

An Analysis of Ethics in Business Research

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Abstract: Ethics and ethics education have become increasingly relevant today, given the rise of unethical research practices, scandals, scientific misconduct and corporate disasters. This article reviews two papers presented by L Niami and M Lindorff in this regard. While Lindorff asserts that organizational issues shape the objectives of research, the interests of participants are neglected, thus ignoring the possible effect of the research outcomes on individuals. She ascribes this lapse to the lack of proper guidance on the ethical responsibility of business researchers towards their participants and thus suggests ingraining these principles at college and university levels. She urges the implementation of principles of justice, beneficence and respect for persons when involving human subjects in research. Naimi on the other hand, examines this issue with an eye on the university community and emphasizes on understanding and monitoring the research process to ensure that it progresses ethically. Researchers must also understand the consequences of unethical conduct. She identified informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and seven such other principles of ethics as essential in research and proposes critical inquiry, role playing and games and other such strategies to inculcate them.

Keywords: Ethics, Ethics in Research, Teaching Research Ethics, Impact of Ethics on Research.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethics has received more attention in the last few decades than ever before in the wake of unethical research practices and other corporate disasters. Thus ethics education has become increasingly relevant in our day, given press coverage of corporate scandals, political corruption, and scientific misconduct (Kolp and Rea 2006; Callahan 2004; Hellman 2001; Mallor et al. 2005)¹. This paper attempts to highlight a possible approach posited by both authors to solve the growing ethical dilemma which we witness in our day.

II. RISE OF UNETHICAL BEHAVIOUR

Naimi (2007) posits that unethical behaviour is on the rise in all sectors of society. In America alone, employee misconduct costs companies more than \$400 billion dollars a year. The Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University, asserts that 75% of all college students confess to cheating at least once (Kleiner and Lord 1999)². This is in line with an earlier study by Baird, Stern and Havlicek, which asserts that nearly 85 percent of college students cheat (Lupton, Chapman and Weiss 2001; Callahan 2004)³. Naimi (2007) mentions another study of business students in 2001 which found that 'students who engaged in dishonest behaviour in their college classes were more likely to engage in dishonest behaviour on the job' (Callahan, 2004). Another study states that business students reportedly were far more likely to engage in unethical conduct than others, based in part on their belief that 'you have to do whatever it takes to get ahead' (Goodpaster 2006)⁴. In a recent poll at a Midwestern university, 55% of college students in management and business

¹ Naimi, 2007

² Naimi 2007

³ Naimi 2007

⁴ Naimi 2007

studies reported that ethics is ‘whatever a person thinks is right’ and that ‘personal ethics is more important than society’s moral values’ (Naimi, 2005)⁵.

Consequently, it is not surprising that when it comes to business, little is known about the importance of carrying out ethical research. Lindorff (2007) asserts that organizational research is supposed to make the world a better place. However, researchers and participant objectives are often contradictory, as organizational interests typically shape research objectives thus ignoring the possible effect of research on Individuals and the society. Lindorff (2007) asserts that this is on account of little or no guidance or literature existing on the ethical responsibility of business researchers towards their participants. To validate this point, Lindorff undertook an analysis of 120 articles published over the span of six years from the Journal of organizational research and came up with only seven, which had a brief paragraph or reference to ethics in business research. This finding thus raises questions about the motivations of organizations and researchers for carrying out research.

Jones (2004)⁶ in her research examines this thorny issue, identifying four kinds of contradictory motivations which typically drive research. She argues that these motivations typically determine the relationship between the researcher and the participants namely:

- Consultancy
- Instrumental academic
- Co-consultancy
- Academic research pro bono public

According to Jones, the consultancy research motivation basically sees the research as a transaction thus regarding the subjects/participants as a collection of objects of interests. On the other hand, instrumental academics seek academic recognition from their research efforts such as being published in a journal of research and the like. Their interest in the subject is to the extent that it helps further their cause (academic recognition in this case). Thus, the research objective is typically tailored to meet the requirements of the research sponsors.

Jones further asserts that co-consultancy typically seeks to benefit the organization, while the effect on the participants remains largely unknown until the change process is completed. Finally, academic research pro bono publico seeks to serve the needs of the society.

So according to Jones, the effect of research on the participants depends on the type of research undertaken, and the professional ambitions and comfort zone of the researcher. Sponsorship, collaboration, and academic achievement driven research rarely provides any benefits to the participants.

III. FOCUS ON ETHICAL RESEARCH

Lindorff (2007) asserts that the attitude of the researcher towards research participants should be moved away from the realm of the research motivation to researchers having a standard of ethical conduct which guides them as professionals as seen in the professional code of ethics which guides medical and psychology research. This is especially critical in research involving human subjects. To ensure integrity in research, the principles of ethical research needs to be ingrained from the grassroots- colleges and universities to the organizations who commission research and their researchers who undertake them. Consequently, students, faculty and researchers should be made to demonstrate that they understand the ethical and legal ramifications of their work before commencing any research (Naimi 2007).

Before ethical research principles can be ingrained, a proper understanding of ethics is required. According to Naimi (2007), ethics isn’t about answers, but about questions. It is about awareness, understanding, monitoring and consequences. Hence the researcher requires an understanding of what constitutes unethical conduct when using research participants. Students also require mentoring to make the right decisions and the consequences of unethical conduct. Naimi (2007) goes on to highlight some ethical issues in research:

⁵ Naimi 2007

⁶ Lindorff 2007

- Informed consent,
- Voluntary participation,
- Confidentiality,
- Anonymity,
- Conflict of interests
- Data security
- Capacity
- Protected groups,
- Social responsibility, and
- Humane treatment of subjects.

A. Principles of Justice, Beneficence and Respect for Persons

Since guidance on conducting ethical business research is lacking, Lindorff (2007) attempts to bridge the gap by identifying several literature and publications, which give a general guidance about ethics in research, especially in the fields of medicine and psychology. She zeroed in on the United States Belmont Report (1988)⁷ which focuses on three principles that are particularly relevant to the ethics of research involving human subjects:

- Justice
- Beneficence
- Respect for persons.

According to Aristotle, justice is the lawful, equal and fair treatment of individuals. The Belmont report applies this principle to ethical research by stating that equals should be treated equally. Accordingly, subjects should not be selected on the basis of their accessibility, manipulability, or circumstances. In the business context, employees should not be made to suffer while employers reap the benefits of research. In other words, employees should not be compulsorily subjected to research participation because of their accessibility, or because they fear that not participating could possibly result in the loss of their jobs or their career progression within the organization.

Many organizations do not consider Justice as used in this context as few researches detach personal welfare from the organizational performance. In fact according to Walsh, Weber and Margolis (2003)⁸, fewer than 2 percent of the articles analyzed from the American Academy of management attempted to examine the impact of organization practices outside the confines of the organization. Thus, there is always a conflict of interest between the stakeholder perspective (employers, shareholders) and that of the participants. Organizations want profit while the participants want the research to be beneficial in some way to them.

The potential for conflict of interest goes up a notch when researchers are commissioned or sponsored by companies. The researcher wants to uphold their integrity and perhaps state the findings as they are, but sponsors want research outcomes that further their own end which may not always be in the interest of the research participant because as Jones (2004) rightly asserts, the participants are seen as objects and just a means to an end. Consequently, a natural conflict of interest exists between what is beneficial to the organizations and research sponsors and what is truly beneficial to the research participants.

Another principle highlighted by the Belmont report is beneficence. Beneficence has a connotation of utilitarianism. In other words, what are the benefits that the subjects will obtain from participating in this research? Hence, research subjects should not be treated as a means to an end, but an end in themselves. For example, if research linking benefits of individuals to the overall performance of the organization revealed that certain groups within a company received far less

⁷ Lindorff 2007

⁸ Lindorff 2007

than their colleagues because of some kind of discrimination, will the outcome of the research lead to a reformation, or will it just become a sentence in a widely publicized report, that leads to no action on behalf of the mistreated employees. Accordingly, when using a common good approach, one seeks to establish or maintain conditions that are beneficial to all members of a given society in furtherance of the society's goals (Naimi, 2007).

The third principle highlighted by the Belmont report is respect for persons. Individuals have the right to privacy and autonomy according to the deontological framework. Thus, the rights of individuals should be upheld because violating them usually causes harm. Therefore, within the business research framework, participants should be made fully aware of the intended use for the research as well as the circulation, and what the potential outcome from the research may be. After making the participants aware of these, then the participants will be able to make informed decisions about whether they wish to participate in the research or not, with a full knowledge of the potential repercussions.

B. Naimi's Strategies

Naimi (2007) further identifies other basis of ethical conduct highlighting several deontological theories which were not explicitly covered in the Belmont report – the Kant's categorical imperative and virtue. Naimi (2007) describes Kant's approach as identifying whether or not there is a universal right or law to guide one's course of action. The Virtue theory, promulgated by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, takes this thought one step further by focussing on the cultivation of desirable traits. A virtuous person demonstrates prudence and wisdom in all his decisions and, as a result, lives a wholesome and fruitful life. (Mintz 1996)⁹.

Therefore, Naimi (2007) posits strategies for inculcating the aforementioned principles into the minds of the student community as follows:

- **Critical inquiry and online legal research**

Naimi (2007) describes this teaching strategy as typically involving students conducting a search of relevant cases and laws via the Internet, scanning information in news and media publications, online journals, online libraries, and databases. One of such cases will be the rise and fall of notable organizations such as Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, and Arthur Andersen, and the tougher measures and standards to encourage ethical conduct, transparency, and corporate social responsibility which were implemented by the United Nations post Enron.

- **Distance Learning**

Naimi highlights the many benefits of using distance learning (DL) especially web-based distance learning, also known as Networked Open Learning (NOL) (Banks et al., 1998; McConnel,1999)¹⁰ to bring students and their tutors together. She asserts that the very structure of the NOL which incorporates plagiarism testers such as Turn it in (<http://www.turnitin.com>) and Ithenticate (<http://www.ithenticate.com>) in addition to peer reviews usually serves as a natural deterrent to plagiarism. Thus inadvertently helping inculcate ethical principles into the minds of students.

- **Simulations and role playing**

Simulations and role-playing are tools typically used in business ethics training. Naimi (2007) asserts that these provide students with opportunities to explore decision-making and problem solving in realistic settings. Students develop skill and proficiency in identifying ethical and legal issues, analysing problem situations, determining courses of action and making decisions (Sammons, 2003).

- **Case studies**

According to Naimi (2007), the use of case studies constitutes a fertile area for teaching business ethics, business law, leadership and management skills, and research ethics. The ability to discuss and debate encourages additional background research as students strive to understand what went wrong, when, why and how it could have been avoided.

⁹ Naimi 2007

¹⁰ Naimi 2007

- **Action research**

Eden and Huxham (1996)¹¹ state that ‘action research involves the researcher in working with members of an organisation over a matter which is of genuine concern to them and in which there is an intent by the organisation members to take action based on the intervention’.

In addition to the above methods identified by Naimi several professional bodies have adopted various methods towards ingraining ethical principles into the minds of their members. The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) for example have included a compulsory ethical module which all students must complete before completing the ACCA qualifying exams. The module includes a course on ethics as well as an online ethical module which students and affiliates must complete before attaining membership. This initiative has gone a long way to helping inculcate the principles of professional ethics and integrity especially as it relates to the accounting profession into the minds of the members.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the views presented by Lindorff and Naimi highlight different sides of the same thorny issue about ethics in business. Naimi examines this issue with an eye on the university community while Lindorff examines this issue with an eye on the practitioners who have been trained by the universities and are sponsored by organizations concerned primarily with profit. Thus the teaching of ethical research to would be practitioners as well as setting guidelines for today’s practitioners is highly imperative for the promulgation of ethical research in the business arena.

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¹¹ Naimi 2007