Ethical Challenges of Undertaking Management Research and Recommendations

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Abstract: The essay delves into the ethical challenges of undertaking management research, highlighting the significance of ethics within this field. It begins by outlining the fundamental concepts of management research and the methodologies of qualitative and quantitative studies. The discussion then turns to the ethical principles that guide academic research conduct, followed by an in-depth exploration of specific ethical challenges faced in management research. The core of the essay presents these challenges and offers recommendations for addressing them. By advocating for a distinct ethical framework tailored to management research, the essay contributes to enhancing ethical standards within the field.

Keywords: management research, ethical challenges, qualitative & quantitative research methods

1. Introduction

Since management research is a comparatively new study and an applied science which crosses several disciplines, it has relied on ethics norms established by relevant social sciences to guide its research.[1] There is an argument that business schools have not prepared students with techniques to deal with ethical issues;[2] this deficiency may due to the absence of ethical practices amongst university faculties who depend on self-discipline, which may be insufficient. However, the present situation is featured by an important growth of ethical regulations among social sciences. Thus it has been suggested that management researchers should look at ethical issues in a different way from other social sciences and explore a more precise ethical context for management research. Since ethical regulations have been set up increasingly by ethics committees, management research is facing numerous ethical challenges including ethical issues for qualitative and quantitative researches, which are the most typical and frequently used research techniques. This essay will mainly discuss about the ethical challenges of management research and how to overcome them with making reference to quantitative and qualitative methods.

The structure of the essay is organized as follows. Firstly, the basic idea of management research and methodology of qualitative and quantitative researches will be explained. Secondly, the ethical principles will be discussed. And then challenges of management research and recommendations for overcoming them will be analyzed, which is also the main body of this essay. At last, a final conclusion about management research and its ethical issues will be drawn.

2. Management Research, Qualitative & Quantitative Methods

2.1 Management research

Management research is a systemic study that assists to solve business difficulties and contribute to management knowledge. It is an applied research that involves the pragmatic application of science and exercises part of the academia's cumulative theories, methodologies and techniques for a particular objective. It deals with resolving practical problems and normally adopts empirical methodologies; it is in comparison with fundamental research, which focuses on exploration of basic parts of phenomena.

According to Easterby-Smith, there are four elements that make management a distinct focus for research. Firstly, management research employs transdisciplinary approaches; secondly, it is difficult to get access to relative information since managers regard their information as competitive advantage on the market; thirdly, managers are well-educated and prefer information generated by traditional research methods. At last, the findings of management research normally need to settle pragmatic management difficulties since managers need high-quality information to make correct decisions.[3]

2.2 Qualitative & quantitative research methods

Qualitative research is a primary domain of academic studies, which is designed to make clear a target group's series of behavior and the hided consciousness that drive it in regard to a particular theme. It applies thorough researches about a small

group of respondents to lead and encourage the formation of hypotheses and the outcomes are normally depictive rather than predictive.[4] Qualitative research is a way of exploration used in various distinct academic subjects and it is derived from social sciences like psychology; while in present times, it is also used in market research by business department including deepgoing interviews of individual respondents, small group discussions, journals and contextual observations. The research may be proceeded face to face, over the phone, by videoconference or online.[5]

Quantitative research is a type of systemic empirical study of marked phenomena through statistic, mathematical or calculating techniques in both natural science and social science. Its aim is to exploit and apply mathematical models and hypotheses with regard to observable phenomena. The measuring process is crucial to quantitative research since it offers the elementary junction between empirical investigation and mathematic expression of quantitative relations. Quantitative information can be any data in number forms like statistics or percentages. Unlike qualitative research, which puts forward broad queries and gathers word information from observation or respondents to look for specific patterns particular to this group of respondents, quantitative researchers analyze the data information with the aid of statistics and expect the analysis will produce unbiased outcomes that can be general to a large scale. Another difference is qualitative research yields results only on the specific case studied and general outcomes are just hypotheses; while quantitative research can be applied to testify whether these hypotheses are true or false.[6]

3. Ethical Principles of Academic Research

Before identifying ethical challenges of management research, ethical principles will be analyzed because they are guidelines of ethical behaviors in management research. Capron put forward that all kinds of researches are supposed to be guided by three ethical principles, that is, respect for people (autonomy), beneficence, and justice.[7]

3.1 Autonomy

Autonomy refers to participators' rights, including right to be informed about the research and voluntarily make decision about whether to take part in a research and the right to quit at any moment without punishment.[7] In qualitative research, the key of autonomy is informed consent, which implies informing the participators exactly all information and details they need to know and achieving a rational balanced level between over informing and under informing.[8] Autonomy also means that participators wield their rights to act as autonomous people to freely choose to agree or reject to take part in the research.[9]

3.2 Beneficence

Beneficence means doing good to other people and avoiding harm. It demands that researchers should try to guarantee the well-being of participators. It depends on an idea that regards research as admissible if it provides benefits and prevents discomfort or maximizes potential well-being of participators and minimizes the possible risk of hurt.[10] However, beneficence in some extreme cases may be breach of autonomy and voluntariness to choose.[9] For instance, the researchers might want to explore the issue of women in domestic violence, while they may determine not to involve them into the study because these women are normally too vulnerable. Under this condition, the researchers do not give them the chance to decide by themselves and talk about their experiences.

3.3 Justice

The ethical principle of justice means fairness and equal distribution. The key point of this principle is to help participators to avoid being exploited and abused. It requires that the returns and duties of the research ought to be fairly and equally shared by different groups so it will not be that participators bear the burden of the research involvement while others obtain the benefits. Besides, the principle of justice may also be suitable for employees and it demands that employees are not utilized just because they belong to the organization under research. Employees should not be asked to take the burden of research in respect of time, energy or reveal of private information which other groups like researchers or employers receive the benefits.[10] In qualitative researches, the principle of justice requires researchers to recognize vulnerability of the participators and their contributions to the research.[9]

4. Ethical Challenges of Management Research

The increasing attention on ethics in social science implies that management researchers are facing a number of ethical challenges. According to Bell and Bryman, there are generally altogether four kinds of ethical challenges for management researchers. They are conflicts of interest and affiliation bias, power relations and informed consent, harm, wrongdoing and risk for participators, and confidentiality and anonymity. In the following essay, these ethical challenges will be analyzed in

details.[1]

4.1 Conflicts of interest and affiliation bias

The ethical challenge of conflicts of interest and affiliation bias means the influence of management research by funding chances and the request of sponsorship or joining in organizations. This not only leads to biased program choice and preference of programs which are short-run and commercially feasible, but also the absence of researcher independence. This will increase the probability that the research may not be explicitly developed to be beneficial to participators or can contain some social risks. The situation will be more serious if the researching program and its planned results are not clear enough to potential participators and can possess pressure and tension, and violation of privacy.[10]

As a special field of academic study, management research is more likely to involve in conflicts of interest and affiliations compared with other social science researches. For all domains of academic research, it is generally agreed that affiliations, especially when they are connected with funds, tend to impact on the way the research is conducted and the way the results are demonstrated. According to Murphy, in some research fields like medical research, the researchers have to describe all underlying conflicts of interest so the affiliations can be considered when examining the results of the research and then their research reports can be published. Nevertheless, it is quite uncommon that conflicts of interest or affiliations are stated in the evaluation or announcement of management studies, even if a lot of management researchers are occupied in management consultancy jobs which are linked with their scientific researches.[11] Maybe it is a good idea to ask management researchers to state the conflicts of interest in the outcomes of research just like what medical researchers do.

4.2 Power relations and informed consent

When studying power relations that examine the relationship between researchers and participators, informed consent is one of the most important ethical principles to be taken into account. However, there still exist many challenges about it. Firstly, under the background of today's digital era of data sharing, the typical character of informed consent has changed; it is hard to define and we are not sure about what participators do consent to as Miller stated "how meaningful and ethical is it to ask respondents to give their informed consent to share their stories for future uses they have not been informed about?"[12] Secondly, there are few analyses in the management research literature about how researchers can guarantee informed consent. Many organizations are absent of contractual individualism which is essential for informed consent since they may firmly support a research program or the organizational culture asks individuals to acquiesce to the will of the upper level of the organization.[10] Besides, in some countries, research ethics like autonomy and informed consent are unrelated to their cultural and social norms,[13] which means people involved in the research have no sense of their rights in research participation. Additionally, increasing application of open-ended interviews in qualitative research suggests that it is normally impossible for participators to have informed consent because it is hard for them to know in advance what questions they will encounter and how their answers may be translated.[14] Another point is that informed consent is flexible. Orb gave an example about caregivers--in the research of the response of family caregivers who take care of patients, the person who gives informed consent may be the caregiver him/herself or the patient or the family members of the patient.[9]

When talking about power relations, we normally care about vulnerable participators to ensure they are not exploited from the research participation. However, unlike other social science researchers, sometimes management researchers deal with mighty people or groups. The issue for management researchers is whether informed consent is a proper way to deal with ethics of relations with participators in the area of management research because the relation between management researchers and the participators is normally featured by a power imbalance that is helpful for the participators rather than the researchers.[1] Managers, particularly advanced managers are apt to obtain a high social position and a quality to exert powering the organizations through setting the admittance limits and expectations with regard to outcome that may benefit them. As a result, management researchers are normally in a weaker bargaining state and they have to ensure consent by providing something in return.[15]

4.3 Harm, wrongdoing and risk

This challenge is related to beneficence principle. Even though there is hardly a physical risk, Levine put forward that research participation may also involve the risk of psychological risk like pressure, social risk like ostracism, financial risk like loss of career opportunity or promotion and sometimes legal risk.[16] Besides, since most management researches are one-off programs, normally the participators are just regarded as origins of information; the connection between researchers and participators often finishes with information gathering and participators get no precise attention or follow-up.[10] What's more, the consequences for participators' participation in the study or publication of study discoveries are hardly clearly taken into account and proposals are not put forward to solve issues presented by participators within the research process.[17]

4.4 Confidentiality and anonymity

The challenges of confidentiality and anonymity are also connected with beneficence principle to protect participators. Similar to other social researchers, it is increasingly important for management researchers to oversee the possible consequences of disclosing participators' identities and protect their confidentiality to prevent harm or risks. It is recommended to use alias name. However, this technique may not be enough if the research is proceeded in a small community where participators may be easily identified. Under this condition, dissemination of the research may need to be limited.[9] The protection of anonymity is a special issue for management research because it is not explicit whether anonymity applies to organizations as individual participators. It could be a problem if the organization's identity must be hidden because many business school researches depend on disclosing their identity as a demonstration of real-life practice.[1] There is also an argument about less protection of anonymity of some special individuals like corporate chairmen or politicians because their status inevitably exposed them in the public. Grinyer pointed out that some participators may wish to reveal their identities rather than stay anonymous to gain property of their stories.[18] Under some conditions there is a reasonable legal reason to make the organization unidentifiable to protect to researchers or their universities.[19] Another point is many kinds of qualitative research do not enable anonymity during data collection like in network researches the research need to know the identity of the participator to study about the relations with other participators.[20]

5. Conclusion

From the analysis of ethical challenges of management research above we can see that for each challenge, the situation is not fixed but various and complex. For example, as for anonymity, there are different cases that some need to be unidentifiable whereas others may hope their identities to be revealed. As a result, in my opinion, there is no "one fit for all" strategy to overcome the ethical challenges; what we need to do is to set up a flexible ethical code for management research to regulate and guide researchers but at the same time allow them to adopt the most proper way to deal with ethical issues under the specific conditions.

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