Challenge of Research Ethics Committees to the nature of operations research☆

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with operational research (OR) practice in light of growing concerns about ethical conduct. It asks whether OR, in the context of increasing regulation through Research Ethics Committees, should consider whether there are certain ethical issues that are affected by the specific context of OR. The article sets out some of the central concerns about Research Ethics Committees and the nature of OR.

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1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen a number of debates and comments attempting to delineate the ethical dilemmas faced by operational researchers [1–6]. These dilemmas tend to be complex and only hazily definable. They reflect debates in other areas of management as to whether unethical behaviour or practice is more a function of “bad apples” or of “bad barrels” [7]. The bad apple argument attributes unethical behaviour or practice to the personal characteristics of individuals. The bad barrel argument, in contrast, refers to organisational or societal issues influencing the behaviour of organisational members.

While this article is essentially about ethics and OR, it has to be borne in mind that ethical issues connect with other contexts, for example, where ethical reviews occur, such as Research Ethics Committees (REC) (or institutional review boards) and research governance frameworks. There has been a rapid growth in such committees over the last few years in the UK [8,9], and the relevance of these to OR will be the main focus of this paper. The interest in REC is raised here because, like other occupational groups, OR is applied to problems that affect people, and there are not many areas in OR that can be considered to escape from ethical consideration [5]. It also seems that the emergence of REC may be fruitful to focus on, specifically in terms of the fact that the ethical agenda is increasingly set by national and international institutions. To that end, this paper will address the nexus between the debates on ethics and OR and the discussions on REC, where it is suggested that ethical practice involve a complex interaction between individual and organisational factors. The paper will review whether OR, in the context of increasing regulation through REC, needs to consider whether there are certain ethical issues that are affected by the specific context of operational research. The article begins by contextualising the discussion in relation to the recent debate on ethics in OR. Following this, some of the central concerns about REC and the nature of OR are set out.

2. Background

As mentioned, a path that seems to run through the debates on ethics and OR reflect ones in other areas of management; that is, whether unethical behaviour or practice is more a function of “bad apples” or of “bad barrels”. The first argument focuses on unethical behaviour or practice of
the practitioner/researcher. In relation to OR, this centres
mainly on the operational researcher as modeller [4–6]. In
particular, the focus is on the behaviour of the researcher/
professional within his/her activity, such as methodological
rigour, objectivity, no advocacy, results emerging from anal-
ysis and not vice versa, and correctness and honesty in re-
lations with clients (see [4,10]). Responses to this aspect of
ethical conduct can be theoretically explained by deontology,
which is concerned with duty or moral obligation [11,12].
This view focuses on the rightness or wrongness of actions
themselves and sees a sharp difference between self-interest
and morality, and proposes that an action only has moral
value if it is performed from duty. The deontological per-
spective underlies much of the discussion on self-regulation
in OR [4] shown by the continuing debates on codes of con-
duct and the professionalisation of OR [13–16]. Deon-
tological ethics is uncompromising by definition, and has been
commonly contrasted with consequentialist ethical theories
for its complete disregard for circumstances which can lead
to morally dubious requirements. This perspective also fails
to specify which principles should take priority when rights
and duties conflict. Thus, a deontological approach cannot
offer complete ethical guidance [11].

The second argument, in contrast, refers to organisational
or societal issues influencing the behaviour of organisational
members. This focuses on the practitioner/researcher re-
sponsibility towards the client or, more importantly, towards
all those affected by the actions and decisions which are
taken based on models and towards society. The argument
focuses on not only the clients but also towards all those
people affected by the actions and decisions which are taken
based on his/her models, and towards society and the exter-
nal world at large. Thus, the practitioner/researcher cannot
ignore the consequences of his/her action and will bear full
ethical responsibility for them. The effort to act responsibly
is then presented as a consequentialist responsibility which
judges the rightness or wrongness of an act by its conse-
quences [11,12,17]. For example, as well as the debates on
the social responsibility of OR [2,3,5], there are concerns re-
lating to the whole process of OR, which connects the real
world and models, where ethical concerns are raised in terms
of the consequences for those not participating but are af-
fected by the process in which professionals (and others) are
taking part [6].

Thus, it appears that commentators have sought to clarify
how far individual ethical theories and principles are appli-
cable to operational research dilemmas, although the discus-
sions appear to have been limited to consequentialist and
deontological theories [11]. A helpful contribution to the
above debate is a recent article by Gallo [5]. He distin-
guished two levels of ethical discourse: rules and principles and values. Deontology falls into the former category, while the con-
sequentialism, identified through our self-comprehension, and
self-reflection and experience, relates to the latter. How-
ever, he claims that the shaping of our principles and values
should be emergent and be a sense making process—or a ‘quest’, as Weick puts it [18]. Gallo also warns against an
over-reliance on rules and to place a strong emphasis on
developing values. Other commentators have also extended
the discussion on ethics beyond consequentialist and deon-
tological principles. For example, Le Menestrel and Van
Wassenhove [6], following Habermas [19], suggest building
communicational ethics, while Mingers [20] and Midgley
[21] suggest a critical approach.

The call for more attention to be given to ethics within
operational research [6] is a sign that there is need to debate
the ethical considerations in OR in a way which continues
to allow for diversity in the field. However, the increased
emphasis on OR and ethics in social problems and the
burgeoning of REC means that operational researchers are
likely to face pressure to address ethical issues with regards
to their conduct where deontological and/or consequentialist reasoning may not be appropriate. This connects to
recent attention to ethics and OR which has focused on the
process of OR (e.g. [22]). The process of building or structur-
ing models is an on-going process or dialogue where ethical
concerns can and ought to be addressed. This issue
has been much discussed in the UK, particularly in relation
to problem-structuring methods or Soft OR [23], and more
recently in connection with the issues of values and the
participation of the different stakeholders in the structuring
process [24]. But what would a REC make of this practice?
The next section will look at the rise of RECs, and their
rational and principles.

3. Research Ethics Committees

In the UK, there has been a growth of RECs that are
attempting to institutionalize ethical decision-making to a
greater extent than before [25]. Drawing on models devel-
oped in the field of medicine [26,27], RECs have now become
well established in the health and social care fields which
may seem of limited relevance to readers of this journal. But
given that some operational researchers seek to conduct in-
vestigations in organizations with responsibilities for health
and social care and that the process of OR is sometimes of-
er as a model for research in areas where poor practice
could have a direct consequence on the health or well-being
of the public, its implications may turn out to be greater
than is immediately apparent.

The UK’s Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC)
has developed a Research Ethics Framework [28]. Develop-
ments of frameworks such as the ESRC’s are likely to give
rise to ethical governance administrations that will be less
‘light touch’ in orientation. It appears that there is afoot a ‘globalisation of ethics’ whereby the ethical agenda is
increasingly set by national and international ethics com-
mittees, conventions, protocols and the like. The rationale
for this derives from changes in public attitudes and expec-
tations of research, through increased concern about the
nature of research and transparency, and the implications of
changes in the context of social science research in relation
to advances in globalisation, information and communica-
tion technology. There is also a concern for the investiga-
tors on research projects (including those on OR projects)
who inherently have multiple legitimate interests—i.e.,
to conduct high quality research, to complete the work
expeditiously, to protect participants, to obtain funding and
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