethical IB research difficult to achieve.

The IB environment is characterized by three forms of complexity (Eden & Nielsen, 2020): multiplicity of entities (i.e., the number and variety of actors, organizations, industries, countries, etc.), multiplexity of interactions (i.e., the number and variety of relationships among the entities), and dynamism (i.e., the variability and dynamics of change over time in the IB system including hysteresis, shocks, business cycles, J-curves, and "long tails"). All three forms of complexity are inherent in the cross-border environment studied by IB researchers, which is the "underlying cause of the unique methodological challenges" that face IB research (Eden & Nielsen, 2020: 1609).

The reasons why the three forms of complexity have an added overlay in a cross-border/international setting are the *differences, distances, and diversities* that exist across countries. Geography has long been viewed as a key factor affecting MNE strategies, structures, and performance; see, for example, the hundreds of publications that build on Johanson and Vahlne's (1977) theory of how firms internationalize and on Dunning's eclectic paradigm for explaining why MNEs exist and their location choices (Dunning, 1988). Cultural differences have also long been studied by IB scholars, building on the seminal work of Kogut and Singh (1988) on cultural distance.

More than 30 years ago, Sundaram and Black (1992) argued that multiple sources of external authority (governments) and multiple denominations of value (economics) were the two key characteristics of the IB environment. The importance of multiple sources of external authority depended (and still depends) on the number of countries where a multinational enterprise (MNE) carries out its activities, the variance in country environments across these locations, and the lack of a global superstructure to mediate threats or opportunities. As a result, the number and variety of sources of external authority are broader and vary more for MNEs than for domestic firms. In addition, multiple

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[2] Our definitions of rules and procedures for implementing research ethics are consistent with Kolstoe and Pugh's (2023) definition of "research governance."

[3] We say "almost all" because the landscape of scholarly journals is littered with predatory journals and publishers that claim to be legitimate but misrepresent their publishing practices (Beall, 2017; Elmore & Weston, 2020). For a useful guide on how to determine whether a journal is predatory or not, see Rele, Kennedy, and Blas (2017). Also see websites such as https://retractionwatch.com/ and https://datacolada.org/toc which identify and catalogue cases of scholarly misconduct.

[4] Simple definitions are: falsification (falsifying data or results through manipulation or distortion), fabrication (making up data or cases), and plagiarism (copying someone else's or your own words without attribution). See, e.g., NAS, NAE and IM (2009), Resnik, Neal, Raymond, and Kissling (2015), and https://oir.nih.gov/sourcebook/ethical-conduct/research-misconduct.

[5] https://oir.nih.gov/sourcebook/ethical-conduct/research-misconduct. See also NAS, NAE and IM (2009) and Resnik *et al.* (2015).

[6] For examples of common methodological practices that enhance "systematic capitalization on chance", see Aguinis et al. (2017: 655).

[7] See Xie, Wang, and Kong (2021) for a recent meta-analysis of empirical estimates of research misconduct and QRPs in scholarly journals.

denominations of value, generated by differing foreign exchange and inflation rates, created (and still create) translation, transaction and economic exposure for firms operating in the IB environment. As a result, the multiple denominations of value are broader, deeper, and more different for MNEs than for domestic firms.

These cross-border/international differences, diversities, and distances have been characterized in various ways, among others, as (i) the costs of doing business abroad and liability of foreignness (Eden & Miller, 2004; Hymer, 1976/1960; Zaheer, 1995); (ii) transaction costs and imperfect markets that motivate internalization (Buckley & Casson, 1976; Rugman, 1981), and (iii) institutional distance (Kostova *et al.* 2020; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). IB scholars have focused on these differences, distances, and diversities and how they affect international business for as long as there have been IB studies. In sum, *context* (locations, nations, cultures, etc.), both inside and outside organizations, matters more for IB scholarship than traditional business research (see also Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen, 2004; Teagarden, Von Glinow & Mellahi, 2018).

More than 20 years ago, Ghemawat (2001) organized the characteristics of the IB environment into the acronym CAGE: C (culture), A (administration, i.e., governments, politics, and law), G (geography) and E (economics), and hypothesized that CAGE distance would affect MNE strategies and performance. Ghemawat (2003: 138) called attention to "the critical role of location-specificity in the prospects of distinctive content for international business strategy relative to mainstream business and corporate strategy." Since then, many IB scholars have used CAGE distance measures to study MNE strategies for coping with liability of foreignness, see, for example, Campbell, Eden, and Miller (2012) for MNEs in the banking industry and Lee, Pattnaik, and Gaur (2023) for internet (i-business) firms.

Saying that IB research is more complex than for other fields of business research does <u>not</u> imply that other business disciplines do <u>not</u> share the same three forms of complexity (multiplicity, multiplexity and dynamism). Of course, context and complexity also matter for domestic research in the business disciplines. Rather, context and complexity create an added overlay in a cross-border/international setting; much like a two-dimensional game of "tic-tac-toe" is more complex when played in three dimensions and even more so in "n" dimensions. The challenges of investigating a research question in any business discipline are typically easier to address when studied "in-country" (within the borders of a single country) than at the international level. There are important differences within countries in terms of laws, languages and institutions but these contextual differences are greater at the regional or global level.

For example, let us look at Sundaram and Black (1992) from the perspective of complexity. Both contextual attributes of the IB environment – multiple sources of external authority and denominations of value – contribute to the three forms of complexity identified in Eden and Nielsen (2020): multiplicity (number of actors), multiplicity (number of interactions) and dynamism (variability across time and space). Sundaram and Black conclude that the two attributes necessitate new theory building to understand better the MNE as an organizational form (1992: 754). We agree and argue that the two attributes also generate greater complexities in the IB environment, which provide additional theoretical and methodological challenges for IB scholars (see also Nielsen *et al.,* 2020).

As an example of the theoretical and methodological challenges posed by multiple sources of external authority, consider the research question of how and why investors react to announcements of international strategic alliances (ISAs) involving partner firms from developed and developing countries. These ISAs are typically viewed as "good news events" with positive market valuations on the U.S. stock market. Miller, Li, Eden, and Hitt (2008) study of U.S.-China alliances provides an early example of applying event study methodology to non-U.S. stock markets. However, they found no investor reaction to these ISA announcements during traditional event windows on Chinese stock markets.

Further investigation showed that the lack of investor reaction was due to weak regulations in China that facilitated insider trading. After China joined the World Trade Organization in 2006 and strengthened oversight of Chinese stock markets, this difference disappeared. Thus, IB theory that is applicable when tested in one country setting (U.S.A.) may not necessarily hold in a different setting (China) when there are CAGE differences and distances. There are also methodological problems, specifically, the difficulty of performing event studies in multi-country settings involving different currencies, which echoes Sundaram and Black's identification of multiple denominations of value as causing problems for IB research.[8] Methodological challenges plague IB research because of the types of research questions we ask and cross-border contexts we study.

These challenges increase the "pitfalls for the unwary" that can lead to practices that do not comply with the norms of research ethics, even when the IB scholar has no intention or motivation to engage in unethical behaviors. Thus, it is critically important that IB researchers practice research ethics, which is a core element of Responsible Research in Business and Management (https://rrbm.network), requiring the implementation of sound scientific methods and processes in both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Researchers must select state-of-the-art research methods that promote research ethics and minimize errors in terms of issues such as sampling, measurement, analysis, and interpretation of results. We turn now to exploring these ethical data and methodological challenges and best practices for quantitative research methods.

4. Ethical quantitative IB research methods

4.1. Data considerations

Research that involves surveys in multiple countries – especially emerging markets – is typically viewed as challenging (Ghauri & Chidlow, 2017). Meaningful comparisons across countries and cultures are feasible only if data are obtained from 'equivalent' constructs and associated measures (Salzberger & Sinkovics, 2006). Data equivalence can be defined as "the extent to which the elements of a research design have the same meaning, and can be applied in the same way, in different cultural contexts" (Hult, Ketchen, Griffith, & Finnegan, 2008: 1027).

There are at least three forms of data equivalence (Hult et al., 2008: 1028) and all three forms are important objectives for ethical research methods. First, construct equivalence exists if a "concept or behavior has the same meaning and function from culture to culture." Second, measurement equivalence requires the "relative comparability of the wording, scaling, and scoring of constructs" from one culture to another. Third, data collection equivalence requires the "comparability of sampling frames and the techniques" used in data gathering across different cultures. Generally speaking, data equivalence is typically examined with survey data; however, the principles underlying data equivalence can be applied to archival data (e.g., differences in accounting standards) and machine learning data (e.g., cultural difference that influence the source data or the programmer's subjectivity). For IB researchers, it is important to learn about the cultures in which the data are collected to determine if data equivalence issues persist (Ghauri & Chidlow, 2017).

4.1.1. Archival data

Potential ethical issues can arise with archival data because IB researchers do not check the "small print" on how the data are collected and cleaned as well as understand who collected the data. For example, IB researchers can fall prey to injudicious trust of data, fail to question potential motives underlying the numbers, and accept numbers at "face

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[8] A discussion of current state-of-the-art research methods, including newly developed empirical techniques in STATA, for cross-border event studies is provided in Eden, Miller, Khan, Weiner, and Li (2022).

value" (Rosenberg & Goodwin, 2016: 3). It is critical for IB researchers to know who collected the data and whether or not the collector has any biases. Also, researchers need to understand if the measures obtained are suitable proxies for their theoretical constructs and whether the measures have different meanings across countries (e.g., the notion of family or perceptions of risk).

A growing number of commercial data providers and institutions have developed large data sets of historical information on a country-by-country basis that are available to researchers. Large data sets provide IB scholars with many opportunities to test their hypotheses. However, the data sets themselves can generate ethical dilemmas when, all too often, IB researchers assume the archival data are accurate and ready for immediate use, but there can be data quality problems (e.g., Gui, 2020; Kalemli-Ozcan, Sorensen, Villegas-Sanchez, Volosovych, & Yesiltas, 2015). For example, in some databases, the data gatherers develop indexes that are based on archival and survey data collected on a country-by-country basis. These surveys may suffer from various biases, such as respondent bias in government-collected data, country differences in survey samples and techniques, subjective versus objective responses, and language challenges that increase the costs of translation and in some regions of the world (Rosenberg & Goodwin, 2016). These concerns call into question sampling techniques (e.g., respondents who are businesspeople, expatriates and/or country experts), measurement problems, and construct issues (Hult et al., 2008; Reynolds, Simintiras, & Diamantopoulos, 2003) that, in turn, may create data equivalence concerns that produce misleading results – even if the researchers use proper analytical techniques.

In emerging markets, there may be additional data challenges – e.g., data gaps, biased data, outdated data, and incorrect numbers (Rosenberg & Goodwin, 2016). In particular, scholars may settle for the wrong proxy or incorrect data. As we alluded to above, emerging markets may require a deeper understanding of particular institutional mechanisms (e.g., Miller *et al.,* 2008). Failure to understand these local mechanisms may produce incorrect results.

Another issue with large datasets is they tend to be reservoirs of information (i.e., items) rather than measure specific constructs. As such, researchers may resort to using unconventional items in an attempt to satisfice or introduce new proxies without examining their validity. Relatedly, researchers can fall prey to ethical dilemmas by focusing on items rather than constructs that can lead to reverse engineering a study (i.e., HARKing) and failing to understand how items are related to each other.

4.1.2. Survey data

In survey-based research, there has been concern about dealing with common method variance (i.e., systematic method error due to the use of a single rater or single source) and causal inference (i.e., the ability to infer causation from observed empirical relations (Rindfleisch, Malter, Ganesan & Moorman, 2008). Another concern is that researchers often provide insufficient information with respect to data equivalence; this lack of transparency has undermined trust in the results of many cross-cultural studies (see Ghauri & Chidlow, 2017). In addition, even if researchers do apply the same scales and methodology across countries, cross-cultural comparisons become meaningless if the numbers on the response scales are interpreted differently across cultures (Mullen, 1995). In survey-based research, it is assumed that respondents' answers to a questionnaire are based on the substantive meaning of the respective items. However, respondents' answers are also influenced by content-irrelevant factors (Baumgartner & Steenkamp, 2001), which is especially problematic in multi-cultural studies. That is, cross-cultural factors that can contribute response bias and thus undermine casual inference.

4.2. Methodological considerations

4.2.1. General analytical considerations

Let us consider a few examples in which theory development does not align with the analytical technique. For example, a scholar might hypothesize that X1 influences Y. However, the theory development clearly suggests that X1 influences X2, which influences Y (i.e., X1→X2→Y). Estimating a model with Y as the dependent variable and X1 as the independent variable overlooks X2 as a mediating variable, and thus the model is misspecified. Or worse, the researcher provides theoretical arguments that suggest X1 influences X2, which influences X3 that, in turn, influences Y (i.e., X1→X2→X3→Y). The theoretical explanation suggests that structural equation modelling is warranted; however, using analytical techniques that test X1→Y – presumably with a linear regression (or for example, a probit or logit model) – overlooks endogeneity concerns and possibly more complex mediation analysis. As a result, the model is misspecified.

Transforming variables can be an effective way to deal with econometric issues. However, some studies perform data transformations without sufficient justification. For example, a theory may contend that X3→ Y where X3 is a continuous variable. Yet, the researcher may transform X3 to a dummy variable without cause and report only the results with X3 measured as a dummy variable. These unjustified transformations may conceal non-significant findings that were driven by other issues (e.g., outliers or measurement error). The choice may also reflect scholarly pressures to produce significant results that support hypotheses, regardless of the amount of data torturing, which reinforces concerns raised about p-hacking (Meyer, van Witteloostuijn, & Beugelsdijk, 2017).

4.2.2. IB analytical considerations

In many IB settings, scholars may develop theories that predict an outcome but the strategic choices create a situation in which some of the firms have incidentally truncated outcomes (Heckman, 1979). Shaver (1998) eloquently showed the estimation bias when predicting performance while ignoring a firm's entry mode decisions, which introduced sample selection bias (Heckman, 1979). Thus, if authors choose an analytical technique that ignores the subset of MNEs that have truncated outcomes, then the results may overlook sample selection bias.[9]

The IB setting can also create complex situations in which a study entails multiple levels, e.g., country, firm, executive (Peterson, Arregle, & Martin, 2012). Ignoring some levels – or using only dummy variables – may be insufficient and thus produce misleading results (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2013).

4.2.3. Using problematic indexes

Let us take a closer look at the methodology used to obtain Economic Freedom index values for various countries. First, the index developer identifies "four key aspects" of a country's economic and entrepreneurial environment – rule of law, government size, regulatory efficiency and market openness – that tend to be influenced by the government. The four aspects are based on "12 specific components", three for each aspect. There is no justification for the four aspects or why there are three components per aspect since factor analysis was not performed. As such, we are unable to determine if they actually measure one multi-dimensional construct (i.e., the aspect) or if some of the components do not even measure the aspect. Similarly, the measures for each of the 12 components are based on equally weighing various items, for which their inclusion lacks sufficient motivation. Again, equal

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[9] Relatedly, some studies may recognize the sample selection bias by using a two-stage Heckman model, but choose inappropriate variables in the first-stage selection model and perhaps incorrectly handle the exclusion restriction, which introduces estimation problems (i.e., misapplying the correct analytical technique).

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Box 1
Sound research design.

Goerzen et al.'s (2013) study of location choice by Japanese MNEs is an exemplary study of sound research design. The authors provide a detailed explanation of the data source and provide detail on the nature of the survey data ("basic facts") to alleviate concerns about subjective responses. They provide a persuasive discussion of the coding for the dependent variable, but still provide measures based on alternative cutoff points for global cities and conduct sensitivity analysis using a more restrictive definition of global city. The thoroughness of the discussion – and scholarly support – of the DV and the other independent variables is commendable. Showing transparency, they list all the global city groups. They use a multilevel multinomial logit model to test some of their hypotheses. Importantly, they explain clearly how the assumption of independence is violated with a traditional regression approach since the error terms of each MNE's subsidiary will be correlated. Lastly, they clearly explain the nesting structure of the data – subsidiaries nested within the MNE.

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Box 2
Data transparency.

Biru et al.'s (2023) study clearly states the sample (US Fortune 500 firms) and time period. They motivate the use of content analysis of CEOs' letters to shareholders with strong support. They specify databases (e.g., Osiris and Compustat) and address potential causality issues and how they plan to address them (lagging variables). They describe the dependent variable (firm internationalization) as a "multi-faceted phenomenon". They discuss the factor loading and reliability; and report the Cronbach alpha. For their CEO regulatory focus variable, they provide support for the use of the CEO letters to shareholders as a basis; show and explain the word categories used; and then describe how the analysis is conducted with Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software. They describe the other variables in an equally comprehensive manner.

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weighting prohibits assessment of whether one or more of the components fails to measure the aspect or if one component is more influential than the others. At least one of the components is based on "other indexes" that have data equivalence issues, while another component assigned specific weights with no justification. Lastly, some of the components are measured subjectively (e.g., investment freedom and financial freedom) with no discussion of who rates the components or if there is interrater reliability. Despite these data equivalence concerns, the index is used in many multi-country studies.

4.3. Best ethical practices

4.3.1. Research design

Research ethics starts with a sound research design. Knight, Chidlow and Minbaeva assert that the research design "sets out the research plan for empirically addressing a research question(s) that aims to develop theory in a feasible way" (2022: 45).

For quantitative studies, research design influences selection of data and analytical techniques for hypothesis testing. Similarly, Ketchen, Craighead and Cheng state, "Let your theory shape your research design." (2018: 17). For studies that use archival data, it is critical to be transparent with respect to who collects the archival data; how the data is aggregated; as well as to test for, acknowledge, and control for potential biases. Archival data users – like survey data users – need to be comprehensive with respect to cross cultural measurement issues; and to demonstrate that the measures are well suited for the theoretical constructs (and control variables). As for analytical techniques, researchers need to justify why the selected technique is optimal for the study and explain why other analytical techniques are inappropriate. Moreover, studies need to provide theoretical explanations for potential endogenous variable and sample selection biases.

For questionnaire respondents to answer questions accurately, they need to "understand the literal meaning" and infer the implied meaning the questions/items (e.g., Schwarz et al., 1998). To minimize response errors and biases, questionnaires need be developed in accordance with

best practices (see Krosnick & Presser, 2010), including longitudinal survey procedures (see Chidlow, Ghauri, Yeniyurt, & Cavusgil, 2015; Rindfleisch et al., 2008).[10] In pursuit of reliable and valid measures of the theoretical constructs, best practices include describing and justifying the object of measurement and selection of respondents; describing the sampling process; disclosing response rates; and assessing non-response biases (see Rindfleisch et al. (2008) for a comprehensive discussion).

More generally, researchers need to explain pretesting procedures (e. g., Hulland, Baumgartner, & Smith, 2018), which are critical, especially when scales are not previous established and validated (Hult et al., 2015); as well as provide clear explanations of the measures and their psychometric properties for dependent, independent and control variables. Survey-based studies should also disclose all scales used and procedures followed such as those detailed in Dillman (1978, 2000) and Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009) (see e.g., Chidlow et al. 2015; Ghauri & Chidlow, 2017). For a discussion of sound research design by Goerzen, Asmussen, and Nielsen (2013), see Box 1.

4.3.2. Data transparency

Data transparency is fundamental to scholarly research. Beugelsdijk, van Witteloostuijn, and Meyer (2020: 887) define data transparency in quantitative empirical studies, including hypothesis-testing studies, "as comprised of an easy-to-follow explanation of the way in which data are generated or collected and also of the procedures used to reach conclusions." Their editorial provides some ethical guidelines for data usage, for example, with respect to using data from one project in other projects, ownership of hand-collected data, and licensed data from data providers. See a discussion of data transparency by Biru, Filatotchev, Bruton, and Gilbert (2023) in Box 2.

4.3.3. Data equivalence

We examine the three components of data equivalence (construct, measurement, and data collection) separately below.

Construct equivalence. We recommend an extensive review of the

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[10] Also longitudinal surveys.

Box 3

Data equivalence.

Hult et al. (2018) represents an exemplary study of data collection equivalence by seeking to "eliminate the alternative explanation that differences in the sampling frame, data collection methods, and final samples account for differences across the 10 countries". Using professional market research firms in each country and a "parallel translation approach" with multiple translators, they note the sampling frame is the same across countries; they collect data in the same manner in each country (online via Qualtrics), and use a random sample of companies from a country-specific representative sample "to alleviate any uncontrolled, systematic errors biasing the estimators." For measurement equivalence, they compare a model in which factor loadings, factor correlations, and error variances are invariant across countries with one that allows them to vary. They analyze four CFA models and perform a chi-square (χ2) difference test for their nested models. Moreover, they clearly describe the procedures for assessing discriminate validity. For instance, they examine two key constructs in a series of two-factor CFA models for the country, region, and overall samples; and compare the restricted and unrestricted models.

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literature and encourage a qualitative approach (e.g., interviews, focus groups) to determine if cultural dissimilarities lead to differences in construct meaning (see Hult et al., 2008). Researchers should determine if a concept can be measured with similar questions in all countries or if concepts need to be operationalized vis-a-vis culture-specific measures. Additionally, triangulation – adopting qualitative and quantitative techniques – can attenuate concerns about construct and measurement inequality across cultures (see Harpaz, Honig, and Coetsier (2002) for guidance). Jin, Lynch, Attia, Chansarkar et al.'s (2015) study, for example, showed transparency with their data collection and explanation of construct equivalence analysis.

Measurement equivalence. For measurement equivalence, alternating least squares optimal scaling may help with scalar equivalence (see Mullen, 1995). Optimal scaling allows estimation and comparison on an item-by-item basis of the metrics of ordinal measures in a multi-country setting. Analysis of multiple group structural equation measurement models may help ascertain whether or not the same measurement model functions across groups. Prior to data collection, additional methods may include clearly describing and anchoring scales as well as providing examples so that the subjects respond in the same manner to the scales. Another recommendation is to consider magnitude scaling (ratio data) as an alternative to Likert scales. Post data collection, standardizing data by respondent instead of by variable may also help ensure measurement equivalence (see Kotabe, Duhan, Smith, & Wilson, 1991). Reeskens and Hooghe (2008), for example, provide a comprehensive description of the measurement equivalence analysis and interpretation of results in their study of generalized trust in European countries.

Data collection equivalence. Hult et al. (2008) recommend a three-pronged approach for data collection equivalence: (i) enlisting parallel respondents for each country, (ii) ensuring matches among sampling frame techniques and procedures, and (iii) minimizing the time between data collection in the different cultures (2008: 1040). Chidlow, Plakoyiannaki, and Welch (2014: 562) also recommend that IB researchers "shift to a more contextualized approach informed by theoretical developments in translation studies" and reframe the translation process to emphasize "intercultural interaction, rather than a lexical transfer of meaning."

In addition to ensuring data equivalence, it is critical to following established diagnostics – e.g., testing for heteroskedasticity, outliers (see Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2013), autocorrelation (e.g., Durbin-Watson statistic), multicollinearity (e.g., variance inflation factor) and skewness and kurtosis – so that the appropriate econometric techniques and adjustments are made. Although this point seems obvious and has been made by other methods enthusiasts, many journal submissions fail to provide evidence of appropriate diagnostics, which may partly explain questionable findings and illogical hypotheses. For a discussion of data equivalence by Hult, Mena, Gonzalez-Perez, Lagerström, and Hult (2018), see Box 3.

4.3.4. Data triangulation

Researchers should triangulate their data if possible (Nielsen et al., 2020). For example, if a scholar has obtained archival data, then researcher should interview key local actors or gather survey data to understand all aspects of a construct in a particular setting. In emerging markets, it is crucial to check the data source and compare it with local market observations and expectations (Rosenberg & Goodwin, 2016). We urge scholars to investigate alternative data sources – especially non-official or non-government generated data – as a means to enhance construct validity. In emerging markets, in particular, scholars may need to be "creative and critical" about the use of variables yet transparent about the potential limitations of new measures. For a discussion of data triangulation by Homburg, Klarmann, Reimann, and Schilke (2012), see Box 4.

4.3.5. Address biases

Above, we mentioned some biases that may arise with survey related data. One effective approach to dealing with survey biases is to consider best–worst scaling methodology. Auger, Devinney and Louviere (2007), for example, show that best-worst scaling can be effective for tackling social desirability bias for social and human rights topics in multiple countries. We contend that the best-worst scaling methodology can be adapted to deal with other IB-related biases stemming from social desirability or local cultures.

Daly et al. provide a clear explanation of the benefits of best-worst

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Box 4

Data triangulation.

Homburg et al. (2012) provide an exemplary study of triangulation with respect to key informants, albeit not internationally focused. They examine characteristics that are construct-specific (e.g., present- vs. past-focused, objective vs. subjective information, salient vs. routine events) and method-specific (.g., archival vs. survey data, survey data from customers, and survey data from key informants with the same vs. different functional backgrounds) and informant attributes that improve or weaken informant reliability. To understand key informant validity, they examine informant, organizational and industry characteristics. Their study shows that triangulation is especially beneficial when the key informant response accuracy is likely to be low and/or when there is scant prior evidence of key informant response reliability in a particular research area.

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scaling and how it resolves bias in a multi-cultural setting: "As there is only one way to choose something as best (or worst), this method significantly reduces, if not eliminates, the biases … that affect ratings scales" (2009: 282). In their multicultural study of conflict-handling style preferences, the authors explain the potential response biases that can arise in a multi-cultural conflict handling styles. The study leverages Auger et al. (2007) by noting that best-worse scaling "eliminates differences in the way that human subjects use rating scales, including cultural differences in ratings scales if they exist" (2007: 305). Lastly, the paper is transparent with respect to constructive feedback and the development of items.

Bias can also arise based on the research question asked. Some MNE executives make strategic decisions – e.g., mode of entry and location decisions – based on ownership, location and internalization advantages that influence performance outcomes, where the research question may introduce endogeneity and/or selection bias (Heckman, 1979; Shaver, 1998). IB researchers need to be prepared to collect additional data on firms for a control group – i.e., the firms that did not choose the same course of action. Relatedly, IB scholars need to test for endogeneity (e.g., Durbin-Wu-Hausman test), and if present, identify and justify suitable instruments, and consider appropriate techniques (e.g., 2- or 3-stage least squares regression or structural equation modeling). [11] Kalinic and Brouthers (2022) provide a persuasive explanation why sample selection bias needs to be incorporated into their study of export performance. For a discussion of addressing biases by Xiao and Tian (2023), see Box 5.

5. Ethical qualitative IB research methods

5.1. Considerations in data and analysis

Qualitative research methods are those that focus less on gathering broad, numerical data on a phenomenon, and more on gaining a sense of the lived experience of the actors involved. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2011) assert that, where objectivity may be questioned in quantitative research, objectivity is literally impossible in qualitative research: the researchers are personally involved in a way that they cannot be in more numerical or positivistic research paradigms. Qualitative research can consequently provide valuable insights that are unfeasible with quantitative research, particularly in cross-cultural contexts where subtle nuances of meaning can make huge differences. However, it is correspondingly open to different sorts of ethical dilemmas, largely relating to human relationships and concepts of power.

We argue that there are four key points to consider in evaluating ethics in qualitative research in international business. The first point pertains to Mahadevan's concept of the "ethnographic triangle" (2011: 151), which captures the general identification of three kinds of stakeholders of ethnographic research across cultures: 1) the researcher of the

phenomenon; 2) the actors in the field (the "subjects" of the research); and 3) the readers of the subsequent report. The three kinds of stakeholders have different relationships and needs with respect to the research project; the key aspect of any project is to balance these interests or, if this is not possible, to figure out whose relationships and needs to prioritize, possibly even different ones at different stages of the process. Though formulated for ethnographic research, we contend that this balancing can also be applied to other forms of research, such as interviews or case studies, which involve qualitative methods or approaches. These stakeholders may also have different cultural backgrounds that shape their perspectives and biases.

The second point leverages Mahadevan (2011: 160), who stresses that it is incumbent on the researcher to identify the "weakest actor" in the study and reflect first and foremost on who they are and what their needs are. In a research setting, the most vulnerable actor may not be obvious, and that actor may not be aware of their vulnerability in the same way that the researcher is. A line manager in a factory may, for instance, be a powerful person in the social environment of the factory; however, if they are portrayed in a negative light in a study of that factory, and senior management are able to identify the actor from the research, that person may be at risk of job loss or disciplinary action. In international research, this can be further complicated by issues of postcolonialism and cultural dominance. For instance, American researchers may assume that their culture and concepts are hegemonic.

Third, researchers in businesses may encounter subjects who focus more on numerical and quantitative risks compared with conventional qualitative studies. For instance, when doing research on a German bank in the City of London for the monograph *Transnational Business Cultures* (Moore, 2007), the ethnographer in charge of gathering data was required to sign a non-disclosure agreement about proprietary corporate information. However, it was only when the company became involved in a merger with a bank from a third country that they opted to end the data-gathering phase: not because they were concerned about proprietary data, rather they were concerned about the disruptive effect of a researcher at the bank during this progress. However, it is significant that the disruptive effect was not a risk they had anticipated at the outset.

Fourth, IB researchers need to consider power with regard to the writing and reception of one's research. While accounts in journals can frequently sound disengaged and detached from the sociopolitical context in which a study took place, the fact remains that studies do not take place in a vacuum. Researchers must be very aware of whose narratives are taking priority during the study and in the subsequent writeup, and why. Moreover, the notion of power – and how different actors act or respond to power can vary across cultural settings. Thus, failure to understand power in a particular setting may lead to different findings. We now consider some forms of qualitative research and the ways in which these ethical issues manifest themselves in these cases.

5.2. Methodological considerations

5.2.1. Interviews

Interviews are the most commonly practiced form of qualitative

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[11] Relatedly, we urge scholars to interview business professionals from several countries in order to identify a particular causal process that, in turn, may alleviate some endogeneity concerns.

research in IB studies, which means that researchers tend to assume a degree of objectivity and neutrality in interview data that may not exist. For instance, MacDonald and Hellgren note that negotiating access to organizations is often fraught with conflict and compromise that are not acknowledged in the written results (2004: 267). Once access is gained, the problems do not stop as interviewers tend to want to interview the most senior people in a firm, assuming that they will know the most about the firm. However, MacDonald and Hellgren argue: "Both experience and theory suggest that top management may not know most about what is going on in the organization, that middle management is likely to be much better informed, and that junior managers may be most knowledgeable of all on specific matters" (2004: 265). If senior managers' views are assumed to be most representative of the reality within the organization, then the experiences of the middle and junior managers, and of any problems or disagreements that they may have with the senior managers' interpretations are not considered. As a result, a study based on interviewing senior managers is likely to be weak and one-sided. MacDonald and Hellgren (2004: 268) go so far as to suggest that such interviews have contributed to the rise of the "hero CEO" narrative currently being challenged in management research.

While there has been an increasing focus in interviewing different stakeholders at different levels in the organization since MacDonald and Hellgren published, it is nonetheless incumbent on the researchers to interrogate their sample and consider if the view they are getting may be slanted in some way. In general, the researcher must consider which people in the organization are likely to have the most informed views on the issue under study when identifying their sample. If multiple groups have different but equally relevant perspectives on an issue, it is worth exploring how to incorporate these diverse voices so as to avoid painting misleading or inaccurate pictures of the organization. The organizational context of the MNE should be taken into account in the interviewing process (e.g., selection of units within the MNE and selecting appropriate interviewees in those units) so as to avoid serious ethical repercussions as per the paradigms discussed above (Marshan-Piekkari, Welch, Penttinen & Tahvanainen, 2004). Chiefly, neglect of the organizational context could lead to an imbalance in the stakeholder triangle where the views of some interviewees are privileged over others, which also leads to queries about whether or not the weakest actor is being adequately protected (Piekkari & Tietze, 2016).

Finally, there is the issue of language use, and of the inevitable discrepancies of meaning between researcher and interviewee in multilingual contexts (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004). In conventional anthropology, Briggs (1986) writes in detail of the problems caused by the ubiquitous role of the interview in Western middle-class culture. When studying a Mexican peasant village, he initially gravitated toward more Westernized individuals, until he abandoned the conventional interview in favor of forms of discourse more familiar to the people of his village. In IB contexts, the use of translation can lead to complex maintenance and crossing of boundaries, as discussed extensively by Westney, Piekkari, Koskinen, and Tietze (2022).

In the above scenarios, the researcher's position is assumed to be unproblematic; albeit receiving only a few versions of events – particularly versions that paint the organization in a positive light or support problematic power structures. Researchers often do not interrogate the power relations inherent in interviews (see Briggs, 1986; Westney & van Maanen, 2011, Westney et al., 2022). Consider, for instance, that senior managers may be comfortable with interviews with outsiders; unlike junior managers, who mostly encounter interviews in potentially hostile and certainly hierarchical situations (such as performance reviews). Furthermore, in international business contexts, the researchers and subjects may have subtly different ideas of how interviews are properly conducted, and the researchers may not realize when they overstep a boundary or miss a promising line of inquiry.

Researchers must thus be particularly careful when conducting interviews since they are rarely objective exercises. That is, interviews always reflect the interviewee's "version" of events and, where the

researcher makes a choice to prioritize one version over another, that choice can never be objective. Furthermore, the idea that one can somehow "remove" subjective perspectives and obtain an "objective" version is not only a fallacy, but attempts to do so generally lead to the study losing the richness which is the key value of a qualitative study. Researchers also need to be as aware of power currents within and outside the organizations, particularly where different cultures are involved and reflect honestly on their role within the organization (Westney & van Maanen, 2011; Piekkari & Tietze, 2016).

IB researchers in particular need to consider the issues involved when working in translation. Many studies are conducted in situations where the native language of the interview subjects might not be the same as that of the researchers, and the researcher may employ a translator or other intermediaries (e.g., Westney et al., 2022). Even when a supposedly common lingua franca is used, Aichorn and Puck (2017) note that what each participant understands may not be as straightforward as they think. For instance, researchers must be aware of the cross-cultural differences in understanding such concepts as "management" or "masculinity."

5.2.2. Participant observation

Participant observation is less commonly practiced for a number of reasons, chiefly, the time commitment and the reluctance of some organizations to allow intensive scrutiny by outsiders (Mahadevan & Moore, 2023). While participant observation shares a number of ethical issues with interviews – mainly with respect to how the researcher gains access to the organization – there are some issues that are specific to participant observation, in particular (1) the possibility of researchers coming to identify with the organization and (2) the issue of whose views are prioritized. The latter may pose a greater risk during participant observation when people are directly and emotionally involved with the workplace and with their informants to a greater degree than interviewers.

Another key issue is that it is impossible to get informed consent from all the stakeholders in the organization who might potentially form part of the participant-observation data. While senior managers can consent on behalf of the firm, the ethics of this are highly questionable. A second issue arises over how to frame participant observation and its value. While covert research is undoubtedly unethical (Fetterman, 2010: 143–145), it can sometimes be difficult to explain the value of observation data to informants, who might then reach the conclusion that the ethnographer is a "spy" or a hostile "outsider" (Green, 1993: 105). Complicating matters, a number of cases exist where observational data has been used for nefarious purposes by the "third leg" of the "ethnographic triangle", namely the reader. Finally, there is the worst-case scenario of an observer encountering a case of fraud or other criminal activity while in the field (e.g., Okely, 2005; also see Fetterman, 2010: 148), which opens up an ethical minefield regarding the researcher's responsibility to the public good as well as to stakeholders in the research process. Reflecting on the complexity of the IB setting, this issue can become further complicated if the managers' actions are considered acceptable in the local environment, but unethical or even illegal in the observer's home country.

Online participant observation also opens up other problematic areas in a cross-cultural context. Legally speaking, statements written in a forum or posted on a social media platform where they can be read by the general public can also be reproduced in a study. However, participants may forget that these statements can be used in this way, leading to scenarios where a statement is quoted in good faith but to the detriment of the writer. In an online setting, it can also be difficult to identify the weakest actor and to safeguard the privacy of potentially vulnerable informants.

5.2.3. Case studies

Case studies are perhaps among the earliest forms of IB research methods. Piekkari and Welch describe the case study as "qualitative

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Box 6
Reflexivity.

Saied, Wierenga, Fernhaber and Nummela's (2023) study of entrepreneurs in the Gujarat province of India provides a good example of reflexivity in action. The researchers candidly discuss not only the characteristics of the research team and how this affected who took part in what aspect of the process, but also how their informants, area of study, choice of methods and decisions throughout the study were informed by their particular research interests. This discussion allows the reader to set the study in context, and the researchers to provide a piece of work where the limitations and utility are clearly set out, and the process of research becomes itself an aspect of data and analysis.

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positivism" where "multiple data sources are encouraged as a form of triangulation, which allows the research to converge on a single account…cases are decomposed into variables, with each independent variable assumed to have an autonomous influence over variation in the dependent variable" (2011: 3–4). In particular, case study research can lead to losing track of the identity and needs of the weakest actor, erasing power dynamics, and letting the study be guided by particular actors within the organization without considering the context. It is useful to note that Piekkari and Welch's (2011) book includes no less than four chapters suggesting ethnography as a way of addressing the problems of case studies.

In order to represent accurately the needs of stakeholders, more context is needed and the logic that underlies triangulating the data sources needs to be transparent and critically analyzed (see Reynolds & Teerikangas, 2016). A concern is that this method of breaking down the data may minimize the complexity and nuance needed to address the ethical issues involved. Ahonen, Tienari and Vaara, for example, express concern that the case study approach "runs the risk of sustaining simplified models of explanation that are inadequate in a complex global business landscape" (2011: 85).

Some scholars have countered against these criticisms of the case study. For example, the penetrating commentary by Eisenhardt (2020) of Welch, Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki (2011) seminal article on the case study in IB research, argues that case studies have become more rich, diverse, and more focused on similarities, differences and useful contingencies. Still, Eisenhardt agrees with Piekkari and Welch's (2011) advice: IB scholars should adopt a pluralistic approach to case studies, one that pays more attention to the context and complexity of IB research.

5.3. Best ethical practices

5.3.1. Reflexivity

In the qualitative research methods discussed above, the best way to ensure an ethical qualitative research program is *reflexivity* (Burawoy, 2003). It is defined as a process of reflection and recursion (Mahadevan (2011: 150–151), whereby researchers reflect critically on themselves, their environment and data, as well as the way in which the data has been written up, the context of the study, the assumed and actual readership, and other factors (also see Guttormsen & Moore, 2023).

IB scholars need to conduct reflexive activities at all stages of the research project. At the beginning, researchers need to consider how they gained access to the field site(s) and how this might make them look to their subjects. During analysis, researchers need to (i) consider whose narratives they have access to, and which ones they prioritized or viewed as more worthy of inclusion in the final account of the project, (ii) be wary of the potential to identify with the organization (MacDonald & Hellgren, 2004; Westney & van Maanen 2011), and (iii) identify the role of the "weakest actor" role in the study. At the writing stage, researchers need to be aware that the process of writing up is as much about creating a subjective narrative and following particular genre conventions as it is about presenting findings and theoretical contributions. Researchers need to reflect on the process of publication and editing with a view to considering the reviewers and editors as

stakeholders in the project. Finally, it can also be valuable to reflect on the position of the study in the wider sociopolitical context. Westwood (2004), for instance, argues that the IB researchers are reluctant to engage with postcolonial discourses or the role of IB research in perpetuating neocolonial relationships.

Reflexivity, furthermore, can assist subsequent readers to evaluate the project from various points of view, including ethical ones. Norris (1993) contends that ethical issues and ethnography can be mitigated with transparency. In particular, to understand the study, the reader needs to know the degree of access the researchers had, the constraints under which they operated, and whether they might have been following someone's "version". In essence, Norris is following van Maanen (1978), who did not explicitly use the word "reflexivity", but did call for a transparent approach – disclosing the researchers' roles, means of access, relationships with subjects (good and bad), as well as personal and professional agendas. Norris also argued that researchers need to consider and be fully honest about their role in the organization: how they participate in it and what they are assigned by their research subjects. For a discussion of reflexivity by Saied, Wierenga, Fernhaber and Nummela (2023), see Box 6.

5.3.2. Balance the stakeholders

Another way of addressing ethical issues in qualitative research is by increased awareness of the stakeholders in the study and ensuring their needs are balanced—or, if one set of stakeholders is prioritized, that there is a very good reason for doing so. The different stakeholders can be identified through the ethnographic triangle (Mahadevan, 2011). Researchers must be aware of the needs of the entire research team and of all subjects, and crucially, people who will later consume the output of the research. They must ensure that any conflicts between the needs of these stakeholders are resolved, and that the study balances these needs as equally as possible. They must also balance stakeholders *within* the triangle – for instance, considering whether a particular tier of management is overrepresented among the subjects, or one faction of the research team's analysis is given priority over others, or whether the researchers are simply seeing the audience of their work as academics and not considering what practitioners and others might absorb from it.

It is also worth emphasizing that balancing is a good practice to adopt for ethical qualitative research even if the study is not ethnographic. Westney and Van Maanen (2011) argue that all studies contain an ethnographic element, even though it may not be understood and/or acknowledged. MacDonald and Hellgren also note that interview-based studies often wind up focusing on only a small number of the interviews given, without interrogating why, or what this does to the results (2004: 277). Interview-based and case study research has the same stakeholders as participant observation-based studies, and so the ethnographic triangle is a useful starting point from which to identify relevant groups.

Above all, researchers working with qualitative methods need to avoid falling into the trap of "quantitative envy" – i.e., trying to make a qualitative study seem "objective" vis-a-vis eliminating direct reference to the researcher's perspective and background, or assuming that more interviews provide a better perspective on the organization. The researcher should consider why they are employing qualitative methodologies, and what they specifically hope to achieve by doing so, in

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Box 7
Balance the Stakeholders.

In his seminal paper "Qualitative personal interviews in international business: Some lessons from a study of Hong Kong transnational corporations", Henry Wai-chung Yeung (1995) provides a good example of how to take into account all three legs of the ethnographic triangle. Yeung speaks candidly of how he found the experience of conducting personal interviews "traumatic", and the impact this had on his research with business elites. He talks the reader through the reasons behind his choices of method and how they were used in practice, and highlights the complex power relations between himself and his interviewees and how the aims of each vis-à-vis his study affected the project. Yeung goes even further, however, and considers the third leg of the ethnographic triangle, discussing how his work was evaluated by critics, and the impact this had on the study as a whole.

Box 8
Transparency.

Peltokorpi and Zhang (2020), in their application of identity theory to the experiences of Nordic expatriates in Asian countries, provide a good example of how transparency can improve a qualitative paper, presenting their data and conclusions framed by a detailed description of the sample, how it was obtained, relevant demographics of the research team, and how the data was analyzed. Furthermore, the same paper contains extensive quotes from interviewees, thus, allowing the reader to draw their own conclusions about whether or not to agree with Peltokorpi and Zhang's analysis.

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order to ensure that they do not lose sight of this during analysis and writing-up. For a discussion of balancing the stakeholders by Yeung (1995), see Box 7.

5.3.3. Transparency

One of the difficulties in achieving transparency in qualitative research in IB studies is that most IB journals require a large degree of anonymity in writing up their methodology. Moore and Mahadevan (2023), for instance, note an example where a reviewer's suggestion for more transparency in an international study was vetoed by a journal's top editor. There can also be a need to anonymize interviewees and disguise corporations, depending on the nature of the data. However, being as transparent as possible about the researchers and the subjects can help make the readers aware of – and able to reconcile – the subjective testimonies of the interviewees with the subjective interpretations of the researchers (e.g., Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

Furthermore, there is also the issue of bias in terms of researchers and the sample as well as factors like social desirability response bias (e. g., respondents may be reluctant to directly criticize their in-group) or cultural differences between the interviewer and respondent that may lead the former to take at face value a response that requires a more nuanced interpretation. In such cases, transparency in terms of reporting responses may help readers towards different interpretations of the responses. Furthermore, reflexivity (Section 5.3.2) and the use of team diversity (Section 5.3.4) may help members of the research team identify and address such issues, or to understand their influence on the data and analysis. For a discussion of transparency by Peltokorpi and Zhang

(2020), see Box 8.

5.3.4. Researcher team diversity

A common way in which IB scholars address the issue of including emic and etic perspectives is in terms of building the research team. A common practice for researchers studying a different culture is to include team members of that culture: for instance Chapman, Gajewska-deMattos, Clegg and Buckley's (2008) study of Polish MNCs includes Gajewska-deMattos, who is from the studied country. While this approach is certainly a practice to be approved of, the researcher must remain alert to power imbalances. For instance, if a point about culture is disputed, then the team needs to clarify conditions in which the local or international researcher's perspective carries more weight. One might also be alert to power issues in cases where the local researcher is a junior scholar or doctoral student, or where the country under study is a developing country. Alternatively, one might also consider issues that arise if the local researcher is of a different class, social group or other condition to the people under study. Hence, sharing the same nationality is not always sufficient, and the differences must be taken into account. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that outsider/etic perspectives also provide insights, and insider perspectives can hold unconscious biases and taken-for-granted attitudes. Finally, there are times when it is not feasible to secure country-specific team members. For instance, in large multi-country studies, the number of researchers from each individual country might prove unwieldy. Well-handled and with a degree of reflexivity, however, balancing diversity within the research team could help develop nuanced and well-rounded perspectives. For a

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Box 9
Researcher team diversity.

In the case of Chapman, Gajewska-De Mattos, Clegg, and Buckley (2008) the team were able to successfully balance both insider and outsider perspectives not only through including a member of the ethnic group under study as part of a team otherwise consisting of outsiders, but through also including team members with diverse academic backgrounds and professional specialities, with an anthropologist and a qualitative IB researcher being balanced by colleagues from more quantitative backgrounds. In doing so, they are able to challenge the concept of "cultural distance", noting that quantitative metrics of distance do not apply in a case where two groups who score very similarly on values surveys view each other as being very different indeed.

Box 10
Triangulation.

Reynolds and Teerikangas' study of international aspects in domestic mergers (2016) provide a good example of a purely qualitative mode of triangulation. Rather than taking the traditional approach of comparing and contrasting data of the same case from multiple methods, both researchers conducted separate case studies of mergers, and came together to compare and contrast their experiences, using the similarities and differences between them as a basis for analysis. In doing so, they are not only able to support and develop the findings of both pieces of research but allow for comparisons with other relevant cases in future studies.

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discussion of researcher team diversity by Chapman, Gajewska-De Mattos, Clegg, and Buckley (2008), see Box 9.

5.3.5. Data triangulation

Data triangulation is often proposed as a means of ensuring reliability and validity in qualitative research. However, we urge a degree of caution, as often what is meant by this is to "triangulate" qualitative data with quantitative research, leading to a situation in which quantitative results are assumed to be authoritative, the problems of which are extensively discussed above. Nonetheless, data triangulation can be a useful practice of ensuring ethical and sustainable practices in qualitative research when used properly. It is good practice, for instance, to use multiple forms of qualitative data gathering in a single study, to obtain variations in perspective; mixing qualitative and quantitative methods can also provide a way of stepping "outside" the qualitative data and reflecting on its different meanings.

In sum, arguably the best way of dealing with ethical dilemmas in qualitative IB research is not to try and avoid them per se, but to acknowledge that they will arise, and to take them into account using the methods described above: balancing the stakeholders of the "ethnographic triangle" and engaging in a process of critical reflexivity at all stages of the study. In addition, IB researchers need to devote more time and energy to understanding how cultural backgrounds may influence subjects' actions and how their own biases may influence the observations and interpretations of subjects' actions. Leveraging the expertise of local culture experts can help with this endeavor. For a discussion of triangulation by Reynolds and Teerikangas (2016), see Box 10.

6. A look ahead: Research ethics and machine learning

There is growing interest in understanding the use of AI/machine learning in organizations and in their use in scholarly research (e.g., von Krogh, Roberson, & Gruber, 2023). Machine learning "is broadly defined as the capability of a machine to imitate intelligent human behavior" (MIT & Brown, 2021). Machine learning lets computers learn to program themselves by drawing upon their experience. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools have become a vital part of business strategy – e.g., automation of business processes and knowledge extraction from big data as well as provision of superior analytical and computational capabilities.

Although there are many benefits to using machine learning, there are ethical issues. Humans train the computers and human biases can be integrated into algorithms that, in turn, may produce biased information or data that reinforces existing inequities and stereotypes. For instance, generative AI such as ChatGPT (i.e., Generative Pre-trained Transformer) has become popular due, in large part, to its ability to provide "compelling human-like answers to almost any question asked" (Budhwar et al., 2022: 609). As such, AI offers huge opportunities for both business managers and business researchers (e.g., von Krogh et al., 2023). That said, Budhwar, Chowdhury, and Wood (2023) note that machine learning possesses inherent bias because it is only trained by using existing historical materials that may contain racial, ethnic and/or gender biased texts, thus influencing interactions with different

stakeholders and undermining ethical IB research. Hence, for researchers, ethical concerns related to biases can arise in firms (i.e., use of AI-generated data) or with AI-based research.

For example, AI researchers produced evidence of demographic differences in most of the algorithms that they studied (Grother, Ngan, & Hanaoka, 2019), suggesting that machine learning holds great promise, but can incorporate various societal biases in an IB setting (e.g., gender, ethnicity). In addition to potential biases, machine learning may produce questionable findings in a multinational setting if the AI scientist at the firm or the IB researcher does not fully understand the context – e.g., cultural differences or business issues across countries. Relatedly, large language models (LLMs) are "artificial intelligence (AI) models with complex architecture and a large number of parameters that have been trained on very large amounts of text (billions of words)" that can create human-like writing (Rillig, Ågerstrand, Bi, Gould & Sauerland, 2023: 3464). Some journals have raised ethical concerns about transparency and authorship when AI is used to assist with – or actually write – scholarly articles (Elsevier., 2023). In principle, we oppose the use of AI in the writing of scholarly articles and recommend that our scholarly journals move quickly to develop AI-specific research ethics norms, rules, and procedures.

The inherent complexity of IB research creates three methodological challenges for scholars: problem definition and research question, research design and data collection, and data analysis and interpretation of results. Clarification of constructs, greater specification of boundaries, and identification of the influence and role of context in theory development and building are needed (Teagarden, Von Glinow, & Mellahi, 2018). IB research must be sufficiently contextualized to achieve research ethics.

The worry is that a firm's AI scientist may have biases and lack understanding of cultural differences, which can produce questionable data by the firm. Similarly, the research team's unfamiliarity as to how AI is used in the MNE, its distinct influence on employees in culturally different foreign subsidiaries, and the team's inability to assess AI-generated data can adversely influence data quality, programming and results.

One of the keys to mitigate bias in machine learning starts with having a research team with diverse backgrounds, expertise and experience. A diverse research team can also help with data equivalence issues. It is really important that the diversity fits well with the IB context being studied – that is, the backgrounds, expertise and experience needed for a team is likely to be context specific. In machine learning, programming expertise and contextual expertise need to be considered to ensure that training data are vetted properly. As Gu and Oelke asserted, eliminating bias requires "close collaboration between domain experts and machine learning experts and the willingness to inspect and challenge the data and the resulting model before it is deployed" (2019: 11).

Some research team members can fill a critical void by having a general understanding of machine learning and the context in order to verify that the training data has addressed local culture nuances. If there is a specific IB topic – e.g., communications during cross-border acquisitions – then team diversity becomes more crucial and varied, including the need for expertise in programming, cross-border acquisitions,

Table 1
Summary of Key Takeaways.

- **Context and complexity matter**. Invest time in understanding the context and nature of complexity to avoid pitfalls and QRPs.
- **Sound research design**. Reflect on data needs, address potential data quality concerns, and identify potential analytical problems.
- **Data transparency**. Disclose when and how data were collected, how variables were measured, and whether there are country-level differences that may influence data quality.
- **Data triangulation**. Assess when it will improve data quality (e.g., multiple informants) and when it is unnecessary. Consider if multiple sources of qualitative data, quantitative data or both may improve data quality.
- **Data equivalence**. Assess data equivalence – and take corrective measures if necessary.
- **Address biases**. Review the literature to determine what biases may arise in a particular IB setting – and take corrective measures if necessary.
- **Reflexivity**. Engage in reflection and recursion during all phases of a research project.
- **Balance stakeholders**. Understand and balance the needs, potential conflicts and differential influences of all stakeholders.
- **Transparency**. Assess and disclose potential biases of all the subjects, anticipate how those biases may influence data collection and analysis, and discuss corrective measures to attenuate those biases.
- **Research team diversity**. Assess the diversity needs of the research team. Understand and communicate when local, international and/or technical perspectives are weighted more (or less).
- **AI/Machine learning**. Recognize potential sources of bias in the sample firms and research team. Leverage team diversity to raise awareness and minimize its influence on data quality and analysis.

language and local cultures. In this situation, research team members need to be able to vet training data based on language, culture and acquisition idiosyncrasies as well as AI usage in the acquirer and target firms. With a growing interest in ESG (environmental, social and governance), an IB study that draws upon machine learning will also need to ensure social neutrality with vetting and programming. Failure to do so – intentionally or unintentionally – may set the stage for questionable research practices (QRPs) and AI biases.

7. Conclusions

A search for the phrase "research ethics" using the Google search engine generates 103 million results. Clearly, ethics in the academy matters. In this paper, we have explored research ethics using the lens of international business research. Our purpose has been to examine the methodological challenges involved in conducting research in the highly complex IB environment and to propose some best practices for both quantitative and qualitative IB research methods. In some ways, we subscribe to a "back to basics" message when it comes to quantitative and qualitative research methods. For a summary, see Table 1. In other ways, we draw attention to the greater importance of context, the heightened complexity of the IB environment, and the need to invest in rigorous methods and ethical practices that can help honest researchers avoid some common pitfalls in IB research and thus promote ethical IB research.

IB researchers, like all scholars in all disciplines, must demonstrate research ethics. Failure to use the best (i.e., most appropriate state-of-the-art) research methods and practices results in research outputs that do not meet current ethical standards. This problem exists regardless of whether the failure is due to deliberate unethical conduct or "sloppy science" or (more likely) lack of knowledge or access to best practices due to resource constraints. In the end, as IB scholars and members of the academy, we stand or fall on the reputation of our research output. Research ethics matters; it enables us to trust each other and our findings, and society to trust our research.

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