**EDITORIAL ESSAY**

# Ethical Research in Business Ethics

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## Abstract

In this editorial essay, we argue that business ethics research should be aware of the ethical implications of its own methodological choices, and that these implications include, but go beyond, mere compliance with standardized ethical norms. Methodological choices should be made specifically with reference to their effects on the world, both within and outside the academy. Awareness of these effects takes researchers beyond assuring ethics *in* their methods to more fully consider the ethics *of* their methods as knowledge practices that have broader institutional consequences. Drawing from examples in published research, we examine five ways in which authors can formulate their methodological approaches with purpose, care and reflexivity.

**Keywords**  Research ethics · Reflexivity · Research purpose · Methodology · Research integrity · Social impact · Beyond compliance

Business ethicists are accustomed to confronting the "hard cases" of ethical choices in organizational life. We believe that business ethics scholarship must be equally sensitive to ethical nuances in the design and implementation of research methods in our own activities. In the complexities of research practice, ethical considerations around method and design exceed the standardized templates of methods textbooks. Where research designs begin and end and whom they implicate as protagonists, who receives voice, protection and authority, and what is rendered visible and invisible within the field of study. These are thorny questions that are not amenable to check-list style compliance guidelines, even where such guidelines also have an important role (cf., Greenwood, 2016).

In our exchanges with authors and within the editorial team, we have confronted a plethora of hard cases that highlight the challenges of research ethics beyond rule compliance. To what extent should the mode of data collection (such as crowdsourced data or social media platforms) answer to ethical quandaries around digital labour and online surveillance? When should organizations or individuals engaging in ethically problematic practices be named, and when must they be anonymized? To what extent should the relationships between researchers and participants be problematized within methods sections, including financial and power relationships between funders, researchers and participants? What are the respective roles of institutional ethics boards and journal editorial teams (along with other actors in the research ecosystem) in validating the ethical permissibility of a design? When should hard ethical questions lead a study to be rejected at the review stage, rather than passed along to the research community to make its own judgment? Such questions (and many, many more) have filled our days with deep reflection, and the current editorial aims to share some of these reflections with the Journal of Business Ethics community, albeit in necessarily schematic form. Specifically, we aim to both expand thinking about research ethics to include elements that are often considered outside of methods, and situate conventional methodological ethics in relation to this broader vision. The result will be a plea for a research ethics based on purpose, care and reflexivity.

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## Between Prescriptive and Evaluative Research Ethics

In a previous editorial essay (Islam & Greenwood, 2021), we borrowed a distinction by Williams (1985) between prescriptive and evaluative ethics; the former refers to what one should do, while the latter to what the world should look like. Mapped onto methods, this analytical distinction differentiates between specific methodological practices (e.g., one should design measures that fit the core constructs, one should gather informed consent) and the broader social and practical implications of research (e.g., the goals of science to innovate, educate or emancipate). We emphasize that this is an "analytical" distinction because, in practice, these aspects of ethics are deeply intertwined, and we distinguish them primarily to show how they spill into each other. Actions should be prescribed, at least in part, for the worlds they contribute to making, although in the fog of situated practice, we are often unaware of, or unable to, clearly link our actions to those future worlds.

From this distinction, it is easy to differentiate heuristically between ethics *in* research methods, that is, the ethical norms and practices internal to research design and execution, and the ethics *of* research methods, that is, whether those methods should be used in the broader evaluative sense. In many cases, these ethical levels align, with ethical practices working toward an evaluatively desirable world. Gathering informed consent is important because it is desirable to promote a world of autonomous choice (e.g., Hansson, 2006). Hypothesizing after the results are known is problematic because promoting false positive statistical results reduces replicability and thus scientific certainty about the world (Kerr, 1998). To take the previous example, however, some have argued that "HARK"ing is less ethically problematic when research is transparently exploratory (Hollenbeck & Wright, 2017); in this case, what is ethically problematic is not the practice per se, but the lack of transparency between a given practice and its exploratory (rather than confirmatory) intent. As for informed consent, in cases where a signed form substitutes for, rather than expresses, true participant autonomy (cf., Dubois et al, 2012), it can obscure rather than clarify the ethics of a research project. To begin with, the presentation of a priori formulated protocols for consent presumes that the identified participant is the only stakeholder in the research who is affected by the research in a manner that would require their consent. Moreover, this protocol may preclude collaborative models in which participants actively construct research protocols with researchers (Hansson, 2006). In both of these examples, a practice is justified on the basis of a deeper evaluative motive, but the mapping between the two is imperfect and situation-dependent.

Tensions may appear between prescriptive and evaluative dimensions of research methods, giving rise to ethical polemics or dilemmas. To give one example, we have had recent debates around the ethics of online data crowdsourcing from platforms such as Amazon MTurk (e.g., Newman et al., 2021). Much discussion has been given to best practice in terms of construct validity and similar "internal" considerations of research design as well as issues such as "bots" or fraudulent respondent activity that affect validity. However, broader considerations in terms of labour exploitation on online platforms (e.g., Shank, 2016) bridge internal and external research ethics, given internal norms for participant autonomy and external considerations of the public good. Less discussed are the systematic effects of widespread use of online data collection for disembodying researchers from participant communities, entrenching economies of digital labour and surveillance, and reifying a context-free individual as the object of social scientific study. These, we would argue, are methodological outcomes that may contribute to undesirable worlds, and thus are materially relevant for ethical consideration.

Other examples illustrate the opposite tension between prescriptive and evaluative research ethics. In a provocative article, Roulet et al. (2017) describe the potentials of "covert" research, where normally unacceptable practices of researcher concealment are weighed against laudable goals such as revealing workplace abuse or unethical organizational practices. In such cases, practices that are prescriptively problematic (e.g., collecting data without consent, concealing researcher identity) are defended on the grounds that the ethical goods, in terms of creating a better world, legitimate such practices. While the example of online platforms seems more defensible at the level of practice but questionable at the level of broad systemic implications, that of covert research seems more problematic at the level of practices while (possibly) defensible in terms of its ethical purposes.

More than simply a conflict between means and ends, however, such tensions reveal discrepancies between ends that are "localized" as specific practices (e.g., the goal of conducting a valid study according to current norms) and the more broad-based ends of research (e.g., creating a better world through socially reflexive knowledge production). Our challenge at the Journal of Business Ethics as editors, and our counsel to authors, reviewers and editors is to reflexively seek equilibrium between the practical ethics of research design and execution and the broader promotion of the public good that is the ultimate end of science.

## Guiding Ethical Research in Business Ethics

Situating research ethics within the relationship between concrete ethical practices and evaluative goals of social improvement adds complexity to ethical decisions, forcing

researchers, reviewers and editors to confront real ethical dilemmas that cannot be dissolved in mere compliance practices. We think the recognition of this complexity is salutary. It emphasizes that the review process is one moment in the broader network of evaluative practices that includes—but is not limited to—institutional ethics approval processes prior to submission, ethical and legal considerations of publishing houses and scholarly societies that administer academic production, and reception of research after publication. Each of these moments bring into light different ethical stakes, and we see our editorial role as an important but not exhaustive evaluative moment. From our perspective, our role is not to present a hurdle over which only the most flawless research can pass, but to curate a conversation with the greatest potential for scholarly generativity and progress. This makes our goal a collective one, and we judge research for its ability to promote the field, by being rigorous, by being interesting, by being reflexive, or by some combination of these epistemic virtues. From the research ethics we have outlined we derive certain guiding principles for evaluation.

## Showing Links Between Methodological Design and the Broader Purpose of the Study

Business ethics scholarship should clarify its purpose through clearly articulated research questions and hypotheses, while explaining in its methods why specific research practices are important for a broader purpose, and why that purpose is itself ethically relevant. Specifically, the methods discussion should reflect how the ethics-related purpose of the study is consistent with the methodological approach adopted, both in terms of the broad design and specific practices. In short, integration of methods with the wider purpose of the study, and alignment between the two, is a mark of ethically sensitive research.

In their recent study of child labour in Indian cottonseed oil farms, D'Cruz et al. (2022) demonstrate an exemplary integration of methods and purpose to explore a topic that is notoriously difficult to study methodologically. Drawing on analyses of children's drawings, together with detailed conversational extracts, the authors paint a powerful picture of the experience of violence in a population of working children. Rather than staying only at the level of lived experiences, however, the authors use those experiences to understand how processes of embedding and disembedding labour within society are manifested at the micro level. Thus, their visual and discursive methods become powerful tools to link everyday suffering with macro processes of economy and society.

## Acknowledging the Web of Relationships Within Which Research Methods are Embedded

Each aspect of the research process, from protocol design to data collection to peer review, involves multiple actors who collectively construct the meaning of scholarship (Greenwood, 2016). While it may not be possible to make this network entirely visible, the ability to do so increases the transparency and value of a scholarly inquiry.

In his study of external funding on research freedom, Goduscheit (2022) uses qualitative interviews, program materials and observations to understand how funding bodies shape research outcomes. He shows how expectations from funding bodies can shape the types of topics studied, the ways in which research questions are answered and the forms of research output that are produced. Rather than simply deeming such influences to be unethical, he analyses the positive and negative features of the evolving relationships between researchers and funding bodies and their implications for developing scholarship.

Similarly acknowledging relationships but on a very different topic, Allen et al. (2019) describe the role of reflexivity in sustainability research, where ecological responsibility can result from acknowledging the multiple relationships between humans and the environment. Promoting an "eco-centric radical-reflexivity", they point to how methods such as participatory action research and arts-based methods can help identify organizational actors as embedded in ecological relationships. In this example, as in the previous one, research is recognized as more than simply the execution of accepted standards. Rather, ethical research depends on developing sensibilities towards the complex economic and ecological relationships in which scholarship is situated.

## Complementing Compliance with Purpose

Ethics should be explicitly discussed as an aspect of methodology, but this is best done when a focus on compliance with standards is complemented by a consideration of core ethical issues and a transparent discussion of how decisions were made in response to those issues. Doing so reveals those decisions as tailor-made for the case at hand and not imposed upon the case without regard for its specificities (Greenwood, 2016). In other words, compliance is not a sufficient criterion for ethical research methods, and a methodological approach focused exclusively on ethical compliance criteria may miss the "bigger picture" of the role of the methods in the broader scientific and social goals of the study.

Nielsen's (2016) paper on ethical praxis and action research elaborates on how research involves ethical decision making and situated, pragmatic choices that go beyond simply ticking the correct ethical boxes. Describing these from

an Aristotelian perspective, he elaborates how researcher-participant interactions give rise to emergent research concerns that are both knowledge-related problems and problems for practice. The ethics of action research in this context is about facing unique problems that cut across the researcher-practitioner divide and can draw upon but are not limited to pre-existing ethics templates.
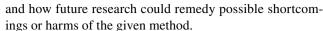
## Adopting an Explanatory Versus a Justificatory Orientation

Methodological descriptions of ethics often have the tone of justification claims legitimizing authorial choices in terms of sample, data collection or analysis. Such justifications are warranted, and are good practice, but we believe that value is added when authors are more forthright about their ethical difficulties and dilemmas. Specifically, we value their attempts to work out those dilemmas transparently for a scholarly audience, that is thereby given access into the workings of scientific decision-making process and not simply presented with a black box labeled "method". There is more value in showing the path taken to an ethical judgement than simply defending that the end decision was a good one. This also implies that wrong turns, changes of track, and similar ethical revisions should be described and contribute to the value of a paper.

Litz's and Turner's (2013) study of unethical practices in inherited family firms provides an interesting case of how researchers can productively describe the dilemmas they face methodologically. Given the difficulty of gathering data about the unethical practices of family members, they candidly ask "how does one approach a question so laced with shame and stigma?"(p.303). Rather than presenting their method in terms of templates used to justify their choices, they recruit the readers directly into their dilemma and walk them through their choices, which involved confronting participants with dramatic scenarios that allowed them to disclose intimately held views more safely. Ultimately building this technique into a validation exercise and a quantitative analysis, the latter are given credibility by their grounding in the initial researcher dilemma that led to the methodological approach.

## Transparency and Reflexivity in Writing and Link Between Methods and Results Sections

Because transparent and reflexive description of methods integrates theoretical considerations within the methods itself, such description allows the method to operate more organically within the broader argument of the paper. Doing so allows authors to establish links between the methods and discussion sections, to describe what went right or wrong, what the limitations and possibilities of the method were,

and how future research could remedy possible shortcomings or harms of the given method.

For example, Bontempi et al. (2021) study of CSR reporting inspired by the case of the Ethiopian *Gibe III* dam is exemplary of how methods can be used to reflexively and transparently link methods and results. Engaging in a "counter reporting", the study draws upon conceptual literature, archival and theoretical research, and activist on-the-ground engagement to build an alternative view of reported social engagement around hydroelectric dams. Alternating between inductive and deductive approaches, these authors were particularly reflexive and deeply transparent in their methodological description, including detailed and publicly available information from their codebook in the article's supplementary materials. The result went beyond the standard critique of CSR discourses to actively create a counter-discourse that was both scholarly and activist in orientation. The resulting discursive struggle continued onto the blogosphere, with methodological debate between the authors and the company itself over methods.[1] We see such interaction and engagement as key to the social relevance of research.

## Purpose, Care and Reflexivity

Research ethics have conventionally been concerned with the procedural aspects of scholarship, in particular the methods. Gold standard in this regard has been to not merely treat ethical standards as hurdles but as aspirations. In this sense an ethical researcher is one who does not only comply but who also cares. We suggest that care requires researcher to actively reflect on and take responsibility for their ethical practices and their research goals, and to situate their practices reflexively within a broader collective process of scholarly inquiry. Thus, we extend the notion of care to embrace the reflexivity of the researcher with regard to their own positionality (and privilege) and with regard to the purpose of research, treating ethics as central to the entire research endeavor. Complementing ethical theorizing that draws data from orthodox empirical methods, we encourage scholars to take up new forms of ethical empirical research in which connections between the conduct of the research and the motivation of the research are deeply and actively formed. The guiding principles we outline in this editorial are aimed at integrating organic, particularized and reflective narratives about the ethical conduct and goals of research in the methods section and throughout the manuscript. Editors, reviewers and authors can all contribute to treating research ethics more centrally in business ethics research.

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[1] https://www.business-humanrights.org/es/%C3%BAltimas-noticias/rejoinder-to-webuilds-response/

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