

Ethical Considerations in Research about Organizations: Compendium of Strategies



Sue L. T. McGregor

(Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Canada; sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca)

ORCID: 0000-0002-4392-9608

Abstract: This paper concerns ethical considerations when conducting research about the policies, procedures, practices, and culture of organizations and institutions rather than research with the humans owning, operating, employed at, volunteering for, benefiting from, or impacted by the organization. Ethical conventions for research with humans are well developed but less so for research about organizations. A pressing concern in the nascent literature is weighing protecting the public interest versus the organization's interests when sensitive, controversial, or damning information about the latter emerges from the research. Given the absence of formally codified procedural ethics, organizational researchers are encouraged to constantly reexamine, debate, and address related ethical concerns. In that spirit, an inaugural compendium of ethical concerns and recommended strategies gleaned from the literature reviewed is shared, and a discussion of omissions from said literature is tendered to scaffold future conversations around this ethical aspect of organizational research.

Keywords: Research ethics; research about organizations and institutions; ethical concerns; procedural ethics; public interest; critical inquiries.

I. Introduction

Ethics matter in research. Ethical conduct when planning, implementing, and reporting research studies can (a) help build public support for and trust in the research enterprise in general and the discipline and university in particular; (b) promote the key aims of research (e.g., revealing the truth, and producing and generating new knowledge); (c) promote values essential for research collaboration and partnerships (e.g., respect, trust, fairness, and accountability); (d) hold government/tax-funded researchers accountable to the public; and foremost (e) mitigate harm to research subjects (usually taken to mean humans or animals) (Resnik 2020; Shamoo & Resnik 2015).

This paper concerns ethical research-design considerations when conducting research *about* organizations and institutions relative to research with humans. It consolidates nascent and uncoded information about this topic into a preliminary practical source appreciating that more work must be done to bolster this methodological strategy. This paper was partially inspired by my recent journey to help a doctoral

Candidate make a case to the university's Ethics Review Board (ERB) for doing research *about* an organization (i.e., its policies, procedures, practices, and culture). The ERB had a full roster of criteria for judging a research proposal involving humans but none for research about organizations.

Another inspiration was Bell and Bryman's (2007) assertion that "the consequences of harming an organization are not the same as the consequences of harming a person" (Bell & Bryman 2007, 69). They maintained that "organizations should not be protected from harm in the same way as individuals" (ibid., 69). However, this wording intimates that they should be protected in some way, and that this protection will differ from or receive different prioritization than that used in research with humans. If researchers are compelled "to adhere to ethical principles in order to protect the dignity, rights and welfare of [human] research participants" (World Health Organization [WHO] 2023, para. 1), what is involved in protecting the reputation, integrity, and welfare of a collective entity like an organization or institution?

Researchers intentionally forge relationships with "powerful organizations or other entities rather than people" (Greenwood 2016, 512), so they can study a collective research subject – a standalone entity whose reputation and stature can be exposed in research (Greenwood 2016; Scott 2008). An organization's reputation is the estimation in which it is held by the general public and the community at large (e.g., citizens, other businesses, media, and governments). It is the standing (stature) it has in the eyes and opinions of others (Anderson 2014; Eccles et al. 2007).

An organization's reputation matters for several reasons that impact its internal workings, bottom line, and shareholders and stakeholders' opinions and interests (Eccles et al. 2007; Kristensen 2023). But why does protecting the organization become a matter of *ethical concern* when conducting research about its policies, procedures, practices, and culture? For clarification, an ethical concern pertains to researchers assessing rightness and wrongness and goodness or badness and then using this information to choose from alternatives and ethically make decisions in their work (Jay 2014; Jones 2014).

An organization's protection matters (i.e., it is an ethical concern) because the loss of its reputation is consequential especially if its integrity or very existence is threatened or compromised by what the research reveals. (a) People depend on the organization for gainful employment and/or volunteer enrichment and civic involvement. (b) The organization provides some manner of service or product to the public, government, or private sector that would be missed. (c) It is an integral part of the local, regional, national, and/or international economy and community. (d) And its owners may depend on its profits to provide benefits to society. Protecting its reputation, integrity, and welfare thus becomes an ethical concern when designing research protocols.

Unfortunately, the practice of employing research designs that protect an organization's interest is underdeveloped. It does not seem to be a pressing matter or ethical concern as is research with humans. To illustrate, Rodgers et al. (2016) reported

that nearly all (87%) their $N=19$ Delphi study participants (“methodologists, research funders, journal editors, interested policymakers and practitioners”) (Rodgers et al. 2016, 9) agreed that it is essential for researchers to account for ethical considerations when conducting and reporting research about organizations. Yet barely half (53%) of the $N=58$ studies they analyzed reported ethical considerations. Perhaps researchers did not realize it was protocol to account for ethical concerns in the method section of their research report (see Greenwood 2016). Perhaps researchers themselves simply did not know what was involved because they had no guidelines to follow.

A half century of observation lends support to this premise. To illustrate, nearly 50 years ago, Mirvis and Seashore (1979) lamented that “up to this point, there have been no systematic efforts to formulate ethical guidelines specific to organizational research” (Mirvis & Seashore 1979, 778). Twenty-five years later, Morse (2005) wrote an editorial about ethical issues when conducting research about institutions asserting that related concerns were yet unresolved. Forward 10 more years, and Jones (2014) continued to lament the lack of guidelines for conducting research about organizations, which has led to researchers “‘wandering in the dark,’ ‘making it up as I go along’ and ‘learning the hard way’” (Jones 2014, Preface).

Jeanes (2017) asserted that *procedural ethics* were lacking when it comes to conducting research about institutions. Procedural ethics refers to the process (procedures) involved in researchers complying with their university’s ethics review process (e.g., purpose of project, data management practices, and harm mitigation) (Baker et al. 2016). In my case, these procedures were not available to me or the doctoral Candidate. Very recently, Kristensen (2023) commented that “research ethics related to organizations has been neglected. [We need procedures that] allow for the explicit inclusion of organizations in ethical considerations and practice” (Kristensen 2023, 242). Bell and Wray-Bliss (2009) urged higher education institutions and funding agencies to establish more formalized ethical governance structures pursuant to conducting research about organizations.

1.1. Established Conventions for Research Involving Humans

In 2023, these ethical concerns remain a pressing matter relative to the well-established ethical conventions for research involving humans. Per the latter, researchers must deal with confidentiality; privacy; fair and just treatment and inclusion; conflicts of interest; informed consent; human protection (e.g., physical safety, dignity, and autonomy); legalities; intellectual property; and responsible reporting and publications (Brad-dock 2018; Shamoo & Resnik 2015). These aspects of research typically raise ethical concerns (Jones 2014).

To illustrate these conventions, in the United States (US), “most research involving human participants that is funded by federal government agencies is subject to the

Common Rule” (Millum 2012, 657). The Common Rule (the short name for the *Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects*) is the baseline standard of ethics employed at most US academic institutions regardless of the funding source (Office of Human Research Protections [OHRP], 2019).

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (2015) is a likeminded entity in the United Kingdom (UK) administering its *Framework for Research Ethics* (FRE). ESRC is the main funding body for UK social science research. The Council clarified that “new situations constantly emerge in the social science arena which require creative approaches to ethics issues. This framework offers general guidance [only and] cannot replace the need for self-critical, imaginative and responsible ethical reflection about issues which may arise in the course of research” (United Kingdom Research and Innovation [UKRI] 2021, para. 3). In the European Union (EU), ethics for research involving humans is not centralized. Instead, each EU Member State ($N=27$) uses its own governance of research with humans (Shaw & Townend 2021).

Canada’s Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research (SRCR) administers and interprets the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Human Research* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council [herein the Tri-Council] 2019). The Canadian Institutional Research and Planning Association (CIRPA) (2012) has a code of ethical conduct for people who identify as institutional researchers (IR) who conduct research *for* institutions, but it is not for ethical procedures when conducting research *about* institutions.

II. Conceptualizing Research About Institutions and Organizations

As a caveat, although others may disagree with the lexical approach used herein, the terms organization and institution were used interchangeably because both refer to a group of people associated for a common, specific purpose (e.g., an educational institution, a civil society organization [CSO], a non-profit organization [NPO], a company or for-profit organization [FPO], a government agency, a union, or a professional society). They are a collective entity that, despite comprising humans, is distinguishable from individual humans (Greenwood 2016; Jones 2014; Scott 2008).

Jones (2014) defined an organization as “a relatively enduring group of people with some degree of coordination around a common principle that has a more or less identifiable boundary” (Jones 2014, 12). Institutions are often construed as formal organizations (Scott 2008). The slippery slope of organizations existing *because* they are populated by humans is acknowledged herein. But for argument’s sake, the focus of this paper is on ethical concerns when conducting research *about* the organization rather than about or with humans *within* the organization. “Organizations are a distinct type of research participant [that] differ from individual participants” (Kristensen 2023, 242).

I maintain that the literature on this ethical aspect of scholarship is nascent, weak, and unorganized, which is problematic for those interested in researching organizational or institutional policies, practices, procedures, and cultures. This paper explores the ethics of research *about* these four features rather than the ethics of research with the humans owning, operating, employed at, volunteering for, benefiting from, or impacted by the institution. Said research would also not involve working with selected or recruited human participants *within* the organization (Farquhar 2012; Mirvis & Seashore 1979). Rather, the research and attendant methods would be *about* the organization, although individuals may be interviewed as a data source or act in the informant role, wherein human ethics protocol would come into play for them (e.g., informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality).

Opinions about this ethical aspect of organizational research are consistent in eschewing the protection of organizations. To illustrate, ESRC (2005) recommended that “research designs should consider the potential harm to respondents’ organizations (...) as a result of the [research]” (ibid., 25). For clarification, this did not pertain to comments made or conclusions drawn by a researcher about the organization. Instead, it concerned how comments made by humans *in* the study could affect their organization, which is an aspect of personal risk accommodated in informed consent (i.e., ethics of research with humans).

Borgatti and Molina (2005) also commented on safeguarding respondents and participants when conducting research *in* an organization (especially in the face of managerial retaliatory action), but they made no mention of safeguarding or protecting the organization itself. Similarly, OHRP (2019) noted that research about educational institutions must not adversely impact student learning or faculty member assessment but eschewed mention of protecting the institution itself. Shamoo and Resnik (2015) gave a detailed accounting of what is involved in protecting human subjects and animals when conducting research (15 principles) but not organizations or institutions.

One important clarification is that “gaining access to an organization through the cooperation of a human does not constitute research involving humans” (Wendy Burgess, SRCR representative, personal communication, March 16, 2021). Rowley (2004) also recognized that although access to an organization or institution depends on humans’ permission, said access does not constitute research involving humans, meaning there are no ethical concerns on that front. That said, ethics cannot be ignored when conducting research about organizations (Bell & Bryman 2007). Researchers must still be transparent to everyone involved about (a) the intent of the research and (b) what and how quantitative results and qualitative findings will be used and disseminated (Greenwood 2016; Rowley 2004).

II.1. Critical Inquiries and Sensitive Findings

Of further note is that “extra sensitivity may be required” (Rowley 2004, 210) to address any ethical tension between (a) respecting organizational and institutional confidentiality and its reputation and (b) publishing data about the organization to benefit the wider community (i.e., the public interest) (to be discussed). Canada’s Tri-Council (2019) called this research a *critical inquiry*, which involves an “analysis that critiques or challenges the policies and practices of institutions” (ibid., 38). A “critical assessment may be legitimately critical and/or opposed to [the organization’s interest or welfare, but] there may be a compelling public interest in this research” (Tri-Council 2019, 37). Researchers do not require the organization’s permission even if it does not endorse the research (Tri-Council 2019).

When reporting sensitive results and findings from critical inquiries, researchers must weigh the (a) risk to the organization or institution (i.e., the object of the research and unit of analysis) with (b) any potential benefit to society and people affected by the organization’s behaviour (Tri-Council 2019). ESRC (2015) similarly maintained that although “research results may have a negative impact on (...) organisations (...) researchers should also consider (...) long-term gains to future beneficiaries” (ERSC 2015, 28). Political sensitivities may be revealed that are contrary to national or local policy, but responsibly revealing and critiquing institutional practices can serve the larger good (i.e., the public interest) and those who benefit from the institution’s products and services (Collinson 2021; ESRC 2005, 2015).

II.2. Reflexivity and Positionality

Jeanes (2017) recognized the lack of clarity in ethical codes and ethical procedures when it comes to addressing the ethical tension between protecting the organization versus the public interest. As a default strategy, she suggested that this tension is “by necessity informed by one’s own ethics” (Jeanes 2017, 184) through a process of *reflexivity*. This is “commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of a researcher’s positionality” (Berger 2015, 220). *Positionality* includes a researcher’s “beliefs, preferences and biases as well as any political, theoretical, and ideological stances along with their emotional responses and personal experiences with the problem” (McGregor 2020, 82). “Where controversy is possible it is always wise for there to be a proper reflection on the issues and possible consequences” (Collinson 2021, para. 23).

Because their positionality influences and potentially biases the research enterprise, ethically, researchers must explicitly recognize and actively acknowledge reflexivity and positionality in the research design (especially when gaining consent) and subsequent data analysis, interpretation, and report writing (e.g., discussion points, conclusions, and recommendations) (Berger 2015; Martin 2002; Sin 2005). When conducting research

about organizations and institutions, reflexivity “should be central to the [researcher’s] ethical position, particularly if it is to be relied upon instead of procedural ethics” (Jeanes 2017, 188), which she judged lacking compared to ethical conventions for research with humans.

III. Proxy Insights Gleaned from Ethical Concerns about Case Studies

The lack of solid ethical procedural guidelines when designing, conducting, and reporting research about organizations is problematic because said research “often raises ethical issues and may sometimes test the limits of formal ethics guidelines” (Langley & Royer 2006, 90). As a starting point and sort of proxy, I propose drawing lessons from the ethics of research involving case studies, which are frequently used when studying about organizations and institutions (Rowley 2004). Case studies entail the in-depth study of a phenomenon in its natural setting and culminate in an overview of a particular situation (Gall et al. 2015).

The literature sampled as proxy, and discussed forthwith, was found by (a) using specific search terms and phrases in the *Google* search bar and *Google Scholar* (i.e., combinations of ethical concerns, guidelines, and conventions in conducting research about organizations and institutions); (b) searching the *Cited by* and *Related Articles* functions for sources identified in *Google Scholar*; and (c) mining the reference list in documents secured. This process was continued until saturation was achieved.

I will begin with the two most oft-cited, renowned case study scholars – Robert Yin, and Robert Stake (Rodgers et al. 2016). Yin (2018) spoke only in general terms on this topic choosing instead to advise scholars to familiarize themselves with ethical standards promoted by their discipline. Benčin et al. (2015) cautioned that heeding this advice may be difficult because of “the differences between disciplines in relation to the same ethical issue or principle” (Benčin et al. 2015, 18). Yin (2018) also opined that “a good case study researcher (...) will strive for the highest ethical standards” but limited his comments to a researcher’s “responsibility to scholarship” (Chapter 3) rather than their responsibility to units of analysis such as organizations.

Stake (2003) advised that “researchers must follow rules for the protection of human subjects (yet should protest those rules when they serve only to protect the institution from litigation) (...) Breach of ethics is seldom a simple matter [thus requiring] their code of ethics [to be] strict” (Stake 2003, 154–155). Stake recognized that, due to ethical obligations, researchers must “minimize misrepresentation and misunderstanding” (Stake 1995, 109). But he did not elaborate on what attendant procedural ethics might look like when studying organizations. He further asserted that “the value of the best research is not likely to outweigh injury to a person exposed” (Stake 2003, 154), but he did not elaborate on organizational exposure.

To accommodate being taken unaware by emergent ethical concerns, Stake (2003)

recommended that researchers undertake ongoing and summative review of their ethical protocol as needed. This should involve their conscience, other members of the research community, and stakeholders. Indeed, some have argued that solutions to ethical concerns in research about organizations should reflect “the ad hoc consent of all parties” (Mirvis & Seashore 1979, 766; see also Collinson 2021). But with ad hoc meaning fashioned from whatever is immediately available, an ad hoc approach feels inadequate and disrespectful of the ethical responsibility scholars hold when researching about institutions and organizations. Fortunately, a few scholars have begun to engage with the ethical aspects of organizational research. Their thoughts are now recounted and will be analyzed to help generate an inaugural compendium of ethical concerns and strategies for research about organizations.

To begin, in her paper, Morse (2005) had a section titled “*Protecting the Institution*” (Morse 2005, 436). She said the anonymity of a unit of analysis (e.g., an organization) could be addressed by signing a consent agreement but cautioned that the trade off for protection was waiving the right to vet the final report, as resultant changes arising from an organization’s scrutiny could compromise validity. “Researchers must be free to write up their data without fear of censorship” (Morse 2005, 436). The research design is problematic when it “prevents the researcher from ‘whistle-blowing’” (Stake 2003, 155; see also Collinson 2021). Runeson and Höst (2009) opined that giving participants feedback about the study “is critical for ... the validity of the research” (Runeson & Höst 2009, 143) (e.g., present the analysis, which they do not necessarily have to accept).

Another protection strategy is for researchers who are not conducting a critical inquiry to clarify they are not intentionally seeking to expose the organization’s weaknesses, policy violations, legal infractions, or procedural inadequacies. However, if these are unintentionally revealed through data collection or analysis, said researchers must weigh withholding this information to protect the organization with revealing it to protect the public interest (Collinson 2021; ESRC 2015; Morse 2005; Tri-Council 2019). A breach of ethics tends to occur when “two contradictory standards apply, such as withholding full disclosure [to the public] (...) to protect a good but vulnerable agency” (Stake 2003, 155).

As an aside, factors to consider when weighing revealing the truth or withholding information could include (a) whether the entity (e.g., organization) wants to know the truth; (b) discerning which aspects of the issue to reveal and those to withhold; (c) whether one’s tact and sensitivity are sufficient to mitigate harm experienced upon learning the truth; (d) whether a third party has requested that the truth be withheld or revealed; and (e) whether circumstances truly justify one’s ethical decision – harm would certainly ensue if one made *that* decision (Braddock 2018). From another perspective, is withholding inflammatory information really a binary decision – disclose or not? Should researchers give organizations and institutions a chance to redress an infraction before (even if) publishing study results?

On another front, Runeson and Höst (2009) argued that when conducting organizational case studies, “explicit measures must be taken to prevent problems [related to ethical infractions]” (Runeson & Höst 2009, 142). To that end, they identified six “key ethical factors: informed consent, university review board approval, confidentiality, handling sensitive results, inducements, feedback” (ibid., 142). In most instances, a representative within the organization would explicitly consent (agree) to the institution *being* the unit of analysis (Runeson & Höst 2009) (although this is not necessary – Tri Council 2019), while appreciating that human permission to access the organization does not constitute research with humans (Rowley 2004).

In more detail, to ensure that organizational consent *is* informed, Runeson and Höst (2009) advised researchers to draft and have a representative(s) sign a consent agreement (i.e., a form or a contract). This agreement should contain domiciles and signatures for all concerned parties and address the study’s purpose, how it will be conducted, any known risks and benefits, and confidentiality issues when results or findings are published. The agreement should also confirm whether the results or findings are for this study only or also for future research. Moreover, academic practices pertaining to disseminating and publishing results or findings should be explained to offset nonacademics’ unfamiliarity with this aspect of research. They may erroneously assume that the findings are proprietary and express displeasure when made aware of a damning publication about their organization (e.g., journal article, or book chapter).

To wit, Runeson and Höst (2009) said researchers should address up front whether the institution or organization’s identity will be revealed or hidden, which is important because some findings and analytical insights may be sensitive to the organizations’ reputation (e.g., practice deficiencies, flawed policies, and breaches of law). They further advised that any attempts to convince or induce the organization to be the focus of the research must not compromise the researcher’s integrity or study validity. The Tri-Council (2019) additionally recommended rigorous handling of data while in transit and storage to both safeguard it and honour any confidentiality assurances.

Yin (2018) specifically commented on the ethical risks inherent in researchers’ familiarity with an organization under study, which could cause them to privilege supportive and ignore contrary evidence thereby impacting validity. To mitigate the possibility of low tolerance for contrary findings, he recommended running preliminary findings past critical colleagues (peers) who can offer alternative interpretations and explanations. Heeding their insights might reduce confirmation bias (i.e., finding what one wants to find) and contribute to ethical rigour and validity.

Yin (2018) further recommended that when studying about organizations and institutions, researchers should ethically (a) ensure accuracy (error-free portrayal of the organization or institution), (b) strive for credibility (organization or institution deems data are true), (c) avoid deception (do not deliberately mislead or create a wrong impression) and (d) refrain from falsifying information.

III.1. Compendium of Ethical Concerns for Research About Organizations and Institutions

Undeniably, ethics is a linchpin of responsible research about organizations and institutions. But coverage of what this might look like was underdeveloped in the literature reviewed for this paper (appreciating that other sources may exist despite meeting the saturation criterion). In an editorial about ethical concerns in research about institutions, Morse (2005) commented that “these special issues need to be constantly re-examined, debated, and addressed” (Morse 2005, 435). UKRI affirmed the “need for self-critical, imaginative and responsible ethical reflection” (UKRI 2021, para. 3) about ethical issues that arise during research but are not covered by general procedural guidelines.

The development of Table 1 contributes to Morse’s (2005) imperative of grappling with what constitutes ethical concerns when conducting research about organizations and institutions compared to humans, which is so very well defined (see Shamoo & Resnik 2015). It summarizes a collection of nascent ideas that became evident from scrutinizing the opinions of a cadre of cited authors who touched on these ethical concerns (namely ESRC 2015; Morse 2005; Runeson & Höst, 2009; Tri-Council 2019; Yin 2018). This compendium did not previously exist in the literature; it is a new finding reported in this paper.

Table 1

Compendium of Ethical Concerns and Strategies for Research about Organizations and Institutions

Similar Ethical Aspects of Research with Humans That May Be Handled or Prioritized Differently

Informed Consent

- Mixed thoughts in the literature on necessity of revealing deliberate intent to be critical of an organization or institution; ethically speaking, the latter do not have to approve a *critical inquiry* about them
- Ideally, per above, obtain signed and informed consent to conduct a study about an organization or institution, *but* researchers can ethically proceed without this consent (i.e., permission from the organization or institution to be the unit of analysis is not required)

Confidentiality

- Explain scope of confidentiality (revealing organization’s identity is allowable unlike with humans); clarify whether organization or institution’s identity will be revealed or anonymized and why (results can affect their reputation, integrity, and welfare)

Recruitment

Ensure that inducements for the organization or institution to be the unit of analysis do not compromise study validity or researchers' integrity

Gaining Access

- Avoid deception (do not deliberately mislead) when gaining access to the organization or institution and when writing the research report

Data Security

- Clarify with the organization or institution how information and data will be secured in transit and during and after analysis

Managing Bias

- Employ reflexivity to make researcher's positionality transparent (acknowledge self-biases)
- Vet data and analysis with critical peers to avoid confirmation bias (finding what you wanted to find)

Validity (Measure What Was Intended)

- Ensure the accuracy (correct in detail) of organizational or institutional data profiled in the research
- Refrain from falsifying information about the organization or institution (do not alter to mislead)
- Strive for credible data (judged accurate by someone at the organization or institution; their assessment may trigger protection pursuant to research with humans)
- Per above, there were mixed thoughts in the literature on member checking and requiring the organization's agreement with researchers' analysis and conclusions and its impact on validity

Ethical Aspects of Research Unique to Research about Organizations:

Balancing and Protecting Interests

- Handle sensitive, damning, or controversial results/findings by weighing protecting the public interest versus the organization or institution's interest (unit of analysis)
- Per above, respect the ethical principle of impartiality (do not benefit one thing over another for improper reasons: do not let personal bias favour one side over another)

Handling of Findings and Results

- Confirm ahead of time with the organization or institution whether findings/results are for this one study or also for further analysis
- Offset the misperception that results and/or findings are proprietary, private, and in house by explaining to the organization or institution a researchers' academic obligation to disseminate results/findings from a study

Compendium of Ethical Concerns and Strategies for Research about Organizations and Institutions

The information in Table 1 can be used to inform research design and methodological decisions and address ethical concerns in research about organizations and institutions. To reiterate, when dealing with ethical concerns, researchers assess the rightness, wrongness, goodness, or badness of a research design issue and then make decisions. All items in Table 1 have some level of ethical relevance in research about organizations and institutions and pertain to before, during, and after the research process. However, they are presently organized according to similar aspects of research with humans that may be handled or prioritized differently and ethical aspects unique to research about organizations.

IV. Discussion

Two general discussion points emerged: (a) the telling absence of several ethical concerns pursuant to conducting research about the policies, procedures, practices, and cultures of organizations and institutions; and (b) the conundrum of protecting organizational interest versus the public interest.

IV.1. Ethical Concerns Absent in Literature Reviewed

The first discussion point pivots around several ethical issues that were not addressed in the literature reviewed. The ensuing ideas emerged from both (a) my intuitive reactions when researching the topic and analyzing the literature herein and (b) informal communication with professional peers who are interested in this topic.

a) Unit of Analysis

What constitutes the unit of analysis was absent in the literature reviewed. The discussion herein was predicated on research about institutions and organizations with the terms used interchangeably – with justification (Scott 2008). But the literature reviewed did not engage with clear distinctions among different forms of collective entities

(i.e., units of analysis): companies, institutions, associations, unions, agencies, networks, organizations, or meta-organizations (an organization of organizations). For example, gaining informed consent from these various units of analysis is unlikely to be standardized, suggesting there may be a range of ethical concerns warranting different strategies to mitigate or minimize organizational harm.

Also, seeking permission from a company or government agency may not be the same as from an informal network or from a meta-organization with no central secretariate. On a related front, Warren (2009) discussed the “ethics (...) of confidentiality and commercial sensitivity” (Warren 2009, 578) when studying about an organization. She urged researchers to preserve anonymity if consent to reveal identities has not been obtained. On that matter, however, she queried “whose permission do we ask?” [in the face of] the multilayered nature of organizations” (ibid.).

b) Boundaries of Analysis

How blurred is the line between (a) research about a collective entity and (b) research concerning inter-organizational relations, intra-organizational dynamics, or interpersonal dynamics *within* the entity as this information is used to collect data *about* the unit of analysis (i.e., its practices, procedures, policies, or culture)? What is ethically involved in more clearly defining the boundaries of analysis (i.e., study delimitations under the researcher’s control) when conducting research about institutions? How necessary is it that the research design reflects a combination of ethical principles for research with humans and research about organizations? Do we need a *hybrid ethical standard* for research about collective entities comprising humans? These issues were absent in the literature reviewed.

c) Purpose of Research

The literature reviewed did not address whether the purpose of the research affects ethical concerns. Would these concerns differ if the purpose was to study an instance instead of a general phenomenon (e.g., a local branch versus an international office)? What about studying the innate workings (culture) of an organization versus how its external brand and reputation influence people? This ethical aspect of research about organizations and institutions was missing in the literature reviewed.

d) Distinguishing Humans from Institutions

A fourth issue arose from the notion that obtaining a human’s permission to gain access to a collective entity does *not* constitute research with humans (Wendy Burgess, SRCR representative, personal communication, March 16, 2021; Rowley 2004). But is the distinction really this clear cut? How can anyone *but* a human act on the ideas and strategies profiled in Table 1 especially informed consent? Does the human giving

permission for institutional access not deserve protection from harm, even though he or she is not being interviewed about or informing on the institution, which is covered by research with humans? On another front, what would ethically be involved in gaining access through a central secretariat or an entity without legal status – even with legal status? These and related issues were absent in the literature reviewed except the advice that a representative (human) from the organization should give consent, but this consent is not necessary to conduct the study (Runeson & Höst 2009; Tri-Council 2019; Warren 2009).

e) Prioritizing and Operationalizing Ethical Considerations

Nowhere was there discussion of (a) which ethical element in Table 1 is most important when conducting research about organizations and institutions nor (b) how each ethical issue should be operationalized for organizations relative to existing ethical protocol for conducting research involving humans. Should operationalization concerns when studying organizations be the same as for humans or different? After all, an organization is a collective entity that is unique from individuals (Greenwood 2016; Scott 2008). Should this distinction not merit different operationalization procedures for access, informed consent, confidentiality, conflict of interest and so on when studying about an organization? These issues were absent from the literature reviewed with an inaugural attempt herein in Table 1.

IV. 2. Protecting Organizational Interest versus Public Interest

A compelling takeaway was that research about organizations and institutions has a unique, distinguishing ethical concern for weighing the former's interest against the public interest rather than that of individual humans. This ethical quandary is significant because institutional and organizational research efforts "often deal with matters of public interest" (Stake 2003, 154), which refers to the common well-being or general welfare of the public or general populace (Nadel 1971). In this case, that means members of the public affected by an organization or institution's policies, practices, procedures, or culture.

To elaborate, "the public interest is about issues which [matter to] and affect everyone even if many of them are not aware of it or even if they don't appear to care" (Collinson 2021, para. 5). For example, it is in the public's interest (i.e., advantage, benefit, or welfare) that roads and bridges (transportation) are available and safe, hospitals and care institutions are available and safe, libraries and schools are available, sanitation concerns are addressed, national and personal debt loads are under control, vulnerable citizens are protected, and public safety and policing are in place (Nadel 1971). Revelations about these aspects of the public interest revealed through research *should* be of interest to the public.

In truth, however, what interests the public is not always the same as what is in their best interest and general welfare (Collinson 2021). Sometimes it is in the public's best interest that researchers bring an important subject to their attention, but this must be done ethically. Deciding whether to expose organizational and institutional practices "is a difficult and delicate judgement, and each case must be judged carefully" (Collinson 2021, para. 21). "Researchers must consider the ethical principles of beneficence and justice vis-à-vis nonmaleficence (i.e., avoiding harm) (...) when considering the ethical aspects of their research" (Gregg et al. 2022, 1414).

Ho's (2013) suggestion appears to speak to this ethical concern: researchers should address the public interest impartially. Ethically, impartiality embraces the principle that decisions should not "benefit one person over another for improper reasons" (Institute and Faculty of Actuaries 2019, Section 5.2). If researchers are impartial, they are not partial to anyone; that is, they do not let their bias favour one side over another. To the best of their ability, they ensure justice is served (i.e., someone is treated fairly, someone is meted the exposure they deserve, or both) (Collinson 2021). In that process, Ho felt that the welfare of the public comes before the welfare of individuals and, as the literature reviewed would suggest, the welfare of organizations. Indeed, sometimes, it may be in the public's best interest that damning, sensitive, or controversial information about an organization, revealed through research, is exposed to public scrutiny (ESRC 2015; Morse 2005; Tri-Council 2019).

Conclusion

This paper tended to raise more questions than it answered, which is acceptable because perspective sharing shapes future dialogue (Berterö 2016). The crux of the matter in the literature reviewed seemed to be (a) how important *is* it that the reputation and welfare of an organization and institution are protected and (b) what would (should, could) addressing that ethical concern look like in research design protocol and a university's procedural ethics? Foremost, weighing the protection of the organization's interest versus the public interest appeared as a dominant and unique theme in the nascent literature about the ethical concerns of research about organizations and institutions.

I remain convinced that researchers would benefit from formalized ethical procedural guidelines for noncritical and critical inquiries about institutions and organizations. To that end, a compendium was shared of proposed ethical concerns and strategies (ethical conventions) gleaned from the literature reviewed (see Table 1) and a discussion of omissions from said literature was tendered to scaffold and augment future debate and discourse around this ethical aspect of organizational research.

Advancements to the ethical dimensions of research design strategies will ultimately improve research about organizations and institutions and, by association, theory, curriculum, policy, and practice. No longer would researchers be wandering in the

dark, making it up as they go along, or learning the hard way (Jones 2014).

References

- Baker L., Phelan S., Snelgrove R., Varpio L., Maggi J., & Ng S. 2016. "Recognizing and Responding to Ethically Important Moments in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Graduate Medical Education* 8(4):607–608. <https://doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-16-00384.1>
- Bell E. & Bryman A. 2007. "The Ethics of Management Research: An Exploratory Content Analysis," *British Journal of Management* 18(1):63–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2006.00487.x>
- Bell E. & Wray-Bliss Ed. 2009. "Research Ethics: Regulations and Responsibilities," in D. Buchanan & A. Bryman (Eds.), *Sage Handbook of Organizational Research Methods* (pp. 78–92). Sage.
- Benčin R., Šumič-Riha J., Strle G., & Riha R. 2015 (June). *Ethics Assessment and Guidance in Different Types of Organisations*. Satori. Available online at: <https://satoriproject.eu/media/3.e-Universities.pdf> (accessed October 10, 2023).
- Berger R. 2015. "Now I See It, Now I Don't: Researcher's Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Research* 15(2):219–235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468>
- Berterö C. 2016. "Guidelines for Writing a Commentary," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being* 11, Article 31390. <https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v11.31390>
- Borgatti S. P. & Molina J. L. 2005. "Toward Ethical Guidelines for Network Research in Organizations," *Social Networks* 27(2):107–117. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2005.01.004>
- Braddock C. H. 2018. *Truth-telling and Withholding Information*. University of Washington Medicine. Available online at: <https://depts.washington.edu/bhdept/ethics-medicine/bioethics-topics/detail/82> (accessed October 10, 2023).
- Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council 2019. "Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans [TCPS 2 2018]." Catalogue No: RR4-2/2019E-PDF. Available online at: <https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/documents/tcps2-2018-en-interactive-final.pdf> (accessed September 15, 2023).

- Canadian Institutional Research and Planning Association 2012. "Code of Ethics for Institutional Research." Available online at: http://cirpa-acpri.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/CIRPA-CODE-OF-ETHICS_Approved-16-April-2012_EN_FINAL.pdf (accessed September 5, 2023).
- Collinson W. 2021 (July). "The Public Interest," *Ethical Journalism Network*. Available online at: <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/the-public-interest> (accessed September 10, 2023).
- Eccles R. G., Newquist S. C., & Schatz R. 2007. "Reputation and Its Risks," *Harvard Business Review* 85(2):104–114. Available online at: <https://hbr.org/2007/02/reputation-and-its-risks> (accessed September 10, 2023).
- Economic and Social Research Council 2005. "Research Ethics Framework (REF)." Available online at: https://www.york.ac.uk/media/abouttheuniversity/governanceandmanagement/governance/ethicscommittee/hssec/documents/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_.pdf (accessed October 12, 2023).
- Economic and Social Research Council. 2015. "ESRC Framework for Research Ethics: Updated January 2015." Available online at: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20220207164637/http://esrc.ukri.org/files/funding/guidance-for-applicants/esrc-framework-for-research-ethics-2015/> (accessed September 10, 2023).
- Farquhar J. D. 2012. *Case Study Research in Business* (1st ed.). Sage.
- Gall M. D., Gall J. P., & Borg W. R. 2015. *Applying Educational Research* (7th Ed.). London: Pearson.
- Greenwood M. 2016. "Approving or Improving Research Ethics in Management Journals," *Journal of Business Ethics* 137:507–520. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2564-x>
- Gregg H. R., Restubog S. L., Dasborough M., Xu C., Deen C. M., & He Y. 2022. "When Disaster Strikes! An Interdisciplinary Review of Disasters and Their Organizational Consequences," *Journal of Management* 48(6):1382–1429. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063221076808>
- Ho L. S. 2013. *Public Policy and the Public Interest* (1st Ed.). London: Routledge.
- Institute and Faculty of Actuaries 2019. *The Actuaries' Code* (Version 3). Available online at: <https://www.actuaries.org.uk/system/files/field/document/Revised%20Actuaries%27%20Code%20FINAL.pdf> (accessed September 10, 2023).
- Jay 2014 (May 28). "Difference between Legal and Ethical Issues," in O. Dawson (Ed.), *DifferenceBetween.COM*. Available online at: <https://www.differencebetween.com/difference-between-legal-and-vs-ethical-issues/> (accessed October 12, 2023).
- Jeanes E. 2017. "Are We Ethical? Approaches to Ethics in Management and Organisation Research," *Organisation* 24(2):174–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508416656930>
- Jones M. 2014. *Researching Organizations*. Sage.

- Kristensen C. J. 2023. "Research Ethics and Organizations: The Neglected Ethics of Organizational Ethnography," *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 12(2):242–253. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOE-11-2022-0031>
- Langley A. & Royer I. 2006. "Perspectives on Doing Case Study Research in Organizations," *M@n@gement* 9(3):81–94. <https://doi.org/10.3917/mana.093.0081>
- Martin J. 2002. *Organizational Culture*. Sage.
- McGregor S. L. T. 2020. "Transdisciplinarity and Transpraxis," *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science* 11:74–89. <https://doi.org/10.22545/2020/00134>
- Millum J. 2012. "Canada's New Ethical Guidelines for Research with Humans: A Critique and Comparison with the United States," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 184(6):657–661. <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.111217>
- Mirvis P. H. & Seashore S. E. 1979. "Being Ethical in Organizational Research," *American Psychologist* 34(9):766–780. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.34.9.766>
- Morse J. M. 2005. "Ethical Issues in Institutional Research [Editorial]," *Qualitative Health Research* 15(4):435–437. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305274575>
- Nadel M. V. 1971. *The Politics of Consumer Protection*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Office for Human Research Protections 2019 (March 19). "Companion Q&A's about the Revised Common Rule." Available online at: <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/sites/default/files/Revised-Common-Rule-Q-and-As-march2019.pdf> (accessed September 6, 2023).
- Resnik D. B. 2020 (December 23). "Essay: What Is Ethics in Research & Why Is It Important?" National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. Available online at: <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/resources/bioethics/whatis/index.cfm> (accessed September 10, 2023).
- Rodgers M., Thomas S., Harden M., Parker G., Street A., & Eastwood A. 2016. "Developing a Methodological Framework for Organisational Case Studies: A Rapid Review and Consensus Development Process," *Health Services and Delivery Research* 4(1):1–141. <https://doi.org/10.3310/hsdr04010>
- Rowley J. 2004. "Researching People and Organizations," *Library Management* 25(4/5):208–214. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01435120410533792>
- Runeson P. & Höst M. 2009. "Guidelines for Conducting and Reporting Case Study Research in Software Engineering," *Empirical Software Engineering* 14:131–164. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10664-008-9102-8>
- Scott, W. R. 2008. *Institutions and Organizations* (3rd Ed.). Sage.
- Shamoo A. & Resnik D. 2015. *Responsible Conduct of Research* (3rd Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Shaw D. & Townend D. 2021. "Research with Human Participants in the European Union," in D. Orentlicher & T. K. Hervey (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Health Law* (pp. 613–630). Oxford University Press.

- Sin C. H. 2005. "Seeking Informed Consent: Reflections on Research Practice," *Sociology* 39(2):277–294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505050539>
- Stake R. E. 1995. *The Art of Case Study Research* (1st Ed.). Sage.
- Stake R. E. 2003. "Case Studies," in N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry* (2nd ed.) (pp. 134–164). Sage.
- United Kingdom Research and Innovation 2021 (August 17). *Framework for Research Ethics*. Available online at: <https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/framework-for-research-ethics/our-core-principles/#contents-list> (accessed September 10, 2023).
- Warren S. 2009. "Visual Methods in Organizational Research," in D. Buchanan & A. Bryman (Eds.), *Sage Handbook of Organizational Research Methods* (pp. 566–582). Sage.
- World Health Organization 2023. *Ensuring Ethical Standards and Procedures for Research with Human Beings*. Available online at: <https://www.who.int/activities/ensuring-ethical-standards-and-procedures-for-research-with-human-beings> (accessed September 10, 2023).
- Yin R. 2018. *Case Study Research and Applications* (6th Ed.). Sage.

