EDITORIAL

Universal research ethics and international business studies

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Abstract

Research ethics have received comprehensive institutional attention at least since the creation of the U.S. Panel on Scientific Responsibility and the Conduct of Research in 1989. Over the last decade, business scholars have focused on a variety of important questions in research ethics, with significant attention being focused on the “grey” areas of questionable research practices. This editorial adopts a different approach. The normative foundations of research ethics, and the core values that should inform research in international business studies, are identified and related to AIB’s new and revised ethics codes. Explanations for the persistence and growth of research misconduct and detrimental research practices are provided. Finally, best practices for institutionalizing research ethics in international business studies are identified.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic research ethics have received increased attention in recent years as high-profile cases of research misconduct have been disclosed and the overall number of retractions at academic journals have increased (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2017). The Retraction Watch database of journal retractions reached 20,000 in 2019, whereas in the year 2000 the list had just 40 retractions (Oransky, 2019). Organizations such as the United States National Academy of Sciences, the Center for Scientific Integrity, the Committee on Publication Ethics, the United Kingdom Research Integrity Office, the National Board for Research Integrity in the Netherlands, and the All European Academies, have each helped call attention to unethical research practices. International business research has not been immune to research misconduct. One study from almost a decade ago analyzed submissions to the International Management Division of the Academy of Management Annual Meeting and found that 25% of submissions had evidence of plagiarism and 13% showed significant evidence of plagiarism (Honig & Bedi, 2012). Program chairs for meetings of the Academy of International Business (AIB) and editors of AIBs journals have seen repeated cases of unethical research practices. Given the clear need for AIB to articulate its own

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standards, AIB recently developed and implemented a new Code of Ethics for members. Previous editorials in *JIBS* have emphasized important issues in research ethics, including irreproducible and non-replicable research (Aguinis, Cascio, et al., 2017; Aguinis, Ramani, et al., 2017), questionable research practices in quantitative hypothesis-testing research such as P-hacking (Meyer et al., 2017), and data access and research transparency (DART) (Beugelsdijk et al., 2020). In this editorial I adapt a broader approach by focusing on a wide range of ethical breaches in international business studies. First, the normative foundations of research ethics, and the core values that should inform research in international business studies, are identified and related to the AIB's newly revised Code of Ethics. Next, explanations for the persistence and growth of ethical breaches are provided. Finally, best practices for institutionalizing research ethics in international business studies are identified.

UNIVERSAL MORAL NORMS FOR RESEARCH

While recent high-profile cases of research misconduct have garnered significant attention in business studies, major research organizations have been attentive to these issues for decades. Over 30 years ago, alleged cases of academic researchers' research misconduct drew the attention of the United States National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine, whose joint Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy (COSEPUP) appointed the Panel on Scientific Responsibility and the Conduct of Research in 1989. The panel's influential report, *Responsible Science* (Institute of Medicine, 1992), set out to help protect the integrity of scientific research. The committee defined research misconduct as the intentional "fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reporting research" (Institute of Medicine, 1992: 27) and noted that these actions are intentional, not accidental. Actions where there was some disagreement as to the harm caused or the extent to which the practices "violate traditional values of the research enterprise and that may be detrimental to the research process" (Institute of Medicine, 1992: 28) were described as questionable research practices (QRPs).¹ In 2017, COSEPUP issued an updated report to reflect the current research environment (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2017). They noted that in the intervening 25 years between their two reports, a clear

institutional consensus regarding the ethical legitimacy of many QRPs has not been reached.² The end result is that there has been little institutional agreement on policies and changes to incentives that would discourage QRPs. In an effort to overcome the current impasse in the institutionalization of prohibitions against at least some QRPs, the 2017 COSEPUP report emphasized "detrimental research practices" (DRPs) upon which there was uniform agreement by committee members regarding the wrongness or illegitimacy of the practices.³ At the same time, COSEPUP articulated the core values that should guide research thereby articulating the normative foundations of research. Prior to this, the InterAcademy Council (IAC) and InterAcademy Panel (IAP), the global network of 105 national science academies, itself identified the core values that should guide research (InterAcademy Council & InterAcademy Panel, 2012). The core values identified by COSEPUP and IAC/IAP have received little attention in the research ethics literature or in international business studies. However, they provide an important, cross-cultural foundation for research ethics.

Recent discussions of research ethics in business studies seldom address in detail the normative foundations of research integrity. However, the 2017 COSEPUP report makes explicit that the foundation for creating and enforcing ethics codes is the academic research ethos (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, Chap. 2, 2017). This understanding of the scientific enterprise was initially articulated by Merton (1942) in his classic discussion of the normative foundations of science. "The norms are expressed," Merton argued, "in the form of prescriptions, proscriptions and permissions. These are legitimized in terms of institutional values" (Merton, 1942: 116). They reflect the broader normative system of science, which includes the collective identification and weighting of norms by members of the social system. This differs from the research orientation of individual scholars which may subscribe to, or deviate from, standardized, institutional norms in varying degrees (Anderson, Ronning, De Vries, & Martinson, 2010). While international business studies seek to assess, describe, and provide conceptual frameworks for understanding the varied dimensions of the field, the norms of research are inherently *prescriptive*. They characterize the parameters within which research *should* be undertaken. These moral norms are established by common consensus of the broader scientific community and

are identified and enforced by academic and research institutions. The normative system of research ethics is universal as opposed to relativistic. It is universal in the sense that it is global in scope and not, with respect to its core values, relative to specific nations, cultures, or institutions. The IAC/IAP have explicitly identified the need that the “the universal values of science be embodied in global standards of behavior that are understood and followed by all” (InterAcademy Council & InterAcademy Panel, 2012: ix; see also European Science Foundation & All European Academies, 2011). Research in international business studies has been transnational since its inception. The field has grown alongside the growth of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business accredited business schools and Ph.D. programs. This reflects a broader trend in the globalization of scientific research. As new scholars are trained in business schools across the globe, and as faculty follow career paths that cross national and regional boundaries, the need for universal standards for research ethics has become increasingly important to our multi- and interdisciplinary field.

Here I emphasize five core normative values of research ethics identified by both COSEPUP and IAC/IAP in their recent analyses of research ethics: honesty, openness, objectivity, fairness, and accountability. In the international business ethics literature, these values fit the description of substantive hypernorms as articulated and defended by Donaldson and Dunfee (1994, 1999). Substantive hypernorms, such as these, are said to emerge from “the convergence of religious, cultural, and philosophical beliefs around certain core principles” (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999: 59). That is, these values articulate fundamental conceptions of the right and the good and are fundamentally normative, meaning that they describe not what *is* but what *ought* to be. Hypernorms are identified and validated by macrocontractors who are imagined to convene in a sort of parliament of humanity. These rational global contractors would, according to Donaldson and Dunfee, derive general norms while allowing local communities (e.g., national academic institutions or specific universities) the ability to interpret and apply these norms in moral free space. The interpretation may take the form of specific institutional rules, policies, procedures, and sanctions that vary among communities or nations across the globe, so long as they are consistent with the overarching hypernorms.

COSEPUP and IAC/IAP may be understood as a practical instantiation of hypothetical macrocontractors. These are five values that they have instantiated. First, the value of *honesty* is violated by fabrication, intentional manipulation, “ghost” writing by third parties, a failure to disclose funding sources, or falsely claiming authorship. It also relates to the editing and publication of journals. For example, referees who fail to disclose their own limitations in training or expertise in the reviewing process exhibit one sort of dishonesty. So too, do journal editors who fail to utilize peer review for empirical research without making this explicit, intentionally mislead the academic community about the quality and legitimacy of the research they publish.

The second value of *openness* is important for enabling replication to the extent that this is possible within the constraints of data ownership or confidentiality. This has been the subject of widespread calls to increase access to data and the transparency of methods (Aguinis, Ramani, & Alabduljader, Aguinis, Ramani, et al., 2017). The *Journal of International Business Studies* (JIBS) has recently instituted new DART policies, consistent with the AIB Journals Code of Ethics, that require transparency with respect to the prior published use of the data and access to supplementary information such as raw output files and research documents, thereby institutionalizing the value of openness (Beugelsdijk et al., 2020).

The third value of *objectivity* is of central importance to the scientific endeavor. It is most obviously captured by the generation of refutable hypotheses that can be tested with appropriate data and are thereby subject to verification. The objectivity of many findings in the social sciences has been called into question in recent years because of the lack of both the verification of theoretical propositions and the replication of published empirical findings (Aguinis, Cascio, et al., 2017; Aguinis, Ramani, et al., 2017; Honig et al., 2014; Open Science Collaboration, 2015). Objectivity is also essential in the peer review process which requires personal biases to be set aside and conflicts of interest that might undermine objectivity to be disclosed to editors. In the international business context, objectivity may be subtly undermined via insufficient language skills. Poor translation of research instruments and findings can render the findings invalid. In such cases, the translation problems would not typically be

accessible by the editor, or reviewers, or readers of the final product.

Fourth, the value of *fairness* requires that the ideas of others who influence research and scholarship be acknowledged and not usurped. It also requires that the determination of authorship be guided by intellectual contributions and not by other considerations such as status. For example, an advisor who insists that he or she be listed as first author on all research stemming from a doctoral student's dissertation, regardless of relative contribution, acts unfairly. Additionally, fairness is one of the ethical foundations of informed consent in research (Miller & Wertheimer, 2011). Fairness requires that subjects shall be provided adequate information in a coherent manner and that their consent be respected. It also entails that we should not impose unreasonable costs on the subjects (Miller & Wertheimer, 2011: 211–212).

Fifth, it is important that members of the research community, whether editors, researchers, referees, or administrators, be accountable for their work. In the sense employed here, the value of *accountability* entails that researchers must be able to explain their findings to fellow researchers, journal editors, and to academic and other relevant institutions and organizations. This accountability is reciprocal in that each member of the research community is accountable for his or her role-specific work to other members of the community. One important element of accountability entails correcting problems in publications discovered after publication in a published correction.

The AIB ethics codes reflect these values. Table 1 presents research ethics hypernorms alongside representative examples of ethical breaches and corresponding text from the AIB Code of Ethics. How these values are implemented at various institutions across the globe is a matter to be determined not individually, but by instead microcontractors (e.g., national or institutional oversight boards) operating within moral free space in specific nations or at specific universities.

ETHICAL BREACHES BY (INTERNATIONAL) BUSINESS RESEARCHERS AND THEIR ANTECEDENTS

The need for clear ethical norms and codes, and corresponding accountability, has arisen in the AIB because of the past experiences of the AIB journal editors and program chairs who have observed a variety of ethical breaches. This is despite the fact

that some of these matters have been previously addressed in the pages of the *JIBS* by Lorraine Eden (2010).⁴ Here I present ten important examples of the types of behavior that continue to be observed by AIB leaders, or are particularly salient to international business studies:

1. **Idea theft** Examples include an advisor who takes a graduate student's original ideas and publishes them as his or her own, or a conference referee who steals ideas, or entire papers, and publishes them as his or her own.
2. **False authorship** The attribution of authorship when it is not warranted. In such cases, the "false author" does not make a substantive contribution. Examples include: senior scholars who put themselves on the papers of more junior scholars via implicit or explicit coercion; "honorific" authorship; junior scholars enlisting senior scholars as co-authors to lend credibility to their work, irrespective of actual intellectual contributions by the senior scholar; and scholars designating spouses, or significant others in their private spheres, as co-authors without sufficient substantive contribution in an effort to promote the significant other's career. Another example, one that is most commonly found with publications that may influence the profitability of a product or service, or the "market value" of a scholar in the consulting, executive education or speaking circuit spheres, occurs when professional writers "ghost author" an article that is then published under the names of academic researchers alone.
3. **Self-plagiarism**: Using previously published material in a new journal article (see Eden, 2010 for elaboration in the context of IB.)
4. **Data segmentation** Also known as "salami slicing" or "slicing and dicing," this practice involves the division of a single study into different papers for the purpose of increasing the number of published papers. Often, the papers include redundant text and data. In such cases, a single study is divided into two or more papers that could more appropriately have been presented as a single paper because the single paper would have had greater meaning and more comprehensive coverage of a phenomenon. The practice also wastes the time of editors and reviewers. While not all papers derived from the same data are examples of deceptive data segmentation, disclosure to editors and readers is needed to facilitate transparency (Eden et al.,

Table 1 Hypernorms and ethical breaches

Value or hypernorm	Sample ethical breaches	Sample corresponding text in the code of ethics
Honesty	Idea theft; false authorship; self-plagiarism	6.5.a AIB members should take responsibility and credit only for work they have performed and to which they have contributed. They should ensure that authorship and other publication credits are based on the scientific or professional contributions of the individuals involved, and not on their professional status or rank
Openness	Failure to disclose prior use of data; failure to disclose data when possible	6.5.b.3. Acknowledge any prior publications when submitting for publication or publishing data or findings that they have previously published elsewhere
Objectivity	Conflicts of interest; language deficiencies that undermine validity	4.1 A conflict of interest arises when personal or financial interests prevent an individual from performing his or her professional work in an unbiased manner 6.3.a. Conduct and report research with the highest standards of objectivity, accuracy, and quality
Fairness	Unwarranted authorship status; conflicts of interest; acknowledgement of prior contributions; failure to obtain informed consent	6.3.d. Acknowledge prior and contemporaneous contributions of other researchers in publications, teaching, practice, and service settings. Follow all appropriate rules and guidelines that apply to research involving human subjects (including surveys) 6.4.d Obtaining in advance the informed consent of persons being studied, providing information, owning or controlling access to material being studied, or otherwise identified as having interests which might be impacted by the research
Accountability	Failure to correct published errors	6.3.g Take reasonable steps, if they discover significant errors in their publication or presentation of data, to correct any such errors in a correction, retraction, or erratum

- 2018; Kassirer & Angell, 1995; Vasconcelos & Roig, 2015). This can be a form of self-plagiarism.
5. **Recycling papers** Using the same data set and making modifications to the names of constructs, or the theoretical motivation, or to the analysis, in an effort to deceive journal editors regarding the originality of the research (a form of self-plagiarism).
 6. **Data falsification** Presenting fake or misrepresented results, i.e., results that are an intentional misrepresentation of reality.
 7. **Misrepresentation of editorial review** Fabricating the history of the review process or engaging in *ad hominem* criticism of the action editors after a rejection, in an attempt to create an alternative reality that would result in a positive editorial decision.
 8. **Conflicts of interest** A conflict of interest occurs when a personal or financial interest could result in biased research or a biased review (Association of American Universities, 2001; Eden, 2010; Thompson, 1993). For example, a

- conflict of interest arises when an author nominates a personal friend as a referee, or proposes as a referee someone who has previously read and commented on the paper in question. Another example, commonly found with publications that may influence the success of an industry, firm, or non-profit advocacy group, occurs when the author(s) fail to disclose financial or other relationships with the relevant industry or organization. There are of course also more subtle expressions of conflicts of interest, such as when an author whose manuscript was rejected by a journal editor, will then go out of his or her way to provide unwarranted negative assessments of this editor's future papers or project proposals when acting as a reviewer knowing that the action editor, who is "guilty" of rejecting the author's paper, is involved in these papers or proposals.
9. **Failing to obtain informed consent** in research on human subjects. This may be most likely to occur when researchers are based in

nations that do not have robust Institutional Review Boards or Ethics Review Committees to provide research oversight.

10. **Insufficient language skills** to translate research instruments and findings in a professional manner rendering the findings invalid. In such cases, the translation problems would not typically be accessible by the action editor, reviewers, or readers of the final product.

Two common constructs from the business misconduct literature provide plausible explanations for the prevalence of ethical breaches in research. *First*, academic misconduct may be understood to be a *rational choice* (Becker, 1968; Greve, Palmer & Ponzer 2010). In certain cases, a researcher may make the calculus that the rewards for engaging in misconduct, or detrimental research practices, are greater than the potential penalties. This can happen when the researcher believes that misconduct and/or detrimental research practices outweigh potential sanctions or penalties. Such behavior might be tolerated at institutions with lax research integrity oversight, or with journals where the editors and publishers fail to operate with appropriate editing and publishing ethics (e.g., by failing to subject empirical articles to peer review). Faculty may elect to publish in such outlets while maintaining the façade of research integrity when there are no tangible costs to doing so.

A *second*, related antecedent of academic misconduct is *strain*. Mertonian strain theory holds that agents utilize illegitimate means to achieve their goals when it is difficult to use legitimate means to accomplish the same ends (Agnew, Piquero, & Cullen, 2009; Clinard & Yeager, 1980; Merton, 1938; Vaughan, 1983). Strain theory historically has been used to explain individual criminal behavior. More recently it has been utilized to explain corporate misconduct. With respect to ethical breaches in research, strain has been identified as a contributing factor (Bedeian et al., 2010; Honig et al., 2014; Nosek, Spies, & Motyl, 2012). As pressure to publish increases at academic institutions that have historically focused on teaching, and in the academic institutions of nations without long histories of rigorous, and scientifically grounded, higher education, the norms for achieving career advancement can be influenced to encourage ethical breaches. This problem is particularly acute in the field of international business where only the *JIBS* is rated a 4* journal by the Chartered Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide and the

Australian Business Deans Council Journal Quality List. Acute pressure by academic institutions to have junior faculty publish in elite journals results in the type of strain that can undermine the integrity of international business research.

In addition to these two above sources of ethical breaches, a third explanation for misconduct is the liability of foreignness (Eden & Miller, 2004; Eden et al., 2018, Chp. 3). The liability of foreignness arises in several ways regarding ethical research practices. First, nearly all graduate students have little or no knowledge of professional research ethics and will conduct research based on the norms they become acquainted with during their undergraduate and graduate training. If faculty engage unethical research practices, this will likely be the model that their students will follow. Second, faculty working at universities in nations that have not yet institutionalized best practices in ethical research will have little guidance with respect to the appropriate professional norms with which they should be operating. Similarly, graduate students who study at institutionally distant universities (away from their home countries), and young assistant professors whose first jobs are in institutionally distant universities, may suffer from the liability of foreignness and as a result well slip into unethical research practices. This is especially true if they do not receive formal training in research ethics. A third liability of foreignness is a lack of English language skills necessary to publish in quality journals. Some doctoral students and junior faculty may have excellent statistical skills, but compensate for weak English language skills by breaching professional research ethics as a compensating mechanism.

It is of course possible for a combination of these antecedents to influence ethical breaches. The above is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the antecedents of unethical research, but rather an overview of some of the most common expressions of unethical research in international business studies. Corrective actions that may be taken to address such unethical behavior are discussed below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The justification for the AIB codes of ethics has two primary parts. “First, as a professional organization with the pursuit of knowledge and education as its primary aims, AIB must ensure trust and confidence in its membership through self-regulation that is consistent with scientific integrity and universally recognized ethical norms. Second, AIB must also ensure that its members are treated ethically in the

context of AIB matters, activities, and structures" (Arnold, 2017). The AIB Journal Code of Ethics provides specific guidance regarding ethical practices in research and publication. The AIB Code of Ethics expands on this guidance and provides mechanisms to sanction violations of ethical research practices, up to and including expulsion from AIB and the publication of a notification of misconduct. Unfortunately, this response to misconduct has already had to be utilized by AIB. Should any person have evidence demonstrating that an AIB member has violated the AIB codes of ethics, this person should report this information to the Ethics Review Committee. There are additional steps that AIB members should take to help ensure the integrity of international business studies.

First, all AIB members should familiarize themselves with the AIB Code of Ethics. Indeed, the AIB now requires members to attest to having read and understood the Code as a condition of membership. In addition, researchers who submit manuscripts to the AIB journals should have read the AIB Journals Codes of Ethics. Comprehensive ethics resources for AIB members are available online. Second, graduate programs in international business studies, and related disciplines, should provide mandatory training in professional ethics. Research supported by the U.S. National Institutes of Health and the Office of Research Integrity has found that well-designed and well-executed ethics training provides significant, long term benefits to students (Watts et al., 2017). This meta-analytic study made several recommendations for effective ethics education. Ensuring that faculty have significant expertise and experience in discipline-specific ethics, and highly effective teaching skills, improves outcomes for students. In addition, the meta-analysis found that courses that require the active processing of course content (e.g., class debates and workbooks) are more effective than social engagement (e.g., games or service). Evidence also indicates that the use of moderately detailed ethics case studies provides sizable benefits to students. More generally, all AIB members who participate in graduate education have a professional responsibility to ensure that graduate students in their programs are trained and mentored in ways that allow them to understand and practice research ethics consistent with the AIB Codes.

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NOTES

¹These included failing to retain data for an adequate period, utilizing inappropriate statistical methods, misrepresenting speculation as fact, and soliciting authorship without making a significant contribution to the research. Questionable research practices (QRPs) have been widely discussed in fields related to international business (Banks, Rogelberg, Woznyj, Landis, & Rupp, 2016a, 2016b; Bedeian, Taylor, Miller, 2010; O'Boyle, Banks, & Gonzalez-Mulé, 2014).

²For example, the appropriateness of hypothesizing after the results are known (HARKing) has been both been criticized as an unethical practice and defended, within certain parameters, as an appropriate research tool (Bem, 2002; Bosco, Aguinis, Field, Pierce, & Dalton, 2016; Grand, Rogelberg, Allen, Landis, Reynolds, Scott, Tonidandel, & Truxillo, 2018; Hollenbeck & Wright, 2017; Kerr, 1998).

³DRPs include:

- Detrimental authorship practices that may not be considered misconduct, such as honorary authorship and demanding authorship simply in return for access to previously collected data;
- Not retaining or making data, code, or other information/materials underlying research results available as specified in institutional or sponsor policies, or standard practices in the field;
- Neglectful or exploitative supervision in research;
- Misleading statistical analysis that falls short of falsification;
- Inadequate institutional policies, procedures, or capacity to foster research integrity and address research misconduct allegations, and deficient implementation of policies and procedures; and
- Abusive or irresponsible publication practices by journal editors and peer reviewers (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2017: 74).

⁴Eden's list included three behaviors: redundancy or self-plagiarism, the failure to cross reference or disclose one's closely related work, and undisclosed relational conflicts of interest.

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