

**Research Ethics in Applied Economics: A Practical Guide**

Anna Josephson and Jeffrey D. Michler. 2024. London: Routledge. ISBN: 978-036-74-57419. \$55.99 (Paperback).

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Economics and theology have always gone together for me. My story is unique: my formal study of economics began in the second year of my Master of Divinity degree program. While studying theology by day, I began studying economics by night: a Master’s in international and development economics that would complement the theological studies preparing me for ordination. My journey from undergraduate degrees in math and computer science to a Master’s in economics involved a detour of extensive work with migrants in the United States and Mexico. I saw the training as a tool to participate more fully in the conversation around better policy. Later, the fields I chose as a PhD student reflected this desire: agricultural development (for regions that send migrants) and labor economics (for migrants who leave home).

Studying different disciplines at the same time made me aware of their starkly different methodological approaches. Since the Enlightenment, theology has embraced a turn toward the historical. In my theology classes, we studied the historical development of the major doctrines of Christian faith and the subsequent controversies. In order to be ordained a priest, I had to sign a statement of faith based on the Nicene Creed, and I had no illusions both about the political context of the Council of Nicea and the gap between the ancient worldview and our modern one. The implication was that the interior formation of eleven years in the Jesuit order contributed at least as much to my suitability as a Roman Catholic priest as the courses that I took in seven years of seminary—three years of philosophy and four years of theology. In fact, the ordination rite for the diaconate presumes that the learning has sunk in in a deep way. The bishop enjoins the candidates: believe what you read, teach what you believe, practice what you teach. Catholic theology speaks of the moment of ordination as an ontological change in the one being ordained.

In eight years of studying economics—three years in a Master’s program and five years in a PhD program—I have never heard the term “ontological change,” although the method reminds me of medieval

philosophers and theologians who believed in a great hierarchy of being. In many ways, reading journal articles reminds me of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*: a systematic search for the structure of underlying reality. Like Aquinas' logic, the proofs are beautiful though sometimes distant from actual experience. We rarely hear of the historical turn except perhaps in terms of the "credibility revolution" or the "empirical turn." There is little interaction with other disciplines, except to criticize their qualitative methods or lack of credible identification strategies.

In contrast, *Research Methods in Applied Economics* provides a helpful corrective in that the discipline of applied economics reflects on itself. The work begins with an introduction that lays out three frameworks of ethics: outcome-based; duty and rule-based; and virtue or character-based. It also describes four principles of ethical research: universalism; communality; disinterestedness; and organized skepticism. The three major sections of the book describe three phases of the research process: developing research; doing research; and sharing research. The first section, on developing research, consists of chapters on idea development and project development. The second section, on doing research, consists of chapters on data collection, data management, and data analysis. The third section, on sharing research, consists of chapters on academic research dissemination and dissemination beyond the academy. Finally, the work concludes with four virtues of the ethical applied economist: fairness, respect, care, and honesty.

Ironically, I read *Research Methods in Applied Economics* as I flew from the academy to the field: on a plane trip from Minneapolis, where I am working on my dissertation, to El Paso, where my work with migrants inspired me to apply for a doctorate in the first place. As I read the book, I realized it filled a gap that I didn't even know existed in my own training. Self-interest echoes in the background: in particular, the pressure that research economists feel to do research that publishes well and contributes to their own standing in the profession and the academy. The Christian will not be surprised at the role of original sin and the economist will not be surprised that incentives drive behavior. Self-interest is at the heart of the many ethical dilemmas that appear in the book: for example, the choice between respecting others, whether they are students, colleagues, or research subjects, and using them merely for one's own personal gain.

The authors give many practical suggestions to push back against these tendencies. Some of them are familiar to anyone who has kept current on best practices in research methods: the role of money in guiding research questions (Developing Research), the use of pre-registration plans to prevent p-hacking and specification search (Doing Research), and taking the time to share research results with the members of the communities where the research was conducted (Sharing Research). The authors provide a useful service in combining best practices in one place, in an accessible textbook format. I feel inclined to incorporate various pieces of material in my own teaching or perhaps use the entire book to teach a course in field research methods.

Perhaps the most valuable part of the book is the inclusion of many concrete examples of ethical breaches. I read *Failing in the Field* (Karlan & Appel, 2016) in a Master's course on field research methods, and even so I have never read so many stories of ethical violations by economists in one place. These violations touch all stages of the research process: manipulative research designs (Developing Research), misleading data analysis (Doing Research), and plagiarism in publications (Sharing Research). The discipline of economics is famously insular compared to other disciplines and many economists have the reputation of being condescending white men, so reading these stories provides a sobering perspective on the shadow side of the discipline that hopefully will engender more humility in its readers.

Despite the practical tips and striking counter-examples, however, I felt a little disappointed as I put the book down, because it shied away from more fundamental questions, such as: Why be an applied economist? How do applied economists improve the lives of the people whom they serve? The Christian economist might say: Why is studying economics the best use of my own gifts and my participation in God's salvific endeavor in the world?

I am reminded of this broader context in social settings when people find out I am a doctoral student in applied economics. I am frequently asked questions about the stock market, to which I reply:

I don't know any more about the stock market than you do. The people in my department are good people, because they are smart enough to optimize the stock market but instead, they are trying to figure out how to alleviate some of the suffering in the world.

I get an even stranger reaction when I celebrate Mass and the faithful ask me why a Catholic priest would do a doctorate in applied economics in the secular world. “In order to serve the people of God in a more effective way,” I reply, often to a blank stare.

For someone already interested in using applied economics for good, Josephson and Michler’s work is a great resource to do it better. However, you won’t find here a reason to study applied economics or even to do research in the first place. For someone like me, who wants to use his quantitative skills to alleviate some of the suffering he has experienced in the developing world, the authors do not engage with the vocational question. Nor does the book include much of the perspective of the subjects of research. We hear about famous ethical breaches and a little bit about agricultural economists who do extension work, but no firsthand narratives of average participants in a research project—what the experience is like or how it has improved their lives.

These big-picture questions are not only the purview of Christian theology. The work of Alasdair MacIntyre or Paul Ricoeur in the narrative ethics tradition addresses these questions from a secular perspective. A narrative ethicist would consider the moment in the researcher’s life when she decided to be an applied economist, the moment in the subject’s life when he enrolled in the research study, and their moment of encounter. These sorts of transformative encounters appear not only in the Christian story (the gospels) but also in the stories of Christians past and present. Not only Christians are interested in what makes a good encounter, however. Other social scientists like sociologists and health policy practitioners are as well. The relatively new field of community-engaged research has emerged to reflect on best practices. Applied economists would benefit from joining the conversation, and *Ethics in Applied Economics* could be improved by incorporating this narrative perspective. Then it would truly cover the complete research life cycle.

### Reference

**Karlan, D. and Appel, J.** (2016). *Failing in the Field: What We Can Learn When Field Research Goes Wrong*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. ■