Content Analysis of Secondary Data: A Study of Courage in Managerial Decision Making

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ABSTRACT. Empirical studies in business ethics often rely on self-reported data, but this reliance is open to criticism. Responses to questionnaires and interviews may be influenced by the subject's view of what the researcher might want to hear, by a reluctance to talk about sensitive ethical issues, and by imperfect recall. This paper reviews the extent to which published research in business ethics relies on interviews and questionnaires, and then explores the possibilities of using secondary data, such as company documents and newspaper reports, as a source for empirical studies in applied ethics. A specific example is then discussed, describing the source material, the method, the development of the research questions, and the way in which reliability and validity were established. In the example, content analysis was used to examine the extent to which the executive virtue of courage was observed or called for in items published in four international daily newspapers, and to explore the meaning which was attributed to "courage" in the papers.

KEY WORDS: content analysis, courage, newspapers, research methods, validity

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Empirical research in corporate ethics

The methodology employed in many empirical studies in business ethics, public sector ethics and ethical decision-making has attracted criticism regarding respondent bias, lack of attention to theory, and failure to address validity (Cowton, 1998a).

Much of the criticism regarding respondent bias relates to the heavy reliance placed on information obtained from individuals though interviews and questionnaires. Randall and Gibson (1990) reviewed 94 published empirical studies of ethical behaviour and beliefs in organizations and found that self-report data was used in almost 90% of the studies. In another review of the empirical literature Ford and Richardson (1994) list 46 published studies of ethical decision making. Over 95% of these relied on questionnaires, open-ended questions, interviews, or the subject's response to a scenario or vignette.

In addition to a long-established caution about the value of information obtained by consulting others, as many will "guess at the wishes of the person who asks them, and answer according to his, and not according to his own, opinion" (Plato c320BC 178b), "virtually every empirical inquiry of issues relevant to applied business ethics involves the asking of questions that are sensitive, embarrassing, threatening, stigmatizing, or incriminating" (Dalton and Metzger, 1992, p. 207).

As "managers are not likely to allow their 'ethics' to be observed or measured" (Treviño, 1986, p. 601) and they may find it threatening "to report honestly about their own cheating behaviour" (Robertson, 1993, p. 588), there is a

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potential for distortion when interviewing individuals about their recollection of ethical behaviour or about their intended behaviour.

Furthermore, since the early 1950s researchers in organizational sciences have expressed concern that the "tendency of individuals to deny socially undesirable traits and to admit to socially desirable ones" may impair empirical studies based on questionnaires which require respondents to report on their own behaviour or attitudes (Randall and Fernandes, 1991, p. 805).

There are also severe reservations about questionnaires as a source of reliable information about events, actions or feelings that are both remote in time and complex (Alvesson, 1996). An example of the use of data from events quite distant in time comes in Harvey Hornstein's study of managerial courage where a questionnaire was used to collect information about events which had occurred five to ten years earlier (1986). A further bias is introduced if some individuals decline to be interviewed and the response patterns of respondents differ from that of non-respondents. This non-response bias would further increase the likelihood of an overall bias in the results (Cowton, 1998a).

Given these difficulties with primary data, Christopher Cowton concludes that "secondary data may have attributes which render them highly attractive when compared to interview and questionnaire results", drawing particular attention to the unobtrusive access available in dealing with sensitive situations (1998b, p. 432). This supports the earlier view of Dalton and Metzger that "nonobservational, nonreactive measures" including the examination of archival sources are particularly appropriate for the collection of data in such circumstances (1992, p. 208).

Many ethics studies set out to measure abstract variables such as ethical behaviour. As in any research, there is a need to ensure that a theoretical basis can be identified which underlies the questions being asked and any constructs which are being tested. In some cases the empirical study is directed at the collection of data which is directly related to a theoretical construct, as in the Hegarty and Sims (1978) experiment where the size of a kickback was varied in order to determine the impact of incentive on behaviour, but it appears that many studies set out to measure abstract variables without providing a theoretical foundation on which to base the definition or the constructs (Robertson, 1993; Randall and Gibson, 1990).

An assessment of the effectiveness of the measuring instrument in actually measuring the construct is also required, but the Randall and Gibson review found "surprisingly little concern for either validity or reliability of the research instruments" (1990, p. 462), while other authors note that assessment of construct validity has been frequently missing from empirical research studies in business and corporate ethics (Weber, 1992; Cowton, 1998a; Ford and Richardson, 1994), or indeed in empirical qualitative studies generally (Silverman, 1993). Diana Robertson (1993), in her suggestions for the future direction of business ethics research, not only mentions the need to establish validity but also draws attention to the weak link that exists between empirical research and the generation of theory.

It is the contention of this paper that the disciplined application of content analysis to material from secondary sources may go some way toward addressing these concerns with respondent bias, lack of attention to theory and failure to address validity.

Secondary sources

Secondary sources are sources of data that has been collected by others, not specifically for the research question at hand (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996). There are many such sources, including governments and regulatory agencies, the public reports of companies, items appearing in the press and other media, published academic research, and the internal documents produced by organizations.

A few examples will indicate the potential. Davidson et al. (1994) studied the extent of community support for illegal activity by tracking the movement in the stock prices of companies whose illegal behaviour had been reported in the *Wall Street Journal*. When managers could not