

**WE'RE ALL ETHICAL AREN'T WE? A REFLECTION ON
RESEARCHER VALUES IN ORGANIZATIONAL AND
MANAGEMENT RESEARCH**

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Abstract

In recent years, relatively little organizational or management research has focused on personal welfare detached from economic or organizational performance. Similarly, the mainstream management literature has tended to overlook the social role and impact of organizations. This suggests the values underlying much of this research relate to the economic interests of capital rather than the “public interest” at individual, group, or societal level. Yet there has been little discussion or debate on this, or the relationship between the personal values of researchers and the context in which they work, and the researchers’ ethical obligations to participants, organizations, and society. This paper discusses some of these issues, and reflects upon how this may have occurred.

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INTRODUCTION

Most management researchers would agree that their research should promote the welfare of individuals and the performance of organizations. Indeed, such a position is often stated in grant applications and the explanatory statements given to potential research participants. Beyond this, they may hope that, as such, society will benefit. It is expected they would also tend to view themselves as professionals with standards for proper conduct, and to accept that such standards distinguish them from non-professional groups (Gellerman, Frankel & Ladenson, 1990). However, unlike the medical research literature, where such discussions are common, there has been little debate on the relationship between the values of organizational and management researchers and the context in which they work, and the researchers' ethical obligations to participants, organizations, and society. However, it is assumed that, as in any discipline, the work undertaken by researchers in our field is shaped by both the researchers' values and the environment in which the work is undertaken. This paper discusses some of those issues, and considers the effect of researcher values on the framing and implementation of research.

RESPONSIBILITIES TO SOCIETY

Historically, the American Academy of Management was built upon a philosophy of management in which the public interest was paramount, although recognition was also given to the "legitimate interests of capital and labour" (Editor's preface, *Journal of the Academy of Management*, 1958, cited in Walsh, Weber & Margolis, 2003, p. 859). More recent claims include that organizational and management research "advances and shapes organizational objectives, culture, individuals and societies as it provides new insights that inform premises upon which decisions and judgements are based" (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2002, p. 105). But is it this unidirectional? Is research the shaping force, with the positive values of researchers influencing the directions research will take and thus the shape of organizations and society? Or are organizational objectives shaping research, and the effects on individuals and society ignored?

It seems likely that, in general, any positive values held by researchers have little influence on the type of research undertaken in the organization and management fields. In recent years, very little of this research has focused on personal welfare detached from economic or organizational performance. Similarly, management literature has tended to overlook the social role and impact of organizations. In an analysis of articles published in the *Journal of the Academy of Management*, the *Academy of Management Journal*, and the *Academy of Management Review* between 1958 and 2000 Walsh, Weber and Margolis (2003) found only 227 of the 1738 articles studied human welfare without examining performance, 115 studied both welfare and performance, 383 studied performance with no reference to welfare, and 996 studied neither performance or welfare. They also found interest in welfare was declining: in 1999 only 19% of articles included reference to some aspect of welfare, down from the 35% of articles in 1978. Not only did citation analysis show studies of performance received more citations than studies of welfare, but fewer than 2% of the studies considered the effect of organizational practices outside the boundaries of the firm. Furthermore, their analysis demonstrated that most research involved some form of economic framing, or paid little attention to the firm's role in society.

This suggests the values underlying much organizational and management research relate to the economic interests of capital rather than the public interest at the individual, group, or societal level. This view is supported by Alvesson and Deetz (1996), who argue that conventional organizational research may subordinate social life at work to technological rationality, implicitly serve the accumulation of wealth by investors, promote careerism in managers, contribute to

excessive surveillance and control by viewing work in terms of certain values or interests, support managers with ideas for managerial control as the norm, implicitly encourage submission to workplace power sources, and minimize the position of stakeholders other than capital and managers.

It is also possible that even when researchers undertake research which they believe is in the interests of individuals or society there is no subsequent “shaping” of organizations or society. One reason is that researchers’ interest in undertaking the research and accurately transmitting the findings may conflict with other interests such as the desire of the sponsoring or co-operating organization not to have negative findings published (Rule & Shamoo, 2001). Negative findings may also be suppressed within the organization, or ignored by key organizational stakeholders. Additionally, pressure may be placed upon researchers to interpret material in a particular manner.

It therefore seems that the topics chosen for much organizational and management research – particularly that sponsored or supported by an organization – and the outcomes of the research may overlook the welfare and interests of the individuals who participate in the research, other individuals or groups, or society. How has this occurred, and how does it relate to the personal values of researchers?

STAKEHOLDER INTERESTS

Unlike medical research, it cannot be argued that, in general, organizational or management research is designed to lead to specific, immediate, or large benefits to humankind, or to the prevention of serious harm. Researchers and their employing organizations, research participants and their employing organizations, and society all have a stake in research outcomes, and these stakes are based upon different, and potentially competing, interests (Germeroth, 1994). Similarly, the subject areas for organizational and management research reflect the interests of its stakeholders, and the areas chosen for any research project may potentially reflect the power differences of particular stakeholders. Researchers generally have an interest in seeking and transmitting new knowledge, and in advancing their careers. Their employing organizations have an interest in attracting research income and increasing research output. Business and government organizations are interested in improving performance. Potential participants may be most interested in issues related to their welfare at the individual, group, or organizational level. The interests of society are complex and multidimensional. However, given the absence of a demonstrated direct benefit to humankind, on a macro level there seems little societal obligation to undertake, or participate in, such research.

Furthermore, researchers’ knowledge seeking can only be undertaken with the co-operation and support of employing organizations. More than half the studies reported in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* between 1992 and 1997 used research survey participants from a single organization (Ostroff & Harrison, 1999). Similarly, an analysis of the research published in the top three American management journals (*Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly* and *Journal of Management*) between 1985-87 and 1995-97 found not only did field studies predominate over other methods such as surveys and experiments, but there was an increase in the number of field studies over the period (Scandura & Williams, 2000).

Organizational and management researchers are therefore in a position in which their research projects must be supported by the participants’ employing organization. As a consequence, the relationships between researchers, participants, and organizations present special challenges. This is especially so when the relationships are a result of a formal collaboration between universities and industry or the result of a consultancy agreement. Universities have a financial and public relations interest in obtaining sponsored or collaborative research. They see industry as a source of research funds, and actively encourage collaboration by rewarding researchers for industry-funded or collaborative grants. A positive view is that new problems are identified, researchers are intellectually stimulated, publications are increased, and student education is

enhanced. A negative view is that such relationships narrow the range of research to topics supported by particular organizations, and researchers lose their independence, focussing on the interests of industry rather than the interests of individuals or society (Rule & Shamoo, 2001).

Moreover, in both cases the most common organizational research project is based upon a one-shot, cross-sectional design. Within this, participants are viewed only as sources of information or data, rather than as stakeholders. The involvement of the researcher usually ends with data collection, and participants receive no explicit consideration or follow-up. The researcher's commitment is normally seen to be production of a research publication, or conclusion of the consulting or research contract. The consequences of participation or the research findings for individual employees or groups of employees are seldom explicitly considered, and issues raised by participants are normally not resolved (Wright & Wright, 1999). In contrast, the effect of research sponsorship on the shaping of research is frequently discussed in the medical literature, and follow-up of participants is the norm. Most common are discussions of the effects of sponsorship by a drug or a device producing company. In such discussions prominence is given to the potential bias in research topics or programs, and the effect of the research upon participants.

It appears, then, that organization and management researchers can find themselves with an unrecognized conflict of interest. Such conflict occurs when two or more of the interests held by, or entrusted to, a single person are considered incompatible or breach prescribed practice. It occurs when a person's "judgement regarding the primary interest (such as a ... [participant's] welfare or the validity of research) tends to be unduly influenced by a secondary interest, such as financial gain" (Thompson, 1993, p. 573). Such conflicts clearly include investigators holding collaborative or consulting agreements with the firms sponsoring the research, employment of one or more of the researchers by the organization under study, or the researcher's professional interest in ensuring a strong research publication record. In each case investigators may formulate and undertake research that has been shaped by organizational objectives rather than participant welfare.

Some conflicts, such as those resting on collaborative financial agreements, are normally recognized and disclosed to participants, although, again, the topic has failed to receive the same space in the management literature as it has in medical journals. However, the effect of other conflicts, such as the pressure exerted on universities to undertake funded research, and the subsequent pressure placed on investigators to obtain grants and undertake sponsored and collaborative research, are seldom recognized or discussed.

The absence of such discussions in the organizational and management literature is interesting, although it is unclear what this tells us about the values of researchers. It may be they believe the absence of physical harm from data-collection means there is no risk of any negative consequence. Alternatively, for some reason, such as pressure to publish, they may have become desensitised to the effects upon participants of their research. However, the nature of human participants requires they are given the same rights in organization and management research as are accorded to human participants in medical and other research. Issues surrounding these rights are considered below.

RESPONSIBILITIES TO PARTICIPANTS

In many countries, participant rights and researcher responsibilities are described in formal ethical guidelines on research involving humans. An example of Western thinking on these ethical issues is the United States Belmont Report (1988). This Report gives beneficence, respect for persons, and justice as the three core ethical principles which should guide all such research. The same principles also appear in other countries' research ethics guidelines, such as Australia's National Statement on Research Involving Humans (NHMRC, 1999).

Beneficence

Firstly, the principle of beneficence requires that researchers should make efforts to secure the well-being of participants. It rests on a utilitarian framework which views research as acceptable if creates benefits and does not cause harm, or minimizes risks of harm or discomfort and maximizes possible benefits and the well-being of participants. In Australia, the National Statement on Research Involving Humans specifies where “research ... is undertaken solely to contribute to knowledge, the absence of intended benefits to a participant should justly be balanced by the absence of all but minimal risk” (NHMRC, 1999, p 12). Similar statements occur in the guidelines of many other western countries.

Serious attention to the principle of beneficence requires that researchers assess the probability and magnitude of benefits and the many potential dimensions of harm, and ensure robust procedures that anticipate and confront possible harms. As organizational and management research is normally designed to benefit stakeholders other than the participants, usually the researcher or organization(s), the absence of specific benefit to participants requires that all but minimal risk should be absent. However, although there is seldom a risk of physical harm, as Levine (1986) points out in a discussion of clinical research, research participation also carries the risk of psychological risk such as stress; social risk such as ostracism; economic risk such as loss of promotion or career opportunity; and occasionally legal risk. There are times when responses raise other issues, such as when participants comment upon inappropriate or illegal organizational practices or individual behaviour, express worries, or seek advice. Moreover, studies of work stress, for example, may show the health of a participant requires intervention. It would seem the researcher is obliged to act on this information in order to minimize harm to, and ensure benefits for, participants. However, this seldom appears to be done, and there is rarely any commitment to follow up the research by undertaking any changes the research suggests are beneficial, or addressing the needs of participants.

Similarly, the rights of people not directly involved in a research project may be overlooked. These people also require beneficence, as they may be affected by a study’s publication or findings. For example, qualitative research may find, and report, information relating to an identifiable person’s behaviour. Even if pseudonyms are used, it will not protect the third party if the participant – or their organization – and thus the third party, can be identified. Not only is there the risk of legal proceedings for defamation, but also publication of this information does not demonstrate recognition of the rights of the third party.

Respect for persons

The second core ethical principle, respect for persons, is demonstrated by viewing individuals as autonomous agents, and protecting those with diminished autonomy. This principle rests on the deontological framework which operates from the foundation that individuals have rights – such as for autonomy and privacy – and these cannot be violated without causing harm.

An example of the application of this principle to organizational and management research is the section of the Academy of Management’s Code of Ethical Conduct (2002) which states “Research should show respect for the rights of individuals and organizations” (p. 291) and “It is the duty of Academy members to preserve and protect the privacy, dignity, well-being and freedom of research participants. This duty requires ... informed consent from all participants... Informed consent means explaining to potential participants the purposes and nature of the research so they can freely choose whether or not to become involved. Such explanations include warning of possible harm and providing explicit opportunities to refuse or participate and to terminate participation at any time. Because students and employees are particularly subject to possible coercion, even when unintended, special care must be taken in obtaining their informed consent...” (p. 292).

Despite this, there has been little discussion on the nature of this “special care”, and upon how researchers can ensure voluntariness and informed consent. Many work situations lack the contractual individualism necessary for informed consent because organizations may have strongly supported a research project, or because the climate requires acquiescence to desires expressed by management. In addition, research in some countries involves participation by people for whom human rights issues such as autonomy and informed consent are irrelevant to social and cultural norms (Macklin, 1999). They thus have had no concept of any rights they may have over participation in research, even when they are told that participation is voluntary. Moreover, increasing use of open-ended qualitative research means that it is often impossible for participants to give informed consent to the use of their participation, as they do not know in advance what themes may emerge, or how their words will be interpreted (Richardson & Godfrey, 2003). Participants may also introduce topics they did not intend to introduce, or the supportive climate of an interview may lead them to reveal details they did not intend to reveal. Yet, again, there has been little discussion of such issues in the literature.

Justice

Justice requires the burdens and benefits of research to be fairly distributed. Particular groups should not have to bear the burden of being research participants, while other groups later receive the benefits. In addition, researchers should demonstrate fairness in the selection of participants, and not exploit particular groups. It could be asked of organizational and management research if the benefits to researchers’ careers, and, in some cases, to organizations, are just when participants have to bear the burden of the research with little or no benefit to themselves.

How has this occurred?

The above discussion suggests that there is seldom a direct consideration of beneficence, respect for persons, and justice in organization and management research. It appears that the values of researchers are utilitarian, emphasizing the economic interests of capital and organizational success, rather than societal or participant health. Furthermore, it seems that participants have become “the proverbial ‘invisible’ men and women of organizational research” (Wright & Wright, 1999, p. 1110). How has this occurred?

One explanation may be that researcher training in management is different than that which occurs in medical or other research disciplines, and does not sensitize researchers in our field to the potential for bias in selection of topics for funded research, or for research to benefit or cause harm. Individual researchers – whose focus is on the research itself and achieving a publication record - may therefore sometimes not be aware of broader ethical issues involved in the framing and conduct of their research. Also, even if researchers are aware and consider research outcomes as within their responsibility, harm is difficult to predict (Richardson & Godfrey, 2003). It requires judgement about individual sensibilities, an understanding of the current situation, and knowledge of future conditions. Researchers seldom have the resources to gather the data necessary to predict all possible outcomes.

Moreover, people differ in their assessment of harm in a given situation. For example, Sparks and Hunt (1998) found that more experienced researchers than students recognised the ethical issues embedded in research scenarios. Even so, almost a quarter of the researchers did not identify any of the ethical issues in cases described to them. Similarly, Ilgen and Bell (2001) reported that Human Resource professionals, who typically are responsible for providing consent to undertake research in organizations, were less sensitive to issues surrounding consent and potential risk to participants than are members of Human Ethics Institutional Review Boards. The Human Resource professionals also believed employees were more likely to react negatively to the organization if given the full information necessary to allow informed consent. Thus the traditional organizational gatekeepers may not always act in the interests of research participants or other employees.

In addition, given the pressure to publish, spending time on ethical issues such as participant autonomy or the effect of bias on research topic selection could be seen as bothersome, and adding only unnecessary complexity to the research process. This is particularly likely to be the view when researchers believe that organization and management research is “no risk” to participants.

CONCLUSION

Unless researcher values are utilitarian and based upon achieving the economic interests of capital, it appears there is little evidence to support the view that researcher values have shaped a great deal of organizational and management research. Nor is there evidence that the research “shapes organizational objectives, culture, individuals and societies” (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2002, p. 105). There thus seems a need for researchers to reflect upon their own values, and to become as engaged in the ethics of the research as they are in its other components. Such consideration is important, for at least three reasons. The first is that the nature of human participants requires they are given the same rights in organization and management research as are accorded to human participants in medical and other research. The second reason care should be taken with ethical issues is that the nature of most management and organizational research is inherently exploitative. It is initiated by the researcher or the employing organization, not by participants. Unlike medical research which is usually designed to “cure” the ailments of participants, in management and organizational research the outcome is seldom related to participant welfare. Researchers should therefore take the same care with issues related to bias in topic selection as we hope that medical researchers take when undertaking research funded by drug companies. The third reason organization and management researchers need to explicitly consider the types of research they undertake, the terms upon which people are involved in their research, and the effects of their research upon participants, is that the type of research we do and the manner in which we treat our research participants suggests to the world our core values.

I accept that the above may be an unduly “black” view of organizational and management research. I am sure there are many researchers who struggle to find support for research programs that are designed to benefit their participants and society, and ensure participant rights are upheld. However, I also believe that we do need to engage in robust dialogue about the relationship between research funding and potential bias in our research topics, and the values we hold and how these are reflected in the research we undertake.

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