# From the Editors

Past Trends and Future Directions in Business Ethics and Corporate Responsibility Scholarship

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of *Business Ethics Quarterly*, we took the opportunity to catalog and categorize all of the articles published in *BEQ* volumes 1-25. Our intention was to learn more about what the journal has published over its entire history, to explore particular publication trends—especially over the last ten years—and to identify potential gaps in scholarship and areas where more scholarly attention is needed. Because *BEQ* has been the highest ranked (by a variety of objective measures) and consistently most selective journal in the field of business ethics and corporate responsibility for many years, the resulting analysis provides important insight into the most significant scholarly trends and developments in the field.

To categorize contributions to the journal, we reviewed all articles published in the journal (but not book reviews or book review articles or editorials) and placed each article into a single category. Typically a theme needed five articles in order to be created. Specific themes emerged (e.g., stakeholder theory, labor and employment ethics, virtue theory, and governance) with many articles. In other cases, the article did not fit into a specific theme but did fit into a general category of scholarship (e.g., conceptual analysis, normative analysis, and global business ethics). Many articles could appropriately be placed into two or more categories, but in all cases we limited each article to a single theme or category and always opted for the most specific theme among available options. Tables 1 and 2 present the major and minor themes published in the journal over its full, twenty-five year history. Tables 3 and 4 present the major and minor themes published over the last ten years and so represent the most current trends in scholarship.

BEQ may be considered by some to be primarily a normative ethics journal, but the evidence of what we have published over the last twenty-five years makes plain that normative work is just one aspect of what *BEQ* authors have contributed to scholarship (e.g., Blanc and Al-Amoudi, 2013; Brenkert, 2000; Buchanan, 1996; Eastman and Santoro, 2003; Koehn, 2013; Moberg, 1994; Werhane and Gorman, 2005). The single largest category is comprised of conceptual scholarship, with over 100 conceptual articles published (e.g., Donaldson, 2000; Duska, 2014; Elms, Brammer, Harris, Phillips, 2010; Goodpaster, 2000; Heugens and Scherer, 2010; Scott, 2002; Sen, 1993; Smith and Dubbink, 2011; Smith, Gonin, and Besharov, 2013; Weaver and Trevino, 1994), not including the stand alone themes of corporate social responsibility and stakeholder theory, which include primarily articles undertaking conceptual or empirical analysis. *BEQ* also published over seventy articles

Table 1: 25 Years of *Business Ethics Quarterly* - The Major Themes (5% & more of the total data)
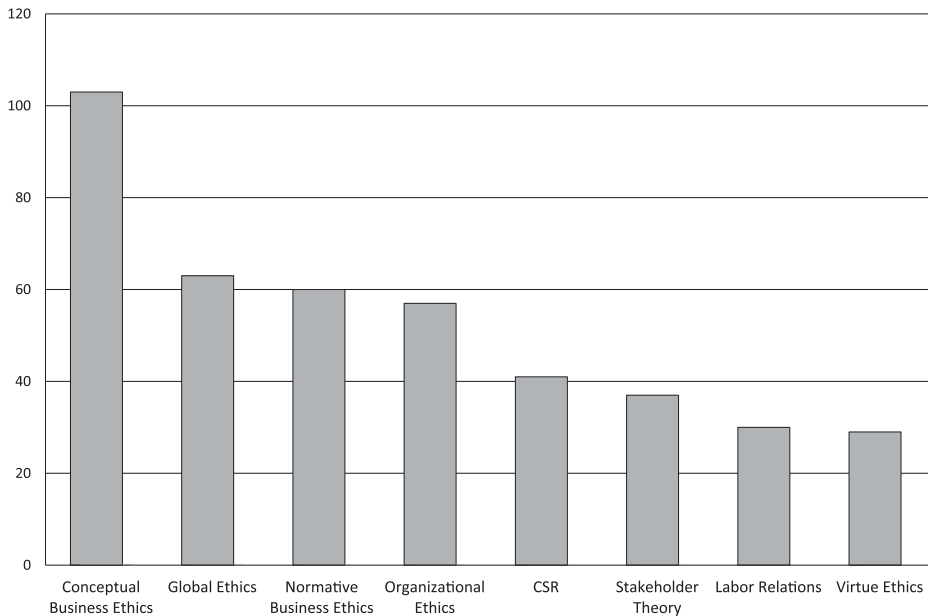
on organizational ethics (e.g., Ashkanasy, Windsor and Trevino, 2006; Dalton and Metzger 1992; Jones and Ryan, 1998; Rupp and Bell, 2010; McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield, 1996; Stansbury and Barry, 2007; Trevino, 1992; Weaver and Trevino, 1999; Reynolds and Bowie, 2003; Warren, Gaspar and Laufer, 2014) and leadership (e.g., Ciulla, 1995; Neubert, Wu, and Roberts, 2013; Pain, 1996; Rubin, Dierdorff and Brown, 2010; Taylor and Pattie; 2014), again with a heavy emphasis on conceptual and empirical work.

In the earlier years of *BEQ*, there was a particular concern with the *stakeholder* paradigm of fiduciary duty as contrasted with a wider *stockholder* paradigm of normativity applied to the organizational unit of analysis (e.g., Boatright, 1994; 1994; Goodpaster, 1991; Freeman, 1994; Freeman and Phillips, 2002; Hosseini and Brenner, 1992; Marens and Wicks 1999; Phillips, 1997; 2003). As indicated in Figure 1,[1] in the last ten years there has been a notable drop off in the number of articles on stakeholder theory published in *BEQ*, but this has been counterbalanced by increased numbers of stakeholder theory articles being published in high quality general management outlets.[2] Likewise, work in organization business ethics has gone "mainstream" with work on these issues being published in many different management and applied psychology outlets.[3] In recent years, we have seen increased attention to corporate responsibility in the pages of *BEQ*, in part because of the development of political corporate responsibility as a new research stream (e.g., Carroll, 2000; Dunfee, 2006; Glavas and Kelley, 2014; Gond, Palazzo, and Basu, 2009; Karam and Jamali, 2013; Madsen and Bingham, 2014; Moon, Crane, and Matten, 2005; Néron, 2008; Norman and MacDonald, 2004; Orlitzky, 2011; Wettstein, 2012). Articles dealing with global business ethics have also increased
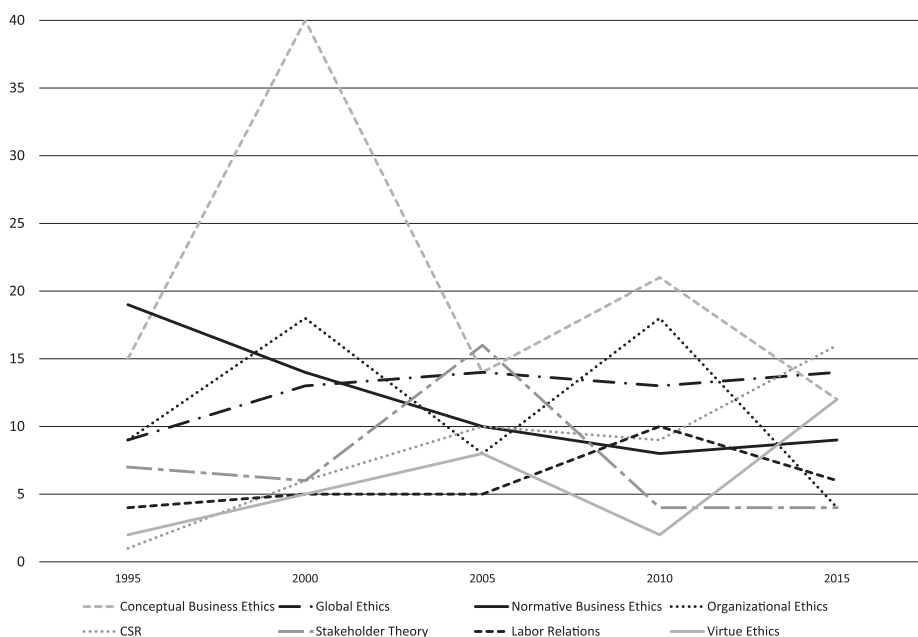
Figure 1: 25 Year Trends (8 major themes)

(e.g., Arnold, 2010; Arnold, 2013; Benham and MacLean, 2011; Cragg, 2012; Gilbert, Rasche and Waddock, 2011; Hsieh, 2006, 2009; Kobrin, 2009; Muchlinski, 2012; Sama, 2006; Santoro, 2010; Scherer, Palazzo, and Baumann, 2006; Shivarajan and Srinivasan, 2013; Sidani and Thornberry, 2013). This is likely due both to the importance of global trade in the 21st century and to the emergence of new global governance norms regarding business and human rights. Attention to virtue theory has spiked in recent years (e.g., Beabout, 2012; Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2014; Hartman, 2008; Moore, 2008; Payne, Brigham, Broberg, Moss, and Short, 2011;. Sison and Fontrodona, 2012), but it is also true that much important work needs to be done to situate and contextualize the role of virtue in the broader range of business ethics and corporate responsibility scholarship. For example, increased attention is needed to help understand the place of virtue in organizational ethics and corporate governance and in relation to human rights and sustainability.

BEQ fosters true *dialogue* between the disciplines and its articles therefore need to be *accessible* to multiple disciplines. We can't have philosophers writing only for philosophers and social scientists only for social scientists, because this leads to silos in the readership rather than genuine dialogue. Looking forward, we encourage more cross disciplinary or multidisciplinary research, scholarship that is as sophisticated with respect to say, corporate governance as it is with respect to political philosophy, or scholarship that bridges the gap between research on corporate ontology and empirical research on organizational ethics and compliance programs. We need deeper probes into "thick" theories of the good (i.e., more attention to *normativity* when it comes to the "goods and services" of business).

Table 2: 25 Years of *Business Ethics Quarterly* - The Minor Themes (each less than 5% of the total data)
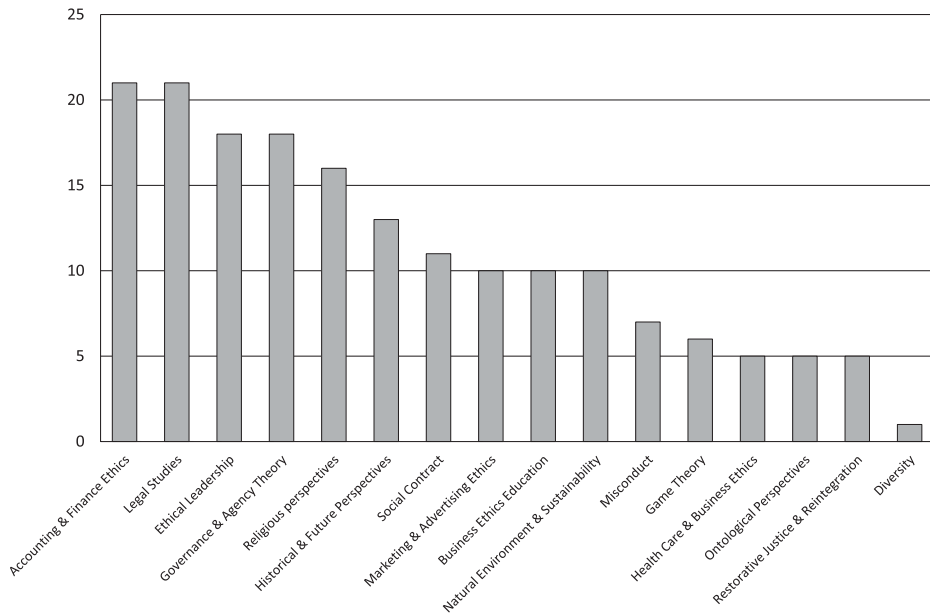
We also need deeper probes into the interface between virtue ethics and business education, i.e., the formation process of future business leaders in the academy. High quality, theoretically motivated research needs to be done to advance understanding of business ethics education and training. Topical areas where there have been relatively few contributions in recent years (e.g., philosophically rich discussions of unethical and ethical leadership, organizational misconduct, marketing ethics, agency theory, business and the natural environment, including discussions of climate change and sustainability, and ethics in financial services) also merit the attention of scholars.

The recent, growing literature on business and human rights, much of it published in *BEQ,* has been dominated by theoretical perspectives, typically from a philosophical or legal perspective. But rigorous empirical studies on the human rights practices of transnational companies and other businesses are needed to advance understanding in the new era of business and human rights inaugurated by the United Nations' adoption of the tripartite framework on business and human rights.

With respect to empirical research in behavioral business ethics, several trends are obvious and, along with them, several absences are noticeable as well. The rapid growth in micro-level behavioral studies of ethical behavior is the most noticeable change from as little as a decade ago. Collectively, this work reveals a multitude of interesting dynamics in the process leading to ethical and unethical behavior by individual actors, often with attention to direct influences from surrounding organizational contexts. At the same time, certain limitations to this work also are clear. First, the normative perspective implicit in such work often is limited to "WEIRD" morality (i.e., the morality of Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic societies; Henrich, Heine,

Table 3: The Past Decade of *Business Ethics Quarterly* - The Major Themes (5% & more of the total data)
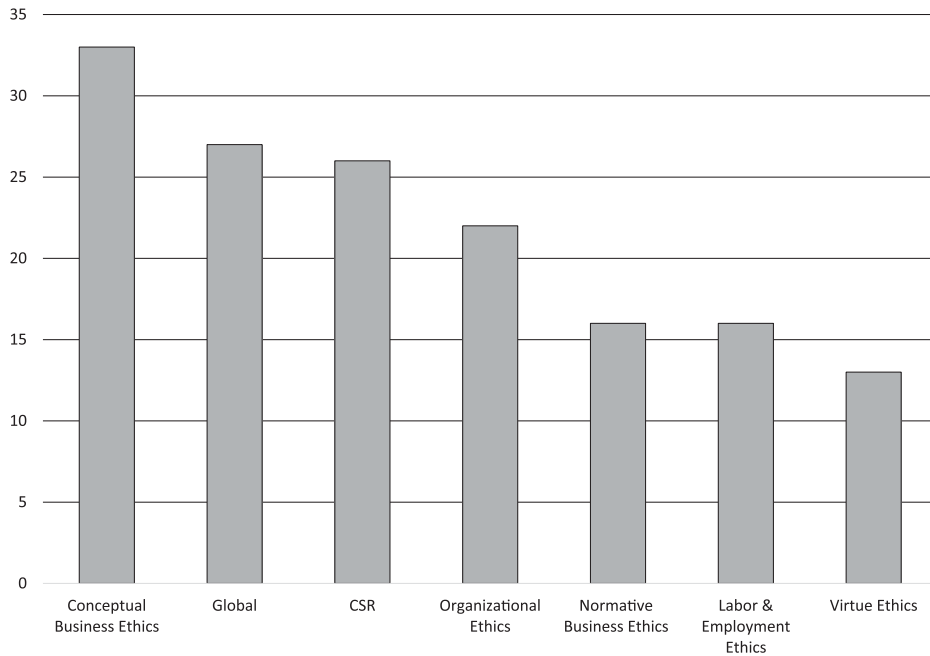
and Norenzayan, 2010a, 2010b). Behaviors relevant to characteristic WEIRD concerns of harm, fairness, rights, etc. receive much attention; behaviors relevant to the ethical concerns of other cultures receive relatively little attention. To some extent this is understandable; such alternative moral perspectives likely are outside the personal experience of many, if not most, Western-based scholars. But it nevertheless is a significant limitation on the scope of empirical business ethics research. It also seems a limitation on normative research as well, with its conventional emphasis on issues of harm, fairness, and rights with regard to various stakeholders.) *BEQ* has strong record of theoretical scholarship on Confucian ethics over the last fifteen years (e.g., Kim, 2014; Kim and Strudler, 2012; Koehn, 2001; Romar, 2004; Strudler, 2008) and more recently has published empirical scholarship in Arab contexts (Karam and Jamali 2013; Sidani and Thornberry, 2013), but more work is needed.

Secondly, such approaches sometimes can be too "micro," or too individualistic, in their focus. That is, they risk failing to consider how ethical practices emerge *over time* as collective achievements (or collective failures), treating them as more synchronic, and less diachronic, than in fact they might be. What is needed, in that regard, is the addition of insights from other social science fields, such as sociology and cultural anthropology, to the already obvious reign of social psychology in the empirical study of business ethics. Such fields have noticeable influence in other areas of organizational inquiry; there is no reason why they should not have a more prominent role in the study of business ethics.

Table 4: The Past Decade of *Business Ethics Quarterly* - Minor Themes (Each less than 5% of the total data)
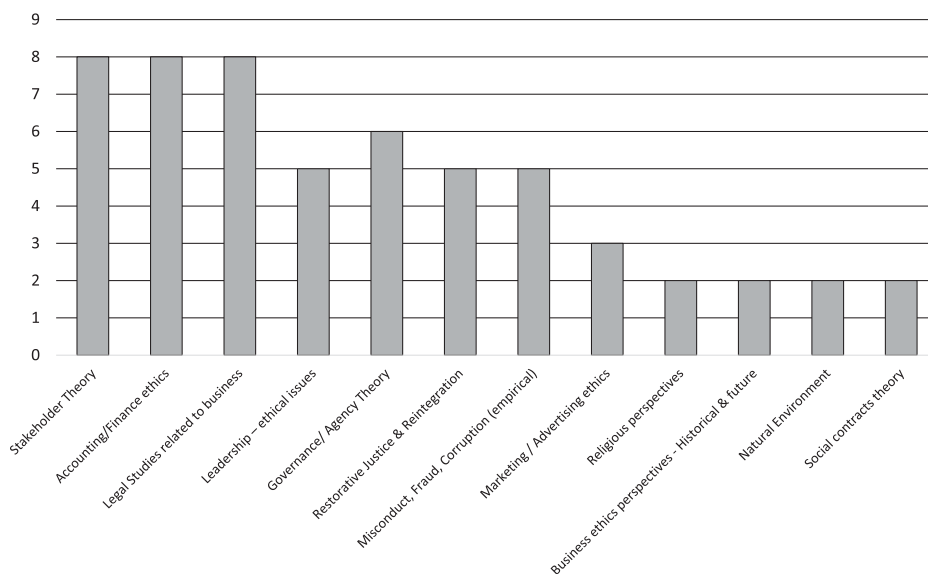
More generally, business ethics research, both empirical and normative, seems focused on either the isolated individual or group actor(s) in their immediate context, or in the context of the large corporation (e.g., empirical studies of corporate social responsibility and its connection to financial performance; institutional influences on CSR; managing ethics in large organizations; etc.). But many, perhaps most, persons (outside of a few wealthy nations) work in other kinds of contexts (e.g., small or family businesses). On what basis do we assume that the ethical dynamics of the isolated individual or group, or of the large (multinational) corporation, are the same as those within small businesses?

We hope to see more scholarly energy devoted to topics and themes discussed above, with particular efforts to moving discussion beyond those topics which one can always expect to see "on the program" at the Society for Business Ethics Annual Conference and other business ethics, business and society, and corporate responsibility conferences. The difficult task for business ethics and corporate responsibility scholars will be to approach such topics in ways that are novel and important without being naïve or dismissive. As always, *BEQ* will continue to welcome a diversity of theoretical perspectives, written in different scholarly styles, so that we continue to publish the best business ethics scholarship from any disciplinary perspective while recognizing that much of the groundbreaking scholarship to be published in the future will be multidisciplinary in nature.

Denis G. Arnold, Editor in Chief
Kenneth E. Goodpaster, Associate Editor
Gary R. Weaver, Senior Associate Editor and former Editor in Chief

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NOTES

1. Our analysis of trends is constrained by the breadth and diversity of contributions to the field. Figure 1 includes only the major themes and excludes the minor themes, many of which include articles that would count as either normative or conceptual if they were re-categorized into those categories.

2. A review of high quality management journals (*Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Administrative Science Quarterly, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Strategic Management Journal*) reveals that from 1991-2004 twenty-four articles with an explicit focus on stakeholder theory were published and from 2005-2015 thirty-five articles with an explicit focus on stakeholder theory were published, suggesting that stakeholder theory has become a mainstream research topic in management journals in recent years.

3. This point was emphasized by Linda Trevino in her remarks at the panel discussion on recent trends in research published in *Business Ethics Quarterly*, a part of the 25th Anniversary Celebration of *Business Ethics Quarterly* at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Business Ethics, August 7, 2015 in Vancouver, BC.

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