

PANEL DISCUSSION

‘Ethics and Professional Identity in the Academies of Management’

Introduction

Emma Bell, Lecturer in Organizational Behaviour, Warwick Business School, UK

This panel discussion will provide opportunity to reflect on the ethical issues faced by management researchers and to consider the role played by our professional academic associations (British Academy of Management, European Academy of Management and the Academy of Management) in promoting or undermining the ethical conduct of their members. Specific issues to be addressed by the panel include the following:

- What are the main ethical issues that management researchers need to address?
- Are there any significant differences between the ethical dilemmas that confront management researchers and other researchers in the social sciences?
- How do ethical issues and dilemmas vary with respect to source of funding, type of organization, means of access, research strategy, method of data collection, participant status, and relationships between organization and researcher?
- What is the significance of ethical codes and institutional ethics committees on ethical decision-making in management research?

It is a further aim of the panel discussion to provide a structured context in which new researchers can also express their views. To this end, two current PhD students who have expressed an interest in this subject will act as rapporteurs, reflecting on the views expressed by the panel in the light of their current situation as ‘novice’ academics.

Panel Speakers

Karen Legge, Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Warwick Business School, UK

‘Can Ethical Behaviour Survive the Marketplace for Management Studies?’

University Business Schools in the UK are confronted by two factors that may have ominous repercussions for the maintenance and development of ethical behaviour on the part of academic and academic-related staff. The first is the funding crisis in universities that compels institutions to seek funding in the marketplace rather than from public sector sources. Such funding may come from industry (e.g., pharmaceutical companies funding biochemical research), or from individuals (e.g., students who pay ‘premium’ fees). In such cases there may be the temptation to act in a less than disinterested manner in order not to alienate the source of funding. This is particularly likely to be the case when close calls have to be made in grey areas. For example, there is the issue of backgrounding ‘marginal’ but ‘disappointing’ (from the fund-giver’s perspective) research results; giving marginal students who are working in their second language ‘the benefit of the doubt’ in assessing work; allocating more resources to students who pay premium fees at a cost to other students. The slippery

slope is compounded by the readily available appeal to utilitarian ethics, with arguments about the value of cross-subsidisation.

The second factor is the development of a culture and institutions of auditing in the UK, whether of research (RAE) or teaching (TQA, QAA). In theory, the function of auditing-- apart from accountability of public funds-- is the development of the highest standards in teaching and research. (This is somewhat ironic, not to say cynical, as the introduction and refinement of such auditing correlates strongly with the reduction of state funding to higher education in the UK). In practice, audits, both formally and informally, act as resource allocators: either directly, through the allocation of HEFCE funding or indirectly, through the impact of ratings on the various media-based league tables that are important in status attribution and as marketing devices to potential clients and staff. As with most performance related reward systems, the temptation is to focus on those behaviours that will deliver the reward, at the cost of dubious ethical practice e.g., 'salami slicing', and the neglect of areas of activity that do not 'pay off' (administration, 'invisible' time spent with HEFCE funded students). The very existence of an auditing culture and institutions, by implying a lack of trust in academics to develop the best teaching and research within their capability, may be argued to encourage instrumental and non-collegial behaviour that in the long run does not serve a university's stakeholders.

Can professional academic institutions combat these potential dangers? I have just finished reading the American Academy of Management's 'Code of Ethical Conduct', which outlines appropriate ethical behaviour with respect to students, managerial knowledge, to the academy and the larger professional environment, to managers and the practice of management and to the world community. It is full of commendably high ideals and clearly spelt out practices to safeguard those ideals. The only problem is that the Code ignores the sorts of political pressures that I have indicated and the existence of an additional major constraint on its proposed courses of action: time. If one followed to the letter its proposals on 'striving for teaching excellence', one would not have time to undertake research, let alone follow the guidelines on how to act ethically in the role of a consultant. Lacking any discussion of the constraints in enacting this Code, it appears little more than a wish list. Who was it that said 'the best is the enemy of the good'

Karen Legge has previously worked at Manchester Business School, University of Sheffield, the Management School, Imperial College and the Department of Behaviour in Organisations, Lancaster University. She is joint editor of the *Journal of Management Studies* and is a member of the editorial boards of *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Human Resource Management Journal*, *Gender, Work and Organization* and *Organization*. Karen's interest in this panel discussion stems from her research on the ethics of Human Resource Management and the ethics of organising.

Mark Easterby-Smith, Associate Dean and Professor of Management Learning at Lancaster University Management School, UK

‘Does the British Academy of Management Need Ethics?’

The question of ethics seems to be creeping up on the management community from a number of directions: from other disciplines such as psychology where clear codes exist to protect the individual research subjects; from organizational research sites such as the NHS which are heavily influenced by the assumptions of medical ethics; and from other, more litigious, countries such as the USA where ethical clearance might be expected before conducting joint international research projects. Does this mean that a response, or at least a position, from BAM is now required? In the following paragraphs I summarise some of the classic arguments for and against ethical codes before concluding with consideration of some of the options facing BAM.

There are three main arguments in support of ethical codes for researchers. First, that they help to protect the interests of those who aid the research process, usually individual informants or subjects, though it might equally apply to groups, communities or organizations. Codes that derive from this premise will stress the importance of confidentiality, and procedures to avoid the use of research outputs in ways that might harm the interests of these informants. Second, ethical codes help to guarantee the quality of the research output through directing attention to issues of plagiarism, bias, inadequate methods, and the general relationships with, and between, research staff and colleagues. The expectation here is that such ethical codes will protect the reputation and credibility of the research community as a whole. Third, may be seen as a necessary response to a range of exogenous factors such as the threat of litigation if things go wrong, and the legal requirements of nations and international associations.

The arguments against ethical codes tend to emphasise the costs, and the danger that control and bureaucracy will drive out creativity and opportunism. At best, it is suggested ethical codes will make no difference to the quality of the research enterprise because people will simply pay lip service to them; at worst they will lead to a reduction in research quality and will leave research subjects more vulnerable to harm in ways that fall outside the predetermined frameworks. Moreover, most ethical codes assume a positivist position, in the sense that the researchers are required to seek ‘factual’ knowledge and that it is possible to pre-specify procedures for identifying this knowledge. Things get a little harder when researchers start to consider sensemaking and the co-production, or contestation, of knowledge.

As far as BAM is concerned, we also need to consider whether there are features of management and business research which mean that the assumptions applied to other disciplines and contexts do not apply for us. The problem here, of course, is that BAM covers a broad area, which includes a number of sub-disciplines and methodologies. There are economists, accountants, marketing researchers, both quantitative and qualitative, sociologists, ethnographers, occupational psychologists, and so on. This does, however, point to one important feature – a considerable diversity of methodology and ontology. In addition, three other features are likely to be

significant: the unit of analysis is somewhat more likely to be at group or organizational levels than at individual levels; research informants/ subjects, especially managers and 'leaders', are often more powerful than the researchers; and, when the unit of analysis is at organizational levels, the research informants may also be the people who control access across organizational boundaries.

So what are the options for BAM? First, should it have an ethical code, and what form would it take? A simple course of action is to do nothing, and this would be supported by a significant portion of the membership. Next up the scale might be a generic statement of ethical principles which would draw attention to key issues such as the need to protect informants, the importance of 'good practice' in the conduct of research, and so on. The attraction of this position is that it could be expressed at a level of generality which might be appropriate to most of the sub-disciplines within BAM. A fuller position would require greater detail on the behaviours and principles that are considered ethical or unethical, and if we were to adopt this approach, then it might be easiest to 'borrow and adapt' the ethical code employed by a related association.

Then, there are questions about the degrees of voluntarism and the approval mechanisms that would be regarded as appropriate. A compulsory ethical approvals process would almost certainly be regarded as politically and practically infeasible. But there are instances where it might be very useful for a researcher to be able to demonstrate that her research project had been subjected to a process of ethical scrutiny. In which case an optional model would apply, and given the costs involved it would be best if this were operated at the level of the individual's institution. The role for BAM might then be to develop a generic ethical code which would be offered to institutions as 'best practice' (which might supplement any procedures already in place), and this could include suggestions about the approvals process. This might be helpful both for individuals and institutions especially if external institutions such as AMBA or the Research Councils were to decide to take a stronger line on ethical issues.

Mark Easterby-Smith is the current Chair of BAM. He is based at Lancaster, where he was until recently the Director of the Graduate Management School. He has now taken up a Fellowship with the Advanced Institute of Management Research where he is undertaking work in the area of organizational learning and international dynamic capabilities. He has a long-standing interest in research methods and is joint author of the popular textbook 'Management Research: An Introduction' (Published by Sage in 1991 and 2002, and reprinted 12 times). He argues that management research has a major political dimension, both in its execution and in its consequences, and hence that ethical issues are an unavoidable part of the research process.

‘The Background to Codes’

Governments, corporations and professional associations globally are, increasingly, developing codes of ethics to define, and delineate, standards of conduct for individuals. At the same time, it is not always clear what problem a code of ethics is the solution to. However, these codes vary in length and take a number of different forms. They are generally said to fulfil one or all of three functions:

- Codes provide general principles of ethical conduct to be aspired to
- Codes provide guidance in areas where decisions fall into ethical ‘grey areas’
- Codes indicate what penalties are likely to result from unethical conduct

A fourth function, that is not generally publicised, is the decorative role of codes. Codes indicate that an organisation is, on the face of it, seeking to enhance ethical behaviour, although in practice codes may sit on shelves and have no impact. We know that Enron had a well-thought out code.

Part of the explanation for the increase in the codification of ethical behaviour is the lack of trust in individuals and groups to regulate themselves. An integrity model of ethical conduct is being replaced by a compliance model.

For codes of ethics to be successful, the key is to perceive formulation and implementation as flip sides of the same coin and to build codes up from the ground, involving a multiplicity of different stakeholders. Thus, ethical issues are grounded in the problems that are faced by individuals within organisations and are not given in advance. Of course, conflicts of interest, treating others with respect, issues of accountability and so on are universal, but they play out differently at local levels. Thus, for example, Registers of Interests that form an integral part of most codes, usually include the interests of members of the family. However, the definition of the family does change from place to place. This is not to argue for ethical relativism, but to recognise the problems of a ‘one code fits all’ approach. Thus, whilst a code may propose a general set of principles around notions of integrity, impartiality, accountability, honesty, leadership, transparency, probity and so on, it is imperative that these principles are then defined in terms of the specific issues that face individuals in their particular professional and organisational contexts. A first consideration, then, for management researchers, is to develop and agree upon a set of principles that might inform our behaviour and then to work through what that might mean specifically for the kind of research that we do.

A further consideration concerns enforcement and punishment, otherwise why should we take such codes seriously? Unfortunately, codes tend to stress the punishment of unethical behaviour rather than the reward for ethical behaviour. However, we do have to consider the difference between inappropriate, unethical and illegal behaviour and to consider the sanctions that might be imposed for a breach of a code. More importantly, we also have to consider who or what body might impose and enforce such sanctions.

Codes are generally considered to be necessary but not sufficient in developing an ethical culture and will sit alongside existing regulations and protocols and will be supported by appropriate training, encouraged by ethical leadership. At the same time, individuals may also be subject to other sets of rules and regulations including employment law, Human Rights obligations and the rules of different professional bodies.

However, involvement in the development of codes of ethics is, in itself, educative and will enhance the content of the code and make it more likely that it will be embedded within an organisation or profession.

Where does all this leave management researchers, as members of a profession rather than an organisation? It would be relatively easy to develop a set of principle that we can all agree upon and to identify the issues that we commonly face in our research activities. More difficult is the enforcement of such codes. Generally, enforcement of codes takes place through line management, through a specified Ethics Officer or through some Central Body created specifically to regulate codes of ethics as part of the regulation of unethical behaviour generally. To apply such mechanisms to a professional body is more problematic, particularly if membership is dispersed amongst different professional bodies or if membership of a professional body is not required to practice the profession.

An alternative is to develop enforcement mechanisms within the organisations through which management researchers practice. Indeed, as we know, research ethics committees proliferate throughout our institutions of higher education. It is a moot point the extent to which such committees act as a screening device for, in particular, undergraduate projects, rather than developing guidelines and enforcing sanctions for unethical behaviour on the part of members of academic staff.

If we are serious about developing codes of ethics for management researchers we have to give consideration to how such codes will be enforced and what sanctions will be applied for breaches of the code. It is not clear whether we, as an academic community, are willing to embrace such a development.

Alan Lawton's main research, teaching and consultancy interests are in the areas of public services management and organisational and management ethics. He has developed Codes of Conduct for governments and other organisations and given numerous workshops of developing and implementing codes of conduct, primarily for government bodies. He was formerly a Senior Lecturer at Open University Business School and Head of the Centre of Strategy and Policy and has written ethical decision-making policies for both the OU and Teeside Business Schools.

'Ethical and Professional Issues in Management Research in an Interdisciplinary International Context: Some Lessons from the RESPECT Project'

Management research sits at the intersection of a range of different academic disciplines and also uses a range of different methodologies drawn from different origins and covered by different professional associations. At one extreme lie large surveys, typically covered by the codes of practice of organisations like the Market Research Association (or its international equivalent, ESOMAR); at the other are highly qualitative exercises, perhaps carried out by psychologists or ethnographers, for whom many of the concepts underlying the ESOMAR code of practice may be highly problematic. Management research could therefore be regarded almost as a paradigmatic illustration of the problems which arise in developing common ethical and professional standards for the conduct of interdisciplinary research.

This presentation draws on the work of the RESPECT project, funded by the European Commission to draw up guidelines for ethical and professional good practice in the conduct of interdisciplinary, international research projects. The aims of the project are to create professional and ethical guidelines for the conduct of socio-economic research based on current and forthcoming EU legislation and a synthesis of existing professional and ethical codes and taking specific account of the changing technological context; and the interdisciplinary, international environment of EU-funded research projects

Why do we need codes of practice?

Any discussion of research ethics has to start by addressing the question of why codes of practice are needed in the first place. After analysing around 300 existing professional codes of practice and the surrounding literature, the RESPECT team concluded that the underlying reasons boil down in essence to two, which are present to varying degrees in existing codes.

The first of these is moral commitment (the 'deontological' principle) which dictates that researchers should strive to be good people doing research which will benefit humankind. The second is a group of utilitarian reasons. These include:

- To create a level playing field;
- To make it possible to work with strangers;
- To be able to trust the results of colleagues' work;
- To maintain/improve standards;
- To increase the public standing of research professionals and general respect for social research and its results.

Why now?

There are several reasons why the issue of research ethics is currently in the spotlight. These include:

- Growing diversity of the field in response to broadening scope of public policy and need for monitoring and evaluation;

- New ICT-based research tools and multiplication of information sources and delivery media change the nature of research;
- Digitisation of information facilitates new forms of plagiarism and blurs the boundaries between ‘published’ and non-published research and makes verification difficult;
- New EU legislation on copyright and data protection affects the collection, analysis and publication of data and raises new questions about who owns what;
- Speed of technological change accelerates need for innovatory models, concepts and methodologies;
- Increasing inter-disciplinarity and multidisciplinary;
- Increasing international collaboration;
- Breakdown of traditional self-regulating communities of researchers.

The principles underlying the RESPECT code of practice

The RESPECT code of practice is based on three underlying principles: compliance with the law; upholding scientific standards; and avoidance of social harm. The presentation will focus in particular on those aspects of each which are particularly relevant for management research.

Compliance with the law

New data protection legislation currently being enacted in all EU member states place new responsibilities on researchers in respect of the collection and processing of data and limitations on how (and for how long) it can be stored, and the terms on which it can be passed on, and to whom. The definition of what constitutes ‘personal data’ is surprisingly broad, as are the new rights conferred on data subjects and these can place real limitations on research inside companies which overwhelmingly consists of research on human subjects. Particularly contentious issues concern the anonymisation of data about employees before it is passed on to managers and the secondary analysis of existing data sets (e.g. HR records).

Most existing social research guidelines on ‘informed consent’, and confidentiality assume that the data subject is a vulnerable individual, relatively powerless compared with the researcher. How can such guidelines be applied in situations where respondents may not only be people who wield considerable social power (such as company CEOs) but also may actually be the people who have commissioned the research?

Another cluster of legal issues concerns intellectual property law, which is also in the process of radical revision across all EU member states. This does not just raise questions of who owns the final outcome of the research, and rights of authorship, citation etc., but also who owns (and has the right to use, or veto the use of) intermediary data, such as interview transcripts, data sets etc.

Most ethical and professional codes oblige researchers to behave in general as good citizens and a number of other legal obligations may also be relevant to any specific piece of research, for instance the obligation to report crime (e.g. if a researcher comes across suspected fraud, evasion of tax or employment regulations or other malpractices)

Upholding scientific standards

The requirement of scientific integrity generally focuses on accuracy, impartiality, integrity and honesty. These may seem fairly straightforward but in practice are often hotly contended. Ethnographic researchers, for instance, may fiercely deny the possibility of absolute objectivity and see reflexivity and an awareness of the subjective baggage inevitably brought by the researcher to the research process as an important part of research practice.

It is also usually a requirement that researchers do not claim too much for their work and demonstrate at all times an awareness of other work in the field and acknowledge their debts to other research, both in terms of content and in terms of methodology. These principles are relatively easy to apply in academic research but can often be difficult to respect fully in small pieces of commissioned research where sponsors demand highly focused results.

Other issues, including confidentiality, may also be difficult to resolve in conflicts between the sponsors' requirements for control of the results (sometimes resulting in restricted publication requirements) and the professional obligation to disseminate results to the broader scientific community for peer review or verification.

Avoidance of social harm

The requirement to avoid social harm also raises a range of issues for management researchers including the protection of vulnerable respondents, the application of equal opportunities principles and responsible dissemination.

Ursula Huws was formerly a senior lecturer in research methodology at the University of North London. She is currently an Associate Fellow of the Institute of Employment Studies and Honorary Visiting Professor of International Labour Studies at the Working Lives Research Institute at London Metropolitan University. Since 2000 she has been working on several large international projects including EMERGENCE, looking at the global relocation of employment, and RESPECT, designed to develop professional and ethical codes of conduct for socio-economic research in the information society
www.respectproject.org

Discussants

Nick Wylie Doctoral Student, Warwick Business School and Neil Hair
Doctoral Researcher, Cranfield School of Management, UK

‘Ethical Research? The Perspective of First-time Researchers’

As novice researchers our experience has been that ethical issues are not simply confined to standard commitments about such things as confidentiality and anonymity and whether we have complied with generalized external codes of conduct. Instead, we would argue that the ethical dimension of our research centres around particular situations or dilemmas where we can see clear alternative courses of action, one of

which we regard as being ‘more’ ethical than the other. The process of assessing and reflecting upon the decisions that we made in these situations has, in our opinion, ensured that we remain sensitive to ethical issues throughout each stage of the research process. One initial point to make is that we have both adopted highly qualitative methodologies and as such our discussion of ethical issues may well be effected by the proximity we have had to our research subjects. In this piece we will present details of specific situations we have encountered that have posed ethical questions.

During one of our research projects the main ethical concerns centred on the extent to which the researcher could and should be entirely transparent about the nature of their thesis. This issue was first addressed when drawing up the initial letter sent to request access to a specific department as the decision was made by the researcher not to mention the concept of High Performance Work Systems even though a critical engagement with this topic is fundamental to the thesis. In addition, neither the chosen research methodology of discourse analysis nor the theoretical framework of social constructionism were directly mentioned in the letter. This decision was based on the assumption that including this level of detail would have introduced an unnecessary degree of complexity into the request as well as detracting from the benefits of the research to the specific manager, both of which would have decreased the likelihood of gaining access. From an ethical perspective the ‘more’ ethical approach would have been to have included full and detailed information about the research and the methodology because a failure to do so would lead to an unacceptable distortion of the main purpose of the research and the absence of genuine informed consent. The decision to exclude direct reference to various concepts was based more on the pragmatic self-interest of a researcher keen to progress with their PhD despite awareness that this could be construed as ‘un-ethical’ behaviour. The issue of informed consent is further clouded when the research approach is largely inductive, exploratory in nature, and theory building. This is especially true of Doctoral work with emergent properties which represents a challenge for novice researchers particularly when the researchers themselves are not completely informed at the start of the project. Finally, as academics and practitioners know only too well, the purpose and language used by one is not always appreciated and understood by the other, but accommodating that difference within our research so that we are presenting a suitable level of information to gain access has presented itself as an ethical issue.

The transparency of information also became relevant when reporting the findings of the research back to the manager who granted access. Because the research was conducted in a highly unitarist and paternalistic environment where employees are given a voice only within tightly managerially defined boundaries, the researcher faced a dilemma about whether the negative connotations of this environment should be discussed as part of the report given to the Department Manager; especially when the implications of these issues would form an important part of the final thesis. The ethical choice made in this instance was that an overt criticism of management at the research site should be avoided as it might jeopardise the research relationship in the future, contradict the commitments made when requesting access and perhaps most fundamentally, undermine the researcher’s role as representative of Supervisor, institution and funding body. Again, it seemed that pragmatic self-interest had a vital influence over the ethical behaviour of the researcher because the ‘more’ ethical

approach would have been to emphasize the findings in the same manner regardless of the audience, rather than make assumptions about which part of the data should be emphasised for different groups or individuals.

In another of our research projects, involving research into relational activity in electronic communities, the sponsors insisted empirical work be supported with a feasibility study whose principal aim was to place a financial value on the relationships developed as a means of justifying the introduction of a community charge. The dilemma for the researcher was one of a conflict on how the results of his research would be used and how his respondents might be affected. This also has the effect of changing the way the researcher felt about his work – the utilitarian perspective that had been adopted to gain the trust and commitment of respondents was dramatically called into question.

Within the realm of virtual reality additional dilemmas exist and strike at the very essence of whether protecting and respecting online personas is equally as important as doing so in more traditional research situations. Are virtual respondents just as real? These issues are compounded by a lack of consensus within the research community itself where a debate on what is real, what constitutes harm, and whether communications are to be treated as public (because they are posted with public consumption in mind) or private (with implied ownership where permissions to use should be sought) have yet to be resolved. The novice researcher is therefore left reflecting on his own course of action with little evidence of discussion by colleagues in the same research field. Similarly with virtual research the abundance of readily available historically based data (in regard to relational activity) offers the researcher the allure of easily collected and suitably rich data. The dilemma exists as to the extent to which permissions are required from the authors of the posts (since this is done in publicly accessible places online) or should be (since the research touches on personal relationships that might affect not only those being researched but the relationships being researched as well). Once the researcher made the decision to seek permission, the process of obtaining this was complicated by the transient nature of membership in such forums. Clearly a non-response cannot be taken as an acceptance of use. Should a non-response be taken as an end to its use?

By reference to specific situations that we have faced as part of our doctoral research we hope to have highlighted what we regard as the most important ethical issues that we have confronted. Whilst we would recognise that these particular dilemmas are not necessarily 'new' issues faced by an emerging generation of researchers, we would argue that they are often played out in less traditional research environments, but also within a context of heightened ethical awareness where academic reflexivity is more and more important. Furthermore, having identified these issues we maintain that the choices made do not constitute a resolving of the ethical nature of our research, rather that we have made particular decisions based on a range of assumptions about gaining access, engaging respondents, and the manner in which the results are communicated. We also feel strongly that we would have gained from a discussion of these issues at an early stage of the research process with experienced researchers adhering to similar ontological and epistemological approaches. Such discussions would certainly help build confidence that these issues reflect common concerns amongst the management research community whilst moving us beyond the adherence to static 'codes' of ethical conduct.

Neil Hair is examining the conceptions of consumer-to-consumer interpersonal relationships in electronic communities. He is using a virtual ethnographic research strategy which raises particular ethical issues in relation to considerations of anonymity and confidentiality. Nicholas Wylie is looking at High Performance Work Systems (HPWS). Through the methodology of discourse analysis, he hopes to engage with some of the assumptions that underpin the HPWS literature and look at the impact that this discourse has on individual perceptions of performance.