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Two Decades of Organizational Ethics: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: This paper conducted a systematic review of organizational ethics (OE) articles published over the last two decades, 2000-2020. This paper utilized the Systematic Quantitative Assessment Technique to identify 58 OE articles published by six of the most popular academic publishers in the world: Emerald, Elsevier, Sage, Springer, Taylor and Francis, and Wiley. The review covered five key issues: 1) Time distribution; 2) Geographic distribution; 3) Article type; 4) Data collection methods; and 5) Themes explored. The findings of the systematic review revealed that interest in OE waxed and waned over the two decades covered by this review, and that Africa and South America. The spread between conceptual and empirical OE articles were quite balanced, and survey was the most popular data collection method. Nine themes were identified, with the most striking findings being that having a strong and positive ethical climate had a positive impact on employee and organizational outcomes.

Keywords: Organizational Ethics, Systematic Review, SQAT, Research Gaps, Two Decades

Introduction

The last two decades (2000-2020) had been a difficult one for organizations in terms of dealing effectively with ethical dilemmas (Wing et al., 2021). The beginning of this time period was riddled with a series of financial scandals due to the ethical failings of organizations such as Enron, WorldCom, Tyco and Freddie Mac (&Dimitras, 2020). In 2007/2008, the unscrupulous lending practices of American banks led to the global financial crisis that led to a deep global recession and the loss of millions of jobs (Winchester, 2020). Currently (2020-2021), organizations are dealing with many ethical issues brought about by Corona Virus global pandemic that has gripped the world; these issues typically centre on employee issues such as deciding whether to retain or sack

employees, deciding how to help employees dealing with the virus, and deciding which employees can work from home (Eachempati et al., 2020).

The ethical upheavals faced by organizations over the last twenty years have brought the issue of organizational ethics into sharp focus among academic scholars, organizations and policy makers alike (Martinez et al., 2020; Adler et al., 2021; Mohd Ghazali, 2021). Organizational ethics have been defined as the systematic way in which organizations deal with issues that occur as a result of internal and external stimuli (Lu et al., 2020). The “correct” way of dealing with these issues is typically communicated to employees via various principles, guidelines, and code of conduct manuals so that every member of the organization knows how to behave (Zeng et al., 2020).

Organizational ethics are important because they embody the values that are most important to an organization and enable all other stakeholders to understand what those values are and what to expect when dealing with that organization (Grobler & Grobler, 2021). Research has shown that organizations with a very clear ethical ethos lead to employees making better quality decisions with the subsequent consequence of improved employee morale and increased productivity (Lin et al., 2020; Schwepker et al., 2020). Additionally, organizations that advocate for the highest levels of ethical behaviour by management and employees alike are able to develop a strong and positive reputation in the society in which they operate, and are able to recruit and retain the most talented individuals (Brinkman & Kochupillai, 2020).

In light of the importance of organizational ethics to the long-term success of organizations, this study sought to conduct a systematic review of the extant scholarship on organizational ethics over the last two decades (2000-2020). The review relied on high-quality, peer-reviewed journal articles published by six of the most renowned academic publishers: Emerald, Elsevier, Sage, Springer, Taylor and Francis, and Wiley. The objective of the review was to provide a holistic understanding of the nature and focus of previous studies on organizational ethics as well as to identify research gaps for future research to explore. This was achieved by answering five research questions: 1) What is the time distribution of organizational ethics (OE) articles?; 2) What is the geographical spread of OE articles?; 3) What types of OE articles have been published (conceptual versus empirical)?; 4) What methods were used to collect data?; 5) What themes have OE articles explored and what were some key findings?

In the course of carrying out this study, two prior systematic reviews of OE were discovered (Suhonen et al., 2011; McLeod, 2016). Suhonen et al. (2011) focused on OE articles in the healthcare sector, while McLeod focused on OE articles published between 1980 and 2012. McLeod (2016) only focused on the data collection methods of the studies reviewed, their geographical scope and the business discipline explored. This study provides an update on McLeod (2016) and is more robust in that it addresses three important research questions which McLeod (2016) did not address: 1) Time distribution of OE articles reviewed, 2) Type of OE articles published, and 3) Themes explored by the OE articles as well as key findings.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: First the methodology utilized for this study is described. This is followed by a discussion of the findings for each of the five research

questions (as this is a review paper, the traditional literature review section is omitted), and the paper ends with a conclusion.

Methods

This study used the Systematic Quantitative Assessment Technique (Pickering & Byrne, 2014) to conduct the review of OE articles over the last two decades (2000-2020). The SQAT provides a clear five-step process for a researcher to conduct a systematic review of any concept. In addition, it allows the researcher's study to be easily replicated by other scholars which is very important in the context of systematic reviews (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). Table 1 presents the five-step process recommended by SQAT, and how it was used in the context of this study.

Table 1. **SQAT Description and Application**

S/N	Step	Application in this study
1.	Define topic	Occupational ethics in the last two decades: A systematic review
2.	Formulate research questions	Five research questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the time distribution of OE articles? 2. What is the geographical spread of OE articles? 3. What kinds of OE articles were published? (conceptual versus empirical) 4. What data collection methods were used? 5. What themes did OE articles investigate and what were the key findings?
3.	Identify key words	“Organizational Ethics”
4.	Identify and search databases	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Google Scholar was the primary article database used. 2. The search focused on articles that had the phrase “organizational ethics” in its title and were published between 2000-2020. 3. The search was limited to journal articles published by Emerald, Elsevier, Sage, Springer, Taylor and Francis, and Wiley.
5.	Read and assess publications	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The abstracts of all articles found were read to ensure that their primary focus was on OE. 2. Only journal articles were selected for analysis.

Source: Authors' review

A total of 58 OE journal articles met the criteria explained in Table 1. The breakdown of these articles based on academic publisher is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. **Breakdown of OE Journal Articles Based on Academic Publisher**

S/N	Publisher	Number of OE articles
1.	Emerald	6
2.	Elsevier	4
3.	Sage	13
4.	Springer	18
5.	Taylor and Francis	12
6.	Wiley	6
Total		58

Source: Authors' review

Findings

Time distribution of OE articles

Figure 1 presents the time distribution of the 59 OE articles reviewed for this study over the last two decades, 2000-2020.

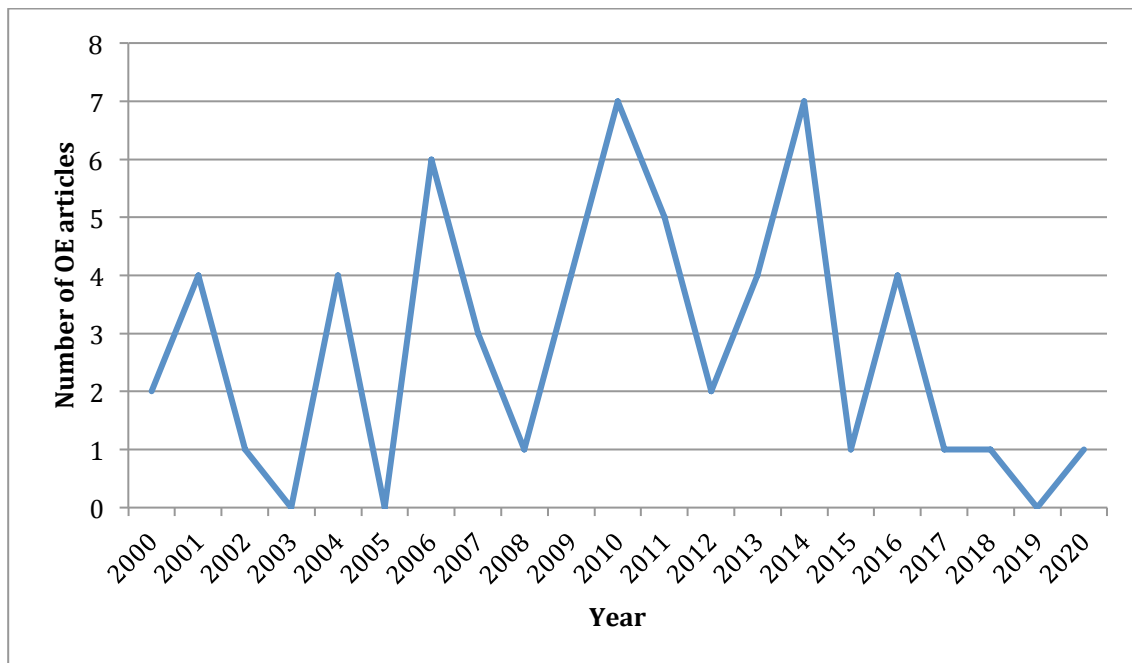


Figure 1. **Time Distribution of OE Articles**

Source: Authors' review

It can be observed from Figure 1 that interest in OE has waxed and waned over the two decades covered by this systematic review, with 2010 and 2014 being the most productive years (seven OE articles) in the context of OE research. It can also be observed that in 2003, 2005 and 2019, no OE articles were published based on the 58 articles reviewed for this study.

Geographic distribution of OE articles

The systematic review of 58 OE articles revealed that 18 countries were represented, and Figure 2 presents the top three countries from which these articles originated from over the last two decades, 2000-2020.

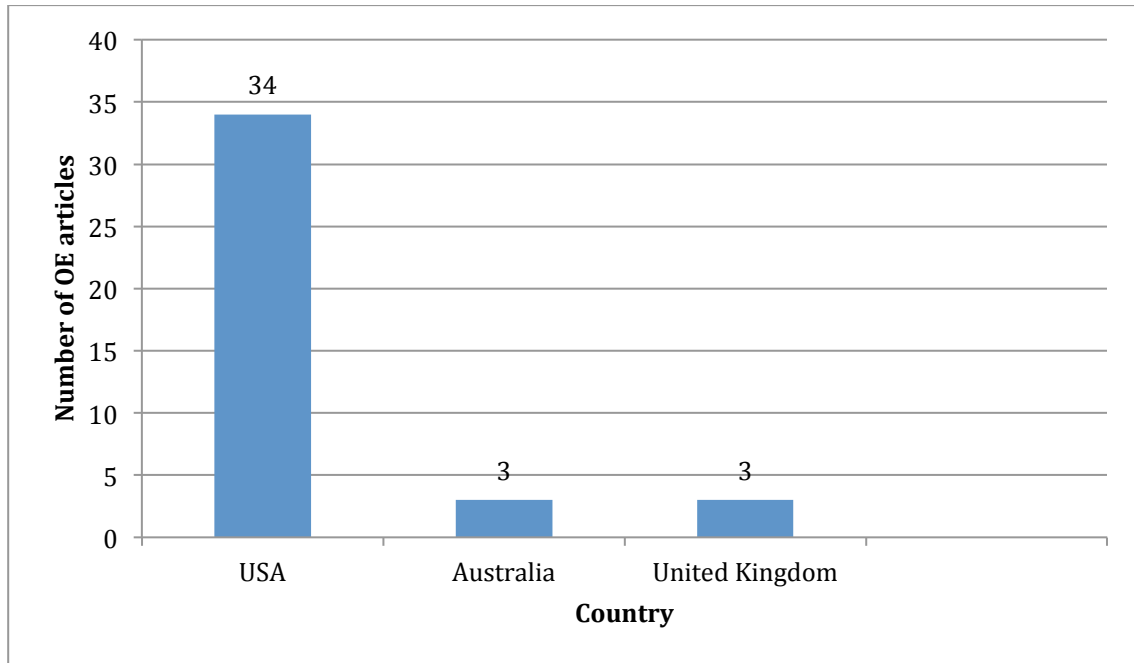


Figure 2. **Countries with The Most OE Articles**
Source: Authors’ review

The United States of America had by far the largest number of OE articles, with 34 articles referencing this country. Australia and the United Kingdom were a distant joint second with three OE articles each. The remaining 15 countries and the number of OE articles associated with them are presented in Table 3. It must be noted that some studies referenced more than one country in their study of OE, so the total number of articles contained for all countries will surpass the total number of 58 articles reviewed

Table 3. **15 Remaining Countries and The Number Of OE Articles Associated with Them**

S/N	Country	Number of articles
1.	Canada	2
2.	China	2
3.	Germany	2
4.	Israel	2
5.	Netherlands	2
6.	Belgium	1
7.	Bulgaria	1
8.	Finland	1
9.	Kuwait	1
10.	Malaysia	1
11.	Oman	1
12.	Poland	1
13.	Saudi	1
14.	Singapore	1
15.	Spain	1

Source: Authors’ review

In order to provide additional insight regarding the geographic distribution of OE articles, Figure 3 provides a continent-by-continent breakdown of the 58 articles reviewed.

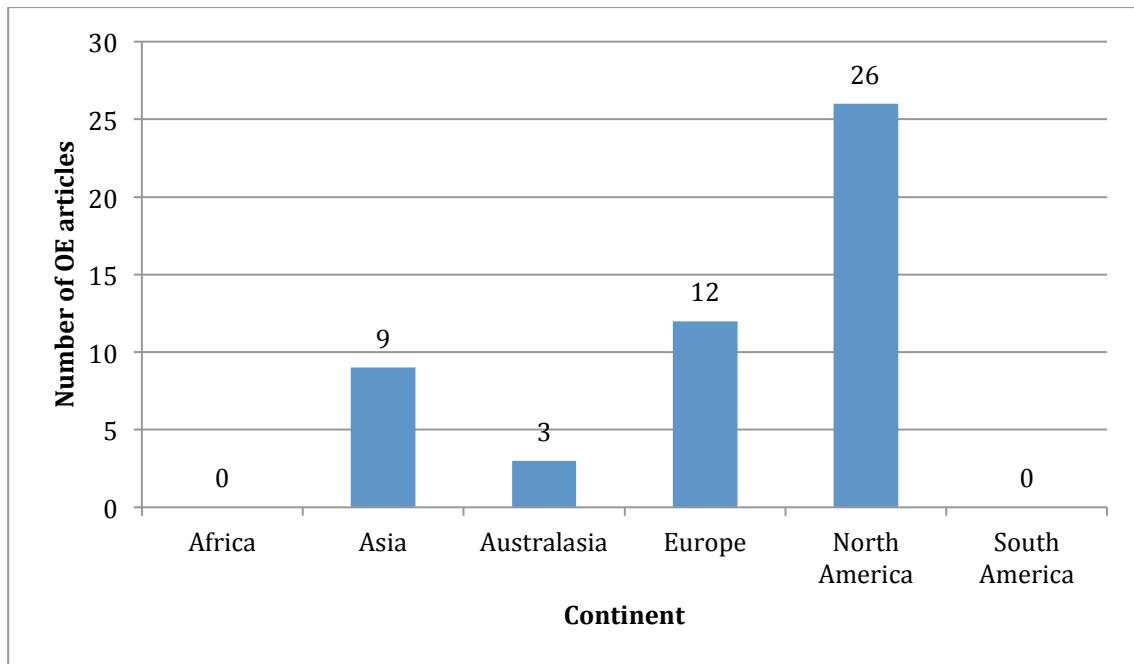


Figure 3. OE Articles by Continent
Source: Authors' review

Figure 3 clear shows the geographical research gap in the context of the extant OE articles reviewed for this study. Africa and South America had no representation among the 58 OE articles reviewed. There is thus a need for OE scholars to investigate this phenomenon in these two continents, particularly because ethical behaviour of organizations has been identified as a source of competitive advantage in the global market place. In addition, the Ethisphere Institute produce a list of the world's most ethical companies every year, and the 2020 edition had only two companies from South America (Natura and Sertecpet) and none from Africa among the 131 companies that made the list (Ethisphere, 2021). OE scholars can thus play an advocacy role in these two continents by conducting empirical studies to provide evidence to organizations in these countries that having a robust ethics framework is indeed a valuable resource.

Article Type

Figure 4 presents a grouping of the 58 OE articles reviewed based on whether they were conceptual or empirical in nature. It can be seen that 28 of the 58 articles were conceptual while the remaining 30 articles were empirical. This shows that OE scholars have explored both conceptual and empirical perspectives quite evenly, and it is expected that future OE studies continue on the same path. Conceptual studies provide the research agenda for future empirical OE studies.

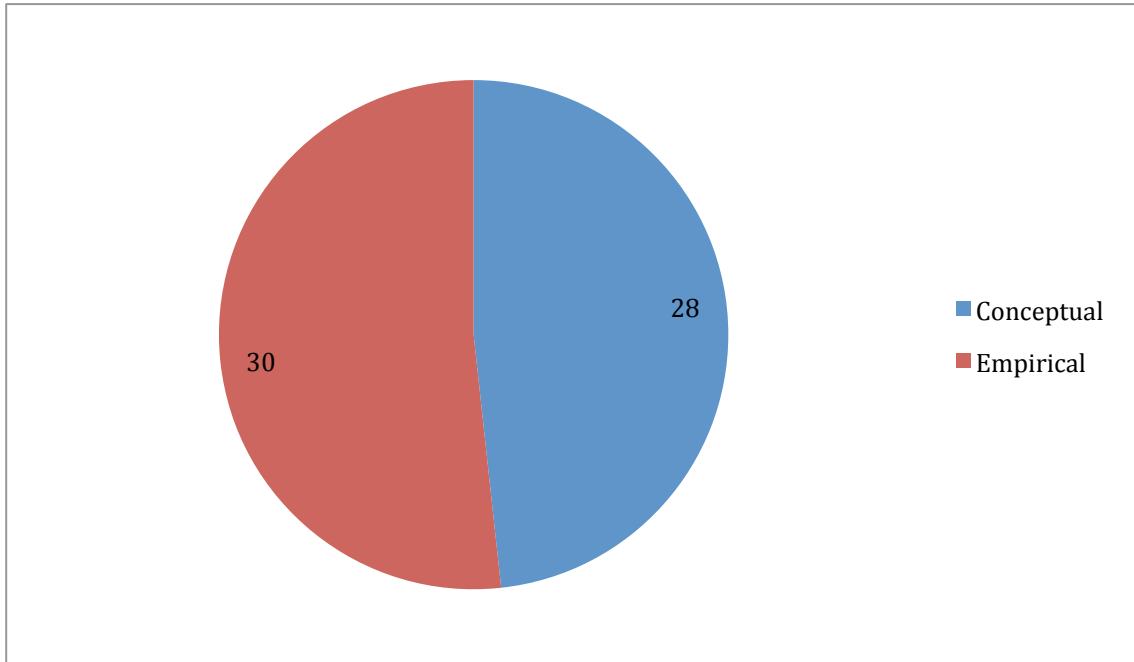


Figure 4. **OE Article Types**
Source: Authors' review

Data Collection Methods

Figure 5 presents the six different data collection methods used by the 30 empirical OE studies reviewed in this study; the remaining 28 OE articles were conceptual and thus did not collect any data.

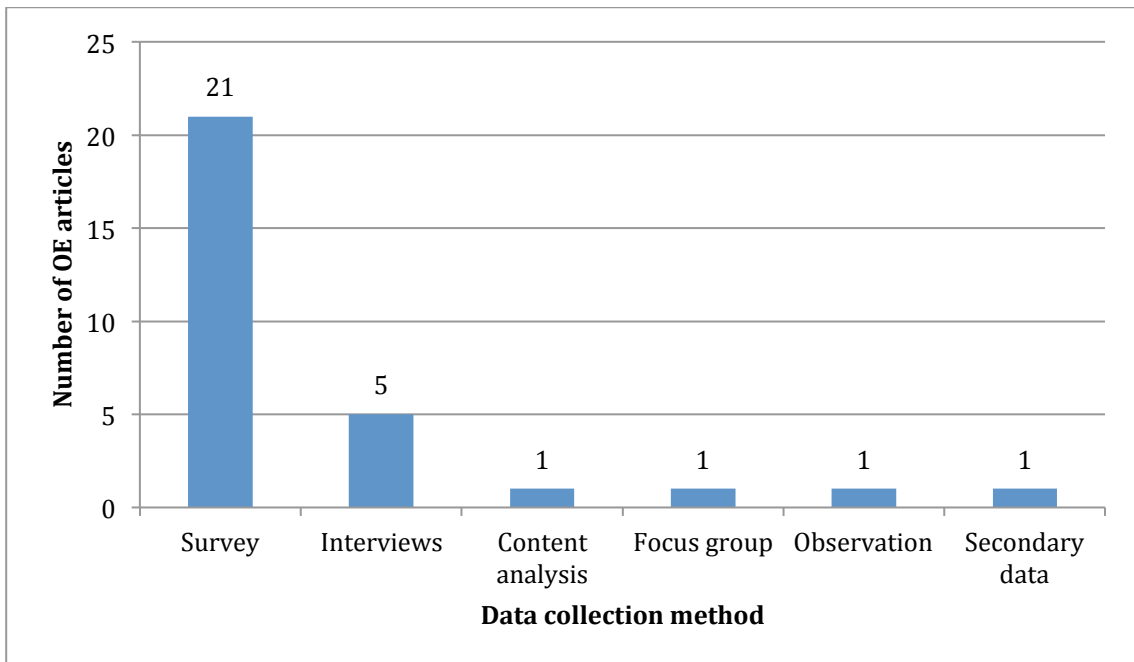


Figure 5. **Data Collection Methods**
Source: Authors' review

It can be seen from Figure 5 that 70% (21 out of 30) of the empirical OE articles reviewed utilized a survey to collect data; this was by some distance the most commonly used data collection method (e.g., Valentine et al., 2013; Akhavan et al., 2014; Dietz & Kleinlogel, 2014; Kowal & Roztocki, 2015; Pathardikar et al., 2016). Interviews were a distant second in terms of data collection method used (5 out of 30) (Weber, 2006; Sekerka, 2009; Rhodes et al., 2010; Van Der Wal, 2011; Martinez et al., 2020), while the other four methods were utilized by only one study each: 1) Focus group (Goltz & Hietapelto, 2006), 2) Observation (Page, 2007), 3) Secondary data (Ormiston & Wong, 2012) and 4) Content analysis (Tan, 2012).

Figure 5 reveals that prior empirical studies on OE have tended to favour quantitative data collection methods over qualitative ones over the last two decades. This is probably because studies on OE tend to solicit the perception of respondents regarding the organizational ethics present in their firms (e.g., Credo et al., 2010; Elango et al., 2010; Valentine et al., 2010; Ploeger et al., 2011; MohdGhazali & Ismail, 2013). Future empirical OE studies should utilize more qualitative data collection methods like observation and interviews so that additional in-depth insight can be obtained on OE and how it affects various organizational outcomes.

OE Themes

Critical analyses of the 58 OE articles reviewed for this study revealed that they explored nine distinct themes which are showcased in Figure 6.

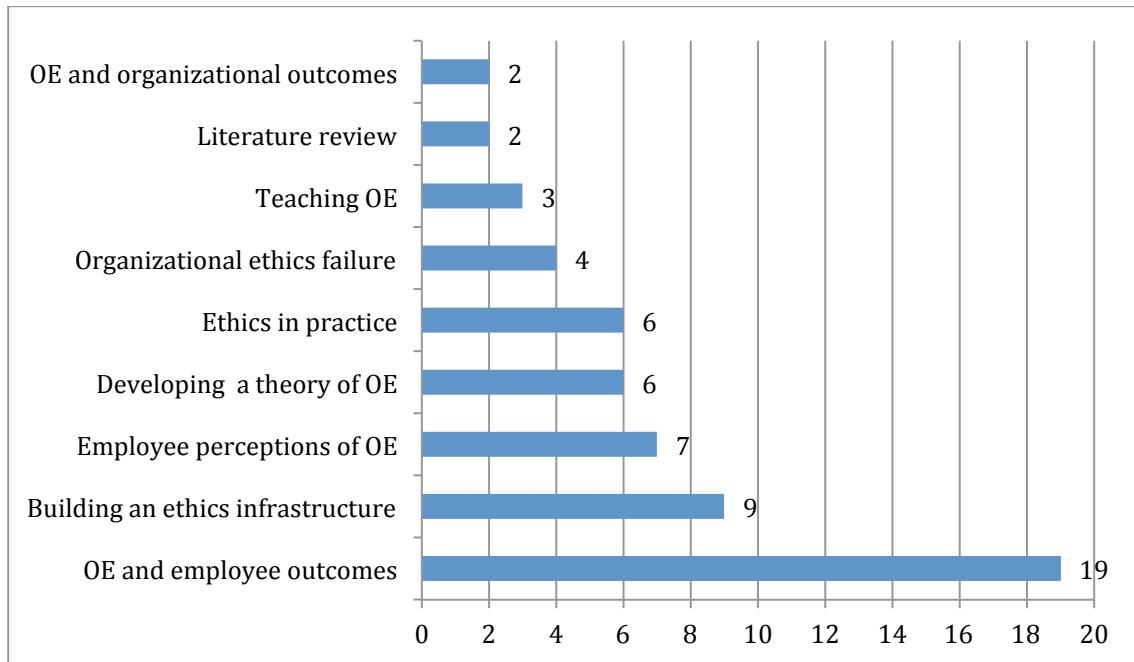


Figure 6. **OE Themes**
Source: Authors' review

It can be observed from Figure 6 that the most common theme explored by the OE articles reviewed was investigating the impact of OE on various employee outcomes (19 out of 58). The positive employee outcomes included job satisfaction (Koh & El'Fred,

2001; Kowal & Roztocki, 2015), stewardship and integrity (Magil, 2001; Magill & Prybil, 2004), valuing diversity (Barker, 2002; Connor, 2006; Valentine et al., 2006), ethical judgments (Mohd Ghazali & Ismail, 2013) and career satisfaction (Pathardikar et al., 2016). On the other hand, negative employee outcomes included intent to leave (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Rosenblatt, 2009a), work absence (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Rosenblatt, 2009b) and role conflict (Valentine et al., 2010).

What was most interesting was that most of these studies in this first theme that were empirical in nature found that when employees had a positive perception of the organizational ethics of their firms, it had a positive impact on desirable employee outcomes (e.g., Mohd Ghazali & Ismail, 2013; Kowal & Roztocki, 2015; Pathardikar et al., 2016) and a negative impact on undesirable employee outcomes (e.g., Shapira-Lishchinsky & Rosenblatt, 2009a; Shapira-Lishchinsky & Rosenblatt, 2009b; Valentine et al., 2010). The implication of the findings of these studies is that organizations should endeavour to build a strong and positive ethical climate as this encourages employees to give their very best in ensuring that shared organizational goals are achieved.

The second most common theme (9 out of 58) included studies that offered comprehensive recommendations on how an organization could build an effective ethics infrastructure that would enable all stakeholders to embody the core values of that organizations. The studies covered different organizational contexts such as healthcare (Ray, 2006; Suter, 2006 ; Bean, 2011 ; Lemiengre et al., 2014; Castlen et al., 2017), academia (Weber, 2006) and the public sector (Tremblay et al., 2016). Sekerka (2009) argued that organizations needed to go beyond merely relying on compliance-based ethics to build a strong ethical infrastructure; rather organizations needed to encourage its members to actively seek to be ethical in their actions.

The third most investigated theme was an attempt at understanding the factors that affect employees' perceptions and expectations of ethics within their organizations (7 out of 58). Factors identified included culture (Rhey et al., 2000; Al-Khatib et al., 2004), age (Faber, 2001), gender (McDaniel et al., 2001; Ploeger et al., 2011) and ethics training (Valentine & Fleischman, 2004; Van der Wal, 2011).

The fourth theme contained six studies all seeking to develop a theory of organizational ethics to underpin future empirical OE research (e.g., Sekerka et al., 2013; Munro, 2014; Dion, 2018), while the fifth theme also containing six articles focused on providing case studies of OE in practice in different contexts (e.g., Lair, 2014; Martinez et al., 2020).

Four studies made up the sixth theme all providing case studies of instance where organizational ethics failure led to negative consequences for the organizations involved (Page, 2007; Adams & Balfour, 2010; Naylor & Berlinger, 2016). As for the seventh theme, the focus of the three studies was to recommend and demonstrate the effectiveness of various OE teaching approaches in the university system (Goltz & Hietapelto, 2006; Craft, 2010; Morris & Wood, 2011).

The final two themes had two studies each, with the ninth theme providing a literature review of previous OE studies (Suhonen et al., 2011; McLeod, 2014), and the tenth theme investigating the influence of OE on organizational outcomes (Ormiston & Wong, 2012;

Akhavan et al., 2014). Ormiston & Wong (2012) found that an organization with a positive and clear ethical culture tended to have a high level of corporate social performance.

Table 4 presents the key findings of this review of 58 OE articles published over the last two decades, 2000-2020

Table 4. Summary of Review Findings of 58 OE Articles

S/N	Focus	Key Findings	Implications
1.	Time distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2010 and 2014 were the most prolific years in OE research, with 7 articles each - Only two OE articles were published in 2020; none were published in 2003, 2005 and 2019. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interest in OE has gone up and down at different points over the last two decades, 2000-2020
2.	Geographic distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 18 countries had at least one OE article - USA had the most number of OE papers with 34. - Africa and South America had no OE articles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Future OE research should focus on African and South American organizations
3.	Article type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conceptual (28) and empirical (30) OE articles were quite balanced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Future OE studies should continue in the same path, with conceptual articles providing the research agenda for empirical OE studies.
4.	Data collection methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Six different data collection methods were used. - Survey was the most common method used to collect data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Future OE studies should adopt more qualitative data collection methods in order to provide in-depth insights into OE.
5.	OE themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 9 distinct OE themes were identified. - The most common theme investigated the impact of OE on various employee outcomes - Most of the studies in the first theme found that OE had a positive impact on beneficial employee outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A strong ethical culture is beneficial in motivating employees to full support their organization.

Source: Authors' review

Conclusion

The ethical culture and climate of an organization has been shown to be an important determinant of employee and organizational performances (Mohd Ghazali& Ismail, 2013; Kowal & Roztocki, 2015; Pathardikar et al., 2016). These findings thus indicate that organizations must place a renewed emphasis on the nature and quality of their organizational ethics particular after the many problems faced by organizations over the last two decades. It is against this backdrop that this study conducted a systematic review of OE scholarship published between 2000-2020 by six of the most prolific academic publishers (Emerald, Elsevier, Sage, Springer, Taylor and Francis, Wiley); in total 58 OE articles were reviewed for this study. These articles were reviewed along five dimensions: 1) Time distribution; 2) Geographic distribution; 3) Article type (conceptual versus empirical); 4) Data collection methods; and 5) OE themes.

From the point of view of organizational practice, the most important findings of this review was the fact that empirical evidence indicates that organizations that embody and encourage excellent ethical behaviour have the most committed employees which translates into sustained overall performance.

This review had certain limitations which future OE reviews can address. First, its reliance on only six academic publishers means that high quality OE articles by other publishers were not included in this review. Closely linked to this first limitation is the fact that only peer-reviewed journal articles were included in this review, which means that quality OE articles in terms of conference proceedings and book chapters were also excluded from this review. Future reviews can expand their source of articles by expanding the number of publishers as well as the type of OE articles included in the review.

As 2021 begins and organizations continue to battle with the events of the global COVID-19 pandemic, developing a comprehensive ethics infrastructure has become a necessity for all organizations in order to successfully navigate the turbulent business environment that shows no signs of abating in the foreseeable future.

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