Deepening Methods in Business Ethics

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Reams of pages have been written about methods in journals and textbooks, in dissertations and essays, on methods both qualitative and quantitative, concerned with philosophy and technique. We do not intend to add to this debate in any substantive manner, rather offer a few words in provocation. Despite some anti-method sentiment, we are still optimistic about the promise of some “magic in method” (May 1994, p. 10).

Method and Purpose

Here’s a way to think about method in business ethics. A method is like a recipe. Follow the steps and the dish will be delicious. Of course a problem might be that the author of the recipe may not know very much about food and its tastes, or how particular ingredients work together. If the author is some authority on cooking, we are more likely to believe that the dish will be tasty. If the author has made the recipe many times, then perhaps we just made a mistake somewhere in the cooking. The authority of the author is always in play on this view of method. Let’s call this idea of method, “Method as Technique.”

Here’s another way to think about method in business ethics. There is no difference between method in business ethics and method in science. Theoretical framings are set. Hypotheses are formulated. Data are collected and analyzed. Hypotheses are confirmed or rejected. And, theoretical framings are adjusted appropriately. Some have argued that the consistent application of this method usually called the “hypothetico-deductive method” has led and will lead us to Truth...to understanding the way the world really is (in

some non-trivial sense of “really is”). Following the method makes the results true. Or, if you like, the data stand in a relationship of confirmation to the hypotheses. The resulting “knowledge” lets us represent the world as it really is in our language. Let’s call this idea of method, “Method as science.”

Here’s another way to think about method in business ethics. It’s really nothing special. Short of believing that dichotomies such as “theory-data,” “fact-value,” “conceptual-empirical,” etc. are useful, business ethics scholars should focus on telling and retelling some useful stories that help us figure out how to live better. How they figure out the narratives that are told about why businesses work the way they do, and how a reweaving of these narratives may allow us to improve things, seems to us to depend first and foremost on the experiences or the insights or the creativity of the storyteller. There is no one recipe, nor is there a special “scientific method” that guarantees success. Of course, sometimes it turns out the technique and thinking about theory and data and interpretation are useful. No guarantees (just like in science). Let’s call this idea of method, “Method as purpose” or “purpose-driven method.”

Fewer Rules, More Thought

Many scholars and their journals want to lay down the law with respect to methods. If you have used “qualitative methods” then you must have A, B, C, etc. If you use “quantitative methods” then you need to do 1, 2, 3, etc. Treated as such, methods drive inquiry or, to put it another way, methods become an end in themselves. We are at risk of becoming slave to what has been termed by Janesick (1998, p. 48) as methodolatry: “a preoccupation with selecting and defending method to the exclusion of the actual story being told.” Mindless attachment and devotion to method can overtake the discourse of research and move us away from understanding the actual experience of research participants (Janesick 1998). Without denying the usefulness of

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certain techniques or specific data, we suggest that we need to rethink our relationship with methods.

To begin, we should ourselves ask the most basic questions. What is method? What is the purpose of reporting method? What is good method? While it is beyond our self-imposed remit to address these questions in any comprehensive manner, we cannot resist asking them and proposing that a guiding criterion to our responses should be the specificities of the problem to be solved. Furthermore, we propose that in problem-driven research it makes no sense to think of method as separate in any way from theoretical ideas about or our experiences of phenomena under investigation. Theory, method, and analysis are inextricably intertwined. From this position, method is simply what we do or the way in which we solve a particular problem; the purpose of reporting method is for us to explain why we have chosen this particular way and what we have done; and a good method is one that the reader finds plausible and arrives at a useful solution. An essential caveat is that any “solution” is revisable when a better one comes along. We believe that this is the way that science actually works, so that the three approaches to method are actually related. Methods are the tools we use to figure out how to solve particular problems. In the solving of problems we learn how to accomplish certain things (think about what turns red litmus paper blue, and the experiments that show that finding). And, we are able to tell a more complete story about the problem and how we need to address it. This is exactly what happens in science, and most modern philosophers of social science would agree (Cartwright and Runhardt 2014). Method is part of what makes a particular solution useful, but so are how we frame the problem conceptually, the very purpose of our problem-solving (research), and data that may be relevant.

...in Quantitative Research

For instance, take a central task of “quantitative method,” that of measurement. It is not merely a “technique” nor a procedure in “science.” From the outset, the very act of naming a phenomena to be measured has implications beyond method and is in itself a normative and sometimes political action (consider the measurement of “climate change” as a case in point). The manner in which a phenomenon is defined delineates boundaries and allows assumptions, with values embedded and goals mandated. For example, if the purpose of a study is to eradicate corruption, bribery may be defined as undue influence to breach fiduciary duty (Turow 1985), even as “immoral unethical and harmful” (Cleveland et al. 2009, p. 200). In contrast, if the purpose is to explore cultural practices, bribery may be understood as gift giving or an accepted way of doing business (Tsalikis and Nwachukwu 1991; Tian 2008). Measurement, understood as the

systematic assignment of values or placement of things in categories, relies on three kinds of activities (Cartwright and Runhardt 2014): (1) characterization or development of criteria that are fit for purpose; (2) representation or the selection/creation of measures that may be idiosyncratic or common; and (3) procedures that are “on-the ground” and continuously being revised). As noted by Cartwright and Runhardt (2014), these activities should mesh, that is they should not only be consistent but also mutually supporting and co-evolving. We wish to highlight the significance of quantitative research methods addressing purpose and being revisable.

The assumed rules of quantitative methods, embedded as they are in the socio-political institutions charged with academic knowledge production, take on a status far exceeding mere convention. In the *Journal of Business Ethics*, the conventions of quantitative methods have been challenged from a jointly ethical and pragmatic perspective. Zyphur and Pierides (2017, 2019) and their interlocutors (Cortina 2019; Edwards 2019; Powell 2019) debate the imperative that quantitative methods should be “fit for purpose” and that their validity should rest on the connection of methods with the purpose of the research and the concepts and units of analysis invoked. We encourage you to read these important opinions.

....and Qualitative Research

Likewise, one could consider cases in their role as a primary “qualitative method.” Historically, cases and case studies have several roots (Morgan 2014). There is the tradition of medical case notes and case histories as narrated by patients and/or their practitioners, whereby the “case,” as in law, is noted for its singularity. For anthropologists, and more recently sociologists and management scholars, case study is field work that involves intense personal experience observing and recoding specific people in specific places. For any one researcher’s definition and method, another differing understanding could be provided. Hence, rather than define cases or case studies as a particular research technique carried out according to a particular scientific procedure, it is more helpful to ask what they do, what purpose they fulfill, what problem they solve. Cases allow us to do a number of things: (1) to consider the unit of analysis in its wholeness (e.g., a whole industry, town, event, or ritual); (2) to explore this wholeness in situ, with depth of engagement, dense evidential materials, and across a range of topics; (3) to use multiple research methods; (4) to treat the boundary between the subject of analysis and its context as blurred and fluid; and (5) to narrate an outcome that is complex and open-ended, and does not artificially differentiate between “raw data” and analysis (Morgan 2014). In the words of

Morgan (2014, p. 291): “Analysis is almost everywhere within a case study, for conceptual and theorizing work is integrated into the account of the evidence, so although the outcome may appear ‘descriptive’ this appearance is usually deceptive.” We wish to highlight the inseparability of qualitative methods from the practices and the theories with which they engage.

Our theories stand in relationship to the phenomena that they are explaining. Sometimes we encounter new phenomena, and we have to decide whether the current theory is consistent with these phenomena or needs revising. In business ethics, the so-called clinical cases could be especially important as they often are inspired by anomalous results that indicate our current narrative could be better. Indeed, the *Journal of Business Ethics* has a section dedicated to Practice and Business Ethics. Interesting theory, as noted by Mintzberg (2005, p. 370), “comes from the weaving together of many insights, many creative leaps, most small and perhaps a few big. It’s all in the weaving.” The heuristic of clinical case method focuses us on research that arises from practice, not an outcome of a planned and methodical attempt to collect researcher motivated data, rather a narration by the researcher of an empirical encounter. These methods help us reweave the strands of current theory.

To Conclude

It is easy to become a slave to the latest technique, to the latest “method.” We urge our authors to think through their methods in conjunction with the purpose of their research and the problems they are trying to address. Often, we simply need to ask a better set of questions, or to frame a problem differently, or address the underlying normative and ethical dimensions of the phenomena. Whatever method you have used to create a story worth telling, tell the story as it actually occurred. And, yes, sometimes the tools we use, the hypotheses and data (where these are appropriate), need to be carefully reconsidered. Good papers hang together, so that at the end of reading them we can say, “I think I understand how to do some things I did not know how to do” or “If we thought of things this way, we could make the world better.” Research in business ethics is too important not to have such a high bar.

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