BUSINESS ETHICS RESEARCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
MAPPING THE INTELLECTUAL STRUCTURE OF BUSINESS ETHICS STUDIES IN 2001-2008

This study examined the status of contemporary business ethic research in the new century. With citation data of SSCI from the top two business ethics journals, Journal of Business Ethics and Business Ethics Quarterly, this study used citation and co-citation analysis to identify the most important publications, scholars, and research themes in business ethics area, and then mapped the intellectual structure of business ethics studies. The results help profile the invisible network of knowledge production in business ethics and provide important insights on current research paradigms of business ethics studies.

Business ethics grew out of religion’s interest in ethics in business and management education’s concern with social issues (De George, 1987). The history of ethics in business is a long one, going back to the beginning of business, yet the history of business ethics is brief and some might even claim business ethics is too recent a phenomenon to have a history. In his review on the status of business ethics development, De George (1987) argued that business ethics had gradually developed into an interdisciplinary field and that the research on business ethics had experienced five different stages in the past decades until the middle of 1980s, including the ethics in business stage (prior 1960), the rise of social issues in business (in the 1960s), the rise of business ethics as an emerging field (in the 1970s), the initial consolidation period (the first half of the 1980s), and the refinement and further development of business ethics (after 1985). Research in business ethics area has since developed rapidly, yet no recent study has examined contemporary business ethics research ever since then and it is not very clear how the contemporary business ethics research has evolved, what is the status of the present business ethics studies, and what are their key research themes. The objective of this study is to bridge the gap by providing business ethics researchers with an overview of contemporary business ethics related publications in the 21st century and to map the objective structure of different research topics and concepts in the development of business ethics.

Study of Academic Literature and its Intellectual Structure

There are a number of techniques that can be used to study a body of literature and its intellectual structure. Most frequent is the simple literature review where a highly subjective approach is used to structure earlier work. More objective and quantitative techniques, such as citation and co-citation analysis, have recently become popular with more online databases available for such analysis (Diodato, 1994, Pilkington & Teichert, 2006). These techniques are objective and unobtrusive (Garfield, 1979), and they can be used to explore the intellectual structure of the published works of a given field.