

JBE Virtual Special Issue on Sociology and Business Ethics

Abstract for website

This virtual special issue of the Journal of Business Ethics is dedicated to the role that social theory and sociological research can play in understanding business ethics in the contemporary world. Articles have been selected for this virtual special issue that highlight the insights provided by the long tradition of sociological theorising, that focus upon enduring social problems and which deal with particularly 21st century issues. Whilst this selection of material is prefaced with some editorial comments explaining the significance of each individual article and how they might be thought to offer a relatively coherent approach to sociology and business ethics - thereby giving a strong flavour of what Journal of Business Ethics regards as important work in this area - these articles are by no means exhaustive in their topic coverage. Hopefully this collection will encourage you as the reader to consider a wider range of Journal of Business Ethics articles or perhaps to submit work in the general field of sociology yourself.

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Sociology and Business Ethics: A Virtual Special Issue

This is new format for Journal of Business Ethics, what we are calling a 'virtual special issue', is designed to draw together previously published work at the journal on a particular theme or issue in order to make a comment on the current and future state of debate around this topic. This first virtual special issue is comprised of papers previously published in the Journal of Business Ethics. As such all editorial decisions regarding their publication were made prior to and independent of their selection for this virtual special issue. They have been re-selected here to show the range and depth of material that might well be published in future issues of the Journal in the area of 'Sociology and Business Ethics'.

The structure of the discipline of sociology, deeply embedded within universities across the world, has produced approaches with specific audiences, theoretical and methodological frameworks and organizational dynamics that often do not sit well with an interest in business ethics. Intensive work at the specific tasks of specialization and boundary maintenance mean that schools of management and departments of sociology seldom consider issues of common interest. Yet this boundary spanning, interdisciplinary work does exist and this section is meant to appeal to and provide space for such publications. Are there sociological concerns, of either a conventional or a more critical bent, which business ethicists should take more seriously? Can business ethics illuminate the interconnected worlds of consumption, production and reproduction where these meet in individual behaviors, group dynamics, organizational life and state practices? Do the sociological classics and subsequent social science writers of the 20th and 21st centuries illuminate ethical issues in ways which other disciplines do not?

It should be noted that in the UK at least, there has been a disappearance of the sociology of work and of organizations from University Sociology Departments. Instead this material is predominantly taught in Schools of Management **and** Business Schools. The difference between these two institutional forms is not glaringly obvious because there is mobility between the two and the unenlightened use the term interchangeably. There is not room in an introduction such as this to unravel the complexities of this linguistic distinction between types of school; suffice it to say Schools of

Management tend to look at management in action across all organizational forms whether in the voluntary sector, the commercial sector or located in the State. Business Schools offer less coverage and, as the name suggests, look only to management in the industrial, service and post-industrial sectors of the capitalist economy. This tension between breadth of coverage and depth of analysis may be over-egged but for some of us it is a real distinction with real consequences.

One might imagine then if this diagnosis is anyway near correct that the subject of 'Business' Ethics would originate in Business Schools with a noticeable tapering interest in Schools of Management and a relative shortage of interest in Sociology Departments 'proper'. In the case of Management Schools and Business Schools this is in fact not the case. Indeed it is the reverse. More work on Business Ethics is being done in Schools of Management than in Business Schools because of the narrow curriculum and MBA focus of the latter. These need not be antithetical to a concern for ethics and moral issues but in action they do seem to foster much more concern for pragmatic, unencumbered perspectives to making money. When it comes to Sociology Departments in this triangle of possibilities, it is our view that JBE would be a good home for sociological work on Business Ethics originating in Sociology Departments.

So in order to widen the appeal of Business Ethics in general, and Journal of Business Ethics in particular, to authors in Business Schools on one hand and those in Sociology Departments on the other, we have undertaken a judicious selection of articles to whet the appetite.

In this selection of previously published pieces in JBE, there has been an attempt to highlight pieces that are sociological in orientation and which bring to the readership insights generated from within that disciplinary field. Some articles re-published here originally dealt with sociological theory, some with classic issues within contemporary sociology such as the home, the family and work and some with issues that have come to the fore in the 21st century such as the nature of the body and of globalization.

The first three pieces deal with different approaches to Sociological Theory. John Hendry deals with that theorist of morality under industrialisation par excellence- Emile Durkheim. In *After Durkheim: An Agenda for the Sociology of Business Ethics* (Hendry, 2001) there is a sociological consideration of Durkheim's work and its relevance to business ethics well over 100 years after it was penned. Hendry argues that the rise of economic self-interest within

market structures in the 21st century resonates with Durkheim's concern for the stability of society. Whilst the old professions within France did show some adherence to extant moral codes, Durkheim's concern was that business felt unfettered by such matters. Economic contracts and egoistic self-interest had replaced those moral codes previously governing the upper middle classes. There must be moral discipline in place of individual appetites argued Durkheim. Today, says Hendry, the marketization of so many aspects of economic and social life has made these pressures to worship individual appetites rather than codes of morality even stronger. He asks three research questions which still pertain. Are there different moral codes inside and outside business? What is the nature of their relationship? And what would a society or an organization look like that was totally driven by self-interest and totally neglectful of seeking a shared moral order? These questions drive much of the current debates in business ethics even if the notion of what is defined as 'moral' and how one recognises, methodologically, a single 'moral code' both remain problematic.

William Shaw (2009) in his article entitled *Marxism, Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility* looks at that other sociological great of the 19th century, Karl Marx and at his relevance for today. These two great sociologists, both originating from close to the Rhineland are often seen as offering very distinct approaches to society and its moral fabric. Whilst both identified the massive socio-economic shifts that were occurring in their worlds and the ruptures with the past that these changes entailed, the nature of the diagnosis and prognosis each offered was very different. A Marxist theory based on the notion of 'alienation' as at the heart of enormous shifts in how humanity is seen within the moral order do not sit at all well with Durkheim's concept of 'anomie' which does not begin with economic property rights at its core but focuses rather on shifts in value systems. Moreover, whilst Durkheim conceivably would have more than tolerated the notion of 'corporate social responsibility', indeed he may well have welcomed it, the Marxist tradition has eschewed belief in the possibility of any capitalist corporation behaving in a socially responsible way. Shaw's argument, intended for a Chinese audience, is that corporate social responsibility is indeed compatible with Marxism.

Jean-Michel Plane's (2000) article *The Ethnomethodological Approach to Management: A New Perspective on Constructivist Research* considers the relevance of that West Coast US phenomenon –ethnomethodology -which was claimed at one time by its founder, Harold Garfinkel (1968), to be indifferent to

sociological concerns whilst at the same time reflecting them very well. By this one means that ethnomethodology was concerned with how the sociologist did her or his work and what their relationship was with their subject matter—often at the cost of neglecting the subject matter itself. To be an ethnomethodologist at one time was seen as heretical by those sociologists committed to more traditional positivistic methods. For ethnomethodology was all about understanding everyday conventions by which we as sociologists negotiated our way around the ‘real world’. Everyday life involves a significant practical accomplishment by the human being and a constant process of engaging in reflexivity is necessary. Traditional sociology had missed this crucial set of tasks in establishing a moral order by which we understand our place in the world.

All three of these pieces, on Durkheim, on Marx, and on ethnomethodology reflect the importance of theory and on what theoretical object we seek to engage with, for illuminating issues at the heart of business ethics.

In the second section of selected items the focus is upon those perennial concerns of mainstream Sociology—work, home and the media. Colin Boyd (2010) in his *The Debate over the Prohibition of Romance in the Workplace* from looks at the literature on sex and sexuality in the workplace where ethical issues present HR managers with many problems. It is widely recognised that many of us meet our partners in the work sphere so this is not a minor issue of gossip. But the very fact that it is such a major topic of discourse in organizational settings does reflect on its importance to human interests and understanding.

Susanne Tietze, Lynette Harris and Gillian Musson (2002) wrote a piece entitled *When ‘Work’ comes Home: Coping Strategies of Teleworkers and their Families* (see Erratum for missing names in Vol 43:4, 2004 p 395). This relates to the huge Western problem of the collapse of a previous separation since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution between work and home, work and leisure.

And tied in with the electronic envelopes which most Westerners have decided to carry around them, cocooning them in a digital world, Larry Boone and Christine MacDonald’s (2009) piece on *Broadcasting Operation Iraqi Freedom: The People behind Cable News Ethics, Decisions and Gender* shows that the home media we possess and our digital platforms in general have ethical issues

running right through them. Today, Sociology has become really good at understanding these forms of mass communication and as a topic the ways in which we are led to understand the world in a variety of controlled and heavily structured ways has become a central disciplinary concern.

In the final section of this Virtual Special Issue we look briefly at two 21st century concerns that Sociology brings to the fore. These are issues connected on one hand (so to speak) The Body and on the other Globalization. These may be thought of as the micro and the macro respectively that are today highly intertwined and are moved between much faster than we might imagine. For example, the human body of the individual is now a target for pharmaceutical companies, health clubs, and a whole host of goods and services around fitness and wellbeing. Our bodies are also the focus of State regimes in which our health, and the costs it represents to the tax payer, is an issue of national concern. So one can move from the body to the organizational or state level of analysis very easily by tracing those who are interested in what Michel Foucault called 'bio-power'(Cisney and Morar 2016). But bio-power can take the sociologist to the global level of analysis very quickly too by looking at international control of the movement of bodies in space, at how some 'mobilities' as John Urry (2007) would have called them, are welcomed and others discouraged. How globalisation opens up the vast majority of the world's population for economic activity based around the market rather than pre-existing forms of self-sufficiency and family based social control is a major sociological shift in itself. And perhaps it is in this area in particular that much more research needs to be done by Business Ethics scholars to include those parts of humanity who are entering market relations for the first time and are forced to abandon traditional means of understanding their moral existence.

In the article by Chris MacDonald and Bryn Williams-Jones (2002) *Ethics and Genetics: Susceptibility Testing in the Workplace* found, the authors look towards genetic testing that was just being developed at the time they wrote. This has huge implications for all human beings which are being increasingly recognised. Our final piece in this Virtual Special issue is by Beverley Metcalfe (2008) on *Women, Management and Globalization in the Middle East*. This was originally published in 2008 and considers the impact of globalisation on

women outside 'the 'west'. It reminds us that many of our assumptions are laden with values of which we may well be unaware.

These eight articles, published over a number of years in JBE are offered as food for thought but also, indeed primarily, as invitations to readers in Business Schools, Schools of Management and in Departments of Sociology to see JBE as a vehicle for publishing your work in the space and place which is 'Sociology and Business Ethics'. We hope your interest is stirred by this collection.

Code of Ethics

Conflict of Interest: None

Ethical approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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