The Use of Secondary Data in Business Ethics Research

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ABSTRACT. The relatively recent increase in empirical research conducted in business ethics has been accompanied by a growing literature which addresses its present shortcomings and continuing challenges. Particular attention has been focused on the difficulties of obtaining valid and reliable primary data. However, little or no attention has been paid to the use of secondary data. The aim of this paper is to stimulate the interest of business ethics researchers in using secondary data, either as a substitute or complement for primary data, bearing in mind both the benefits and shortcomings of doing so. It is suggested that secondary data not only offer advantages in terms of cost and effort, as conventionally described in research methods books, but also that in certain cases their use may overcome some of the difficulties that particularly afflict business ethics researchers in the gathering of primary data. In order to help business ethicists respond to this call for greater consideration of the potential offered by secondary data, the wide variety of forms that such data may take is indicated and a number of themes regarding their use discussed.

1. Introduction

As scholarly activity in business ethics has grown in recent years, the "sustained and cumulative" normative contribution (Robertson, 1993) of the philosophers and theologians has been augmented by the introduction of "various types of social sciences" (Fleming, 1990, p. 2). Bringing with them an orientation towards empirical research, they "open vistas not accessible by other modes of inquiry" (Frederick, 1992b, p. 245). As a consequence, empirical research has been gaining a stronger foothold, at least in the *Journal of Business Ethics* (Robertson, 1993) and is now common (Brady and Hatch, 1992). This growth has, in turn, prompted a number of reviews which have taken stock of, advised on, and worried about the conduct of empirical research and its contribution to the development of business ethics.

The majority of empirical studies to date have been in the form of questionnaire surveys (Randall and Gibson, 1990), perhaps because they are "typically the quickest and easiest of the tools to use" if publication is the goal (Bain, 1995, p. 14). Whether they are the most appropriate way of making progress in business ethics is a moot point; interviews, for example, may provide greater depth, although access can be "formidable" (Liedtka, 1992, p. 167). But even in their own terms questionnaire studies have been criticised on a number of grounds – some of which apply to interviews too – thus casting doubt on the contribution that an empirical perspective has yet made to the development of the field.

Criticisms of existing questionnaire surveys include poor questionnaire design, the use of "convenience" rather than random samples, low response rates and a failure to address the issue of non-response bias (Randall and Gibson, 1990), and the use of poor scenarios (Weber, 1992). All these are standard issues in survey design, but business ethics entails particular difficulties. "Virtually every empirical inquiry of issues relevant to applied business ethics involves the asking of questions that are sensitive, embar-

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rassing, threatening, stigmatizing, or incriminating", state Dalton and Metzger (1992, p. 207). Suggestions have been made for coping with these difficulties, for example randomized response techniques (Dalton and Metzger, 1992) and the detection of social desirability response bias (Fernandes and Randall, 1992; Randall and Fernandes, 1991), but little use seems to have been made so far of the available tools. There is the further worry that even candidly stated attitudes might bear little resemblance to actual behaviour (Gatewood and Carroll, 1991). Frederick (1992a, p. 93) sums up the situation well when he asks: "How secure then is our empirically-derived knowledge of the role that values and ethics play as business practitioners make decisions?"

It would seem, therefore, that empirical research in business ethics still has to undergo some further development and may encounter particularly difficult problems in doing so, owing to the sensitive nature of the questions involved. Perhaps the collection and analysis of primary data is too problematic or, if it is to be done more assiduously, too ardous and risky an undertaking for many scholars. One possible way forward is not to become embroiled in the difficulties relating to the collection of good primary data, but rather to use secondary data; that is, data that already exist. The aim of this paper is to consider the possibilities afforded by secondary data. It does so by first indicating something of the variety of forms that secondary data may take. The subsequent main section then discusses a number of issues relating to the use of secondary data, including some of the advantages and disadvantages of doing so.

2. Types of secondary data

Secondary data can be defined as data collected by others, not specifically for the research question at hand (Stewart, 1984; Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992). Whatever the precise wording used, the essential point is that the researcher does not gather the data. Secondary data can take a wide variety of forms, as guides to bodies of collected data make clear (Miller, 1991). Some writers on research methods simply list possible sources of data, while others attempt to classify them in some way. The following sub-sections divide secondary data according to certain broad categories of source, beginning with governmental and similar bodies.

Governmental and regulatory bodies

Governments are important publishers of data, one of the best known forms being censuses (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992). National income and expenditure accounts and other systematic social statistics are also important. Governments have traditionally derived their data from administrative records, but more recently they have also used sample surveys, a practice in which the U.S.A. has led the world (Hakim, 1982). There are also many quasi-governmental and other official bodies which produce large amounts of data. Many of these data series stretch back a considerable distance into the past.

An official source of material of considerable potential interest to business ethicists is the legal system. Published legal judgments are a rich source of insight into many issues, not just in terms of what the actual decision was, but also the circumstances and reasoning that led to the particular decision. An example from the business ethics literature is the work of Simms (1994), who analysed two cases in her work on privacy in employee health screening. There are also quasi-legal regulatory bodies in many societies. An example of a governmental one is the U.S.A.'s Environmental Protection Agency. Dooley and Lerner (1994) made profitable use of its toxic release inventory relating to 8,000 companies.

There are also non-governmental bodies involved in regulating business which produce judgments as a part of their activity. For example, the present author is engaged in a study which analyses the decisions of the U.K.'s Advertising Standards Authority, as did Lawson (1985). Whatever the source of such adjudications, both the nature of the complaint and the way it is resolved provide data of interest to the researcher.

The major dilemmas for the business ethicist

when using published judgments would seem to revolve around the relationship between: (1) the adjudicated behaviour and behaviour more generally (how typical is the behaviour that has "surfaced"?); and (2) official and "real" reasons for a particular decision. However, even "surface" analysis of statements can be of value in at least two ways. First, it can reveal inconsistencies which can provide a stimulus for further research and reflection. For example, Martens and Stevens (1994) examined the basis for conclusions given in Financial Accounting Standards published by the Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB) in the U.S.A. and concluded that the FASB was not living up to its stated commitments. At the very least, this should encourage accounting educators to think very carefully about the extent to which they rely upon FASB statements in explaining the rationale, some of which has ethical overtones, of standards to their students. Second, there are available to the researcher a number of techniques, broadly within the ambit of content analysis, which allow the researcher to analyse text as a collection of symbols which transcends conventional notions of content as an object of concern (Krippendorff, 1980). Thus the procedures of content analysis, which in general terms classify the many words of a text into much fewer categories, enable valid inferences of different types to be drawn – about the sender(s) of the message, the message itself, or the audience of the message (Weber, 1985). With the availability of computer tools and the amount of text available in, for example, annual reports and newspaper articles, the scope for the application of content analysis in business ethics seems vast – and deserving of a paper in its own right.

Companies

For business ethicists, though, one of the most important sources of secondary data will be companies themselves. Much material is publicly available, particularly in the annual report and accounts. Some of this is "text", such as the Chairman's statement and other information on operating activities, which again can be analysed at more than one level (Gowler and Legge, 1986), perhaps using the tools of content analysis as discussed above. Quantitative, primarily financial, data are also produced by companies of course.

Financial data derived from company accounts are now easily available in the form of public databases such as Datastream. Easterby-Smith et al. (1991, p. 119) express some misgivings about the level of detail available though. The main limitation of this kind of data is that it is constructed at a "macro" level, regarding each company as a single entity. Although correct in its basic thrust, this is perhaps unnecessarily negative in tone, since a number of items of quite detailed information, admittedly for the whole company, are available, as are some data on the company divided into geographical or business segments. And other sources of data can be used in tandem. An example of research which used both a financial database and newspaper information is the work of Davidson et al. (1994), who investigated the reaction of the stock market to announced corporate illegalities using the *Wall Street Journal* and computer tapes from the University of Chicago's Center for Research in Security Prices.

The Press

Indeed, the press can be a useful source of data on its own. Newspaper articles can, as well as providing timely and pertinent "vignettes" for teaching purposes (Bain, 1994), form a major research resource. Their usefulness will depend on, *inter alia*, their extent and the perspective from which they are viewed. For example, are they to be used as sources of "facts" about something to which the researcher has no direct access, or are they treated as researchable phenomena in their own right? Again, it is a question of the approach to be taken to "text", as indicated above.

The "media" also include other useful material. For example, they sometimes commission opinion polls which, as well as giving the researcher a "free-ride", distance the researcher from the construction of the evaluations. Thus

Beliveau et al. (1994) and Thomas and Simerly (1994), used surveys reported in *Fortune* magazine, and Vance (1975) used social responsibility rankings of companies derived from polls of businessmen and students to investigate whether such companies are good investment risks.

Other academic researchers

Such "research" by the media has to be treated with some care, and perhaps academic researchers are more comfortable in using data which has been collected by other scholars and, in most cases, subject to some form of peer review. There are a number of approaches possible to such secondary analysis. One method is simply to re-analyse the data as published; see, for example, the work of Schultz et al. (1994) on business intelligence. Sometimes re-analysis can involve more than one set of research results. Robertson (1993), under the heading of "broaden the methodological base", recommends meta-analysis – the quantitative analysis of a group of studies that investigate the same research questions through somewhat similar methods. One of the benefits of this is that it generates a larger effective sample than an individual study in isolation. Once results have been tabulated and investigated, possible influences on differences in results can often be posited, thus providing fruitful suggestions for further research (Hunter et al., 1982). Many of the techniques were developed in psychology, where the studies reviewed are mainly controlled experiments (Hakim, 1987), but meta-analysis can also be performed on case studies. Yin (1989) suggests that a set of case studies can be "interrogated" by means of a coding instrument and, if the number of cases is large enough, categorical data can be subjected to sophisticated statistical analysis.

Given the concerns over the quality of existing empirical research in business ethics, briefly cited in the Introduction to this paper, it might be thought that meta-analysis is barely feasible and certainly unwise. However, Hunter et al. (1982) caution against hasty methodological judgments when conducting meta-analysis. They suggest that the restriction of the scope of meta-analysis should be topical rather than methodological – though presumably, as Robertson (1993) says, the methods used should be "somewhat similar". Part of their argument for this is that assessments of methodological deficiency are usually based on a theory that is itself not empirically tested or on unspecified personal taste. So they suggest that a comprehensive set of studies should be constructed, including those judged to be methodologically deficient. If meta-analysis shows no significant variation between studies, whether "defective" or "competent", then there is no difference between the two categories. And even if there is variation, it may or may not be explained by separate meta-analyses of the two groups of studies.

A further possible problem for meta-analysis in business ethics is the limited number of existing studies, of whatever quality. However, it may be the case that some research published in other fields will prove fertile ground for business ethicists; indeed, putting an "ethics spin" on well-respected research in, say, marketing or accounting, might be a very interesting and valuable contribution to make. In order to do so, it might be necessary to have access to the underlying data rather than published analysed results. A considerable amount of previously analysed research data is held by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research in the U.S.A. and the ESRC Data Archive at Essex University in the U.K., but sometimes negotiation with the original researcher might be needed for access to a particular data set. Other researchers' earlier primary material or results could be particularly valuable if, for example, responses to surveys are showing a tendency to decline (Hakim, 1982).

Private sources

Other forms of data might also be accessible by negotiation. Easterby-Smith et al. (1991, p. 188) point out, for example, that companies' internal reports and memoranda can provide good material for the researcher. Organizational archives can also be a valuable source of data. For

example, the present author was able to gain access to the preferences of 125 clients of an ethical investment information service as revealed in filed documents (Anand and Cowton, 1993; Cowton, 1991, 1992, 1993). Another example from the business ethics literature is Judge (1994) who utilized archival data on a regional sample of hospitals in the United States for the period 1985–87. Clearly such work necessitates negotiation of access and the exercise of discretion, working within appropriate ethical and legal constraints. But since the interests of the researcher tend to be in the general rather than the particular, it can be relatively easy to reassure the relevant parties. There might also be material held by individuals, such as diaries and files, that would be of value to business ethics researchers, although negotiation of access might be more difficult. For further discussion of the use of organizational and other archives, see Bryman (1989).

Conclusion

The purpose of this section has not been to construct a taxonomy or comprehensive list of secondary data sources but rather to illustrate their wide variety and hence rich potential. They range from the private – e.g. organizational archives – to the highly public such as official statistics; from material collected by individuals to data gathered by governments. In terms of their nature, they may be qualitative or quantitative (including financial), and recent or historical (Bryman, 1989). What they have in common is that they have been collected by some other party, generally without the research purpose of the subsequent business ethics user in mind. The practical research issues which this raises are discussed in the next section.

3. Using secondary data

It is common in books on research methods to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of secondary data vis-à-vis primary data (e.g. Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992; Stewart, 1984) – at least where secondary data are systematically treated. In this section the two primary benefits and shortcomings of secondary data will be discussed and some further themes of particular interest to business ethics researchers highlighted and explored.

Cost

The principal advantage of secondary data is cost. The fact that secondary data already exist means that they are generally less expensive than primary data. This is not to say that their cost is negligible. The researcher might get a cheap ride, but it is not a free ride. In the next sub-section, the demands of data manipulation and interpretation are outlined, but acquisition can also involve some expense (Stewart, 1984). This can sometimes be quite high. For example, some on-line services, directories and market research intended for commercial use can be very expensive. However, they do form part of the research infrastructure of many business schools, and commercial business information might become cheaper once its competitive usefulness has passed. Although its age might then raise a question regarding timeliness, its academic usefulness is likely to decline less rapidly than its commercial value.

Overall, there is likely to be a financial advantage in using secondary data, which might be particularly attractive to graduate students lacking research funds. And as Stewart (1984) points out, the computer has added greatly to the capacity not only to store and use, but also to identify and retrieve secondary data. There is almost certainly also a time advantage, making research relying on secondary data a particularly feasible route for academics with heavy teaching or administrative loads, not just because it takes less time to pursue the work but also because, “unlike a new survey, secondary analysis can be done in fits and starts, in available blocks of time, over a long period” (Hakim, 1982, p. 169).

Loss of control

The attractive "cheap ride" features of secondary data carry with them a penalty though, in that the researcher is unable to exercise any control over their generation. And the fact that the researcher has not been involved in the gathering of the data means that effort needs to be expended in understanding the nature of the data and how they have been assembled. This is as much to appreciate what the data do not reveal as what they do. This might appear to be an obvious point for something "technical" such as accounting numbers, but it applies just as much to other data. Without a proper appreciation of the underlying method, there is a danger that the researcher will misuse the data, perhaps drawing unwarranted conclusions. A particular problem is the risk of bias – deliberate or unintentional – in the data, which means that they should be evaluated carefully (Stewart, 1984). Unfortunately, there might be insufficient information to do this as well as might be desired (Frankfort-Nachmias, 1992). For example, Randall and Gibson (1990) have been critical of business ethics researchers for failing to meet generally accepted standards of methodological disclosure. The possibility that future researchers will wish to re-analyse the data, perhaps as part of a meta-analysis of studies, reinforces Randall and Gibson's recommendation that reviewers and editors should be more demanding than they have been in the past.

Even if previous researchers have used a particular type of secondary data without misgivings, that is insufficient reason for failing to make the necessary investment in understanding the data. Taking an example of a data source from the financial field which has been employed in the business ethics literature (e.g. Davidson et al., 1994): Abdel-khalik (1984) pointed out that many previous "events" studies, which had investigated the impact of news on share prices, had failed to recognize the time taken for press releases to appear in the *Wall Street Journal*. The conclusions of the studies may well have been flawed as a result. Unfortunately, such background work can sometimes lead the researcher to a dead end. For example, having seen a number of authors cite relevant U.K. official statistics with no apparent qualms (Falush, 1977; Nightingale, 1973; Shenfield, 1969), I embarked on some research on charitable donations by companies, with the particular aim of discovering whether the requirement to disclose their aggregate level in the annual report and accounts had led to a significant change in practice (Cowton, n.d.) – a possible example of "information inductance" (Prakash and Rappaport, 1977). However, upon further investigation – some of which was quite involved, with reference to background papers and telephone conversations with government statisticians – it became clear that the data were much less reliable than the initial literature review had implied and inadequate for the intended purpose. The research program had to be re-designed considerably.

In addition to seeking to understand the nature of the data being used, the researcher may also need to expend effort in processing them into a form suitable for his or her own purposes. This can sometimes be quite simple. For example, in the case of one of my own projects, which was concerned with the relationship between the voluntary and business sectors, investigating voluntary organizations' choice of banker, it was just a case of working through a directory of charities and making entries on an analysis sheet, from which an aggregate summary was derived (Cowton, 1990a). In other cases the process will be in the opposite direction, with the researcher disaggregating, and then re-analysing, the published material.

Theory and data

One consequence of the loss of control over the generation of secondary data is that, notwithstanding the researcher's attempts to manipulate the data into a suitable form, having been generated for another purpose they are likely to address less adequately than desired the theoretical concerns of the researcher. This raises the issue of the relationship between research and theory development, which has worried a number of reviewers of empirical business ethics research using primary data too (Randall and

Gibson, 1990; Robertson, 1993). For example, my own research on ethical investors, referred to earlier, was unable to address a number of topics, such as equal opportunities, that had been mentioned in the previous literature simply because they were not included in the information intermediary's service at that time; the information service did not offer relevant criteria which could be used to exclude companies from investment portfolios. Thus secondary data are likely to map only approximately onto the researcher's ideal research questions, hypotheses or concepts, and the researcher needs both to bear in mind the extent of that approximation and to make readers aware of it when the results are written up for publication.

Hakim (1982, p. 16) though, has an interesting alternative perspective on this issue, suggesting that relying on secondary data rather than gathering primary data can actually benefit the development of theory. "One advantage of secondary analysis is that it forces the researcher to think more closely about the theoretical aims and substantive issues of the study rather than the practical and methodological problems of collecting new data. The time and effort involved in obtaining funds for and organising a new survey can be devoted instead to the analysis and interpretation of results." This point is particularly likely to have some validity if there is a fixed time budget. As already mentioned, for whatever reason the relationship between theory and data has not been strong in existing empirical research in business ethics, according to some reviewers.

A further "alternative" perspective on theory and data should also be mentioned. The discussion of this sub-section has so far tended to assume that data are sought in order to carry forward theoretical priorities, which is consistent with the sequential "rational model" of scientific enquiry. However, as Martin (1982) points out, while this is an effective structure for presenting research findings and is perhaps an idealized guide to how research ought to be conducted, in many cases it lacks descriptive validity. In other words, while there may need to be a theoretical justification for research when it is published, this does not imply that the reasons for the research were solely or even primarily "theoretical". There are many other possible influences on the conduct of research work, data availability being one of them. This is familiar from work using primary data. Kulka (1982), for example, reflects on the serendipitous nature of the data collection process – how things become modified, sometimes for the better, during the research process. But the fact that secondary data exist prior to the conduct of the research means that they can additionally play a serendipitous role in the *initiation* of research. This is particularly important given the relatively small amount of empirical research that has been conducted in business ethics to data; an over-reliance on published research for providing ideas for new studies might lead to an undesirably narrow and somewhat incestuous development of the literature. Other sources of inspiration are needed, and secondary data are particularly useful because by their very nature they contain the seeds of the solution to the question that they stimulate in the mind of the researcher.

An example of work prompted by data is my own previously mentioned research on the relationship between banks and voluntary organizations. I was consulting a U.K. publication entitled *Charities Digest* when I noticed that the entries for many charities contained information on their bankers. This led to my wondering which bank, if any, had an unusually large number of the larger charities as customers, and why; not a profound thought perhaps, but one which, prompted by secondary data, led to a successful small project exploring one aspect of the relationship between the commercial and voluntary sectors (Cowton, 1990a). The data in *Charities Digest* were used to form estimates of the market shares of the banks, which were then subjected to statistical analysis.

Even if secondary data do not prompt a particular research endeavour, consulting secondary sources may be particularly useful in the early stages of research for generating sensible hypotheses or for other aspects of research development. The knowledge and understanding of the subject can both constrain and stimulate research questions in a better way than if reliance is placed upon existing academic literature alone, even if those data are not subsequently funda-

mental to the prosecution of the research. Furthermore, if the secondary data are the outcome of some non-academic process there is less likelihood that analysis of them will be deemed "irrelevant" by practitioners; some "non-academic" party has already deemed them worth collecting.

Against this positive view of secondary data, though, should be set the risk that the availability of "good" data can come to dominate the research agenda. Stock market studies in accounting and finance might be a case in point, where the availability of large datasets over a long time frame holds a strong attraction for researchers, particularly those wishing to prove themselves capable of using research tools taught in a doctoral program. The danger is that the nature of the database – what it includes and omits – comes to exert too strong a hold over the development of the academic agenda. In particular, there is a risk that theory development is stunted or misdirected. However, data-driven research might be deemed preferable to methodology-driven research – which seems to be the case in many fields – which can lead to the collection and analysis of valid but relatively useless data.

"Eavesdropping"

There is also a case for believing that, rather than being mere substitutes for "better", but more expensive, primary data, which is generally the tone of the discussion of advantages and disadvantages in research methods books, secondary data might actually possess some advantages in practice. For example, secondary data might provide some useful material when it is simply not possible to gain research access for the gathering of primary data, which is a particular problem in ethics research (Liedtka, 1992). Secondary data, because of their "non-reactivity" (Webb et al., 1977) or, in some cases, "unobtrusiveness" (Webb and Weick, 1979), might also be of help in dealing with another major concern in business ethics research, namely social desirability response bias (Fernandes and Randall, 1992; Randall and Fernandes, 1991), whether deliberate or unintentional. There are ways of controlling or detecting such bias, but it is nonetheless a worry. If it is the intrusion of the researcher that precipitates the biased response, particularly when the study is known to be one on "ethics", then there might be advantages to what I term "eavesdropping", or "listening in", through the use of secondary data – if there are good reasons for believing that the data are not systematically biased. (Bias may result from the original process of generation, selective deposit or selective survival.) There may even be strong grounds on some occasions for believing that the data are extremely robust because of the nature of the process by which they have been generated. For example, in my own previously mentioned study of ethical investment preferences, the individuals who completed the questionnaires actually paid to do so. Since the precise advice about suitable companies they were to receive depended on their answers to the questions, there is every reason to suppose that their responses were truthful. Similarly, in his study which utilized hospital archives, Judge (1994) was able to outline a number of reasons why they could be relied upon, which related to incentives and control procedures that were in place in the field. Incentives and controls of such potency are extremely unlikely to be available to academic researchers gathering primary data. However, the term "eavesdropping", which is a surreptitious social practice of dubious virtue, also implies that there will ethical and legal questions for the researcher to address before embarking on the exploitation of such data.

Therefore, while secondary data do not usually permit access to the deeper factors which should form an important element of business ethics research (Brigley, 1995; Phillips, 1991, 1992), they might not be any worse than the research methods conventionally used, and may actually provide better "access" in some circumstances.

Given the problems of recall – and, indeed, of researching periods beyond possible recall – secondary data can also provide access which is infeasible using primary data collection methods. If historical data are required, perhaps in an attempt to conduct a longitudinal study, then there may be no alternative to using secondary

sources (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992; Hakim, 1987). It is almost like "eavesdropping" on periods to which the researcher has no direct access. How useful such data are raises a general issue about the usefulness of historical research in general, but that is a question considerably beyond the scope of this paper. At the very least there is a case to be made that the relationship between variables is relatively stable compared with the level of the variables themselves, if a quantitative study is being undertaken. Thus the use of secondary data allows for the possibility of conducting longitudinal research in business ethics, which Robertson (1993) recommends. It is not just a question of cost and effort, although those are important considerations; if business ethicists are only just starting genuinely longitudinal studies based on primary research it will be some time before useful results are forthcoming if secondary data are not used too.

The relationship with primary data

The discussion so far has suggested that there are certain pragmatic reasons why secondary data might be preferred to primary data; they are probably less costly, might be less biased, or primary data are inaccessible. However, the two types of data are not simply substitutes for one another. More often they can function as complements (Stewart, 1984), perhaps serving to make up for the inadequacies of the other or providing confirmation. This complementarity could be viewed as data "triangulation" (Jick, 1979). Thus the use of secondary data can increase the credibility of research findings using primary data (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992). For example, in my own research on voluntary organizations' bankers, the analysis of *Charities Digest* entries was complemented by a number of interviews focused on bankers' policies towards the voluntary sector. In the case of the ethical investment project, possible developments of the information intermediary's database (i.e. gaps which meant that I could not address certain topics) were tested through a subsequent questionnaire survey of religious communities (Cowton, 1990b). And referring back to the earlier comments on historical research, if a particular series of data is still being produced its validity can be assessed against current primary data.

However, complementarity can sometimes be limited, at least when it comes to publication. For example, in the project on voluntary organizations' bankers, owing to restrictions regarding confidentiality it was not possible to relate publicly the statistical analysis to the discussion of individual banks' policies towards the voluntary sector. Nevertheless, even in such a situation the insights gained can be helpful to the researcher.

4. Conclusion

This paper has indicated that there are a number of advantages – such as cost and availability – and disadvantages in the use of secondary data, the precise balance of which will tend to be contingent upon certain features of the situation being considered, not least the particular type of secondary data and the feasibility and cost of gathering primary data. But as a general rule it seems to be the case that researchers are not as aware as they might be of the potential of secondary data for providing valuable insights into a whole range of questions in a cost-effective manner. Stewart (1984), for example, suggests that individuals and organizations do not take full advantage of the array of secondary information available to them, perhaps because of the great explosion that has occurred in recent times. A further reason for under-exploiting secondary data is that social scientists tend to think in terms of collecting new data when initiating a research project (Hakim, 1982), perhaps influenced by the focus on primary data collection techniques in research methods books. There is a danger that the recent business ethics literature on how to tackle the challenges involved in primary data collection – while well-intentioned and generally helpful – will reinforce that tendency and thus lead researchers to overlook the potential of secondary data. Certainly the majority of empirical studies in business ethics to date have drawn upon primary

data, particularly in the form of responses to questionnaire surveys, although there are sporadic examples, some of which have been cited in this paper, of the use of secondary data.

The aim of this paper has been to stimulate and guide further use of secondary data by business ethics researchers. Perhaps a heightened awareness of the value of secondary data will encourage some researchers to conduct empirical research who have been holding back because they do not have the necessary resources to do good primary research or are intimidated by the problems of primary data collection in a sensitive field such as business ethics. There is certainly plenty of material "out there". For this reason this paper has paid more attention than most treatises on research methods to indicating the various types of secondary data that exist, reflection on which may serendipitously stimulate potential researchers to initiate new avenues of research in business ethics which might not be obvious from the studies published to date.

While it has to be admitted that for some research questions secondary data will be but poor proxies for, or at best complements of, primary data, there are also situations in which secondary data may have attributes which render them highly attractive when compared with interview or questionnaire results. Two particularly valuable features of secondary data seem worthy of reiteration: first, the possibility of "eavesdropping", providing unobtrusive access to sensitive situations or to the past, perhaps for the conduct of longitudinal studies; second, the way in which secondary data not only facilitate the pursuit of the empirical research agenda but also expand it as researchers perceive in datasets interesting research issues or novel avenues of enquiry.

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