And Justice for All: Our Research Participants Considered as Valued Stakeholders

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ABSTRACT   Management scholars have suggested that our research is lacking in both relevance and meaning. In this article, I argue that a primary reason for this lack of relevance and meaning is the failure of our research to be responsive to all potential research stakeholders. Adopting the committed-to-participant research perspective, I offer suggestions for how both journal editors and organizational researchers can meaningfully include our research participants as valued stakeholders of the research process.

KEYWORDS   committed-to-participant research (CPR) perspective, positive researcher values, research ethics, stakeholder rights

INTRODUCTION

According to more and more organizational scholars, our research has become one increasingly lacking in relevance and meaning (Beyer, 1997; Freeman, 1986; Miles, 2011; Slocum, 1999; Wright & Wright, 2001). A primary reason for this lack of relevance and meaning is the failure of our research to be responsive to the legitimate wants and needs of all our potential stakeholders or constituents (Wright, 2006). In particular, although there are at least four primary stakeholder groups for our research endeavours (the researchers, the organization being studied, research participants, and our students), the consequences of much of our effort appears to be primarily directed to satisfying the needs of only two of these stakeholder groups, the research scientists and the study organizations. As I have previously argued (Wright & Wright, 1999, 2000, 2002), organizational researchers have all too often neglected the actual participants of our research endeavours. My purpose
in this article is to examine the problem of neglecting our research participants through the dual lens of being an active organizational researcher and as a former associate editor of the *Journal of Management* and a current associate editor of the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. By adopting the committed-to-participant research (CPR) perspective, I offer suggestions for meaningfully including our research participants as valued stakeholders of the research process.

**THE MISSING STAKEHOLDER: OUR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

Most of the authors of this Editors’ Forum on research and publishing ethics in *Management and Organization Review* are or have been journal editors. Collectively, they have reviewed thousands of papers. Having served as the action editor on hundreds of manuscripts myself, I have seen research designs in many different ‘shapes and sizes’. Among the papers that I have read and reviewed, the three most commonly used data collection methods involve the single-wave, cross-sectional design, the use of data obtained from a data bank, and online experiments (Wright, 2006). In the single-wave design, the researcher is typically most concerned with increasing sample size. In the quest for a large sample size and a good response rate, researchers typically promise confidentiality and anonymity to the respondents. While these conditions assure the participants that their responses will not become known to management, it also guarantees that the researcher will not be able to proactively interact with the individual participants. In a like manner, the reliance on secondary data obtained from a data bank all but guarantees that there will be no contact between the organizational researchers and study participants. Finally, the use of an online data collection method, while fast and easy, has created a number of problems for organizational scholars. For example, how does an online researcher adequately monitor the degree to which their participants become distressed or agitated as a result of their participating in the online research study? The simple answer is that it is not very likely that the researcher will be able to satisfactorily monitor the well-being of respondents using these three methods of data collection. For example, and as noted by Wright and Wright (2002), participants in online research are relegated to a minimal stakeholder role. The guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity may inadvertently marginalize these participants. In particular, one potentially negative consequence of participant anonymity status may be the creation of an ‘out-of-sight, out-of-mind’ mentality. That is, because we never view them as ‘real’ people, they become nonentities and are no longer even considered as stakeholders in the research process. Taken together, anonymous single-wave designs, secondary data obtained from a data bank, and online methods of conducting research make it extremely difficult to champion the interests of research participants. The importance of considering research participant rights is made evident through the following four examples taken from my own research and teaching.
Caring for Participant Well-Being in Our Research and Teaching

The first example came from a study of work stress. Consistently very high diastolic blood pressure readings taken from a participant in this research project (Wright & Sweeney, 1990) helped to encourage a high-ranking manager employed by a very large service-oriented organization to seek the advice of his personal physician. His physician immediately placed him on blood pressure medication commending him for using good judgment and coming in before he suffered a heart attack. This individual was completely unaware of this problem until his blood pressure was taken as part of my research project. In a second example, the very high blood pressure readings taken on the job from a seemingly robust and healthy man convinced him to take an early retirement. Several years later, at a retirement party for his former boss, the man told me that he felt great, his blood pressure was under control, and retiring from his stressful work situation was one of the best things he ever did. As with the first example, this individual was unaware of his problem until his blood pressure was taken on the job as part of my research. His wife was very clear in her belief that his decision to retire early saved his life.

A third example happened in the classroom. I have engaged my MBA students over the years in discussions of the role of an individual’s character in organizational and leadership settings. More specifically, students are assigned the task of completing a 240-item questionnaire (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) measuring such strengths of character as courage, justice, kindness, forgiveness, gratitude, humility, and perseverance. After filling out the questionnaire online, the students receive immediate feedback detailing their character strength scores. Responses are averaged within scales, so that they learn the relative (within subject) ranking of their 24 strengths of character. I next supplement the online questionnaire procedure with both in and out of class assignments. More specifically, and with these rankings in hand, students are assigned the task of providing a written analysis of what they learn from the survey results. Upon completion of the analysis, the class engages in a classroom discussion of the role of character (Wright & Goodstein, 2007) in a number of topics, including the development of character-based leaders (Quick & Wright, 2011; Wright & Quick, 2011).

Another use of this survey is in identifying student generated ‘profiles in character’ for a number of occupations. Groups of four or five students identify the top five ‘profiles in character’ considered to be most beneficial in attaining ‘success’ in such occupations as: accountant, entrepreneur, nurse, politician, engineer, sales/marketing, and dairy farmer (many of my students grew up on farms in rural Kansas). Once these profiles are generated, students engage in discussions on how to best develop these optimal character-based profiles. By design, online student questionnaire responses are incorporated into intervention strategies in which students are actively encouraged to view themselves as self-regulatory and self-reflective (Wright & Quick, 2011). Consistent with a CPR perspective, the dual
goals of enhancing student well-being and generating societal good are clearly expressed to and understood by the student participants. As a result, students demonstrate significant interest in these interactive, face-to-face exercises. Students have told me that the learning experience would have been quite minimal without these interactive interventions.

The final example is a tragic story involving the suicide of a participant in my research by a self-inflicted gunshot. This individual was a well-educated professional male, approximately 40 years old and a participant in a published research project designed to examine the role of positive and negative emotion on job performance and turnover (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). One of the study measures used was the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). This scale measures how often one feels emotionally overextended and exhausted by one’s work (anchored from 0 = never to 6 = every day). To emphasize the extent to which he was emotionally exhausted, this participant extended the ‘how often’ classification to 10 (from the original ‘0’ to ‘6’ classification), which he anchored with the phrase ‘expletive deleted’.

His responses were disturbingly similar on a second measure, the Positive and Negative Affectivity Scale (PANAS) developed by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988). In this measure, the participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they experienced each descriptor of affect in general on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely). Once again, the particular research participant recalibrated the scale and defiantly noted that he was ‘dead! alert’, as well as being ‘extremely, extremely . . . angry’. In addition, in the margin of the questionnaire, he noted the need for multiple individuals to be killed (no specific names used). He used ‘blood-red’ pen ink to embellish these responses.

I did not know of these responses until tragedy struck within days of his completing this questionnaire. As discussed in a previous paper (Wright, 2006), when I learned of his tragic ending, I immediately examined his questionnaire and discovered the morbid additions to the questionnaire. I also learned that he left a suicide note. While his suicide was in no way related to the research project, his suicide note clearly demonstrated his great anger and despair. Although he never formally threatened anyone at work, a number of coworkers noted his manifest anger and indicated what they thought was the real potential for him to harm himself or others either on or off the job. Obviously, his suicide had a profound impact on others. Several coworkers told me that his suicide affected not only their ability to effectively perform their job, but also aspects of their personal life. The grief of a number of colleagues was long-lasting in duration, with at least one coworker commenting that they were sure they would never get over his suicide. Several coworkers commented to me 2 years after his suicide that they were still highly troubled by how he died. Unfortunately, little direct guidance is available from our professional organizations on how a researcher should handle these types of situations. If I had noticed this participant’s notes on the survey before the
tragedy, what should I have done? Should I have reported it to the organization that employed him? Should I have contacted the authorities? What is my responsibility to the coworkers who suffered from his death? The Academy of Management (AOM) code of ethics has little to say on the subject of protecting our research subjects beyond ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

Specifically, the AOM’s latest ethical credo (2005: 1) sets forth a number of general and professional principles designed ‘to improve the work lives of individuals, the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations, and the well-being of society as a whole’. AOM members (2005: 2–4) should seek to ‘treat students, colleagues, research subjects, and clients with respect, dignity, fairness, and caring’ and be aware that ‘It is the duty of Academy members to preserve and protect the privacy, dignity, well-being, and freedom of research participants’. The credo concludes that it is important ‘where appropriate, to protect the anonymity of research participants’. This code, unfortunately, does not provide specifics on what rights our research participants should be granted. To address this obvious void in the Academy’s ethical credo, my father Vincent P. Wright and I developed the CPR perspective (Wright & Wright, 1999).

The CPR Perspective

The CPR approach is most closely associated with the action research model in suggesting that the relationships among all stakeholders are important (Lewin, 1948; Wright, 2005; Wright & Wright, 2002). Inherent in the action research model is the realization that ‘good’ theory should identify with its possible applications (Wright, 2006). In other words, as organizational researchers we should actively work to develop feelings of empathy for the various work and life events experienced on a day-to-day basis by the study clients or participants. More to the point, and adapting the approach advocated by Schein (1987), I previously suggested that we consider our research role from the context of being an ‘expert’ helper (Wright, 2006; Wright & Wright, 2002). The word helper bears further elaboration. Organizational researchers are typically not medical doctors or clinical psychiatrists. Both morally and legally, we must not exceed our levels of expertise. With that caveat, the CPR perspective proposes that organizational researchers act as critical observers, informational sources, and referral agents for the participants of our research, especially those deemed to be at risk.

As evidenced by the four examples described above, the CPR approach has allowed me to become more meaningfully involved in assisting ‘at-risk’ individuals suffering from such job-related trauma as high blood pressure, job burnout, suicidal tendencies, and the unexpected death of work colleagues (Wright & Wright, 1999, 2002). For example, Wright and Sweeney (1990) examined whether employee coping modes were related to cardiovascular health. Incorporating a CPR perspective, the overall well-being of the participants was an a priori, stated
project goal. The participants’ valued contribution of time and cooperation as part of the project were acknowledged and rewarded. How so? First, after receiving permission from management to conduct the research, each potential participant was individually solicited to be in the study by the researcher. Realistic expectations regarding their potential commitments of time and effort were made explicit during this meeting. The voluntary nature of subject participation was made similarly clear. Second, when appropriate, but certainly upon completion of the study, potentially harmful consequences and suggested appropriate lifestyle changes were discussed with every participant deemed at risk. To that end, every participant was offered a written summary of the overall findings as well as a confidential summary of their individual results (for a further discussion, see Wright, 2006).

This CPR approach increased my sense of commitment to the research project because it had meaning and relevance to the actual participants. In other words, my identity as a professional in a helping profession was evidenced through assisting real people. An added benefit was that I was able to actually see that I made a contribution. A number of participants took the warnings to heart and sought medical advice. Contrast this approach to a typical approach that focuses on obtaining as much useable data as quickly and easily as possible without knowing who are the people providing the data. It becomes readily apparent why many of us sense a lack of meaning and relevance in our work. At present, the CPR approach is not widely used by organizational researchers. As I will discuss next, the gatekeeper role of journal editor provides the opportunity to meaningfully expand the stakeholder domain of our research to include our research participants.

The CPR Perspective and the Role of the Editor

Over the years, I have queried many colleagues about their research and the obligations we have towards the research participants of our scholarship. I find the typical responses to be disturbing regarding research participant rights. For example, while one individual stated that he was willing to do everything that the AOM required in terms of ethical research procedure, he also noted that he did not consider research participants to be important research stakeholders. Another young faculty colleague considered our participants to be ‘ancillary or a necessary evil’ to the data collection process. Finally, a consistent response that I have received when giving research presentations on the subject is that I am suggesting that researchers ‘do more work’ and they are already overburdened with various job requirements. Because of the importance of publications for success in our research career, I suggest that the best mechanism for change resides in the research gatekeeper role afforded to journal editors (Aguinis & Vaschetto, 2011).
Wright and Hobfoll (2004) discussed the research requirements and expectations with each prospective research study participant by means of a direct contact procedure. Each participant was treated as a research stakeholder whose contributions of time and cooperation are highly valued and rewarded with respect (for a further discussion of this approach, see Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Rosnow, 1997; Wright, 2006). To that end, at the conclusion of the study each participant was offered a written summary of the findings. Based upon these findings, those participants deemed ‘at-risk’ were made aware of the possible problem(s) and offered the opportunity to discuss potential solutions with me. In the Wright and Hobfoll (2004) study, the research topic was job burnout. As they reported, a number of participants used the knowledge that they were ‘burnout-at-risk’ to seek medical advice or investigate alternative employment opportunities. In particular, one participant told me that his job had become increasingly more stressful. The results of this study further convinced him that his overall health was being adversely affected. After weighing his options, he found another job in a different occupation in another state which better suited his interests, skills, and abilities. Approximately 1 year after his move, he got in touch to tell me that he had indeed made the correct choice.

This has happened many times over the years and has provided me with an enhanced sense of meaning and relevance from my research endeavours. Simply stated, I cannot remember each and every one of the study variables. Similarly, I cannot remember all the results from the majority of my research projects, especially the ones from early on in my career. However, I can distinctly remember the actual names, and even much of the conversation, for a large number of participants from my research (for a further discussion, see Wright, 2010). Inherent in the CPR approach is the core belief that organizational scholars have a moral obligation to all groups or stakeholders affected by their research (Wright, 2006). As both a researcher and editor, I consider the opportunity given to me to explore various aspects of the human experience as a gift. I wish to share this gift with my fellow researchers and actively encourage that (i) whenever possible, we supplement secondary source data with the use of primary data sources; (ii) whenever possible we solicit research participants through the use of direct contact procedures; (iii) we always guarantee confidentiality of the results, give this guarantee personally and put it in writing; (iv) we provide written feedback of the overall study findings to all research participants; (v) we provide confidential, individual summaries to research participants deemed to be at-risk; and (vi) we serve as a reference source for professional assistance whenever necessary and appropriate.

CONCLUSION

In a recent thought-provoking article, Miles (2011) railed against theories of management that exclusively focus on short-term economic returns to a single
stakeholder. He chides those management scholars who study organizational phenomena ‘... primarily from the vantage point of their computers’ (Miles, 2011: 4) to the neglect of strategies championing the use of primary source data. He calls for a rebirth of management scholarship focusing on an action research approach following ‘... prescriptions for fully utilizing the capabilities of all organizational members ...’ (Miles, 2011: 5). Miles’s approach is highly congruent with the CPR perspective. As demonstrated through examples from both my teaching and research, inherent in the CPR perspective is the total commitment to share in the responsibility of positively affecting and helping to better the human condition through our organization-based research. These positive values are consistent with the AOM’s call to treat all our stakeholders with dignity, kindness, and respect. As one whose career has concentrated on the study of employee health and well-being, the use of the CPR approach has been instrumental in fostering and enhancing well-being of not only my research participants, but also has facilitated my own development as well.

NOTE

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REFERENCES


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