

“Europe’s Take on Business Ethics”
A Content Analysis of Business Ethics: A European Review (September 2006)

By William C. Frederick, Posted to website, August 2007

This report summarizes the results of a content analysis of articles appearing in the United Kingdom-based journal *Business Ethics: A European Review* from April 1998 through July 2006. This study was undertaken on the initiative of the author and entirely without the prior knowledge of *BE:ER*’s editors, past and present, who bear no responsibility whatsoever for its findings but who have kindly given me permission to post this summary on my website.

I undertook this analysis to inform myself about the present state of business ethics inquiry as recorded in one of the leading scholarly and professional journals published in Europe. It was my intention to investigate Eurocentric perspectives to determine if, or how, they might differ or reinforce the views about business ethics found in similar journals published in the United States.

Part I describes the methodology. **Part II** reports the results. **Part III** discusses the significance of the findings for the further study of business ethics.

PART I. HOW THE STUDY WAS DONE

The content analysis was done during the Spring and Summer of 2006. All articles—excluding book reviews and non-scholarly items—from April 1998 through July 2006 were examined, thus excluding earlier issues which were not available. Articles—a total of 272 individual articles—are classified according to the following categories:

- **Topic.** An article’s topic was noted but not classified or recorded. All articles are normative expressions of one kind or another, ranging from negatively critical views of business practice to those of a more moderate, accepting, reformist perspective.
- **Practice Oriented.** Articles containing information that is relevant to, helpful for, and practically useful in *business practice*, as contrasted with articles whose primary focus is on *abstract theory* of professional academic interest to business ethics scholars.
- **Industry.** Articles with a specific industry focus, e.g., banking, plus country or regional location of the industry.
- **Approach: Conceptual/Theoretical/Descriptive/Analytical.** A **conceptual** approach involves main reliance on well-known conceptual categories normally used in the field of business ethics and corporate social responsibility. A **theoretical** approach denotes an article devoted entirely or largely to discussion of various theoretical explanations of the problems and issues of business ethics. A **descriptive** approach involves discursive discussion describing some state of affairs or a specific issue or problem, sometimes involving personal opinion unsupported by research evidence, or being of an exploratory nature. An **analytical** approach includes any use of analytic technique or methodology, statistical or otherwise, as well as a reasoned approach to an article’s subject matter.

- **Discipline(s).** The use of one or more academic/scholarly disciplines, e.g., philosophy, economics, organizational science, etc.
- **Empirical Research.** Whether an article relies upon empirical research to elucidate a business ethics issue, problem, or situation.
- **Methods.** The type of investigative method employed, e.g., questionnaire.
- **References.** The primary national or regional source(s) of the literature cited.
- **Author affiliation.** The author(s)' organizational affiliation, by type and nation.

PART II. RESULTS BY CATEGORY

Practice Oriented

One of four major objectives of *BE:ER* is “to promote good ethical thinking *and practice* [emphasis added] at corporate and individual levels” as distinct from purely abstract theoretical issues. The classification of an article as practice-oriented or not involves a degree of subjective judgment, so there were some close calls that might be judged differently by other observers. Articles are categorized by “Yes, Practice-Oriented” or “No, Not Practice-Oriented”.

- Yes = 109 (40%)
- No = 163 (60%)

The significance of this division is discussed in Part III of this report.

Industry

Two kinds of information are revealed in this category: the specific industry-focus featured in some articles, and the variety of nations in which a specific industry's ethical or unethical business practices are examined.

Articles are categorized by “Specific industry focus” or “Industry not specified”. (Three articles are not classified in either category.)

- Specific industry focus = 67 (25%)
- Industry not specified = 202 (75%) In the three-quarters of the articles not focused on a specific industry, authors tend to generalize across all industry classifications. See additional commentary in Part III.

The specific industries identified are:

- Investment (12 articles)
- Auditing/Accounting (7)
- Teaching ethics (6)
- Internet-related (6)
- Oil (5)
- Banking (4)
- Pharmacy (3)

- Asbestos, retailing, weaponry, real estate, not-for-profit, alcoholic beverages (2 articles on each)
- Insurance, shipping, advertising, biotech, e-business, construction, supermarket, textile, child adoption, media, shoe manufacturing, and fast food (1 article on each).

The specific-industry articles display a rather wide geographical and national range, although they tend to be focused on UK-based and European industries. Due to the treatment of more than one industry by some articles, the total number of nations represented is 97.

- UK = 25 (26%)
- General Europe = 9 (9%)
- Spain = 7 (7%)
- Finland = 6 (6%)
- Israel = 5 (5%)
- China = 5 (5%)
- United States = 5 (5%)
- Sweden = 4 (4%)
- Turkey = 4 (4%)
- Africa = 4 (4%)
- Ireland = 3 (3%)
- Canada = 2 (2%)
- Russia = 2 (2%)
- India = 2 (2%)
- Asia = 2 (2%)
- Mauritius = 2 (2%)
- New Zealand, Netherlands, Germany, Australia, Poland, Estonia, Japan, 3rd World, Brazil = 1 each (1%)

Approach: Conceptual/Theoretical/Descriptive/Analytical

The distinction between **Conceptual** and **Theoretical** is admittedly tricky and imprecise but tends to mirror the difference between an “applied” article and a “pure” or “abstract” one. The purpose here is to give some insight into the journal’s objective “to offer rigorous . . . analysis of ethical issues”.

- **Descriptive** = 68 (25%)
- **Descriptive/Analytical** = 82 (30%)
- **Conceptual** = 67 (25%), including various combinations with **A** and **D**
- **Theoretical** = 45 (17%), including various combinations of **T/C/A/D**

Over half (55%) of the articles fall into the **D** or **D/A** category. An additional 6% are solely **Theoretical**. The **Conceptual** approach, in various combinations including **A**, **D**, and **T**, is found in 95 (35%) of the articles. The overall result is that **Descriptive** and **Descriptive/Analytical** articles predominate, followed by various **Conceptual** approaches, with **Theoretical** papers a distinct minority.

Disciplines

In this study, a total of 122 articles could be clearly identified as employing one or more scholarly disciplines. Some overlap exists in some of the categories. The percentages exceed 100 due to the combined use of disciplines in some articles.

- Social sciences = 46 (38%)
- Philosophy combined with another discipline = 28 (23%)
- Philosophy = 19 (16%)
- Organizational science = 10 (8%)
- Economic theory = 4 (3%)
- Economic theory combined with another discipline = 8 (7%)
- Business functional fields (accounting, finance, marketing) = 8 (7%)
- Human resource management theory = 5 (4%)
- Law and law combined with economics = 2 (1.5%)
- Religion = 2 (1.5%)
- Other = 3 (2.5%)

Overall, the use of a scientific discipline of some kind—when combined, they might be called “management science”—outnumbers philosophic approaches by a margin of 2 to 1. How this unevenness might affect understanding of business ethics is discussed in Part III.

Empirical Research

In addition to descriptive, discursive, speculative, and theoretically abstract ways of presenting ideas about business ethics, some scholars turn to empirical research as a way of elucidating issues and problems.

The 272 articles, contained in the 40 issues involved in this study, sort themselves out as follows regarding the use of empirical research:

- “Yes”, uses empirical research = 73 (27%)
- “No”, does not use empirical research = 199 (73%)

Half of the articles included in the “Yes” category are published in the most-recent 11 issues of the journal, representing about 3+ empirical research articles per journal issue. The first 29 journal issues contain around 1+ empirical research articles per issue. So, a slight trend toward greater reportage through empirical research is apparent. The reciprocal of this trend is that the greater number of all articles rely on less rigorously testable presentations.

Method(s)

In addition to advanced statistical and quantitative methods of analysis (not specifically tallied here) found in some of the 73 empirical research articles, the principal research methods are the following ones:

- **Questionnaires alone** = 20 (27%)
- **Questionnaires** combined with **Scenarios** = 9 (12%)
- **Questionnaires** combined with **Interviews** = 7 (10%)
- **Case or Incident analysis** = 18 (25%)
- **Data base analysis** = 17 (23%)
- **Focus group** = 2 (3%)

With questionnaires and case/incident analyses making up three-quarters of methods used, it is evident that the research reported in the 73 articles leans toward a somewhat soft version of empirical research.

References

Scholarly writing and reportage in any field is based upon, and ideally is an extension of, an existing base of research literature. Articles are typically judged by how thoroughly and effectively their authors display a familiarity with, and an ability to link their current efforts to, what has been recorded by their research predecessors. Thomas Kuhn labeled this kind of scientific writing and authentication a manifestation of “normal science”, whereas by contrast emergent paradigms reveal themselves when such existing knowledge bases no longer provide adequate answers facing scientific investigators. Additionally, scholarly references are a reflection, not just of an existing research tradition but also of specific sociocultural factors underlying and affecting scientific investigations. For that reason, one might normally expect that a business ethics journal whose “focus is primarily, though not exclusively, European” to publish articles derived from a referential base rooted not just in the normal-science literature of business ethics inquiry but also to a large extent in European sources.

In this study, articles are classified by the primary national or regional source(s) of the literature cited in the article’s bibliography. For example, an article drawing exclusively on United Kingdom sources is listed as “UK”, whereas one drawing mainly on UK sources but also including United States references is listed as “UK/US”. The major results of this rather imprecise classification of 257 articles are as follows (15 articles contained no references):

- UK/US = 38 (15%)
- US/UK = 28 (11%)
- UK = 20 (8%)
- US = 11 (4%)
- UK/Euro = 9 (3.5%)
- Euro/UK = 2 (1%)
- Any combination of UK/US/Euro in a single article = 79 (31%)
- Total of the above sources (UK, US, and Euro alone or combined) = 187 (73%)

These figures indicate that the dominant referential base is a combination of UK, US, and European sources. Two other measures reinforce this possibility:

- Articles drawing on any UK and/or Euro citation = 227 (88%)

- Articles drawing on any US citation = 209 (81%)

The other notable national or regional sources of research literature found in the articles are as follows:

- Scandinavia [Listed separately as a region of Europe] = 12 (5%)
- Australia = 6 (2%)
- China = 6 (2%)
- Israel = 5 (2%)
- Africa = 4 (1.5%)
- Other areas (Turkey, Canada, Latin America, Oceania, India, Mauritius) = 9 (3.5%)
- Global (defined as drawing on a worldwide range of sources) = 22 (9%)
- Internet websites = 19 (7%)

Part III of this report contains further observations about the significance of the Anglo-Saxon dominance found in the articles, particularly what it may reveal about the resiliency and relevance of current research in business ethics.

Author Affiliation

It should come as little surprise that the bulk of authors published in *BE:ER* are affiliated with universities in the United Kingdom and Europe (the organizational affiliation of the authors of 10 articles is not identified):

- UK university = 116 (44%)
- Other European university = 52 (20%) Netherlands (9), Spain (8), Finland (8), Sweden (6), Norway (5), Germany (3), Ireland (2), Denmark (2), France (2), and Greece, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Turkey, Hungary, and Croatia (1 each)
- UK/other university joint authorship (Greece, Spain, China, Egypt, New Zealand, Canada) = 6 (2%)
- US university = 19 (7%)
- US/other university joint authorship = 4 (1.5%)
- Other nation/region university (non-European, non-US university) = 38 (14%) Australia (8), Israel (7), China (6), Africa (5), Canada (4), Cyprus (2), Mauritius (2), and Oceania, Philippines, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (1 each)
- Practitioner/consultant = 21 (8%)
- NGO = 6 (2%)
- Government = 2 (1%)

A notable feature is the significant proportion (20%) of non-UK European universities represented, along with universities (14%) from beyond both UK/Europe and the United States. Joint authorship by scholars in two or more nations occurs but not frequently (3.5%). Nor are contributions by practitioners/consultants (8%) or NGO representatives (2%) numerous. Input from US universities is slight (8.5%).

PART III. SIGNIFICANCE

This content analysis of *Business Ethics: A European Review* provides insights that go beyond the question of this journal's leading role in advancing the cause of business ethics inquiry.

Cross-Atlantic Interchange and Reciprocal Influence

For better or worse, business ethics (BE) and corporate social responsibility (CSR), as formally organized fields of academy inquiry, "began" in the United States around the middle of the 20th century. As historians and cultural anthropologists will testify, the underlying phenomena of normatively-tinged business practice giving rise to this academic development extend far back into ancient times and are spread widely among the world's peoples. Questions about the propriety of business activities are as old as business itself. Setting aside the reasons why the United States context stimulated the more recent development, and acknowledging similar tendencies in other nations, it remains true that the greater amount of academic commentary and research has been generated at United States universities, particularly in the faculties of business schools (CSR) and philosophy departments (BE).

One might normally expect that body of academic literature to exert a compelling influence on new entrants to the field, particularly in those nations most closely linked by history and culture as are the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as other European nations. This report validates that expectation: citations to US-generated literature are found in 81% of the articles; and US references appear in combination with UK and European sources in 73% of the articles. However, total UK and European citations comprise 88% of the articles' references, giving a slight edge to these non-US sources. Only around 20% of the articles relied on literature originating outside the US/UK/Europe sphere of influence. And while this report does not correlate referential source with university affiliation, the greater part of the authorship (64%) derives from UK and other European universities whose faculty members rely heavily on US-based citations, thereby extending the influence of the US data base on UK/European and other non-US-based scholarship.

Frankly, and quite personally, I expected and feared that this heavy reliance on the US literature might be present among non-US academics. While attesting to normal, traditional academic routines and practices, such intellectual dependence may possibly lead to a perpetuation of concepts, theories, and habits of thought not entirely congenial to the needs of scholars in other nations. More seriously, new entrants to the field of inquiry might be led to believe that all of the needed conceptual and theoretical groundwork has been created, leaving only contextual elaboration as the next work to be accomplished. But is that true?

CSR/BE: Universalist or Home-Grown?

Closely related to the validating (scholarly) sources of new inquiry is the question of the behavioral/institutional/sociocultural meaning assigned to CSR and BE. If one works solely or primarily from an established base of previous research that is accepted as legitimate, the bias will be toward seeking and projecting a common, and perhaps even a universalist, meaning of CSR and BE consistent with that referential foundation (another

manifestation of Kuhnian normal science). Such a tendency is clearly present in much of today's CSR/BE literature, as evidenced in the columns of the several leading BE/CSR journals. Three widely-used concepts (among several others) illustrate the point, each presumed to be a valid way of addressing (and redressing) workplace normative issues *wherever they occur*: human rights, stakeholder claims, and corporate citizenship. Current CSR/BE inquiry is driven forward mainly by reliance on these and closely-related concepts.

If one then links the primacy of US/UK/Euro literature, as noted above, to the universalist presumption lying behind the use of key concepts, it would be possible to characterize much of today's CSR/BE inquiry as a type of ethno-imperialist scholarship, by which theories and research accepted as valid in one part of the world are projected, perhaps unconsciously, as valid in all regions and under all conditions where business is conducted. Today's "globalization" process, of course, reinforces and encourages such a trend.

This report is not the place to examine the pros and cons of this question. Its significance, though, lies in the kind of picture and inquiring structure projected by any given scholarly journal, including *BE:ER*. It suggests the need to provide room for the great sociocultural diversity of legal systems, religious beliefs, ownership rights and obligations, accounting and finance rules, market traditions, etc.—in short, all of the normative constraints comprising the core of moral guidance for business as practiced in any particular sociocultural context. Let the (conceptual) chips then fall where they may—as useful or in need of contextual reform. One cannot help but be impressed by the variety of European settings where there appears to be a rising awareness of what has been labeled "corporate social responsibility", "business ethics", and "corporate citizenship", along with the struggle to make those ideas meaningful under diverse levels of economic development, civic involvement, and geopolitical standing. Two books illustrate the point: Habisch et al., *Corporate Social Responsibility Across Europe* and MacIntosh et al., *Living Corporate Citizenship: Strategic Routes to Socially Responsible Business*.

BE:ER's editors by opening the journal's pages to a variety of authors from around the world (represented in 45% of the articles) who rely on sources from their own nations and regions (found in 26% of the articles) have indeed supported an openness and willingness to have its authors seek their own unique ways of approaching CSR and BE. A valuable service, indeed. Home-grown commentaries about the meaning and practice of CSR and BE are worth hearing in all sociocultural quarters.

Abstract versus Grounded Presentations

Admirably so, *BE:ER*'s articles tend toward a grounded quality not generally present in several other journals in the CSR/BE field. Some 40% of its articles are **practice-oriented** in the sense of presenting information that is practically relevant to the kinds of ethical issues that occur in the workplace. A **specific industry context**, along with that industry's particular problems, is discussed and analyzed in one-fourth of the articles, as contrasted with a one-size-fits-all approach employed by most CSR/BE scholars. The dominant approach of *BE:ER* authors (55% of them) is **Descriptive** and **Descriptive/Analytical**, a presentational mode that depends on a close understanding of "how things really are". Moreover, reliance on a grounded **scientific discipline** of one

kind or another—as contrasted with abstract philosophic discussion—is favored by over two-thirds of the authors. While it is true that empirical research comprises only one-fourth of the contributions, the recent trend is upward.

Readability and Accessibility

BE:ER seeks to provide its readers with “readable commentaries on current issues and developments”. I believe it succeeds in doing so: the language is straightforward, academic jargon and complex statistical analyses are kept to a decent minimum, the issues addressed are current, the workplace problems are of compelling significance, the format is open and inviting, and the selection of topics diverse. For a journal that caters to a pan-European, multilingual audience, those qualities are as admirable and necessary as they are rare. Practitioner input is slight in quantity and quality, and *BE:ER* is only marginally more likely than similar CSR/BE journals to be found on workplace shelves. Add it all up, and the result is extremely worthwhile for practitioners and scholars alike who seek a clearer understanding of corporate social responsibility and business ethics.