

**“Viewing Business Ethics: From Olympian Heights or Factory Floor?”  
COMPARING U.S. AND EUROPEAN BUSINESS ETHICS JOURNALS**

William C. Frederick, August 2007

As a follow-up to the preceding report on *Business Ethics: A European Review (BE:ER)*, and to place that journal in a larger context of other business ethics journals, I conducted a similar but smaller-scale content analysis of one of the leading business ethics journals published in the United States. A small sample was chosen, consisting of one (the same sequentially numbered) issue of the US journal for each year from 1998 to 2006, which were the same years used for the analysis of *BE:ER*. A total of 58 articles from these nine issues was examined and the contents were classified by the same categories used in the preceding study of *BE:ER*. Book reviews and responses were excluded.

The same caveat is noted here as in the *BE:ER* case (pun intended!): A fair degree of subjective judgment occurs in both studies; the sample is consistent (same sequentially numbered issue each year) but not random; and the method of content analysis employed here (and previously) is less than rigorous.

A comparative analysis follows the tabulated results.

### **RESULTS BY CATEGORY**

#### **Topic of Article**

The normal range of topics expected in a journal of business ethics was observed. No attempt is made here to list, describe, or classify these topics.

#### **Practice-Oriented**

- Yes, practice-oriented = 38%
- No, not practice-oriented = 62%

#### **Industry**

Ten specific industries were identified as the focus of a single article: marketing/advertising (2), fast-food, financial services, personnel marketing, pharmaceuticals (2), military base, automobile, and extractive, representing 17% of all articles.

#### **Approach: Conceptual/Theoretical/Descriptive/Analytical**

- Conceptual (including any combination with other categories) = 42%
- Theoretical (any combination) = 32%
- Descriptive (any combination) = 21%
- Analytical (any combination) = 5%

### **Discipline(s)**

- Philosophy (any combination including other disciplines) = 35%
- Law (any combination) = 21%
- Organization theory (any combination) = 12%
- Economic theory (any combination) = 9%
- Human resource management (any combination) = 8%
- Psychology (any combination) = 5%
- Other = 11%

### **Empirical Research**

- Articles reporting empirical research = 9%
- Articles reporting no empirical research = 91%

### **Methods**

Research methods used, plus appropriate analytic techniques:

- Survey questionnaires = 44%
- Cases and case incident = 22%
- Data base analysis = 22%
- Scenario analysis = 11%

### **References**

- United States-based (any combination with other categories) = 60% of articles
- United Kingdom-based (any combination) = 13%
- Europe-based (any combination) = 9%
- Internet-based (any combination) = 8%
- Global-based sources (any combination) + other = 7%

### **Author Affiliation**

- United States university = 78%
- European university = 11%
- Other = 10%

### **Author Disciplinary/Departmental Base**

Note: This item was not identified in the *BE:ER* study.

- Philosophy (any combination with other categories) = 61%
- Law (any combination) = 16%
- Organization theory (any combination) = 15%
- Economic theory (any combination) = 5%

- Theology (any combination) = 3%

## HOW DO THE TWO JOURNALS COMPARE?

As the saying goes, the devil is in (or revealed by) the details.

- The journals are about equally devoted to—or shy of—**practice-oriented** information, discussion, and analysis: around a 40-60 “deficit” of practice-oriented material. The tacit message to practitioners: look elsewhere if you seek guidance on how to cope with on-the-job ethics issues and problems.
- **Specific industry focus** is all but absent in the US journal, while readers of *BE:ER* are much more likely to find industry-focused information (25% of the latter’s articles deal with a specific industry setting), as well as industries in various nations. In this sense, *BE:ER* is far more grounded in the specifics of industrial operations and their ethical dimensions, and it provides a wider global industrial perspective.
- A similar feature is revealed in the extent of **empirical research** found in these two journals. Again, only 9% of the US journal’s articles are empirical in approach and content, which means that 91% are pure rhetoric. The British-based *BE:ER*, on the other hand, displays empiricism in over one-quarter of its articles—not an outstanding escape from unsupported rhetorical dialogue but at least a step in a desirable direction. Research **methods** in both journals tend to favor questionnaire surveys (about 50%) distributed to sample populations with typically low response rates. Case and incident analysis (about 25%) and data base analysis (about 25%) are typical of both journals. First-rate comprehensive, sophisticated analytical research methods appear occasionally, but too rarely, in both journals.
- Equally revealing differences are the comparative **approaches** found. Conceptual (42%) and theoretical (32%) approaches dominate the US journal, with descriptive (21%) and analytical (5%) bringing up the rear. The European approach favors descriptive (25%) and descriptive-analytical (30%), while conceptual (25%) and theoretical (17%) are in the minority, thereby reversing the US style of analysis. Does that say something about the greater practical relevance of Europe-based ethics analysis when compared with US-based approaches? I think so. Or does it say that US business ethicists are obsessed with conceptual and theoretical issues while ignoring the practical ethics issues that are everyday occurrences in the workplace? Perhaps so.
- Part of the answer to these questions may be hinted at in the **discipline(s)** most favored by authors in the US journal. Philosophy led the way with 35% of the articles drawing on that approach; in *BE:ER* it was only 23%. Social sciences were used 38% by *BE:ER* authors but only 14% by US journal authors. Law at 21% was the second most favored discipline in the US but used in only 1.5% of European articles.
- An author’s **disciplinary or department base** also provides commentary on the preferred way to discuss ethics matters (as noted above, this information was not sought in the *BE:ER* study). Philosophy was the majority base of authors in the US journal at 61%. Law (16%) and organization theory (15%) together accounted for

about one-third of the articles. Economics (5%) and theology (3%) were at the tail end. Philosophers obviously have found a receptive home in the US journal, helping to account for the heavy reliance on theoretical and conceptual approaches as contrasted with empirical, analytical, and even descriptive accounts.

- The **referential base** of each journal reflects its geographical location, as might be expected. US-based references are found in 60% of the articles in the US journal, with another 22% based on UK/European sources. In *BE:ER* around 38% of articles draw significantly on UK/European references. The US influence on *BE:ER*'s authors is also strongly expressed through their citations to US literature in 81% of the articles, which is somewhat counterbalanced by various combinations of UK/European citations in 88% of the articles.
- The same national and regional bias is present in the **organizational affiliation** of authors. *BE:ER*'s writers are from universities in the UK (44%) and other European nations (20%), with only 7% located in US universities. As expected, some 78% of US journal authors are faculty members at US universities, with European universities represented in 11% of the articles. *BE:ER* however is notable by opening its pages to non-US and non-European authors (14% of the total). This global diversity of authorship is not present in the US journal, nor can it match the European journal's authors who are practitioners, consultants, NGO representatives, and government officials (a total of 11%).

## CONCLUSION

Can it therefore be said that one of these journals is "better" than the other? Most certainly not, on the basis of these two less-than-rigorous content surveys. However, hints abound of the kind of readership sought or cultivated by the respective journals, as well as the possible results achieved in each case.

The European *BE:ER* appears to serve a two-layer readership:

- academic scholars who teach, research, promote, and/or critique business ethics from a discursive/descriptive/analytical perspective, and
- business and management practitioners with an interest in workplace ethics issues and problems as clarified by case/incident/scenario analysis performed in specific industry contexts

In this sense, *BE:ER* communicates a sense of practitioner outreach, with emphasis on how workplace ethics is affected by type of business, industry history, and national culture. It projects a factory floor perspective.

The US journal appears to favor an authorship (and therefore readership?) of academic scholars who specialize in teaching and writing about business ethics:

- Here, too, as in *BE:ER*, one finds articles written primarily by academicians but from a rather abstract theoretical and conceptual perspective at considerable remove from day-to-day workplace activities and with little specific industry focus.

- A general impression is left that the US journal's authors are talking principally among and to themselves rather than speaking directly or specifically to the perceived normative needs of business practitioners. The view tends toward the Olympian.

In conclusion, I do not venture a judgment about the scholarly quality of these two journals beyond saying that both contain a few articles of outstanding scholarly merit, along with a number of pieces best described as "fluff" or "bonzos". The large majority of articles appear to achieve what the respective editors have sought in each case: to clarify in the minds of both scholars and practitioners the sources, puzzles, and potential solutions to ethical dilemmas in the workplace.