

It Takes a Village: Ethical Publishing of Family Business Research

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Abstract

This editorial explores key issues regarding ethics in family business research – particularly that surrounding the evaluation and publication process – and advocates creating a stronger and more knowledgeable community of scholars to overcome the many challenges facing responsible research. Rather than only discussing the various types of ethical problems in research such as plagiarism, unprincipled data manipulation, and falsification of data, we expand the conversation to include the role the scholarly community – including researchers, reviewers, editors, and institutional leaders – plays in dealing with ongoing ethical concerns in scholarly publishing. We offer a few pragmatic suggestions for improving some processes, but primarily make a broad call for building a stronger (global) community of family business researchers that supports and promotes ethical conduct in publishing research through increased dialogue and interaction.

Keywords

ethics, family business, integrity, publishing ethics, responsibility

Ethics Is a Growing Concern in Scholarly Publishing

The topic of research ethics is not new. In fact, a quick search using ABI/Informs reveals more than 3,300 scholarly journal articles about research ethics and responsibility, with many of these focusing on medical research. In the social sciences, there are also numerous articles and editorials discussing research ethics, many more recent ones noting the rising number of incidents and the difficulty associated with identifying and dealing with unethical behaviors in publishing research (e.g., Honig & Bedi, 2012; Kacmar, 2009; Schminke, 2009; Schminke & Ambrose, 2011). Scholarly associations seek to formally help the communities they serve with respect to such ethical issues. The Academy of Management, for example, has a Code of Ethics that applies to all members and has a committee dedicated to educating all members about the code and the expected ethical behaviors it champions. Without fully reiterating the assorted works on the various research ethics topics, the purpose of this editorial is to bring attention to the issues that may resonate with and apply more to the family business research community, with particular emphasis on the processes of research evaluation and publication.

Previous articles and editorials on research ethics tend to discuss the role of the individual researcher, outlining acceptable and unacceptable behavior such as plagiarism, unprincipled data manipulation, and falsification of data. While much of the responsibility to be ethical when engaging in the entire research process does reside with the individual scholar, we seek herein to briefly discuss the responsibilities of the broader research community, including not only researchers but also editors, reviewers, and institutional leaders (e.g., program chairs, academy division leaders, publishers, university administrators). The reason for this “it takes a village” approach is that the comprehensive orientations and activities associated with it seem to be the most effective path to follow to ensure that ethical research is normalized and established as a benchmark for scholarly behavior.

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On the surface, ethical misconduct by those engaging in social science research may be less serious in terms of outcomes and implications than medical research, largely because it does not generally have direct life or death implications. However, we believe that the ramifications of unethical conduct in family business research can be detrimental to individuals, families, communities, and even societies in terms of financial, social, and emotional well-being. For example, unethical behavior can unfairly elevate individual careers, as well as the reputations of affiliated organizations (e.g., business school rankings). Furthermore, given the prevalence of family businesses worldwide, as well as their impact on all economies, the financial, psychological, and sociological implications of unethical family business research can be far-reaching. Overall, as a fast-growing and increasingly global field of study (Sharma, *in press*), it is essential that family business research is conducted with the highest standards so that legitimacy and credibility serve as the foundation on which the discipline is built.

Building a Community of Responsible Family Business Scholars

Each of us plays an important role in producing high-quality and ethically sound research. Indeed, we often play multiple roles simultaneously: researcher, editor, reviewer, and institutional leader. As a research community then, it is in our best interest to ensure that we each do our part, given our role(s) in the research process. Below we offer general comments along with practical suggestions pertaining to each of these roles, which are summarized in Table 1. Our overarching goal in offering these observations is to stimulate conversations and actions through which unethical scholarly behavior will be significantly reduced and hopefully eliminated. We believe this positive outcome can be reached by first establishing a basic understanding of the most common ethics-related issues as well as some newly developing ones. Subsequently, these understandings can be the foundation for promoting a dialogue regarding these issues and the actions we can take to deal with them. It is only through such a collaborative effort that a strong and vibrant future for the family business discipline can be assured.

Key Issues for Researchers

As previously noted, researchers play a central role in the broader scholarly community in that all unethical behaviors originate from an individual's decision to act or not to act in a certain way. However, poor decisions may not be malicious in intent; in fact, such decisions are sometimes the product of ignorance and/or indolence. While one might argue that ignorance and indolence are not valid excuses—and we agree—there still seems to be a need to inform and educate the scholarly community about the various forms of unethical research behavior such that no such excuses can be given nor accepted.

The need to inform and educate seems especially pressing as family business research continues to gain scholarly interest on a global scale; scholars may vary greatly in terms of culturally and institutionally prescribed expectations regarding what is or is not appropriate behavior in terms of publishing practices. Overall, awareness of potential pitfalls presumably leads to avoidance of ethical problems. Hence, we will briefly discuss a few of the more prominent ethical issues relevant to publishing family business research, although we recognize that the responsibility for conducting and disseminating research in an ethical way ultimately rests with the researcher or research team. However, we do not account for the myriad of ethical issues that exist with respect to the study of human subjects, which is presumably under the purview of a university's institutional review board and/or various governmental institutions.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is appropriating someone else's work, words, or ideas and fraudulently presenting them as your own. While most researchers recognize plagiarism as an unethical practice, it remains a persistent and prevalent issue. For example, Bedeian, Taylor, and Miller (2010) report that 70% of surveyed faculty are aware of colleagues who have engaged in some form of plagiarism. Furthermore, there is evidence that plagiarism is increasing in frequency and cannot simply be attributed to individual lapses in judgment (Honig & Bedi, 2012; Martin, 2013). Overall, plagiarism is widespread and still difficult to eradicate from the publishing process in spite of

Table 1. Practical Suggestions.**Researchers**

- Write and rewrite to ensure unique ideas and ways of presenting information.
- Utilize multiple coauthors to add diversity to ideas and style of presentation.
- Avoid electronic copying and pasting directly into manuscript.
- Develop referencing, paraphrasing, and summarizing skills.
- Utilize antiplagiarism software on our own work.
- Involve multiple authors in methods/analytics to confirm outcomes.
- Mentor and train doctoral students in appropriate publishing conduct.
- Provide adequate and complete data information to instill confidence.
- Read, understand, and adhere to agreed-upon codes of conduct.
- Seek counsel when dealing with questionable issues.

Reviewers and editors

- Manage time and other obligations to ensure high-quality reviews and editorial recommendations and decisions.
- Limit the number of manuscripts received by reviewers and action editors.
- Acquire expertise when needed to ensure ability to properly evaluate manuscripts.
- Admit when studies are beyond one's ability to adequately assess.
- Read, understand, and adhere to "Journal Editor Code of Conduct."
- Work to develop specific, fair, and appropriate consequences for unethical behaviors.
- Support efforts by institutional leaders and other gatekeepers to enforce sanctions.
- Seek counsel when dealing with questionable issues.

Institutional leaders

- Develop codes of conduct and other policies and update them consistently.
- Regularly and obviously (i.e., without legalese) broadcast policies and sanctions (e.g., retractions).
- Work to develop specific and fair consequences for unethical behaviors.
- Establish mechanisms to effectively deal with cases (i.e., appeals processes) that removes the burden (and blame) from individuals.
- Be less tolerant with the excuse of ignorance.
- Provide training and support (e.g., software) to reviewers and editors concerned with how to identify misconduct.
- Support efforts by other institutional leaders and gatekeepers to enforce sanctions.
- Seek counsel when dealing with questionable issues.

increased use of computerized programs that detect plagiarized passages in a manuscript.

At the most basic level, plagiarism is both stealing and lying, which are inherently wrong. However, many people fail to see the quandary with plagiarism; it seems to be commonly viewed as innocuous—a victimless offense. From an academic perspective, however, plagiarism generally defeats the purpose of scholarship—to create new knowledge and understanding—and is potentially harmful to the original researcher in terms of recognition and citations, which are becoming important forms of currency in most academic fields.

The related issues of self-plagiarism and plagiarism through language translation may be a greater source of

confusion for many scholars. Self-plagiarism is the borrowing of a scholar's *own* words or ideas without giving proper credit. For example, some and perhaps many scholars do not think that offering the same description of a theory or construct used in two related studies is inappropriate or qualifies as plagiarism. However, the problem with self-plagiarism is more often one of copyright ownership, because most authors sign over the rights to their original work on publication. Hence, the words or ideas presented in a paper are no longer the original author's property following copyright transfer, but that of the publisher. Similarly, the ideas and words should not be simply subject to translation and then presented as new work, despite the difference in readership

and market. In other words, it would be unethical to take yours or another's work published in one language, translate it, and then present it in another language as your own *new* work. It is important to remember that plagiarism is not just about the specific words used, but rather the presentation of ideas without giving proper credit.

As a means of dealing practically with issues of plagiarism, we offer the following suggestions for researchers. First, researchers should ensure that citations are properly given; presenting another's ideas without proper referencing is plagiarism, even if the wording differs from that of the original. Second, authors should take the time to rewrite their papers numerous times, ensuring that significant changes are made with each iteration. While electronic copying and pasting is useful as a time-saving technology, it may be facilitating plagiarism (often done with the intent of changing the phrasing later). Furthermore, utilizing multiple coauthors in the rewriting process can help develop new ideas or change the way ideas are presented and phrased. In this way, scholars might avoid copies of their own or others' work, even when the topic of discussion is very similar (e.g., a methods section that is similar to a previous study).

The skill of referencing, summarizing, and paraphrasing is difficult to develop, particularly for scholars for which the journal's language is not their native one. At *FBR*, we are particularly proud of the diversity of scholars involved as authors, editors, reviewers, and readers. In fact, *FBR* has scholars from 24 countries represented on its masthead and received paper submissions with first authors from 34 countries during calendar year 2014 (Sharma, in press). However, while such diversity of backgrounds is beneficial in many respects, it also brings with it challenges associated with differences in culture, norms, and, particularly relevant here, language. As another key suggestion for scholars, we recommend making dedicated efforts to develop the skills of referencing, summarizing, and paraphrasing, as well as undertaking a meticulous paper review process that ensures exact quotes are minimized and/or given proper credit. In other words, authors who are not native speakers may be limited in their ability to rephrase key points that both communicate the same information to the reader and do so in a substantially different way.

There are also several software packages available (e.g., Turnitin or iThenticate) that do an excellent job of identifying areas of a paper that may be plagiarized, in

terms of exact wording. Recently, many journals have made it the norm to either check manuscripts with a Google search or with plagiarism detection software such that problems in this regard can be detected prior to the full review process. For example, since March 2014, SAGE (the publisher of *FBR*) checks every manuscript submitted to *FBR* with a thorough Google search, which is then followed by an iThenticate check if warranted; problematic manuscripts are returned to authors without going through a review process. We would suggest that it would be a good practice for scholars to submit their *own* papers to one of these plagiarism programs prior to submission to a conference or journal. In this way, any questionable areas can be quickly and easily identified and corrected without unduly burdening the review process.

Improper Data Manipulation and Reporting of Information

In addition to plagiarism, there seems to be growing concern in the scholarly community regarding improper manipulation and reporting of data. Without giving credence to the possible reasons a researcher might act with malice in this regard (e.g., pressure to publish), there are some specific actions one might take to ensure that such activities do not take place, intentionally or unintentionally. For instance, at *FBR* and generally in the social sciences, we see a growing number of papers submitted where scholarly teams are composed of three, four, or more authors. In fact, for empirical articles only, the average number of authors has increased from 1.56 in the first 5 years of *FBR* (1988-1992) to 2.84 in the most recent 5 years (2010-2014). In many cases, the empirics are handled by only one of the team members and there are little or no checks and balances regarding how the methods and statistics were performed. We therefore suggest that members of a research team take the extra time necessary to ensure that data and methods are being properly examined and reported. Indeed, reproducing results should become common practice, where two or more members of the research team individually examine the raw data and the analyses to ensure their credibility. Similarly, those working as individuals and without coauthors should solicit help and feedback from trusted colleagues if possible.

While calling for raw data to be provided openly for all to view and manipulate may be premature (and possibly unethical itself due to data security concerns), there does

need to be transparency in how the data are gathered and analyzed in any given study. Scholars should provide adequate and accurate information regarding data and analyses such that the reader (i.e., other researchers, reviewers, editors, and practitioners) can be confident in the findings and implications. Furthermore, research should disclose and clearly explain differences if data are used in multiple studies. Indeed, while *FBR* has yet to deal with this problem, some journals have identified the presentation of relabeled variables, which appear to be new or unique but are actually the same as previously published ones, as a key problem. This concern is also relevant to the falsification and omission of information issue discussed in the following section.

Falsifying or Omitting Information

Falsifying or omitting information can come in various forms. The most obvious situation of information falsification pertains directly to the data being examined. For instance, a researcher might choose to change a key variable, without sound methodological reasons, such that the results are improved. In the case of omission, however, there are many ways to avoid providing information to the reader that might raise ethical questions regarding a particular study. As a simple example, consider the use of older data for testing modern research questions. While older data might be relevant and completely reasonable, even necessary, for some research questions, it may be problematic if considering more contemporary phenomena. If a researcher did not purposefully include the year the data were gathered, this might be considered unethical to the extent that age of the data was relevant to the study.

Other, more tangential, issues may also involve falsifying or omitting information. For instance, simultaneous submission of manuscripts to different journals is typically forbidden (as with *FBR*), because it increases the workload of editors and reviewers. A less known practice is to resubmit rejected papers to the same journal. Often such submissions are solicited by editors with the expectation that the new paper will be substantially different from the previous. However, it is somewhat ambiguous as to what constitutes a “new” submission in such cases (Ireland, 2009) and, as with *FBR*, typically requires extensive editorial review to ensure significant differences exist between papers. Such violations (i.e., simultaneous submissions or resubmissions of the same

paper) may have little impact in isolation (aside from reputation damages if a violation is discovered), but can have far-reaching negative consequences if allowed to continue in volume. Finally, and related to the issue of self-plagiarism, a copyright may be infringed on if the author posts or links a version of the paper to a third party site (e.g., ResearchGate or an individual website) without permission from the publisher. These concerns are being more systematically detected and addressed by publishers such as SAGE, but it is best to proactively avoid problems by carefully examining specific publication policies for each copyright holder.

In these and various other situations, we encourage researchers to familiarize themselves with potential ethical problems that may occur when conducting and publishing work. It is not acceptable to act unethically, even if that activity is prevalent or even the norm. Indeed, scholars should actively seek the counsel of other scholars regarding the use of practices that may be common, and also ethically questionable. For instance, while honorary or gift authorship is clearly unethical, there are various opinions associated with what constitutes a “significant contribution” worthy of authorship. In other words, what is the level of design and conception, data collection and processing, data analysis, and writing—individually or in combination—that constitutes a substantial contribution to a research paper? By extensively discussing such ambiguous situations in a transparent way, not only can researchers avoid problems, they may also enhance their reputation.

Key Issues for Editors and Reviewers

In our scholarly domain, reviewers and editors are extremely critical as they essentially control the direction and speed of new knowledge creation in the field. However, the work of a reviewer and editor is often arduous and requires extensive commitments of time. As such, there is a need to balance the competing demands of quality and speed. Unfortunately, the demands on reviewers and editors is exacerbated by the growth in unethical behaviors in research, where the editors and reviewers are commonly the only means of detecting problems including plagiarism, improper data use, and false or omitted information. Hence, the already challenging task of evaluating and guiding research becomes even more difficult when one must be attuned to the possibility of unethical behaviors. Some publishers

(e.g., SAGE) have worked to ease this burden, however, by devoting significant resources for the purpose of detecting and handling plagiarism.

The duties of a reviewer and editor are not without their own ethical challenges. For instance, there is a need for reviewers to maintain as much objectivity and confidentiality in their evaluation of research as possible. Indeed, since draft manuscripts may contain groundbreaking ideas, reviewers should protect the author's intellectual property and disclose any conflicts of interest that may be present. Likewise, editors should be as objective as possible regarding the evaluation of research, which may be more difficult since their decisions are commonly not blinded like that of the reviewer. Indeed, editors must hold themselves accountable for evaluating the quality of the research rather than the quality or notoriety of the researcher. In fact, many editors of journals that publish family business research (including *FBR*) have signed a Journal Editors Code of Conduct (<http://editorethics.uncc.edu>). The Code essentially describes best practices for publishing ethics from an editor's perspective such as promoting transparency, communicating ethical standards, and refraining from coercive citation practices. In some cases, editors are now precluded from publishing in their own journal for the duration of their term to avoid ethical problems, real or perceived (e.g., Harley, Faems, & Corbett, 2014).

Understanding the difficulty of reviewing and editing, we have some key suggestions that can improve our ability to minimize the occurrence and influence of unethical research behaviors. First, reviewers and editors should be careful to not overextend their obligations. We all have limited amounts of time, meaning that we should be careful to allocate and properly manage that time. If, due to time constraints, we fail to be diligent in our reviewing and editing efforts, we are acting unethically ourselves. At *FBR*, efforts are made to minimize work pressures by limiting the number of new manuscripts handled by reviewer board members (3 per year) and action editors (25 per year). Furthermore, new team members are added as the workload increases year to year. However, such efforts also highlight the need for more editors and reviewers to help take on the burden that continues to increase due to global growth in scholarship, particularly in family business research. Submissions to *FBR*, for instance, continue to rise, showing a 9% increase in just the last 2 years (Sharma, in press).

Our second suggestion for editors and reviewers is closely related to the first; we suggest that scholars agreeing to edit or review a paper ensure that they have the necessary expertise to properly evaluate the paper. In particular, as statistical procedures become increasingly sophisticated, there is a need for more adequately trained reviewers—those that can fully evaluate new or more complex methods and statistics. Unfortunately, it is no longer reasonable to assume that every researcher is executing the statistical procedures associated with a study at the highest levels of quality (i.e., that the authors have made the effort to develop sufficient competencies in a technique). Regrettably, a large number of studies are submitted to *FBR* that fail to demonstrate a reasonable level of understanding regarding the methods and statistical techniques they employ. While time constraints may limit our knowledge in certain areas, we (in all roles) should ensure that we maintain the highest level of expertise possible, given the ever-increasing complexity of the field. In the event that we are needed to continue with evaluating a manuscript without satisfactory knowledge, we should disclose such limitations as appropriate.

Perhaps more important, we should also be willing to acquire expertise when needed or admit where our expertise may fall short and openly inform others of any limitations that may exist (Bedeian, 2004; Rupp, 2011). However, technological developments may help in this regard. For instance, *FBR*'s newly updated keyword system electronically matches reviewer-supplied areas of expertise with key works provided by authors of submitted manuscripts. In this way, we can ensure that, at least generally, the reviewer is properly matched with the theory, methods, and topics of the manuscript. Yet it is necessary to point out that this matching is only as accurate as the keywords that are supplied by the reviewers and authors. Hence, it would behoove reviewers to specify only those theories, methods, and topics they feel particularly knowledgeable about and to update these areas of expertise regularly.

Finally, there is a need for tangible and, potentially, severe consequences to unethical behaviors in research. It seems that in most cases there are not *any* consequences. Rather, people are prone to ignore the problem. Even a tarnished reputation is not much of a deterrent if wrongdoings are not generally conveyed to the broader community. In other words, unethical behaviors may sully a reputation, but the tangible consequences of a

bad reputation (e.g., denial of future publishing opportunities, formal reprimands from the scholar's home institution) only occur if the behavior is visible. In many cases, unethical behaviors take place prior to final publication and are generally not communicated beyond a small group, such as an ethics committee. So, while blinding the review process may help cases where accusations are made but are unfounded, it also hurts when there is no record, formal or informal, of substantiated offending behaviors. In this respect, we believe that scholars throughout the global community should find a way to collaborate for the purpose of developing sanctions that could be consistently used to discourage unethical research behavior, both during and after the publication process.

Key Issues for Institutional Leaders

While the individual is ultimately responsible for research misconduct, the institutions (i.e., governments, societal groups, and organizations) within which we work and interact play a large role in influencing behavior. In particular, institutions—or, rather, the leaders of institutions—have the ability to deter unethical behaviors through developing normative controls that establish high research standards and meaningful consequences for misconduct. While standards are commonly established and communicated (e.g., SAGE is a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics and adheres to their recommendations and flowcharts), it is the penalties associated with substantiated misconduct that seem to be poorly developed and implemented. In other words, we seem to largely understand the nature of unethical research behaviors, even many of the antecedents, but we do not seem to have a firm grasp on how to handle situations once they are substantiated. Retractions of problematic articles seem to be on the rise, as our ability to detect and validate misconduct improves, and represents movement in the appropriate direction. The broadcasting of retractions and other sanctions also seems to be expanding (c.f., retractionwatch.com) and should help deter future unethical behaviors.

Recognizing the discomfort that often accompanies ethical discussions, particularly those involving accusations, there appears to be a need for established mechanisms and consequences that can reduce the burden placed on individual institutional leaders. The implementation of more objective means of substantiating

unethical research behavior may be helpful. For instance, software is available or could be developed to help detect problems (e.g., plagiarism recognition software, tracking systems for simultaneous paper submissions). Furthermore, providing specific training to reviewers and editors on how to identify potential misconduct might prove useful. Also, given that research ethics has now been discussed extensively in the social sciences, there is a need to be less tolerant with the excuse of ignorance. While seemingly harsh, it is necessary that we execute more strict penalties for misconduct. However, specifying such penalties is challenging given their potentially significant effects on an individual's career and the possibility of legal entanglements. Perhaps an appropriate path for considering the desired nature of stricter penalties is for professional scholarly associations to devote time and energy to consider the critical issue of how to effectively and professionally deal with misconduct. Overall, the scholarly community needs to consider new alternatives as to how research misconduct might be verified as well as how offending researchers might be handled to ensure fairness for all persons involved.

Conclusion

With the growth and prevalence of unethical behavior in publishing, there is increasing interest in understanding and correcting the problem. As reasons for such behavior, scholars generally point to publishing pressures with greater global completion, the increasing complexity of research, and the availability and utility of impact factor and citation counts that can be used as tangible comparison tools (e.g., Bedeian et al., 2010; Honig, Lampel, Siegel, & Dmevich, 2014). While this editorial cannot substantiate these causes, we do wish to draw attention to the issues and, in doing so, create a dialogue within the growing family business scholarly community. Creating awareness throughout the (global) village—comprised of family business researchers, reviewers, editors, and institutional leaders—is the first step toward curbing unethical behaviors and their negative effects.

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