



## Ethics and Communication in Organizational Contexts: Moving from the Fringe to the Center

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### Abstract

Traditional notions of organizational communication have framed ethical questions as largely frivolous and placed them at the fringe of the field. Three factors contribute to this placement: 1) confusion over responsibility and accountability; 2) limitations on discussions regarding ethical questions in organizations; and 3) the view that ethics are not relevant when compared to larger issues of efficiency and profitability. More recently, several research traditions and initiatives have converged around ethical questions, including organizational culture and efforts to develop and examine codes and guidelines for ethical practice. These value based views of organizations and communication have the potential to serve as unifying frameworks for understanding questions of communication and ethics in organizational contexts.

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### INTRODUCTION

In a comprehensive review of the state of organizational communication ethics, Charles Redding (1996) concluded that scholars in this field had essentially ignored questions of right and wrong, good and bad, desirable and undesirable. Redding suggested that communication scholars' obsession with questions of organizational effectiveness and efficiency had essentially overwhelmed questions of ethics and values. This lack of attention had occurred despite the fact that "The preponderance of everyday problems that plague all organizations are either problems that are patently ethical or moral in nature or they are problems in which deeply embedded ethical issues can be identified" (Redding, 1996, p. 18). Similarly, in their 1982 review of almost 900 published studies in organizational communication, Allen, Goucher, and Siebert (1994) could identify only 28 that included a focus on ethics. These included articles focusing on strategic use of communication, issues of information flow and access, and decision-making. The authors noted that very few of the articles were published in communication journals and that "clearly, ethics deserves more attention" (p. 286)

More recently, however, questions concerning the ethics and values of organizational communication have received more attention in the research literature (Seeger, 1997; Cheney, 1999; Conrad, 1993). Propelled in part by cultural and interpretive metaphors of organizational communication inquiry (Putnam, 1982; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001), efforts to detail the moral dilemmas organizations face (Jackall, 1988) as well as dramatic instances of ethical failure such as the EXXON Valdez oil spill, the Archer Daniels Midland price fixing scandal, and the continued deception and consumer harm caused by tobacco companies, these views situate questions of right and wrong more centrally in organizational communication inquiry.

This essay seeks to explore the traditional dearth of ethical inquiry in organizational communication, and the emergence of ethical questions and issues as more central areas for theory and investigation. Three factors have complicated ethical inquiry into organizational communication. These include: confusion of responsibility and accountability, limitations on discussions regarding ethics organizations, and the view that ethics are simply not relevant when compared to larger issues of efficiency and profitability. Additionally, two models for focusing and furthering communication-based inquiry into the ethical dimensions of organizational communication are proposed and described. Finally, research questions

regarding ethical aspects of communication and organization still in need of attention are presented.

### **ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND ETHICAL INQUIRY**

Redding's (1996) critique of the field suggested that few systematic investigations into organizational communication phenomena had incorporated questions of ethics and values. This dearth of inquiry exists despite the fact that value questions are inherent to organizational contexts and that communication is inherently a value based construct and process (Seeger, 1997; Johannesen, 1993). Among other issues, organizational communication includes questions of employee privacy and voice, free speech, persuasion and coercion, diversity, whistle blowing, change, climate, management, power and control, outcomes, leadership, legitimacy, recruitment and socialization, management style, advertising, and public relations (Redding, 1996; Seeger, 1997). Cheney and Christensen (2001) argue that the external organizational communication designed to create and maintain organizational identity includes several ethical and moral issues. These include "(1) the posited character or integrity of the source of the messages, (2) the defensibility of a particular message, (3) the legitimacy or pattern of campaign of messages, (4) the practical impact of messages or the cumulative effect of a series of message, (5) the openness of the structure of communication between an organization and its publics/audience, (6) the articulation or representation of general public interests and (7) the question of shared responsibility." (p. 259). Unfortunately, these issues as questions of values and ethics have traditionally been at the fringe of organizational communication inquiry. One reason is that examinations of value questions within organizational communication has been fraught with conceptual and procedural difficulty. This includes confusion over questions of responsibility and accountability, limitations on discussions regarding ethical questions in organizations, and the view that ethics are not relevant when compared to larger issues of efficiency and profitability.

### **RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Responsibility and accountability are complex concepts closely connected to issues of ethics. Ethicists argue that accountability is necessary for an ethical judgement and for maintaining an ethical climate in social structures, including organizations (Seeger, 1997; Johannesen, 1990; Werhane, 1985). Responsibility denotes a moral obligation to some larger groups or social structure such as family, community, and organization. Accountability, offering accounts of decisions or actions, is a critical social process that insures that individuals bear the consequences for their own actions (Johannesen, 1990). Questions of accountability and responsibility have dogged organizations since the early days of management theory. Henri Fayol (1949) in his defining treatise on administrative management, for example, argued that unity of authority and responsibility was a hallmark of responsible management. Since that time, the idea of clear and unified lines of responsibility and authority has been management dogma. This view persists despite the fact that responsibility and accountability in organizations is necessarily compartmentalized, shared and dispersed.

Organizational ethicists have wrestled with the problems of responsibility and accountability in two primary ways. Some, such as Velasquez (1982) and DeGeorge (1986) have suggested that responsibility must be an individualized construct. As DeGeorge notes "Because an organization only acts through those who act for it, it is the latter who must assume more responsibility for the corporation" (1986, p. 5). This traditional view of responsibility locates accountability on individual managers and decision-makers. Other critics, such as French (1984) tend to reject these essentialist views in favor of at least some level of collectivist notion regarding organizational responsibility. He notes, for example, that legal systems increasing treat organizations as persons, extending to them rights usually associated with individuals. In this sense, he argues, organizations have taken on the status of a moral person. Werhane (1985) argues for a middle ground suggesting that while organizations cannot be viewed as moral persons, that for practical reasons, there are at least some instances where responsibility must be accepted by both the corporate body and by individual managers. Without some collectivist notion of responsibility, she argues, organizations may simply scapegoat individual members and avoid bearing the consequences of actions. These views, like the legal system, therefore, accept a more personified notion of organization, one that allows for corporate or collective accountability (Deetz, 1992; Werhane, 1985).

The reality concerning lines of authority and responsibility in organizational life, however, is almost always unclear, particularly as organizations have become larger and more complex (Perrow, 1984). As work is divided and compartmentalized and as employees become increasingly specialized, and even remote, a clear

and unequivocal understanding regarding who is accountable for what is reduced. As Jackall (1988) notes, the segmented work patterns of modern, bureaucratic organizations have served to cut off action from responsibility (p. 131). In organizations then, “who caused what is a matter of rival interpretations” (Petress & King, 1990). Responsibility is, therefore communicatively and retrospectively constructed as participants argue that they are more or less responsible for particular outcomes.

The complex nature of organizational responsibility and accountability makes determination of responsibility and accountability a significant impediment for researcher and critic alike. Causality is often diffused such that investigators are frustrated in their attempt to understand basic questions regarding how ethical choices are made. However, the communicative processes whereby participants seek to portray themselves as more or less responsible for outcomes are important areas for inquiry. The genre of apologetic discourse (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1999; Hearit, 1995) for example has detailed the range of explanations offered by both organizations and individual managers for wrongdoing. This research, however, does not typically ground the examination of apologia in large questions of ethics and values. None-the-less, apologia represents a fruitful line of inquiry for understanding that responsibility is rhetorically and retrospectively constructed in organizations and for sorting out how such arguments are made.

A second factor accounting for the general dearth of research in organizational communication ethics is that organizations often do not explicitly discuss ethical issues and do not make these discussions part of the ongoing discourse of the organization. A number of scholars have documented the fact that ethical issues are rarely discussed in most organizations. Toffler (1986) for example, concluded that managers avoid engaging employees in discussions of ethics so as to maintain ethical ambivalence. This ambivalence, then, translates into plausible deniability in case something goes wrong. Deetz, Tracy and Simpson (2000) describe an ethics code of silence in organizations that drives ethical issues underground until they become significant problems (p. 125). Seeger (1997) offers a somewhat less jaundice explanation as to why ethics are not part of the discourse of organizations. “Managers,” he concludes, “are usually not trained to discuss ethics” and often suffer from perceived powerlessness and general ambivalence with regard to ethical questions (pp. 187-188). Jackall (1988) similarly suggests that participants in organizations avoid discussions of critical value-based issues because these issues are politically sensitive. Others have noted that ethical issues such as sexual harassment are often systematically ignored in organizations, often forcing victims to rely on whistle blowing to call attention to these issues (Kreps, 1993; Near & Micelli, 1986). The fact that conversations about ethics are rare suggests that ethical questions often go unaddressed in systematic ways in organizations (Brown, 1990). Moreover, because ethics and values do not become part of the overt discourse of the organizations, the ethical framework used to make decisions often remains hidden from the view of observers and researchers.

The view that ethical questions do not relate to the larger and more important issues of organizational efficiency or effectiveness is a third factor that accounts for the absence of research regarding the ethics of organizational communication. As Cheney and Christensen (2001) note:

To talk about the value of behaving ethically in itself is frequently not persuasive. A measurable economic end product becomes the warrant for making a case for “good business.” And “just business” becomes a short-hand justification for all sorts of questionable corporate practices (p. 262).

Ethical issues are often positioned in opposition to the more important questions of organizational profitability. Value questions are secondary questions only considered when economic goals are met. In fact, a significant body of work suggests that many managers view their jobs as requiring basic moral compromise (Deetz, 1995; Jackall, 1988). Recently, however, some communication scholars have suggested that issues of ethical communication are not entirely disconnected from larger questions of ethics. Heath (1999) for example, suggests that part of the strategic issue management of the organizations should involve maintaining ethical conduct. Stakeholder theory (Deetz, 1995; Freeman, 1984; Freeman & Gilbert, 1987, Strong, Ringer & Taylor, 2001) seeks to broaden the definition of organization beyond the narrow economic interests of stakeholders to all those groups with a stake in the success of the organization. Cheney’s (1999) examination of the Mandragon Cooperatives details the case of a corporate structure that is first grounded in clear and unequivocal set of social values and profitable. Seeger and Ulmer (2001) have described two organizations that in the wake of devastating fires chose to emphasize the well being of

workers and the community over immediate short term issues of profitability and economic stability.

This work, then, begins to hint at models of profit making organizations where fundamental issues of value and ethics appear to be in more balance with questions of economic viability. Moreover, the success of these organizations clearly indicates that broader notions of ethics and organization are viable. In addition, new research traditions for organizational communication have recently emerged that create new opportunities for exploring the ethical and value based dimensions of organizational communication. These emerging traditions go beyond issues of responsibility and accountability, limitations on discussions of ethics, and the view that ethics are not relevant to organizational issues of efficiency and profitability.

## **EMERGING RESEARCH**

The recent surge in interest regarding ethics and values in organizations is associated with the development of new research paradigms and frameworks. In some instances, these developments have been associated with the articulation of other, more general theories of organizational communication. Other areas of research have emerged to focus specifically on issues of ethics in organizational communication. These approaches include cultural based views, and applied ethics and professional codes.

### **CULTURE**

Arguably, interpretive and culture based views of organizational communication have become a dominant paradigm for inquiry (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). Culturally based metaphors and methodologies of organization emerged in the 1980s (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1980) and interest in values dimensions soon followed. This interpretive turn in organizational inquiry focuses on organization as a symbolic and linguistic place where meaning is constructed and used to make sense of experiences (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). Culture intersects with ethics in at least three ways; at the point of organizational values, over issues of organizational identity, and at the level of cultural critique.

Conrad (1993) notes that while the cultural view of organizations focuses on values, it treats them largely as straightforward, unproblematic and reflected in organizational operations and decisions. Values are most often framed as the underlying assumptions and guidelines of organizational life. Some investigations have suggested that values are broadly and persuasively communicated in organizations and do inform actions and decisions (Martin & Siehl, 1983, Valesquez, Moberg & Cavanaugh, 1983). Values may be encoded and communicated in stories, language, symbols and icons or more explicitly through codes, mission statements, or corporate values statements. Beyer and Lutze (1999) provide an extensive review of the organizational values literature and model the relationship between values and decision making. Cheney's (1999) examination of value premises of corporate discourse found in corporate documents (1993) and his detaining of the values processes at the Mondragon corporation (2000) provide clarification of both the larger value framework of "business" and of how values function within one organizational culture. Other investigations have focused on how values are encoded and transmitted in organizations, (Louis 1980) and how values become part of the organization's larger cultural discourse (Waters & Bird, 1987).

In addition to a focus on values, cultural approaches have also focused on questions of organizational identity and ethics. Drawing on issue management (Heath, 1997) and organizational rhetoric (Elwood, 1995, 1992; Hoover, 1987) identity concerns issues of image, reputation and legitimacy as organizations seek to craft a sense of "what the organizations 'is' or 'stands for' or 'wants to be'" for both internal and external audiences (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p. 233). Questions of identity and ethics merge in the larger ethical assessment of organizations. Those organizations assessed as good, worthy and appropriate, for example, may enjoy a positive reputation, legitimate image and stronger identity. This legitimacy, then, may translate into a broader basis of stakeholder good will and support (Metzler, 2001). Cheney and Christensen (2001) for example identify a number of ethical concerns for communicating externally and building and managing identity. These issues "represent important basis for ethically informed criticism of the communication that organizations carry on between themselves and their environment" (p. 262). These approaches to organizational identity may be particularly fruitful in linking questions of ethics to issues to organizational success.

Finally, a third trend within the larger paradigm of organizational culture is a small but growing body of work focusing on organizational critique. Deetz (2001) suggests that of the general orientations to organizational culture, “critical studies have the most explicitly stated value commitments and most explicit attention to moral and ethical issues” (p. 26). Critical studies approaches organizational communication from a clear value premise; one that seeks to eliminate domination and create workplaces that emphasize equality and democracy (Deetz, 2001, p. 26-27). This work often draws on feminist and cultural perspectives, labor studies, and multiple stakeholder views to promote diverse and genuine participation in organizations (Deetz, 1995, Mumby, 1988; 1996). As such, critical studies represent a radical shift in notions of organization form conceptualizations that emphasize issues of investment, production and markets to those that privilege questions of participation, development, and empowerment of diverse groups. This body of cultural critique is not merely concerned with what an organization is as a system of communication and meaning, but seeks to advocate what an organization should be.

The study of organizational culture makes investigations of values, identity and critique central to understandings of larger systems of organizational meaning. Values are also assumed to have a direct affect on organizational action and decisions as well as moral choices. Much of the cultural approach to organizational communication, however, views values as simplistic and unproblematic and fails to recognize how individual and organizational values intersect, how competing values are negotiated, how values shift, how feedback, social influence and reinforcement may affect values and their expression (Beyer & Lutze, 1999). Critical approaches to organizational communication represent a very minor theme in the larger study of organizational culture. None the less, cultural approaches may help clarify issues of responsibility, limitations on discussions of ethics, and issues of relevancy. Since culture, and its constituent norms, icons, symbols, language and values are the organization, for example, ethical issues and values questions take on new relevance. Identity makes explicit the link between doing good and good business. Responsibility and accountability may themselves be framed as organizational values manifest more strongly in some organizations. Other organizational cultures may be related to avoidance and diffusion of responsibility. Critical approaches advocate a clear set of values. The ethical critique facilitated by cultural perspectives similarly enriches and broadens the conversations about the value dimensions of organizational life. Moreover, organizational discourse, one aspect of the interpretive approach, points specifically to the conversations as a way to understand “the subtle aspects of organizational life” (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001, p. 79) such as value systems and the ethical orientations they support. Discourse has been proposed as an approach to understanding how ethical issues are resolved in organizations (Warren & French, 1998).

## **APPLIED ETHICS**

A second area representing general models for ethics and organizational communication is in practical and applied ethics. Applied ethics, as an area of both inquiry and practice, focuses on issues of ethical decision making and problem solving in professional and organizational communities (Singer, 1986). Applied ethics typically concerns moral controversies with specific manifestations in professional or business contexts such as law, engineering, medicine and bio-ethics, research, government, and communication. Specifically, applied ethics focuses on norms and guidelines of professional practice, methodologies for promoting ethical decision-making, various codes of conducts and how these function to promote discussion, informal decisions, and resolve practical ethical problems (Rosenthal & Shehadi, 1988).

Ethical codes and guidelines have been popular in organization since at least the 1970’s and have become increasingly popular for businesses and professional associations (Ethics Resource Center, 1997; Farrell & Farrell, 1997). They were initially created by organizations and professional associations seeking to respond to specific ethical wrongdoings. Codes vary significantly in their form and structure, from highly legalistic documents used to protect organizations from legal liability to much more general aspiration value statements (Schwartz, 2001). In some cases, statements of core values or mission statements have served as the organization’s formal declaration of ethics. They vary widely in functions, including protecting the organization from legal liability, constraining and focusing employee behavior, to enhancing the image of the larger image and reputation of the organization (Frankel, 1988; Schwartz, 2001). In addition, codes serve as a means of communicating value positions to organizations and as a way of facilitating discussions regarding ethics in organizations (Seeger, 1997; Stevens, 1994). It is relatively common, for example, for all new employees to receive copies of the code. Some studies have suggested that essentially all Fortune 500 organizations have codes of ethics although it is not clear that these codes are regularly used (Center for Business Ethics, 1997). Codes and ethics programs have been found to be related to improved ethical

climate and are particularly important during times of transition (Center for Business Ethics, 2000).

One of the interesting recent developments in the area of applied ethics is the development of professional codes of conducts for the communication discipline and proposals for codes of conduct in organizational communication (NCA, 1999; Montgomery, Heald, MacNamara & Pincus, 1994, 1995). Associational codes for communication professions have been used for a numbers of years. These include codes for journalists, public relations professionals, the advertising industry, and broadcasters (Johannesen, 1997). These codes, although not without controversy, have helped identify important ethical issues, clarified the core values of communication, suggested methods for avoiding and resolving ethical dilemmas. Moreover, they promote discussions of ethical issues and help broaden understanding. More recently, the National Communication Association adopted a Credo of ethical conduct in 1999. The credo was developed over a two year period that included broad based discussions among members. The final document includes ten principles regarding the practice of ethical communication. The Credo notes that ethical questions occur whenever people communicate and that ethical communication is “central to responsible thinking, decision-making, and the development of relationships and communities. . . .” (NCA Credo, 1999). The NCA Credo draws on a broad set of ethical traditions including honest, truthfulness, free speech, condemnation of hate speech, the ethic of care, privacy, respect, social justice, protest, responsibility and responsiveness among others. The Credo makes an explicit statement regarding responsibility; “We accept responsibility for the short and long term consequences of our own communication and expect the same of others” (NCA Credo, 1999). Moreover, the Credo makes a clear link between ethical communication and effective communication. “We believe that unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and consequently the well-being of individuals and the society in which we live” (NCA Credo, 1999).

The applied ethics approach addresses issues of responsibility and accountability, limitations on ethical conversations, and the argument that ethics are not relevant when compared to efficiency and profitability. Codes and guidelines, for example, function in part by explicitly clarifying issues of responsibility and accountability. A common feature of corporate codes, for example, is to clarify issues of conflict of interests. Some of the more legalistic corporate codes require that employees sign an affidavit indicating that they have read and agree to abide by the code. Many organizations use codes and guidelines to foster conversations about ethics and values. Johannesen (1996) suggests that codes serve an argumentative function, “to stimulate public and professional scrutiny of major ethical issues” (201). Codes, along with ethics programs, audits and reports can serve to make ethics part of the organization’s agenda (Seeger, 1997). Often, individuals are trained in the use of the code and may use the code to defend their choices and actions (Crable, 1978). Finally, codes and guidelines, as applications of ethics to practical controversies, often explicitly address the relationship between ethical issues and efficiency and profitability.

## **RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Although questions of ethics have migrated toward the center of the organizational communication field, understanding remains largely fragmented and a number of important areas remain essentially unexplored. These areas of inquiry concern both how communication functions in the doing of ethics in organization and how communication praxis may be a target of ethical standards. Organizational communication scholars and ethicists for example, should turn their attention to examining how values are manifested and communicated throughout organizational contexts. Although studies of socialization and codes of ethics have begun to explore some of these processes, investigations of more informal communication process such as storytelling have not yet focused explicitly on ethics. In addition, important questions concerning how practical issues of ethics are resolved and the role communication might play in that process need attention. The ways in which codes, guidelines and even ethics training are used and influence communication, choice and behavior, for example, represent fruitful areas of inquiry. The ways in which moral conflicts are discussed and argued in organizations requires attention. Other than in the formal and stylized cases of whistle blowing and apologia, little is actually known about how, when, and with what frequency organizational members discuss, explain, justify, defend, and argue about ethical issues. These communication processes are at the heart of any comprehensive understanding of how ethics function in organizational processes.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many other issues of ethics and organizational communication not explicitly discussed her, illustrate the

fact that ethics are integrated into all aspects of organizational life. These include topics such as human resources, whistle blowing, leadership, privacy, diversity, voice, persuasion and coercion, change, power, outcomes, recruitment and socialization, management style, advertising. As noted in the NCA Credo, "Questions of right and wrong occur whenever people communicate" (NCA Credo, 1999). This includes the rich communicative context of organizational communication. These efforts to place ethics at the center of the field recognize the link between communication and ethics and implicitly argue for a conceptualization of organization that includes at its core value dimensions.

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