Bringing Human Trafficking into Executive Suites and Academia:

Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Despite major, politically successful global campaigns against human trafficking (or forced labor, as the practice is generally labeled in Europe) and despite its links to business and to global supply chains, its treatment in academic business disciplines, including management, business ethics (BE), corporate social responsibility (CSR), and supply chain management (SCM), has been limited. Our central aim in this paper is to address that lacuna, and in doing so to advance a claim that human trafficking-forced labor and ways to counter it should be considered more than the topic is now by business and academia. To that end, we explore the challenges to deeper engagement with the subject by managers and academics. We present an ethnography based on the experience of two of the authors, who have interacted with academics, activists, managers, victims, and perpetrators in relation to human trafficking in various settings, including working with a major technology company to research online sex trafficking. Through the ethnography, we imply that managers, activists, and academics who respect the others’ roles do better if they inhabit those roles to some degree, with all three groups open to morally-based rules, opportunities for profit, and the search to understand perspectives beyond one’s own.

Key words: Human trafficking, forced labor, power of words, ethnography, participant-observer research, value tensions
INTRODUCTION

Consider the power of words, as illustrated in two phrases: human trafficking and forced labor. The first term, prevalent in the United States, suggests the movement of people, especially women, for the purpose of selling sex, and on the face of it leaves ambiguous whether the transactions involved are forced, consensual, or something in between. The second term, prevalent in Europe, gains its own emotional power by making clear the nonconsensual nature of the transaction, while losing the emotionally powerful associations with movement, sex, and gender that permeate the first term.

Operationally, the two terms converge. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, which made the United States among the first nations to create anti-trafficking legislation at the national level, defines criminally punishable human trafficking as follows:

(A) sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or
(B) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

Sex trafficking comes first in the American definition, but the broader second clause of the legislation makes clear that fraud in obtaining labor for the purpose of debt bondage and other forms of unfree labor is criminally punishable as human trafficking in the United States, regardless of whether there is a commercial sex act, movement, or force. The international definition of forced or compulsory labor in the International Labour Organisation [ILO] Forced Labour Convention comes out in the same place. The ILO’s definition goes as follows: “Forced or compulsory labour shall mean all work or service which is exacted from any person under the
menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily” (ILO 2012: 19). According to the ILO (2012), forced labor includes slavery, slavery-like practices, debt-bondage and serfdom, which have been interpreted by the ILO as including human trafficking for labor and sexual exploitation.

By placing sex and movement in the background rather the foreground, and by foregrounding the concepts of labor and coercion, the ILO’s words call to mind the image of a coerced male or female worker in a field or factory, rather than a woman coerced into commercial sex. In the end, the American and international definitions unite in broadly proscribing fraudulent debt bondage and other forms of coercive work. But, we would suggest, the different connotations of the terms “human trafficking” and “forced labor” remain significant as an indicator of an emotionally and morally charged subject that is not easily assimilated by management, business ethics, CSR, and SCM academics, or by businesses.¹

Over the past few decades, activists against human trafficking and forced labor have attained significant political successes at the international, national and local levels, notably in the ILO convention (2012) and the American TVPA legislation (2000) previously noted, as well as in the adoption in 2000 of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (The Palermo Protocol).² These political successes, however, have not been matched by comparable successes in engaging the attention of

¹ In this paper, we treat the two terms as synonymous and primarily employ the American term, partly because it accords with the experiences of two of the authors of this paper, whose work in researching human trafficking will be described in Part I. We note a diversity of perspectives among ourselves on certain issues of terminology, which will be further explored in Part I, and also note that that diversity is related, usefully in our view, to the fact that we are a group with diverse national origins.

² For background and links to the full convention, see http://www.unodc.org/unodc/treaties/CTOC/
scholars in business disciplines (Crane, 2013 is a notable exception, and Crane & Kazmi, 2010 is also worth noting), or of executives. The moral intensity that has been a central feature of the movement against human trafficking in both its American and European incarnations has given the movement a major part of its political power. But it has arguably also limited its academic and business reach. A moral jihad or crusade against modern-day slavery, powerful though it is in the political arena, can raise “I’d rather not go there” hackles, perhaps warranted ones, among academics and businesses accustomed to normative reticence. If the choice is between joining an absolutist campaign against prostitution and long-term labor contracts and declaring oneself a supporter of prostitution and coerced labor, we suspect that many or most scholars and businesspeople would prefer not to do either, and in their desire not to make an unpleasant choice will remain detached from issues that in fact have pertinence to scholars and firms.

We as authors have a diversity of perspectives on normative issues related to human trafficking and forced labor, some of which we explore in the ethnographic central part of this paper, which relates the experiences of two of the authors who are engaged together in research into online sex trafficking. At the same time, we share a belief that it is important for people in academia and business to engage in open-minded, serious consideration of where and how to draw lines between impermissible forms of work and permissible forms, with a safe space provided for people with different personal, ideological, and practical positions on the difficult issues that are involved. In this exploratory, ethnographically-centered paper, we will not be proposing where to draw the lines. We will not be taking a normative position on whether the modern-day human trafficking issues involved in, for example, labor contracts for Nepalese workers in a Malaysian factory (Bloomberg, 2013) or Ukrainian women in an American brothel are or are not morally parallel to central issues of coercion dealt with in an earlier era of
capitalism, in which once-accepted practices of imprisonment for debt and classic slavery—life-long, noncontractual bondage—were stigmatized and outlawed. We do assume, though, that coerced labor is morally impermissible, and we believe that the question of the boundary between impermissible coerced labor and permissible non-coerced labor—we all are “wage slaves,” but that is, we believe, not only a permissible but a desirable form of human existence—is an important question for positive and normative scholars in business disciplines and for business.

In order to create a safe space for different perspectives, we believe that it is important for scholars to acknowledge a personal dimension to what we do, and to step outside the familiar protective shields of both positive science and of normative argument. As valuable as both those approaches are, we think it is also highly valuable to acknowledge and explore a personal, emotional, experiential dimension to the topic of human trafficking. We do so not because we think that an emotion-laden, experiential dimension is the last word, the voice of unimpeachable truth on the topic. Rather, we do so because we believe that unless personal, emotion-laden experiences, ideologies, and roles are surfaced and respected, academics and managers alike will find ourselves stuck and unable to make progress.

In employing a psychologically-oriented ethnography written from a personal point of view as the core part of our paper, we draw on several methodological sources, including phenomenology (Sartre, 1942), client-centered Rogerian practice (Rogers, 1957, 1961), sociology (Goffman, 1967), Critical Legal Studies (Kennedy, 1986, 1995), participatory action research (Fine & Torre, 2004), and management research into emotion regulation (Grant, 2013). A central influence on this paper is the psychological approach to morality taken by Haidt (2001, 2007, 2012), which in its positive form views evolved human moral nature as socially-oriented,
intuitive, and argumentative (2001, 2007), and in its most recent, normative incarnation (2012) explores ways in which understanding the emotion-laden roots of our ideological disagreements may help us to get along better. Our interpretation of Haidt is refracted through the lens of critical business ethics (Eastman, 2013), which interprets Haidt’s work as well as Kennedy’s Critical Legal Studies work (1986, 1995) as laying a foundation for future academic work that endeavors to overcome or mediate the traditional positive-normative dichotomy (Weaver & Trevino, 1994) by introducing an experiential, psychological, aesthetic, literary dimension that both challenges and complements the standard positive and normative dimensions.

The organization of the paper is as follows: Part I, written in the first person, represents the experiential dimension, and occupies the central place within the paper. It consists of methodological reflections on ethnography, followed by a series of vignettes that mirror the experience of two of the authors in conducting research on human trafficking and the role of technology as part of a grant they received from Microsoft. In the considerably shorter Part II, we redescribe some of the same phenomena described in personal terms in Part I in the voice of academic social science, but using the vignette format of Part I rather than a conventional narrative format. In Part III, the shortest of the three main sections, we suggest that, for all their value, ethnography, social science, and universal principles embodied in law cannot overcome normative dissensus based on background, ideology, and role. In that part, we also offer our own version of normativity, in the form of thoughts on role blending and role switching as ways to foster the psychologically safe terrain we believe is called for if academic theory and business practice relating to human trafficking are to advance.
PART I:  DISCURSIVE QUICKSAND:
CASING METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC RESILIENCE

Methodological preface.³ Doing exploratory research on human trafficking in a management department brings with it a certain acceptance of risk—risk that your colleagues will not understand your work and how to evaluate it, risk that your field will not find your work a suitable fit, limiting the options for scholarship, and so on. These risks are experienced to some degree by academic researchers in all disciplines, perhaps especially among junior faculty engaged in cross-disciplinary work on controversial, emotionally and politically charged topics such as human trafficking and the role (or complicity) of business in its facilitation. As a researcher engaged in this work with my co-author and husband, I am not immune to these risks or their consequences. Through practice, I have tried to develop a sort of resilience appropriate to the topic I am studying in the way I am studying it. I have tried, successfully or not, to mitigate another kind of research risk that cuts deeper—the risk of failing to be open and true to the experiences and perspectives shared in the research and failing to be open and true to the experiences and perspectives experienced by each of us as researchers in the process. The inquiry-based, mixed methods approach utilized in this study is informed by the client-centered theory of Carl Rogers (1957, 1961) and is designed to facilitate openness to the realities of human trafficking as a challenge for business, especially for firms whose products and services facilitate trafficking as well as firms whose supply chains directly or indirectly allow it. The approach, I believe, also facilitates openness to the realities and dynamics of managers, activists, and academics interacting in this space.

³ The first person voice in this preface and the vignettes that follow is that of Author 1.
The material in the section is based on data gathered by myself and my husband (and co-author on this paper) through the following means: a) in-depth interviews with buyers of people, b) in-depth interviews and discussions with subject matter experts, including service-providers and survivors, c) content analysis of how people think about and discuss their utilization of business products and services, including networked technologies, in the buying process (decision making, preferences, processes), d) content analysis of how academic and non-academic knowledge producers interpret and frame meaning of the relationship between business (managers, products and services) and human trafficking more broadly, e) participant observation in discussions about human trafficking and forced labor, including patterns of how/where/when/why it occurs, who benefits, who suffers, methods of recruitment, transactional processes, supply chain actors, forms of control, uses of violence, countries/industries/companies/products affected, and so on, and f) community-inclusive, participatory action research on how to structure, measure and implement cross-sector, multi-stakeholder efforts to combat human trafficking through collaboration with governmental and non-governmental actors, managers and activists, especially around a large sporting event such as Super Bowl 2014—an event anticipated to coincide/correlate with spikes in commercial sexual exploitation. This mixed-method approach incorporates triangulation to mitigate methodological and investigator bias and allow for verification of findings using different methods and different investigators. The exploratory approach is particularly useful for examining complex and deeply nuanced phenomena among understudied populations in difficult to access contexts.

The process of doing exploratory research on human trafficking using the inquiry-based, mixed methods described above places the researcher in the role of investigator and participant, effectively embedding the researcher in the topic (illicit behavior) and the mire that accompanies
The benefits of this approach, I hope and believe, outweigh the risks. The nature of exploratory research is such that it facilitates discovery and also brings about unexpected findings that might have been missed if traditional methods were used. In this case, some unexpected findings emerging from this research provide insight that could help direct more effective interactions between managers and activists on the issue of human trafficking. Other unexpected findings shed light on experiential questions at the periphery of the inquiry yet central to dealing practically with human trafficking as a social issue in management. The vignettes that follow provide a window into some of the unexpected confrontations and existential dilemmas emerging around the perspectives my husband and I have encountered along our exploratory journey as researchers.

A participant-observer ethnography.4

1. Sometimes it helps to start at the beginning

It was a cold day in late January when I got a most unexpected email from an old mentor and professor I ran into over the summer. I flash back to our chance meeting on that hot summer day, how I caught a glimpse of his long red ponytail. It moved with less bounce than I’d remembered but that fast-pasted walk, the upper torso-extended angling that defines someone who knows where he is going and is determined to get there without anyone getting in his way, that was unmistakably VL____. I said to my husband R____, pushing the stroller with our then seven month old: “That’s V____! Let’s hurry and catch up to him.” I remembered surprising myself with my proclamation—the few seconds of hesitation allowing my calculating and spontaneous sides to reconcile were unusually private.

4 Quotations in the ethnography represent the best recollection of author 1, and are not necessarily exact. The conversations described were not recorded. The individuals referred to in the ethnography are referred to by initials, changed from their actual initials.
VL___ was in a hurry to pick up a copy of Village Voice at his local spot for left-leaning papers. We talked a bit about my sister and what she was up to. VL___ had seen a story in Village Voice with my sister’s photo a few months prior. I remembered the story dealt with her research team’s study on the commercial sexual exploitation of children. My sister was an academic and a research practitioner, and I wasn’t sure VL___ approved of the latter.

VL___ picked up the pace; it was getting late and the store might run out of copies. Still, he was happy to point out his favorite stops along the way. R____ mentioned how he was finishing up his dissertation on human trafficking and Roma in Serbia. VL___ told us he was getting ready for a trip and did a lot of international teaching on human rights these days and how he learned a few Serbian words from his Serbian flat-mate who worked on human trafficking. It became a small world quickly in that moment. R____ was proud to share that I was fluent in Serbo-Croatian and did my interviews on post-conflict reconciliation in the region in the language. I was vindicated without even trying. I was still a save-the-world, deep philosopher type and VL___ discovered an interest in human rights and international issues does not necessarily detract from solving local problems, at least I imagined he did.

I didn’t catch any of the subtle disappointment I’d envisioned over the business-school teaching, over my family. I mentioned how we were headed to Buenos Aires in a few weeks. VL___ told us he was fluent in Spanish, his girlfriend lives in Argentina, he spends a lot of time there and Skype is the best thing going. Was I hearing things? Had VL___ changed? Had I imagined his fervent anti-capitalism, critique of relationships? He was still critical of government, critical of the war on terror, but so was business. Had VL___ become a bit more pragmatic over the years; had the left become not so far from the right?
Months later, I got an email from VL___ at an interesting time. R___ was working diligently to finish his dissertation on human trafficking before the birth of our second child. I was trying to find my place in management at a time of great transition. And so came the email. VL___’s Serbian flat-mate was applying for a grant from Microsoft on human trafficking and looking for assistance. I encouraged R___ to contact the flat-mate. They exchanged emails in Serbian and R ____ offered to collaborate, but the flat-mate had it all worked out and only needed a U.S. affiliation, which neither of us could arrange. So the deal was off, it looked like—but well, not so fast.

I was intrigued—Microsoft was interested in human trafficking. The bells started ringing. After all, my interests were in corporate social responsibility, ethics and human rights, R___’s in human trafficking. Maybe we could apply on our own. R___ was concerned that the deadline was less than two weeks away. Competitors had over two months. I was up for it and I could see the opportunity to carve out a space. R___ had put his work on hold so I could finish and defend my dissertation, start my new teaching job and deliver our first child all in the year prior. Now was a chance for him, a chance for us both. It would be a win-win. In less than two weeks, I lined up collaborating partners, got letters of support, included a colleague and we wrote and submitted what turned out to be a winning proposal to understand the role of technology in sex trafficking in the U.S., with a focus on how “johns” or buyers of sex use the Internet and networked technologies to search for “victims” online, especially children.

2. Spreading the news

It was springtime and my belly had reached new girth. The baby was due in a month and my colleagues were amazed I was still around. Would I continue to teach right after delivering as I did the last time? My colleague C___ commented: “You really have a wonderful glow, more
than usual today!” It was a good week. The department meeting started and the chair introduced the agenda. Toward the middle of the meeting she announced the news. “M___ got a grant from Microsoft to study human trafficking.” After the obligatory congratulations came the questions. Unsurprisingly D___ was the first to comment: “Can I just ask, what is this about, sex trafficking? Isn’t trafficking about labor?” Y____ quickly joined in: “When I hear trafficking I think of labor issues, why is Microsoft interested in this?” I gave my modified trafficking 101 talk, noting how trafficking refers to both concepts and how some in the space emphasize sex and others labor, edging in a little of the CSR and ethics language I normally try to interject. I shared the feedback I had gotten from Microsoft Research, how P____, the lead person, called me to share the news and what P___ said: “I just want to say we loved, loved, loved your proposal and we want to fund it.” I remembered how I was taken aback. Was it a West Coast thing or was there something special about P____? She was genuine, she had spunk, she spoke her mind–she was anything but what is represented as “corporate.” P____ went on to say how this was part of her goal to inspire women in computing and shared a bit about Microsoft: “We just don’t want to be part of this [facilitating child trafficking].”

I wanted my department colleagues to be able to experience what I’d experienced in the call and what I knew as a practitioner. I wanted them to see how management and social issues are intertwined and how people in companies do care. It went well.

As the news spread in different circles, so did questions about why Microsoft would sponsor this. It was difficult for people to get their arms around. In my conversation with X____, I could sense the confusion. X____ wanted to understand where this was coming from. “This is the Gates Foundation, right?” “No, actually, it is Microsoft Research, it is the corporation not the foundation,” I replied. What did this mean? X____ could make sense of it if
it were one of Bill Gates’ philanthropic interests—but how did human trafficking fit in as a business issue? This didn’t jibe with business as business. In an encounter a few weeks later, another thought emerged from B_____: “Well, this must be about Microsoft trying to build its reputation.”

Over the following months, the need to explain “why Microsoft?” had become so second nature I just built it into my pitch. By then I thought I’d become agile at responding to the unexpected provocations, including those of green-washing or that Microsoft was trying to cover its legal risk, but my encounter with BO ____ really tested my agility. BO__is a straight shooter who has been in the human trafficking space for a long time; she works with government and business and has mastered the dance between manager and activist. But BO ____’s world of human trafficking involves the supply chain and is more about labor. Technology doesn’t fit her worldview. She challenged me: “What is this about technology?”—she suggested that labor traffickers don’t use technology and that the project is a waste of time. She pressed further: “Did you look into why Microsoft is funding this work? Did you ask questions? Do you know what this is about?” I felt a bit unprepared. “Well, I know there are many reasons companies do things. In this case, I am dealing with the research group and they are behind this.”

BO ____ finally shared what she had been thinking: “Microsoft made money on the backs of children with its investments,” BO____ said. The project was not about technology; it was about guilt. This was a new provocation. I wondered: Was I naïve about the company’s motives? Did it matter why Microsoft would sponsor this? Why did it matter? Was I supposed to do an investigation into how this came about? What if Microsoft did make money on child exploitation? Would that change how this counts? Could they not do something good? Could they make up for harm to some children by helping others? Did I miss a beat in P____’s
conviction? My interaction with BO ____ was like trying to move in quicksand. Everything I said, every move I made, would get me deeper in—one wrong word and you are stuck.

I became a quick study on how to navigate this treacherous space. I understood what was happening when it was happening. I understood that the coupling of business and human trafficking was uncomfortable to many people for many different reasons. I learned that people, managers, activists, and academics alike, felt a need to classify the coupling swiftly in their values computer. If it didn’t have an immediate, obvious meaning, they worked quickly to give it one. Yet why was this the case? I wondered if the coupling of business and trafficking could be “both and”, both business-driven and morally-motivated. It seemed that some managers, like P____ at Microsoft, presented more as morally-driven activists. By comparison, some activists, like BO____, were more calculating, more like one’s image of a manager.

3. Context is everything

My interactions with business managers and activists began to intensify, and as they did, the cracks in the public and private “I” began to show through. K____ was by definition a calculating manager: His role in managing risk for global corporations placed him on the business side without complication. Yet it was complicated. K____ was a father, and he was proud that Microsoft as a business was taking a stand against human trafficking. K____ wanted to help, he wanted to learn more, he wanted to support the work. If Microsoft supported it, why not him? K____ started making introductions, he was passionate, he was a champion of the cause. But K____ and others like him needed to find a way to get their colleagues on board. K____ thought the supply chain group would be interested and made an introduction to F____. F____ was a quick study and immediately saw the application for supply chain risk, but F____ needed to figure out where human trafficking fit and how to pitch it to clients. I knew what
F____ needed: an ROI story to get business interested in this. F ____ and I talked about doing a paper, a missive, something to get the conversation going, to put it in context. But F ____ got busy and I got busy. F ____ took on a new role.

K____ was determined to find a place for human trafficking in his group: “I have two daughters and I don’t want to see this happening,” he shared. K____ made introductions to the CSR group but they weren’t sure where this fit either. Was this an issue for HR? What were they supposed to do about human trafficking? They needed data—they needed to know what others were doing before taking a leap. They were poised but needed more information, more numbers, more science to pull the trigger. K ____ was clearly morally-motivated. He wasn’t happy with the progress. He wanted to get someone at the firm to pay attention to this. He kept trying. F ____ was a little different, even though they were at the same firm. F ____ was looking for a new business line. His motivations were mixed, and that was fine with me.

My interactions with O ____ and the managers in O ____’s firm were a little different, and presented a new layer of complexity. O____ was squarely in HR but wearing a CSR hat. Under pressure from investors, she was leading efforts to shape CSR strategy. I was there to help O____ and her group. The topic of human trafficking came up. O____ was fascinated by the research and my “passion.” She wanted to find a way to work together but trafficking was, she thought, “too sexy” for her firm. They were more conservative, plain vanilla, and couldn’t come out on the issue. O____ and her colleagues didn’t see how human trafficking would be an issue for their business and were reluctant to get into that messy world. The sustainability issues, the green reporting, the triple bottom line—all that seemed a more comfortable space.

It turned out trafficking was “too sexy” for some colleagues in the business school as well. Z____ cautioned me: “But will you be able to publish?” I was thrown aback. “Of course I
will publish the research. Why wouldn’t I?” Z____ offered several concerns. “Business journals publish quantitative work, how can you get this kind of data?” and “This is just too controversial.” I found Z____’s impressions instructive, even though I didn’t agree with them. Z____ was all about publishable scholarship, and I respected that. But there was more. Z____ also objected to the topic being taught in courses. “These issues are more for Harvard students, they are too big for our students, our students need to focus on getting jobs.” I wondered where this was coming from. Z____’s statements to me revealed a clear discomfort with the idea of trafficking as a legitimate problem for both business and business schools. Would this offend the business community, the community Z____ and others longed to worked with but hadn’t necessarily succeeded in doing? Z____ pleaded: “You are really more of a practitioner. You need to choose your path. Look around, people around here hide in their offices with their doors closed and write papers. They don’t apply for grants and do these kinds of things.” Z____ appeared to be offering advice, but his motivations were unclear. Was his objection to the topic or the grant; to teaching about it in class or engagement with business? Did he worry it might take away from the “business” credibility? What was bothering Z____, and why was he trying to deter me? Z____ added a final word of advice: “We are not recognized for this kind of work—there is no incentive for doing this.” Z____ was not in my department so I didn’t really have to worry so much about what he said. At the same time, I couldn’t help wonder what this was about. Why such strong resistance?

Were these interactions really about trafficking, or were they about some other issues underneath the surface, some existential crises that all of us—managers and activists and academics—face privately and publicly? Why was I so driven, why was I all in? Why did I need the research to succeed, the project to work? How do these interactions relate to the space
for human trafficking and forced labor in business? Was there something in these interactions that is indicative of why we get stuck and how we can get unstuck and collaborate more effectively?

4. The power of words

As a researcher in the trafficking space, I live with the power of words. I knew from my husband R____’s research on the anti-trafficking movement just how polarizing the space had become, and how to interpret the meaning behind the words. I also knew that some words were political triggers, especially in the world of anti-sex trafficking, with its links to anti-prostitution abolitionists and anti-pornography. I understood that the rhetoric mattered. On the “supply side”, tensions around the use of “victim” or “slave” vs. “sex worker” were real. You had to be careful. The term “sex industry” arguably offered legitimacy to sex trafficking; “slave trade” drew from the moral intensity of the anti-slavery movements of the past. On the “demand side,” people’s choices to use “buyer” or “customer” vs. “exploiter”, “abuser”, or “perpetrator” were revealing. In the online world, “providers” and “hobbyists” provoked further debate.

In the accepting spirit of Carl Rogers, I made a conscious decision to use the words that research community participants used to the best of my ability. I was also careful to try and manage the locutions of my fellow researchers, knowing that using the wrong word could make or break a relationship. I was concerned especially about our interactions with anti-prostitution abolitionists. They were the toughest on words—often too tough, by my and R____’s lights—and yet we needed to partner with them. They dealt with “victims” and knew the space; they pressured lawmakers, influenced policy and funding, created safe havens and urged for a reversal of blame away from “victims” to the perpetrators. But they were uncompromising. They saw the space in black and white. It was tied to the exploitation of women, plain and simple. They
had less interest in labor trafficking, and protection of children as opposed to women wasn’t a main priority. Everything I had learned when talking to business-driven managers at technology companies needed to shift. There, protecting children was a neutral, consensual space, a safe space for managers to engage. Not everyone could get behind the messy world of exploitation and what it entailed, but a message of protecting kids was pure enough, and helpful to build business buy-in. The anti-prostitution abolitionists weren’t really about building buy-in, though. They wanted action, legal action, policy action, and they were getting it. They were extreme but pragmatic enough to know they had to choose their battles to make big change. They kept their eye on the prize and didn’t sway.

On the day of our presentation to the activists, I cautioned R____ to stay away from risky language; I didn’t want to offend anyone. I needed them as partners. We presented back-to-back and I went first. I presented preliminary findings from my interviews with buyers of sex. In doing so, I realized how tricky it was to use the “right” words. The room was full of a broad base of coalition members, including those from the private sector and not-for-profits. At least one survivor was in the room and identified herself as such. I am always cautious when presenting, especially when victims or survivors are in the room. I don’t want to add to their trauma, don’t want to detract from their experience, add to their harm. I proceeded to describe my interviews and some of the unexpected findings. “My focus is to understand the mindset, how buyers approach this and what would get them to change their behavior.” I explained the hypothesis and that understanding the mindset and psychological profile could help guide smart intervention on the demand side. “There is growing attention to the demand side these days, but not as much research on how to stop it or affect it.” I used real-life examples they could relate
to—how online sites like Macy’s and Amazon use tools that interpret patterns of buying preferences and behavior and how that information can be used to intervene. “If I am searching for black boots, I might get a suggestion for a black purse to match and that might affect my behavior. If we think of this as consumer behavior, and I hate to describe it that way, but if we do—if we understand the profiles we can use the same kind of tools to try to affect behavior in this category.” The participants were attentive. “There are different kinds of interventions. Microsoft could put up a pop-up that says ‘you are being creepy’ and that might be effective for some, maybe the newbies on the fence, but not others. The convicted pedophile might respond ‘I know, I am creepy.’” I continued: “The interviews with buyers are to understand their mindset, how they use technology, and what would or could get them to think differently or change their behavior.” Everyone seemed to get what I was saying and yet it was an approach they hadn’t heard before, as they shared in follow up discussions. The idea of a targeted message, of a targeted campaign to stop demand before it started was intriguing.

In R____’s talk, he described his chatroom analysis and included quotes from the discussions on how hobbyists described their behavior. Some of the quotes revealed insight the participants hadn’t contemplated. R ____ explained in his content analysis: “The internet and technology allows them to communicate and exchange ideas peer-to-peer. It used to be that people would have to go down in the basement or hide what they were doing but now it is more out in the open online and they can share experiences with each other. It lets them feel like what they are doing is normal. Others are doing it too. There is a whole community.” The group found the discussion fascinating. Most conversations in the sex trafficking and online context revolve around Backpage.com and whether it should be shut down. There are extremes on both sides. Law enforcement is mixed because the site facilitates illicit behavior, selling of sex, but
the site also cooperates with law enforcement and they use it to do undercover stings. Other sites are less cooperative; some members of law enforcement fear that if legislative efforts are successful in putting the squeeze on Backpage.com, the behavior will migrate to offshore servers and make it difficult for them to secure compliance with subpoenas. The rubber meets the road here between the pragmatic, calculating manager and the morally-driven activist over Backpage.com. Business ethics and management scholarship is yet to weigh in on this in any formal way—we need to!

So far in his presentation, R _____ had managed to avoid a reprimand on the sensitive language issues, but I suspected a lecture from G_____ would come. When he mentioned how providers and sex workers used the Internet to post their calendars of availability and their reviews and ratings, G _____ became visibly uneasy. I watched her and I knew he was about to get into hot water. R ____ shared: “Some providers create their own web sites and use the Internet as a source of business generation…they present as travelling celebrities and post when they are in town…they seem to have a following.” I knew G ____ wouldn’t like that analysis because it allowed for the suggestion that some of this behavior is consensual. In the extreme anti-prostitution abolitionist view, consent is not possible despite what people say. Their behavior is coerced and they are exploited, there is no room for consensual sex work, it is a myth constructed by the sex industry to legitimize sexual exploitation, case closed.

As I suspected would happen, R _____ was pulled to the side at the end so G ____ could share her concern over the terms. She felt even if R ____ used the words only to refer to how people described themselves, this was dangerous because the utterance would give the exploiters what they want to achieve, unchallenged legitimacy. R ____ took it well and listened carefully.
G ____ also thanked him for his insights, and said R ____ raised a lot of interesting points, and brought up new questions for her advocacy.

Then something unexpected occurred. I was eager, anxious to do damage control but a few participants approached R ____ . I listened in. Someone said to him: “Thank you for coming. If it weren’t for your presentations, this would have been just another meeting of us talking about the same things over and over again. I think we in this group get so hung up on words that we miss the bigger picture of what is going on. What you are doing and exploring is powerful…this is the kind of thing that can be really effective.” I realized in that moment that in trying to control the words, I had gone too far—I had limited the space for honest interaction and reflection. I was contributing to the maintenance of the polarized discourse. Maybe R _____ was right. Maybe I should lighten up.

5. **Talking to a customer/hobbyist/abuser/perpetrator.**

My own analysis to the activists included a message some might not want to hear—that some buyers of sex do not know they are contributing to exploitation. I did catch G ____’s dismissal when I mentioned it. But that is how some people I have interviewed present. In a ninety-minute interview or more (one of my interviews was three hours), there are ways to detect if someone is pretending—some of the men I interviewed really had no clue until they got caught, and learned about commercial sexual exploitation and specifically the exploitation of children. The interviews I completed just affirmed my understanding of the value of including buyers of sex in research, and treating them in a way that allowed them to open up and provide insight that could inform effective solutions.

Listening to and partnering with buyers of sex or former buyers of sex is an uncomfortable place for some. Sensitivity to words and how they are used in this context is part
of the interviewing technique. I was not in a position to instruct people about which words to use; I was there to learn the words they used and what they meant. I knew some of the language would be explicit, and I was prepared to explore the constructs, even those that conflicted with my own moral sentiments, my own linguistic comfort zone, as I had done in several years of qualitative research using this method. That skill was tested in interviews with buyers of sex.

My interview with one sex buyer, Gabe (not his real name), was one example. Gabe called the 800 number that forwards to my cell phone and said he was interested in doing the interview. It was 10 p.m. and I reacted quickly. “Sure, can you give me a few minutes?” I have never turned down an interview, no matter what time. There is simply no way to get those people back. Gabe and I spoke for a couple hours. It was late but he was extremely forthcoming and the interview provided lots of insight. The topic of pornography came up. Gabe was not much into the pornography that proliferated online, he reported rather matter-of-factly: “The problem with ten guys gang banging some chick is that it’s not realistic, it doesn’t really happen that way.” He added: “The thing is guys get off on that stuff. Every guy wants to be that guy…every guy wants to hit that chick…every guy wants to treat her as an object.” I paused half a second, as his locution was unexpected. I followed up, and Gabe explained: “Guys don’t like to hear ‘no.’ I like p---- and I don’t want some chick telling me I can’t l--- her p---- if I want to. Other guys like to c—in a chic’s face and they don’t want some chick saying ‘no.’” The issue of consent, it would seem, was somehow mixed up in this after all. The interview went on, and Gabe shared the benefits of online search: “You don’t have to worry you’re gonna get turned down, you get what you want and no one is gonna say ‘no.’ You get what is advertised.” He also shared his own techniques for getting what he wanted and how he was able to use the Internet and networked technologies to assist with this. Gabe was by far the savviest of the
people I had interviewed. He could spot spam, and distinguish a real ad from a fake one. He was not part of the john school or alternative sentencing cohort, so he didn’t come to me after completing his alternative treatment program. He was not really concerned about law enforcement; he was more concerned about getting what he wanted.

Gabe had no need to respond to ads; he posted his own and people replied. He liked thin girls and made sure to get instant pictures to confirm they were who they said they were, looked how they advertised, and that they were prepared to do what he wanted. Gabe shared the necessity of his verification tactics. He wasn’t going to get duped. “Once I had to turn a girl away. I took one look at her and said, ‘Hell no, what did you do, put on thirty pounds on the way here?’ I was annoyed. She had rolls and all. I told her, ‘I am sorry, honey, but I don’t do rolls’ and sent her away. She was using an old picture. From then on I made sure I got instant pics.”

Gabe provided a bit of context for the verification schemes the buyers use and why they use them. This kind of insight complemented R____’s content analysis of verification techniques hobbyists and providers used. Verification had a number of layers. It was used to verify that someone wasn’t a cop, or was a safe person to meet, but it was also used to reduce the risk of not getting what you wanted, of being disappointed in the transaction. The buyers found ways to “verify” the merchandise and apparently could send it back if it didn’t meet the requirements.

The intricacies of the online world can create illusions. Even the buyers see the online world as somehow classy, erotic, sexy. The offline world of buying sex is seen in a different light, as not having the best merchandise, as desperate, weathered drug addicts. Psychologically, we might think the offline world has more violence than the online world. My discussion with service providers/escorts/prostitutes brought to light some of the violence unique to the online
world, including violence related to online reviews: As one told me, “The pimps are monitoring reviews and when if the person doesn’t get a good review or their ratings go down, they get a beating.”

6. The power of words, redux: Non-sexual slavery/coerced labor

The interview with Gabe and reflection on the online world helped me see G ____ and her moral intensity differently. I understood better the perspective of the anti-prostitution abolitionists and why they insisted on moral absolutism, on why words and context mattered so much to them and why maintaining the coercive, exploitation nature and dismissing the consensual was vital. These issues have never been reconciled among feminists, and this was certainly not going to be the issue to bring them together. Regardless of their orientations and inclinations, there is awareness among feminists of the power of words. Words are used in conversation, but they also shape discourse. The power to direct a conversation and shape discourse is challenged in unexpected and disturbing ways in the online trafficking space.

The interactions I witnessed between W___, a well-known abolitionist from Europe, and T____, a well-known survivor and activist, illustrate this. The conversation turned to contemplating representation of slavery and how the same imagery is used today as in the abolitionist movement of the past, but with a different result. T wondered: “The anti-trafficking movement uses the same images of slavery, but it is not motivating moral action.” W responded to this paradox: “Slavery isn’t a priority because there are no slaves!” W ___ didn’t mean there are no slaves—for there certainly were within his moral framework—but that slaves are not represented. Perhaps if “slaves” were represented in messaging, and the word “slave” were used more regularly in discourse, W and T reflected, this would strengthen the abolitionist movement.
W ____ was more focused on labor trafficking. Slaves to him worked in fields, they worked on boats and in factories, they were the slaves at the base of the supply chain that nobody cared about. The discussion appeared to be taking on a turning point—messaging should emphasize the slaves and the word “slave,” because after all, no business wants to be associated with slaves and no consumer wants to be part of slavery. I thought about how G ____ and the anti-prostitution abolitionists might have a different perspective, but they weren’t in the room.

Just then, something unexpected came from T ____. T was a morally-driven activist and leader of a not-for-profit; he was well known to the group and well respected as a survivor. Everyone listened: “I have a problem with using the word ‘slave.’ I was a slave and it hurts, the word hurts. It hurts to say it, it hurts to think it, it hurts to know it, it hurts to experience it, it hurts to remember it. The label hurts and it would hurt to use it.” The academics quieted, the activists silenced, the managers understood something of gravity had occurred. There could be no follow-up. In that moment of clarity, truth had spoken through the discourse. The existential became real for everyone in the room and they suddenly remembered what was important, why they were there. The back-and-forth I exchanged earlier with W ____ about how business could be part of the solution, his cynicism and his harsh dismissal of Fairtrade International as “rewarding the traffickers,” his righteousness and moral absolutism, it all became immaterial. The conversation changed, and he did not have the answers. No one did.

7. “Thank you for your passion.”

It is difficult to define P ____, my primary contact at Microsoft. She is both business-driven and morally-driven. She speaks from the heart and inspires courage in others to do the same. She is not a typical corporate representative. P ____ makes her life experiences open to the public. She describes how she was a runaway. She identifies with vulnerable youth but also
identifies with her own strength and the steps she took to take control of her life. Her story is a testament to agency and to empowerment, to having the power to act on conviction. To deny that P ____ had an influence on me would be to deny the reality of my experience. P ____ inspired in me the drive to see the project and research through, no matter what obstacles presented.

I remember being confused when people first started approaching me, commenting on my passion, thanking me for what I was doing and encouraging me to keep it up. I would think of P ____. She was passionate, what were these people talking about? Yet they kept coming, people I didn’t even know, board members, trustees, executives, they would find me, contact me, approach me and engage. I got calls from the people everyone said would never engage, would never collaborate, would never share information. My network expanded. There was something credible about being a researcher. I didn’t have the profit motive, I didn’t have the governmental oversight, I didn’t have the NGO agenda. It was freeing for people, even those who tested me. IG ___ asked. “Ok, so I have to ask. You are doing all this work. What’s in it for you?” I realized I needed an answer, I needed a pitch. P ___ had her answer, what was mine? IG ___’s question forced me to think about what’s in it for me. “I am a researcher and this is about research, about what works and what doesn’t, about results, about how to be effective, how to collaborate effectively, how to make change. It’s about doing the right thing.”

I realized this kind of work requires collaboration but it also requires trust. Different entities, as much as they want to collaborate, simply aren’t set up for it. They don’t have the mechanisms and don’t know how to get it done. Some of the people I interacted with figured out ways to overcome the mechanism issue. IG___ was sick of how difficult it was to do basic things. Finally, he created forms and when the forms ran out, everyone started asking for the forms, demanding the forms. IG ____created policy without asking for the permission to do so.
Trust is important in the normative quicksand of human trafficking. Having an identity that people understand, a role that makes sense and that people can relate to, is important for legitimacy and credibility. Maybe that’s why people were opening up. It kept happening. One person came up to me at an event unrelated to trafficking and shook my hand: “Thank you for what you are doing!” I didn’t know who she was and what she was talking about until a colleague filled me in. Did everyone suddenly have a special interest in trafficking? Where was this coming from? After being invited to a meeting to discuss trafficking with a company, a senior manager grabbed my hands: “Thank you for bringing this to our attention, thank you for your work and your passion.” By that point these experiences had become common. I was encountering managers who were eager to understand the problem of human trafficking and what they could do to help. They were also eager to understand if there was a market they could tap into, and if they had a product they could sell.

There were difficult interactions, also. From one conversation with a manager, who was participating in a meeting by phone: “This is very interesting and I am sorry to hear about all this but we are a for-profit business after all.” The room became silent. Eyes rolled. People started winking at me. They mouthed: “Don’t listen to him, just wait until he hangs up.” I went along with it, but I was navigating a new space. Were the people in the room trying to circumvent the system, trying to change how their company did things? Was I being used to help them develop a product? What did they want out of this? The interactions I experienced later showed indeed the economic motivation was strong, perhaps stronger than any morally-driven intentions, yet they were not pure egoists by any means. Still the same comment, the same “thank you for your passion” was curious. I began to think maybe all this thanking and passion meant different things to different people. Maybe for some it was about a personal interest, or even something
religious. For others maybe it was about the positive message, a break from cynicism. In the end, maybe it wasn’t about trafficking at all, but about a proof of concept, proof of the idea that business and morality can co-exist—that the public and private space can collaborate, that the private sector has an important role to play.

8. A quietly committed manager.

RK ran a successful technology company. I’d known him for years. I asked RK his thoughts about the trafficking and technology space, about responsible intervention. RK was happy to help. He volunteered his services and that of two senior executives. RK came to meetings for the Super Bowl collaboration. RK didn’t want recognition, didn’t want credit, in fact he said he could do more if it was under the radar. It was not clear what RK would get out of this. I worried about resources. I didn’t have funding for the Super Bowl project. I didn’t want to compromise my relationship with RK or put him in a bad spot. I was concerned. I realized later it was not my place to worry so much about RK. He said to me: “You don’t need to worry about our resources, I will worry about that and I will let you know if we are overextended.”

RK had character. When we first talked about sex trafficking and the potential risk around Super Bowl weekend, I explained how it wasn’t clear there would be spikes, how it hadn’t been measured. RK looked at me and said: “If it can save one life, that is one life.”

Why was I more concerned about RK’s resources than RK was? Was it that I didn’t want to take advantage? Was it because I brought him in and would be responsible for the outcome? Does that kind of concern sometimes get in the way of things? Did I maybe insult RK by assuming that he as a businessperson was being imposed upon? Was I, as when I
tried to regulate the words R___ used with H ___, buying into existing terms of the trafficking discourse rather than allow for a new space?

RK ____ was hit during the crisis like all the IT companies that serviced the financial services industry. But RK ____’s firm survived, while many competitors did not. RK____ didn’t make the decisions others made, he didn’t lay people off. RK____ had the lowest turnover I had ever seen in any business. RK ____’s team was talented, really talented. They could work anywhere and had offers that would double their salary. But they wanted to work with RK ____.

RK ____ wasn’t greedy; he was modest, humble, visionary and successful. He did well for himself and his company and the company’s recent achievements proved this. What I learned recently when he worked on the Super Bowl project was that RK ____ had a bigger mission. RK ____ was not driven by profit alone—he also wanted to change the world. RK ___ was like P____, my key contact at Microsoft, but a lot quieter. P ____ and RK ____ were successful calculating managers, but they also morally-driven activists. They were cut from the same cloth, fusing altruistic transcendence of role with egoistic immersion in role.

PART II: SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC VIGNETTES

In this part, we connect our ethnography to the rhetoric and the intellectual resources of social science. Here we offer brief discussion of three central topics—the size of the human trafficking phenomenon, its relative reception by academics and by business, and its relation to how people attribute blame, guilt, and responsibility to different kinds of actors--each keyed to the ethnography, with the thought that the ethnography combined with the fragments of social science here and with future more developed science when combined with the ethnography may have greater power than either form of rhetoric alone to stimulate future research and action.
1. When we first talked about sex trafficking and the potential risk around Super Bowl weekend, I explained how it wasn’t clear there would be spikes, how it hadn’t been measured. RK looked at me and said: “If it can save one life, that is one life.” (Vignette 8)

Much as one may regard RK’s response as admirable, one may also reasonably wonder about how many people are in fact involved in human trafficking, either in specialized situations such as Super Bowl sex trafficking or around the world in all forms. As Table 1 shows, the estimates made by different groups differ widely, whether because of different definitions or for other reasons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Estimated Number of Human Trafficking in Persons victims</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>4 million</td>
<td>IOM--no source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2.45 million (12.3 million victims of forced labour for period 1995-2005)</td>
<td>ILO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>No data (20.9 million victims of forced labour for period 2002-2011)</td>
<td>ILO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>700,000</td>
<td>U.S. State Department-TIP Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>800,000 to 900,000</td>
<td>U.S. State Department-TIP Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-06</td>
<td>600,000 to 800,000</td>
<td>U.S. State Department-TIP Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>800,000</td>
<td>U.S. State Department-TIP Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>27 million</td>
<td>Free the Slaves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As researchers committed to business and academic attention to the subject of human trafficking, we would suggest that the major disparities in estimates shown in the table present significant issues for future research to address. Critics who call for better data have a good point to make: More than a decade after the passage of the Palermo Protocol, researchers in the
field have not passed a rough, estimation approach. That makes it plausible for skeptics to wonder whether the anti-trafficking movement responds more to an ideologically driven agenda pushed by moral crusaders, rather than to a pervasive real world phenomenon affecting millions of people (Jahic and Finckenauer 2005, Weitzer, 2007, Gozdziak 2009).

The haze of ambiguity lifts to some degree in regard to the data concerning global prosecutions, convictions, and identified victims of human trafficking complied by the State Department and shown in Table 2. Again, though, further research is called for: The approximately 20 to 1 disparity in the State Department’s numbers between identified victims (Table 1) and estimated victims (Table 2) is of particular interest.

(The 2004 TIP report collected the data for the first time on trafficking investigations, prosecutions, convictions, and sentences. The 2007 TIP Report showed for the first time a breakout of the number of total prosecutions and convictions that related to labor trafficking, placed in parentheses.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Prosecutions</th>
<th>Convictions</th>
<th>Victims Identified</th>
<th>New or Amended Legislation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>6,178</td>
<td>4,379</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>5,808</td>
<td>3,160</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>5,682 (490)</td>
<td>3,427 (326)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5,212 (312)</td>
<td>2,983 (104)</td>
<td>30,961</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>5,606 (432)</td>
<td>4,166 (335)</td>
<td>49,105</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>6,017 (607)</td>
<td>3,619 (237)</td>
<td>33,113</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>7,206 (508)</td>
<td>4,239 (320)</td>
<td>41,210</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>7,705 (1,153)</td>
<td>4,746 (518)</td>
<td>46,570</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Real Global Number of Reported Victims of Human Trafficking in Persons
U.S. State Department TIP Report
2. *Gabe had no need to respond to ads; he posted his own and people replied.* (Vignette 5)

The table below, which shows a substantial increase in early 2013 in monthly revenue obtained for escort and massage advertising by backpage.com, the currently dominant U.S. source of online advertising for sexual services, both provides quantitative perspective on the behavior of Gabe and others purchasing sex online, and suggests some conundrums for future empirical and normative scholarship to explore:

![Backpage monthly revenue graph](image)

Backpage.com is currently center stage in a debate over whether third party content providers and advertisers should be held accountable for the content of ads on their sites. Activists and anti-trafficking supporters are not of one mind on the issue. The interviews two of the authors of this paper have conducted with Gabe and other online purchasers of sexual services have confirmed the central role of backpage.com in their behavior. At the same time, the salience of Backpage.com helps facilitate law enforcement stings. Further,
ads on Backpage.com may provide the basis for data mining online behavior that allows testing of models to disaggregate high risk ads from those unlikely to involve coercion or children; the two co-authors of this paper involved in sex trafficking research are collaborating with computer scientists at Carnegie Mellon University who are developing such models. Here, as in other areas involving human trafficking, government, academic researchers, technology companies, and other businesses face tricky positive and normative issues worthy of further investigation.

3. “Business journals publish quantitative work, how can you get this kind of data?” (Vignette 3; O___ and her colleagues didn’t see how human trafficking would be an issue for their business and were reluctant to get into that messy world. The sustainability issues, the green reporting, the triple bottom line—all that seemed a more comfortable space. (Vignette 3)

We have described in the ethnography the psychic discomfort that the trafficking issue can engender for academics and managers, and suggested that the result is less attention to the subject than it warrants. We readily acknowledge that our basic proposition about reluctance in academic business disciplines to tackle human trafficking, compared to safer CSR subjects such sustainability, itself needs further research. That assertion calls for future positive analyses based on multi-disciplinary literature reviews, as well as future normative work. Here, we offer an observation as a start in the direction of integrating trafficking discourse into mainstream academic discourse: It may be the case that the issue lies not so much in business academics like Z___ mirroring the reluctance of managers like O____ to get involved. Rather, it may lie more in distinctively academic concerns about having positive scholarship and normative reticence disrupted by ideological advocacy.
A common starting point for a firm to start addressing CSR issues (such as labor issues) usually involves making public commitments to CSR or sustainability, establishing or adopting a code of conduct (Preuss, 2009), and setting up systems to monitor compliance. Many different types of codes exist: sub-organizational codes or policies focusing on certain CSR or sustainability issues or a specific function, such as sourcing; organizational-level codes of conduct or code of ethics; and supra-organizational codes, such as industry codes, NGO codes, national codes, or intergovernmental organization codes, for example (Preuss, 2010). Based on one study of the content of ethical sourcing codes by large UK firms, forced labor, along with child labor, already ranks high on the list: 68 percent of these codes included stipulations regarding child labor, 66 percent on forced labor, 57 percent on minimum/living wages, 52 percent on inhumane treatment/harassment, 48 percent on excessive working hours, and 9 percent on employing illegal immigrants, among other social/employment – and environmental and economic – issues (Preuss, 2009). That high level of attention to forced labor suggests a point we believe is important to research further in the future: A comparative neglect of human trafficking and forced labor in the academic business discipline literature may not be equally a phenomenon among business. Whatever discomfort the subject engenders among managers, it can also engender a high level of business commitment, as suggested both by the ethnography and the content of the ethics codes.

4. “Microsoft made money on the backs of children,” BO said. The project was not about technology; it was about guilt. (Vignette 2)

In connection with the foregoing vignette, we would suggest that there are connections for future research to draw between people’s attributions of blame to business and the much studied philosophical conundrums presented by trolley problems and
footbridge problems (Greene, et al, 2001; Mikhail, 2007), in which respondents are asked whether they would throw a switch to divert a trolley to save five lives at the cost of one life being lost (most say yes), and also whether they would push a heavy man off a footbridge to achieve the same result (an overwhelming majority say no). A related source of insight on blame and business, we suggest, is the Knobe effect (Knobe, 2003), under which a profit-making actor is held to have intended the negative but not the positive consequences of profit-seeking behavior.

We suggest that linking the two conundrums allows us to understand that morally motivated actors in the human trafficking space may well enjoy an exemption from harsh moral judgments made against business actors. Consider the following Knobe, intent question applied to the footbridge problem: Do the people who won’t push the heavy man intend to kill the five workers? “No!” is the answer that human moral intuition spits out, we believe. We believe that hardly any of us—even among those of us with a utilitarian bent who believe that it is morally permissible to push the fat man to save the five workers—will say that a person who does not push the man intentionally kills the workers. By contrast, we believe that many in the majority who believe it is permissible to pull the switch would also say that doing so intentionally kills the worker on the side track. Empirically testing that proposition, and complementing it with scenarios related to human trafficking could, we believe, allow additional insight into the psychological dynamics present in BO____’s attribution of moral responsibility for trafficking to Microsoft.

We would suggest that a further fruitful line of future research into understanding what is going on in our ethnography involves integrating trolley problems and the Knobe effect with broader lines of inquiry into evolution and human moral nature, such as the
work of Haidt (2001, 2007, 2012). As a foreshadowing of what such future research might explore, we suggest the following conjectures, and invite the reader to reflect on their potential relation to the ethnography:

C1: Humans (have evolved so that we) have the capability to switch readily from calculative, utilitarian modes of judgment to principled, moral modes of judgment.

C2: Humans (have evolved so that we) judge behavior that is morally motivated in a way that makes the actor responsible only for negative consequences that are a necessary means to the fulfillment of the principle guiding the actor. That is, the moral actor is not held responsible for negative consequences that are an undesired side effect, rather than a necessary means to realize the principle.

C3: Humans (have evolved so that we) judge behavior that is economically (or consequentially) motivated in a way that makes the actor responsible for all negative consequences resulting from the economically (consequentially) motivated activity. It worsens the judgment when the negative consequences are sought after means to the end of economic (consequentialist) gain, but the economic (consequentialist) actor is responsible and blameworthy even when the consequences are unwanted and cause no benefit to the actor.

C4: The differences in standards of blame for morally motivated and economically motivate conduct result in substantial ideological tension that can impair the effectiveness of relations between businesspeople and academics and others who occupy non-business roles.

Our own thoughts on the relation as of now go as follows: A discrepancy in human moral judgment that we believe may well exist—broad blame for business actors and broad exculpation for moral actors—creates discomfort and defensiveness when people who
occupy roles as moral actors, such as academics, government officials, and NGO officers, interact with people in business on the morally charged subject of human trafficking. If we are right in our conjectures, people in business themselves, not just outsiders, hold themselves as economic actors responsible for even unintended and undesired negative consequences on a broad basis. But those in business may well not appreciate the broad scope of blame associated with their role, especially when they believe they are being blamed by outsiders.

PART III. THERE IS NO NORMATIVE SHOWSTOPPER...BUT...A HOPEFUL CONCLUSION

In this concluding section, we will first be brief and blunt. No matter how many ethnographies one collects, and no matter how much one knows about the positive science, one does not arrive at a promised land in which differences in background, ideologies, and roles become irrelevant. Nor is it the case, in our view, that normative philosophy can ever provide us with principles that override the psychological realities revealed by ethnography and the empirical realities revealed by positive science. Drawing on the Critical Legal Studies perspective of Kennedy (1986, 1995) and the critical business ethics perspective of Eastman (2013), we believe that there is no escape from disagreement and dissensus based on background, ideology, and role.

Once we have disabused ourselves of the hope of reaching universal normative consensus through scientific consensus, or the other way around, we can engage in the more modest project of seeing to what degree the tensions between actors in the human trafficking space that we have explored in this paper can be mediated in practice. Some may be incorrigible. For some of us, there may be no meeting of minds and hearts whatsoever to
be had with Gabe, the purchaser of online sex services described in the ethnography. But for some of us, there may be. And other tensions are, we believe, much more readily subject to mediation through appreciation of the other. The tensions we have limned in the ethnography among those in the roles of manager, activist, and academic are all subject, we would suggest, to such mediation. We exist within our roles, backgrounds, and ideologies, but we are not limited to them. In each moment of human connection, there is an inherent possibility of transcendence.

References


