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Managing Ethics in Research Projects

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In recent years, universities and a variety of other organizations have begun to introduce procedures that seek to ensure that their research meets key ethical requirements. So far the focus of this book has been on generating research ideas and considering a range of possible research methods and methodologies in order to explore those very research ideas. Aside from the actual management of the dissertation (see Chapter 12 and Appendix 1), the ethical dimension of your planned research is the one other major topic you should address before progressing much further. In practice, what this means is that your research, which is likely to involve you distributing questionnaires, conducting interviews or conducting focus groups, brings with it various dilemmas in terms of your moral conduct towards the people you are expecting to fill in questionnaires, be interviewed or take part in focus groups. Such dilemmas will be dependent on the design of your particular study, but, typical ethical dilemmas in relation to business management research include: the manner in which you intend to recruit people to your study, the extent to which you will inform participants of what your research is about, and dealing with research participants who may be concerned about how they are portrayed in your final dissertation.

There are some simple steps which can help ensure that your research embodies the kinds of ethical principles that many institutions require, and we will use a range of real life ethical dilemmas to help you as you formulate your own research. The chapter concludes with a checklist of questions to consider.

The importance and relevance of ethics in business management research

Being clear about the ethical dimensions of your research is important for three main reasons: navigating sensitive topics, improving research outcomes, and ensuring professional conduct.

■ Navigating sensitive research topics

The first reason for considering ethics is that you may be researching something which is seen as sensitive. Many of you, perhaps even the majority, will be conducting research on topics that are not seen as particularly sensitive in relation to business organisations. What is meant by sensitive is wide-ranging and may also be defined or viewed differently by different parties. These differences in perspective are important in making ethical choices. For example, imagine wishing to conduct research that looks at the potential for unlawful discrimination in the promotions process. In such situations you may have a senior management team who believe their promotions procedures negate the possibility for discrimination on gender, religious or other grounds. The management team may have conducted research or collected data that underpins their confident claims that discrimination does not occur. In this situation senior managers may be willing to talk openly about topics such as sexual discrimination. However, lower level management or non-management employees within the organization may feel differently. They may believe they have been unlawfully discriminated against, but they may not be willing to voice their concerns for fear of recriminations should they speak out about a failed promotion application. Whilst discrimination seems an overtly sensitive issue, there are many other issues which may evoke sensitivities on behalf of those involved in the research. There are ethical dilemmas where the interests of different groups diverge, e.g. those commissioning the research and those being asked to participate in the research. A commitment to research ethics allows researchers to foresee the potential impact their research may have on their participants and make plans to off-set such concerns.

■ Improved research outcomes

A second reason to consider ethics in your research is that it will improve the quality of the outcomes that you achieve. Imagine yourself as a business

manager facing an organisational problem where you, your colleagues or professional peers have little or no expertise. In such situations, a possible solution is to ask whether academic research has been conducted that might offer some guidance or insight to the problem. However you would still need to attempt some kind of evaluation of the merits and relevance of such research. As such, it is assumed here that you will be looking for primary research that is based on studies involving willing participants, studies involving a high number of participants, studies involving participants sharing many characteristics, as well as studies written in a fashion that does not compromise the reputations of participating organisations.

None of the above would be possible without research ethics. In other words, the best business management research is based on recruiting participants who fully understand what the research is about and can fully relate it to their own experiences. Such participants may also be eager to refer researchers to colleagues or peers with similar or unique insights and experiences, and feel safe in the knowledge that involvement in such research projects will not compromise personal or wider reputations. As such, research ethics is also an important aspect of achieving a good grade for your dissertation.

■ Professional affiliation and conduct

A third reason to note the importance and relevance of research ethics goes beyond the individual and the present moment. As prospective business managers you will be aware that you will sometime soon be expected to join and be governed by a professional body. Students of business management can expect to be members of, for example, the Chartered Management Institute, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, or the Chartered Institute of Marketing. Such institutes tend to have codes of conduct that relate in most part to day-to-day professional conduct, but also refer in some way to conduct in relation to research. As prospective business management researchers you are, as such, expected to abide by the standards set out by organisations that directly or indirectly govern business management research and practice. As further evidence that ethics matter, professional research associations such as the British Academy of Management (2013) also have codes of practice. The British Academy of Management sets out seven key principles (see Box 11.1) that should be followed in the conduct of research and wider professional practice.

Compliance with the requirements of a professional body or association may be regarded as a sensible precaution and such guidance has typically served business management practitioners and researchers over many years. Adopting good practice will help with the credibility of your research and will help you make the transition from student of business management to business management practitioner.

Box 11.1: British Academy of Management Code of Ethics and Best Practice

- Responsibility and accountability
- Integrity and honesty
- Respect and fairness
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Avoidance of personal gain
- Conflict of interest
- Collegiality

Source: British Academy of Management (2013)

Exercise 11.1

Referring to the British Academy of Management's Code of Ethics and Best Practice in Box 11.1, what principles of the code are most relevant to the project you have planned?

Ethical principles in business management research

A range of ethical principles can be closely associated with business management research. Central to most of the ethical principles is the well-being of research participants. In the preface of this book, we discussed Barry Marshall's unusual research protocol where he aimed to give himself a gastric ulcer so that he could treat himself. His research went on to win a Nobel Prize and one could argue that he only put himself at risk. How this research would fare in relation to the principles of ethical research