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CONFRONTING AND DEFENDING UNETHICAL ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR: COMMUNICATION AND ETHICAL SENSEGIVING

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this two-study dissertation was to investigate the role of communication in confronting and defending unethical organizational behavior. Utilizing two language production experimental designs, results reveal how working adults communicate in two different, unethical organizational situations.

In the first study, 326 working adults were asked to respond to an unethical actor who presented the working adults' ideas as his/her own. Participants were randomly assigned to one of nine hypothetical scenarios—scenarios differed by hierarchical relationship (subordinate responding to supervisor, coworker to coworker, or supervisor to subordinate) and interpersonal relational closeness (troublesome other, acquaintance, or friend) with the unethical actor. Workers' responses were content analyzed using a continuous coding scheme, which measured communicative confrontationality, a variable unique to and created for this study. It was hypothesized that supervisors responding to subordinates would engage in the most contemptive confrontationality, as compared to coworkers responding to coworkers, whose responses would be more confrontational as compared to subordinates responding to supervisors. Additionally, it was hypothesized that workers responding to a troublesome-other offender would engage in the most contemptive confrontationality, as compared to acquaintances, whose responses would be more confrontational as compared to friends. Finally, interaction effects between hierarchical and relational closeness contexts were also posited. Results revealed that coworkers engaged in significantly more contemptive confrontationality than both supervisors and subordinates; supervisors utilized significantly more contemptive

confrontationality than subordinates. Neither a main effect for interpersonal relational closeness nor an interaction effect was found.

In the second study, 318 working adults were asked to respond to an organizational outsider who inquired about a recent gender discrimination lawsuit filed against the participant's current employer. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, which presented the guilt of the organization as either ambiguous or certain. Participants' organizational identification (i.e., feelings of oneness with or belongingness to their current organization) was also measured. The linguistic defensiveness—a variable unique to and created for this study—of workers' responses was measured. Responses were content analyzed using a continuous coding scheme, which assessed the frequency of linguistic defense mechanisms. Participants were also asked to rate their felt intensity when crafting their responses. It was hypothesized that highly identified workers would engage in relatively more frequent linguistic defensiveness and feel more intensely when responding to an outsider who inquired about the lawsuit, after controlling for the certainty of organizational wrongdoing. It was also hypothesized that those workers in the ambiguous condition would use more linguistic defense mechanisms in their responses and report greater intensity than those in the certain condition. A moderating effect of organizational identification on the relationship between certainty of organizational wrongdoing and linguistic defensiveness was also predicted. Lastly, predictions were made about workers' organizational tenure; specifically, veteran employees would report higher levels of organizational identification, would incorporate more linguistic defense mechanisms in their responses, and would also report stronger feelings of intensity when crafting their responses. Results

revealed that highly identified workers were significantly more likely to use a greater frequency of linguistic defense mechanisms and report significantly higher feelings of intensity, even after controlling for the certainty of organizational wrongdoing. Additionally, participants in the ambiguous condition used a greater amount of linguistic defense mechanisms than those in the certain condition; however, results could not confirm differences between these groups' feelings of intensity. Organizational identification was not found to serve as a moderating variable. Finally, veteran employees reported higher levels of organizational identification and used a greater frequency of linguistic defense mechanisms. Results did not confirm that veteran employees reported greater feelings of intensity, when responding to the organizational outsider.

This dissertation expanded the current literature on organizational ethics in five, important ways. New variables relating to the role of communication in organizational ethics were introduced. First, the notion of communicative confrontationality was established. Second, the variable of linguistic defensiveness—both workers' frequency of defense mechanism usage and the intensity felt when responding about an organizational wrongdoing—was introduce. Third, this dissertation introduced two new coding schemes for analyzing organizational ethics discourse. Furthermore, during the course of these investigations, these coding schemes were validated and ought to be used in future investigations of organizational ethics talk. Fourth, this study provided empirical support for the potency of the hierarchical context in communicative confrontationality when responding to unethical behavior, to the degree that hierarchical relationships may overshadow feelings of relational closeness in the workplace. Similarly, these results provide further support for the hierarchical mum effect (Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel, in

press). Finally, this study suggested the potential maladaptive power of organizational identification, to the extent that high levels of identification could inhibit workers from admitting organizational wrongdoing and could serve as a barrier to organizational learning. In sum, this dissertation illustrated the potential for communication to enable and constrain unethical behaviors in the workplace in two major ways. First, if workers do not confront unethical behaviors in the workplace, those behaviors may accumulate, and over time, produce a culture where unethical behavior not only occurs, but is accepted. Second, the usage of linguistic defense mechanisms may produce ethical blind spots, so to speak, such that their frequent usage comes to prevent critical, yet ethically-instructive self-reflection and questioning.

CHAPTER 1

Dissertation Introduction

Situations of unethical organizational behavior can range from the seemingly mundane (e.g., attending to personal business on company time, taking home promotional golf balls) to the obviously severe (e.g., financial schemes, retirement swindles, gender discrimination, sexual harassment). Regardless of the severity of the offense, all unethical organizational behaviors likely have in common, at their source, the constitutive role of communication (Jovanovic & Wood, 2006; Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel, in press). As noted by Jovanovic and Wood, "Communicative action itself is an ethical (or unethical) doing, infused in an ethical (or unethical) culture, with another person implicated in the process and the outcome" (p. 389). Applying their insight to a dissertation on organizational ethics then, it seems that there is a cycle in which organizational ethics are challenged or reinforced from within members' communication, and communication comes to be a manifestation of organizational ethics. The ways in which working adults approach (un)ethical situations communicatively in the workplace—whether they are the offender, the witness, or a bystander—plays a key role in shaping the organizational culture that may be morally-sound or ethically-challenged.

This dissertation proceeds as two studies. The collective theme of the two projects is their joint focus on the role of communication in the perpetuation of unethical organizational behavior. Both studies utilize a language production experimental design, in which workers' responses to different situations of unethical behavior were collected, coded using content analysis, and subjected to a variety of

statistical analytic procedures. The projects differ in two, important contextual ways: severity of the unethical behavior that serves as the focus of the study (i.e., seemingly minor versus severe) and the level at which the unethical behavior occurs (i.e., individual versus organizational).

The first study seeks to understand workers' confrontationality when responding to an unethical action done against them. Specifically, how does one respond when a fellow worker presents the participant's ideas as her own? Thus, the contextual severity of the ethical action is seemingly mundane (as compared to the offense presented in the second study), and the behavior occurs at a micro, individual level. Yet while the unethical action in this project may be considered seemingly mundane, situations similar to these are the kinds workers are likely most familiar with in their workplace encounters. Furthermore, instances such as this one are likely to occur in a variety of organizations on a daily basis, with the communicative strategies workers employ in their responses ultimately shaping a workplace's discourse about ethics. Using a unique approach to Goffman's work on *face* (i.e., public self-image), this study sought to extend notions about politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and provide further empirical tests and an extension of the hierarchical mum effect (Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel, in press). Workers' communicative confrontationality and facework strategies—particularly face protection attempts and face attacks—were assessed under three relational contexts: (a) hierarchical relational context (subordinate, coworker, supervisor), (b) interpersonal relational closeness context (troublesome other, acquaintance, friend), and (c) hierarchical role and relational closeness contexts in conjunction.

Rather than investigating communicative reactions to an unethical act done by a fellow individual worker, the organizational wrongdoing in the second project occurred at a macro, organizational level and was more closely related to those cases that appear in the news. Specifically, this study sought to understand communicative differences in workers' responses to an organizational outsider when approached and questioned about a gender discrimination lawsuit at the worker's current organization. Drawing from social identity theory, organizational identification, and the literature on defense mechanisms, the second study assessed the influence of organizational wrongdoing certainty and one's organizational identification on the intensity with which workers discussed the situation and the frequency of defense mechanisms in workers' responses.

In sum, this dissertation was conducted in order to better understand the role of communication in the perpetuation of unethical organizational behavior. More specifically, these studies provide insight into a communicative view of organizational ethics with regard to the influence of hierarchy, interpersonal relationships in the workplace, and the manifestation of one's organizational identification in language-use.

CHAPTER 2

Study One

Organizational Ethics, Hierarchy, and Interpersonal Workplace Relationships: An Investigation of Contemptive Communication

Adults spend upwards of one-third of their waking hours at their workplace (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). In a typical work day, a working adult will likely be involved in activities such as collaborating, information gathering and sharing, conflict, feedback, managing, leading, and following (Sias, 2009). What is essential to a communicative understanding of organizations is that activities such as these are situated in interpersonal and hierarchical relationships. As noted by Sias, "Virtually all organizational activities occur in the context of relationships" (p. 1). Ethical (or unethical) decision-making is one such organizational activity that working adults engage in on a daily basis. Ethics and relationships are essential parts of daily organizational life.

Though organizational ethics have been studied extensively across many disciplines, the phenomenon of how ethics are enabled and constrained in the workplace remains of theoretical, practical, and societal significance and concern. As noted by King and Hermodson (2000), "Unethical behavior by employees is prevalent in today's organizations" (p. 309). Without question, the most extreme cases of organizational malfeasance are those that earn headlines in the media (e.g., Enron, Bernard Madoff's financial scheming, class action lawsuits in large corporations). Ostensibly though, such high-profile cases are not the norm. Most working adults will experience exposure to unethical organizational behavior in their own workplaces in seemingly more mundane ways. Mundane ethical lapses in judgment and behavior may include: leaving work

early, gossiping, or using office supplies and office technologies for personal use (Arnesen & Weis, 2007). Such seemingly minor breaches of ethical conduct, while not as "newsworthy," are still important.

Communication scholars must ask how communication relates to the persistence of unethical organizational behavior. The ways in which individuals "handle" everyday ethical decisions in the workplace eventually—and ultimately—has consequences for an organization's culture and the normalization of assumptions about what is ethical or unethical and acceptable or unacceptable. If organizational members adopt a so-called code of silence when faced with unethical behaviors, the unethical behavior may go unchecked. This *non*communication can actually facilitate future unethical behaviors (Deetz, Tracy, & Simpson, 2000). As noted by Weick (1995), minor inputs, over time, can lead to major outputs.

One way to explore how communication relates to organizational ethics is through the lenses of interpersonal interactions and organizational culture. Consider organizational culture as "the set of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interactions of members" (Keyton, 2005, p. 1). Mundane unethical activities, situated in the context of interpersonal relationships, may create the emergence of an organization's (un)ethical culture (e.g., Schein, 2004; Cheney, May, & Munshi, 2011). As noted by Alvesson (2002), ethical closure is the "disinclination to raise ethical problems or to engage in reflection and dialogue" (p. 138) about ethics, which may lead to organizational cultures "embracing a primarily amoral view on organizational life" (p. 139). In this way, communication is inextricable from the processes by which unethical organizational behaviors persist. Thus, a communicative cycle between

organizational culture and ethical decision making is created: "Organizational culture can both facilitate and undermine ethical decision making and other ethical behaviors" (Keyton, p. 155).

Giddens's (1979) notion of the duality of structure may also offer further insight into the relationship between communication and organizational ethics: the properties of systems (e.g., organizational cultures, command structures, interpersonal relationships) are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems (e.g., how workers communicate about ethics). In other words, how we communicate about ethics is influenced largely by the ethical nature of a culture, and reciprocally, our communication reinforces or challenges existing culturing. Ethics can be produced and reproduced systemically by way of our communication. This argument is similar to the one put forth by Kirby and Krone (2002), who found that the "discursive practices of individuals can either reinforce or undermine formally stated work-family initiatives" (p. 50). The Palo Alto school of theorists also recognized the importance of communication when they argued that, "systems can change through purposive adjustments to behavioral and communication patterns" (Miller, 2005, p. 191). Thus, if we change how we talk about ethics and how we react to seemingly minor unethical actions (first-order changes *within* the system), we may be able to influence overall ethical structures (second-order changes *of* the system).

Ethical expressions are often embedded in ambiguous situations, and when situations arise for employees to engage in ethical or unethical decision-making, workers have an opportunity to employ sensemaking and sensegiving activities. Through an investigation of *what* people say when reacting to an unethical action in

addition to *how* they say it, this research offers insight into the role of communication in the perpetuation of unethical behavior. As such, it could be argued that communication—or a lack thereof—can both enable and constrain unethical organizational behaviors. This view assumes ethics to be a practical, social activity as opposed to a purely abstract and utopian concept (Bird, 1996). Furthermore, ethics are framed in this study as a communicative activity grounded in interaction and dialogue (Jovanovic & Wood, 2006; Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel, in press).

While there are a number of variables that an employee may assess when considering unethical behavior (e.g., individual characteristics, situational factors, and organizational issues; see King & Hermodson, 2000), this study is concerned specifically with two variables, hierarchical position and relational closeness. As noted by Spitzberg and Cupach (2007), individuals "approach their interactions with multiple and mixed motives" (p. 18). Thus, this study asks, specifically, how does position in a hierarchy and level of closeness with an unethical actor affect how individuals communicate about an unethical situation when the unethical action is taken against the participant? Of additional importance for this study are three communicative dynamics: face and politeness theory, mum effect theory, and confrontationality.

Interpersonal Relationships in the Workplace

Many adults spend a large portion of their day at their workplace. As such, the formation of relationships in the workplace, either out of necessity or by choice, is common (Fritz, 1997; Sias, 2009). Workplace relationships are defined as "all interpersonal relationships in which individuals engage as they perform their jobs, including supervisor-subordinate relationships, peer coworker relationships, workplace

friendships, romantic relationships, and customer relationships" (Sias, 2009, p. 2). Thus, while many relationships are formed with a variety of individuals in the workplace in order to achieve the raison d'etre of the organization (i.e., task accomplishment), these relationships can also resemble traditional relationships external to organizational settings (e.g., friendship, romance). As noted by Sias:

> Relationships are the essence of living systems and the basis of organization (Wheatley, 1994, 2001). It is through relationships that systems maintain balance (Katz & Kahn, 1978), chaos becomes order, and fragmentation is made whole (Wheatley, 2001). (p. 2)

The importance of workplace relationships for overall system functioning is clear. This study is concerned primarily with hierarchical relationships and the relational closeness within those dyads.

Despite the recent trend in moving toward flatter, more team-based organizational structures, hierarchy remains a potent variable in organizational communication. Put directly, "hierarchy matters" (Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel, in press) and is "a defining characteristic of organizations" (Sias, 2009, p. 19). Supervisor-subordinate relationships remain one of the most highly studied organizational *topics* (Sias), let alone the most studied workplace relationship. Supervisor-subordinate relationships are indeed important for the investigation at hand, and are discussed below. However, given the nature of organizational life, other work relationships are also important. One specific category of such relationships is that of the relationships among peer coworkers, or "relationships between employees at the same hierarchical level who have no formal authority over one another" (Sias, p. 58). By nature, and

given the trend toward increasingly organic, team-based organizational structures (Evans & Fischer, 1992), peer relationships are becoming more common and workers will tend to have many more peer relationships than any other hierarchically-defined relationship (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Beyond the notion that there are a number of peer coworker relationships, these are particularly potent relationships because coworkers are those with whom individuals likely spend the majority of their time in the workplace (Comer, 1991, Sias & Perry, 2004). We may even spend more time with them than our own family and friends (Sias).

Kram and Isabella (1985) conducted the initial study of peer coworker relationships when they investigated peer coworkers in terms of mentoring functions. The researchers created a typology of three types of peer coworker relationships that are commonly cited in the research today: (a) the information peer, (b) the collegial peer, and (c) the special peer. Information peer relationships could be described as the least close and the most superficial, with low breadth and depth, self-disclosure, intimacy, and trust. Special peers are on the opposite end of the spectrum. These relationships have high levels of the aforementioned relational qualities, open discussion of nearly any topic, and are akin to a "best friend" status (Kram & Isabella). Collegial peers fall in the middle and are characterized by moderation and balance. In sum, much of the initial research investigating specifically peer coworker workplace relationships included an emphasis on relational closeness.

The present study is not concerned with *how or why* working adults become friends per se (see Fritz, 1997; Odden & Sias, 1997; Sias & Cahill, 1998; Sias & Jablin, 1995; Sias, Smith, & Avdeyeva, 2003), but rather the communicative differences that

occur because of these differing contexts of relational closeness and across hierarchical relationships. Sias (2009) is correct when she posits, "While unique, workplace friendships develop and flourish in all types of organizations at all hierarchical levels, and between all types of employees" (p. 91). Just as easily as a boss can be a best friend, she could also be an enemy or a troublesome other. Similarly, a peer coworker can be someone to whom we would only turn for information on a computer function or an upcoming meeting, or he could be someone whom we seek to avoid actively. For the purposes of this study, Kram and Isabella's (1985) traditional typology of peers in the workplace was adjusted slightly for two purposes. First, Kram and Isabella's typology neglected to include a very plausible relationship in the workplace—an unpleasant, difficult relationship with someone one seeks to avoid (a troublesome other). Thus, the typology was adjusted in order to highlight differences between three distinct levels of relational closeness—troublesome other, acquaintance, friend—as opposed to information (acquaintance-like), collegial (both coworker and friend), special (best friend). Second, rather than exploring only peer coworker closeness, this study accounts for relational closeness across three levels of the hierarchy (between subordinates and supervisors, peer coworkers, and supervisors and subordinates).

Nearly every working adult will have at least one supervisor. In a supervisor-subordinate relationship, at least one individual (the supervisor) has formalized authority over the other (the subordinate) to assign and evaluate tasks. This relational dynamic has consequences for the nature of the communicative interactions between the two individuals. Consider, for example, simple information sharing. Sias notes that subordinates are more likely to filter information and engage in upward distortion—

"distorting information provided to a supervisor either through lying or omission" (p. 25)—if: (a) supervisors have great influence over the employee's career trajectory, (b) if the content reflects poorly on the subordinate, or (c) if theirs is a relationship of low trust (see Jablin, 1979).

A defining feature of supervisor-subordinate relationships is the prevalence of downward and upward feedback, both formal (e.g., annual evaluation) and informal (e.g., everyday conversation). A great deal of research on feedback in the workplace is concerned with whether it is positive or negative (Sias, 2009). What is necessary is a distinction between positive versus negative feedback, *not* as good versus bad, but rather as what both types of feedback can accomplish. Sias claims: "Positive feedback is helpful for informing employees as to their current performance, but negative feedback is crucial for eliciting *change* in employee performance, change that is essential for employee development and career advancement" (p. 27). This study assumes a similar stance. While both types of feedback are necessary for supervisor-subordinate relationships, perhaps more weight ought to be placed on delivering negative feedback, both downward and upward about employee performance, behaviors, and actions. Negative feedback, especially in the context of organizational ethics, is what will elicit changes and accountability in unethical behavior and actions. A lack of feedback may lead to the perpetuation of unethical behaviors in the workplace.

Face and Facework in Workplace Relationships

Face and facework dynamics are clearly present in these hierarchical relationships, especially when delivering feedback, generally to supervisors or to subordinates (but including peer coworkers as well). It is much easier to provide

positive feedback, perhaps because negative feedback is an inherently face-threatening action (Goffman, 1959). Face, as defined by Goffman, is "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken up during a particular contact" (p. 213). In other words, face is the public self-image one claims for oneself—how she presents herself, her identity, and her activities to the world. We can maintain, enhance, or lose face. In other words, one's face is not static; it is negotiated constantly (Carson & Cupach, 2000). Brown and Levinson (1987) extended Goffman's original notion of face in everyday interactions through their conceptualization of positive and negative face: positive face refers to one's need for inclusion and validation and to be viewed positively; negative face refers to one's need for independence. The desire to have one's own face esteemed and to be free from imposition has long been considered a universal attribute of the human experience, cutting across all cultures and social contexts (Ting-Toomey, 1994).

Not only are humans concerned with maintaining their *own* face, Goffman (1959) asserts that there is an expectation to assist *others* in claiming esteemed and autonomous public self-images for themselves. Face threats or face threatening actions are infringements on someone's right to an esteemed and autonomous self-image. They occur when, as noted by Miller (2005), "an individual's desired identity in a situation is challenged" (p. 302). Individuals engage in preventive (prior to a face threat) or corrective (post-face threat) face*work* strategies as attempts to manage, counter, mend, or mitigate the effects of face threatening actions (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Cupach & Metts, 1994; Morand, 2000). Such facework is often manifested in linguistic adjustments. For example, a supervisor asks a subordinate to write a reimbursement

check for a personal lunch. The subordinate believes the request (a face threatening action) to be unethical. In response, the subordinate claims, "I do not understand," which is a facework strategy used by the subordinate to deny the request indirectly and to mitigate the effects of the face threatening action (see Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel, in press).

The argument presented here is that the communicative displays and linguistic adjustments—face, facework, face threatening actions—may become even more prominent when considered in the context of organizational ethics. More specifically, how do workers' facework strategies change when they are placed in a situation that asks them to respond to an unethical organizational behavior done against them by someone of particular relational closeness, occupying a certain organizational role?

Much of the research concerning face and facework demonstrates Goffman's description of how individuals ought to protect someone's face if the other person "make[s] a slip of some kind" (p. 231). However, what if that "slip" is unethical, seemingly intentional, and *you* are the *victim*? This situation is an inherently face threatening action. Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto, and Takai (2000) purport the importance of studying how people negotiate face in conflict situations within personal relationships. Face negotiation theory assumes, "the concept of face becomes especially problematic in uncertainty situations (such as embarrassment situations and conflict situations) when the situated identities of the communicators are called into question" (Oetzel et al., p. 399). Unethical organizational behavior is, ostensibly, a situation of conflict. Face negotiation theory takes into account the locus of face, which is particularly important for the unethical situation in this study. The

locus of face refers to the degree of concern for self-face, for other-face, and for mutual-face. The latter is a concern for the image of the relationship (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

Consider the unethical behavior that is the focus of this study: a participant's subordinate, peer coworker, or supervisor—whom the participant considers to be an troublesome other, acquaintance, or friend—presents the participant's ideas as her own in a public setting (a meeting). A unique feature of this study that speaks to the question posed above—being the victim of an unethical "slip"—is that the participant is being asked to respond to what is an inherently face-threatening action done against him: her coworker stole her idea, violating intellectual property rights. The ethical and facework dilemma that is put forward in this study as similar to Goffman's (1959) following claim: "There are occasions when individuals, whether they wish to or not, will feel obliged to destroy an interaction in order to save their honor and their face" (p. 245). Now, is the locus of face necessarily a concern of face-saving for the other individual?

Regarding the locus of face, it now seems as though participants must engage in conversation about the wrongdoing in order to save their own face or the face of the relationship. It is argued here that the face which will be deemed more important to protect or save will vary whether there is a high closeness with the offender and if the offender is in a position of power over the participant. This notion is similar to Brown and Levinson's (1987) equation to compute the weightiness of a face-threatening action (i.e., $W = D + P + R$), where weightiness is determined by the sum of social distance between the actors (D), the power one actor has over the other (P), and cultural rating of the imposition (R). In the case of being the victim of an unethical action perpetrated by

a subordinate-troublesome other, then, we see that the act is especially face threatening on two accounts: social closeness and power distance. We might expect a threshold by which the concern for one's own face surpasses concern for the other's face, and thus, elicits face *aggravation*, as opposed to protection for the other.

Penman (1990) reformulated the concept of facework by providing 16 possible facework options, differing on six aspects: concern for self face/concern for other face; concern for positive face/concern for negative face; desired effect on face (mitigate, protect, threaten, aggravate); immediate/indeterminate efficacy; direct approach/indirect approach; and overall goal (demonstrate respect/demonstrate contempt). Concerns for the self-face and relationship-face (see above) may be manifested linguistically through participants' usage of confrontational strategies. For the purposes of this organizational ethics study, attention was focused specifically on attempts at face protection or face attack/aggravation strategies. Face aggravation strategies include contemptuous communication and tend to be more direct in their approach. This research poses the question of how participants engage in facework strategies by linguistically employing face protections and/or face attacks toward the other person. Face protections are framed here similar to how Goffman (1959) frames face-giving strategies, or, taking care not to embarrass the other in public. Face protections differ, though, in that I do not view face protection strategies as defending and supporting the wrongdoer's need for inclusion. Perhaps more similar to Penman's conceptualization, face protections are framed in this study as indirect approaches, generally conveying some element of respect toward the other. On the other hand, face attacks and face aggravations in this study are framed as direct confrontational attempts. Indeed, as noted by Penman,

aggravations include contemptuous communication and tend to be more direct in their approach. Aggravation could also be described as an attack of the others' face and that individual's right to an esteemed and autonomous public self-image, employed by participants perhaps to defend one's own.

Mum effect. In the organizational setting, workers may be concerned with "softening the blow" (Sias, 2009, p. 27) of negative feedback—or even withholding negative feedback—in order to help others maintain or save face. The mum effect predicts an individual's reluctance to transmit bad or negative news for fear of being associated with the news or for fear of harming the interpersonal relationship at hand (Rosen & Tesser, 1972; also reminiscent of reasons for upward distortion as described above). Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003) found a mum effect present in supervisor-subordinate communication through their investigation of why employees remain silent rather than engaging in upward communication about any issue or concern: "The most frequently mentioned reason for remaining silent was the fear of being viewed or labeled negatively, as a consequence, damaging valued relationships" (p. 1453).

Hierarchical mum effect. Ploeger, Kelley, and Bisel (in press) investigated the mum effect and face concerns in the context of organizational ethics. Specifically, they found that when participants were approached with an unethical request from another working adult, they engaged in various linguistic facework adjustments when responding to the unethical request (i.e., directness and indirectness of responses). Ultimately, the researchers identify what they label a *hierarchical* mum effect present with regard to response directness. In other words, one's (in)directness was influenced

significantly by the hierarchical relationship, with supervisors demonstrating the most directness in their responses to unethical requests from subordinates, followed by coworkers responding to coworkers, followed by subordinates responding to supervisors. The hierarchical mum effect is an indicator of the potency of the workplace for shaping face concerns and facework dynamics and furthermore, that subordinates may be more concerned with saving their supervisor's face than vice versa (Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel; see also Campbell, White, & Durant, 2007). As noted by Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin, "the hierarchical relationship…appears to intensify the mum effect" (p. 1455).

Yukl (2009) further notes that people are more likely to act "cooperatively toward someone who has high positional power, because they realize the person can affect their career and they do not want to risk the person's displeasure" (p. 218). This cooperation may be communicated through face protection and indirect confrontation of the unethical action done against the participant by the supervisor. In addition, in an investigation of politeness theory in supervisor-subordinate conversations, Morand (2000) found that subordinates used more facework when there was a risk of threatening a supervisor's face—which would be the case in this study.

While Agne and White (2004) studied facework in supportive interactions amongst friends, their assumptions are relevant to the context here. The researchers note that perceived roles (one seeking support more than the other) may influence facework strategies. Working adults have to assume different kinds of roles than those described by Agne and White, but hierarchical roles clearly have associated perceptions as well. As described above, due to the nature of supervisor-subordinate relationships, it would

seem that supervisors are overall less concerned with protecting subordinates' faces (Bisel, Messersmith, & Kelley, in press). Thus, supervisors engage in greater, more contemptive confrontationality when the concern to protect one's own face exceeds the concern for another's face, as with being the victim of an unethical action. Given the above rationale on hierarchical influences on facework strategies in situations of conflict (e.g., confronting unethical organizational behavior), the following hypothesis is posited:

H1: Supervisors use more contemptive confrontationality in their communication with a subordinate unethical actor than coworkers communicating with a coworker unethical actor who use more contemptive confrontationality in their communication than subordinates communicating with a supervisor unethical actor.

Agne and White's (2004) arguments on facework in social support situations with friends are also relevant in this investigation of facework in ethical conversations within workplace relationships. Agne and White note, "We expect that closeness influences support interactions in subtle ways. For instance, closeness probably influences what people know about the other's past experiences and that knowledge affects the facework an individual enacts in the interaction" (p. 11). Similarly, it is argued here that the more workers know about each other, the more they will be concerned with protecting their interpersonal relationship and the offender's face.

Studies have investigated facework with respect to ingroups and outgroups (e.g., Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Oetzel et al., 2000). Common ingroupers are family and friends, while common outgroupers are strangers or enemies. Applying these concepts

to the workplace relationships in this study, the "friend" condition is indicative of someone in the participant's ingroup, while the "troublesome other" and "acquaintance" could be considered to be in the participant's outgroup. When communicating with those in the ingroup, people demonstrate a higher concern for other-face (Oetzel, 1999). Conversely, when communicating with outgroupers, individuals have greater concern for self-face.

Furthermore, increased intimacy within relationships has been linked with more polite facework (Lim & Bowers, 1991). Thus, if the unethical offender is a friend rather than a troublesome other or mere acquaintance, the participant will utilize more protective confrontational strategies. The workplace troublesome other and participant share the least intimacy and could be considered to be an ultimate outgrouper, and as such, participants will use the most contemptive confrontational strategies in their response about the unethical event. Finally, the linguistic facework adjustments that participants use with the acquaintance ought to be situated in the middle, between friends and troublesome others. Thus, this study explores the following hypothesis:

H2: Those who are friends with the unethical actor use more protective confrontationality in their communication with the unethical actor than those who are acquaintances with the unethical actor, who use more protective confrontationality in their communication with the unethical actor than those who view the unethical actor as a troublesome other.

Considering the above rationale for both hierarchical relationships and relational closeness in the workplace, it is reasonable to assume that there is an interaction between the two variables. Brown and Levinson's (1987) equation for the weightiness

of a face-threatening action (social closeness and power distance) is particularly useful for considering hierarchy and closeness together. If the participant is the victim of the unethical action done against them by a subordinate-troublesome other, closeness is low and power distance is at its peak. However, if the unethical action is by a supervisor who is also a friend, both closeness and power distance are high. Still, the subordinate will likely protect the face of their supervisor, given the nature of the hierarchical rationale and predictions made above. Thus, this study explores the following interaction hypotheses:

H3: The greatest difference in confrontationality exists between those in the subordinate to supervisor/friend condition and the supervisor to subordinate/troublesome other condition.

H4: The smallest difference in confrontationality exists between those in the supervisor to subordinate/troublesome other condition and the coworker to coworker/troublesome other condition.

This study focused on the communicative strategies working adults produce when they are the victims of an unethical behavior in the workplace (i.e., a coworker presents participants' ideas as his/her own). For the purposes of this study, linguistic confrontation strategies that one employs when responding to an unethical actor's behavior are referred to as confrontationality. Confrontationality exists on a continuum of no confrontation/highly protective confrontation to highly contemptive confrontation. The notion of aggravating or attacking another's face when individuals are forced to defend themselves offers grounds for a theoretical extension to Goffman's (1959) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of facework, as well as that of Penman (1990).

This study was particularly concerned with what working adults "sound like" when they are defending themselves—and possibly engaging in verbal conflict—in order to right a perceived moral wrong done against them in the workplace.

Methods

Participants

A sample of 326 full-time working adults participated in this language production experiment. Participants included 165 males and 157 females (four participants did not identify their sex), ranging in age from 21 to 70 years of age (M = 41.97, SD = 12.41). Respondents lived in 29 states within the United States; one participant lived in Australia. Participants' education levels ranged from an earned high school diploma to an earned doctorate, with a bachelor's degree being the most common educational level obtained (34%). Participants' total work experience ranged from six months to 48 years (M = 20.92, SD = 13.20), while work experience at their current organizations ranged from being a new member of their organization (employed there less than one month) to 42 years (M = 12.47, SD = 12.18). The majority of participants were employees of large organizations (greater than 500 employees; 63.8%), while others were from medium-sized organizations (fewer than 500 employees; 13.2%), small organizations (fewer than 100 employees; 15.6%), and small office/home office/micro organizations (fewer than 10 employees; 6.4%).

Procedures and Design

Highly connected full-time working adults—individuals situated centrally in social networks—from a variety of career fields were recruited to participate in the study through a solicitation email sent by the researcher. Upon receipt of the email,

these individuals were also asked to forward the solicitation email to five other working adults. The final wave of recruitment was to have those five individuals forward the email to an additional five working adults. Through the recruitment email, all potential participants were directed to an online survey hosted by Qualtrics®.

In accordance with institutional review board oversight, all participants read consent forms before participating. Once participants granted consent, they provided basic demographic information (described above). The study then proceeded as a 3 (hierarchical position: subordinate, coworker, supervisor) X 3 (interpersonal relational closeness: troublesome other, acquaintance, friend) factorial design.

Scenarios. Participants were randomly assigned to one of nine conditions. Participants responded in the first person to Casey (the gender-neutral unethical actor) after Casey presented the participant's ideas as "their [*sic*]" own during a meeting, as though it were a real situation (see *Appendix A*). While the unethical action (i.e., stolen idea) was the same across conditions, the scenarios differed on three levels of the two independent variables: hierarchical relationship between the participant and the unethical actor (subordinate to supervisor, coworker to coworker, supervisor to subordinate) and interpersonal relational closeness with the unethical actor (troublesome other, acquaintance, friend). For example, scenario one described Casey as a supervisor who is also a troublesome other to the participant. The participant was asked to construct a response to his supervisor, Casey, as though it were a real situation. In scenario two, Casey is a supervisor who was depicted as an acquaintance. Casey is still a supervisor, but participants assigned to this condition now consider Casey to be a friend. The remaining scenarios continued in the same fashion, but Casey was described

as a coworker (for scenarios four through six) or a subordinate (for scenarios seven through nine). See *Appendix A* for the complete scenarios.

The number of participants assigned randomly to each condition was as follows: (a) subordinate to supervisor/troublesome other (n = 30), (b) subordinate to supervisor/acquaintance (n = 38), (c) subordinate to supervisor/friend (n = 27), (d) coworker to coworker/troublesome other (n = 41), (e) coworker to coworker/acquaintance (n = 42), (f) coworker to coworker/friend (n = 37), (g) supervisor to subordinate/troublesome other (n = 32), (h) supervisor to subordinate/acquaintance (n = 39), and (i) supervisor to subordinate/friend (n = 40). Restated, a total of 95 participants crafted replies as subordinates responding to a supervisor, 120 as peer coworkers responding to a peer coworker, and 111 as supervisors responding to a subordinate. One hundred and three participants responded to an offender who was a troublesome other, 119 to an acquaintance, and 104 to a friend. Participants crafted their responses to the unethical actor in a dialogue box; responses were not restricted to a minimum or maximum length.

Manipulation check. A manipulation check was performed in order to assess whether participants likely perceived distinctions between the hierarchical positions (subordinate, coworker, supervisor) in the conditions and relational closeness levels (troublesome other, acquaintance, friend) in the conditions, and whether the behavior discussed in the scenario was perceived as unethical. Twelve working adults participated in the manipulation check. Results confirmed that these participants did indeed perceive intended differences between hierarchical positions and between relational closeness with the unethical actor. Additionally, participants believed that,

across conditions, the action was unethical. See *Appendix B* for manipulation check details.

Content Analysis

A content analysis was performed on all 326 responses. Each response was coded for level of confrontationality and the associated presence of face protection and face attack strategies. Each response was given only one code.

Training and coding scheme development. Fifteen working adults were solicited for participation in a pilot study. Participants received one of four—of the total nine included in the full study—scenarios and were asked to respond to Casey as though it was a real situation. The four scenarios were selected because they were the most extreme conditions, in that they represented the highest and lowest levels of hierarchical relationships (i.e., subordinate to supervisor, supervisor to subordinate) and relational closeness (i.e., troublesome other, friend). Participants' responses were analyzed in order to: (a) begin the development of a coding scheme for linguistic confrontationality, and (b) investigate and confirm the presence of initial confrontationality differences between the most extreme conditions.

Drawing upon the work of Brown and Levinson (1987) as well as the methods of Waldron and Krone (1991) and Ploeger, Kelley, and Bisel (in press), an inductive coding scheme was originated for the purposes of this study. Two coders underwent two rounds of training. Coders read and reread two selections of responses (at time one: the 15 responses from the pilot study; at time two: a subset of 33 cases selected randomly from the full study data) to identify recurrent confrontational strategies in a process similar to open-coding in constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In

order to open-code, coders identified and labeled each confrontational strategy and then looked for similar and dissimilar examples throughout the selected data. Once open-coding was completed, recurrent patterns were well-established—enough so that no new strategy examples could be found in the selected response-sets. The coders then used these open-codes as a means of developing a content analytic scheme by ordering codes from least to most confrontational, a process parallel to axial-coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

At the completion of this inductive process, coders identified five levels of confrontational directness and face aggravation, ranging from 0 (*no confrontation/highly protective confrontation*), 1 (*protective confrontation*), 2 (*balanced confrontation*), 3 (*contemptive confrontation*), and 4 (*highly contemptive confrontation*). Following establishment of the coding scheme, the two coders selected yet another 34 cases randomly (from the full study data) to determine initial intercoder reliability. Krippendorff's α was computed for both initial interrater reliability, and interrater reliability at the end of coding (the latter referred to as coder drift). Interrater coding reliability was sufficiently high ($\alpha = .89$); a measure of coder drift was also sufficiently high ($\alpha = .85$).

Coding scheme details. An utterance was assigned a score of "0-no confrontation/highly protective confrontation" when the response contained only face protection(s) and/or the presence of a deniable, off-record face attack (e.g., *Hey Casey: That was a great presentation! And I am proud that we worked together to make it a good one. You made the group look good and I am excited about the potential of this super project. Let's keep supporting our team.*). Examples of off-record face attacks

included participants asking variations of, “What just happened?” or “Why did you do that?” without referencing what they meant by “that.”

Those responses coded as “1-protective confrontation” contained more protection attempts than face attacks (e.g., *Casey, I felt like today’s meeting was a little uncomfortable. To me, it seemed like you introduced my project in a way where it seemed like you had more influence over the content than you actually did. Do you understand where I’m coming from? It is really important to me and my current position in this company that others are aware that these are my ideas you presented* or *Casey, I believe we need to talk about what happened today at the meeting. I am confused as to why, after sitting in on my presentation yesterday, you presented the same ideas at the meeting. Can we please meet with a mediator today at 2:00 to talk about it? Thank you.*). Additional characteristics of highly protective confrontations included the speaker acknowledging shared responsibility for what had happened or mentions of surprise or confusion.

Those responses receiving a score of “2-balanced confrontation” included a balance of face protections and face attacks (e.g., *Casey, I’m very confused by your actions this morning. I don’t think you came up with incredibly similar ideas on your own because surely you would have brought that up yesterday. I need you to fill me in on why you did that to me today.*). These responses may have also included one or more of the following characteristics: longer in duration, mention of friendship or respect for the other, usage of “we” language, use of questioning, allowing opportunities for the offender to defend themselves, or asking (rather than demanding) the offender to confess, among others.

Responses that were coded as "3-contemptive confrontation" included more face attacks than face protection attempts, but still protected face (e.g., *Casey, you stole my presentation and presented it as your own. Why did you do this? Since I have the research and planning to back up my presentation, I am going to our boss to let them know what happened.*). Ultimatums were often present in these responses, but the response overall included an element of face protection, even if minor. Similar to the previous code, responses of contemptive confrontation also often included questioning, seeking to understand, giving the other the "chance to right the wrong," or the usage of phrases such as "feel," "please," and "appreciate." However, face attacks outweighed any face protection attempts, in terms of the number and/or forcefulness of the attacks.

Finally, responses that involved highly contemptive confrontation were assigned a "4" and included blatant face aggravation, no face protection attempts and no redressive action (e.g., *Hey Casey, what the hell were you doing in there? I trusted you with the content of my presentation and you betrayed me*). Highly contemptive confrontation responses were often relatively shorter in duration and likely included some of the following characteristics: ultimatums with no attempts at protecting the other's face, declarative statements, threat of bodily harm, profanity, termination of the offender, or direct attacks of the offender's character and of the action.

Coding scheme validation. As noted by Lindlof and Taylor (2011), one way that inquiries and coding can achieve validation is through the evaluation of multiple forms of evidence. Specifically, Krippendorff (2004) recommended that coding schemes be assessed for three categories of validation: face validity, social validity, and empirical validity. As *face validity* is associated with a coding scheme's plausibility or

the degree to which the measure "seems to tap the desired concept" (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 115), I believe the scheme developed for this study—described above and based on existing literature—meets this criterion. Krippendorff describes *social validity* as whether a coding scheme allows content analysts to "address important social issues" (p. 319). Given the history and the persistence of unethical behavior in the workplace, the coding scheme developed for this study satisfies social validation. This coding scheme allows scholars to understand the language production of working adults who are victims responding to a perceived moral wrong in the workplace. This novel understanding of confrontation strategies and face aggravation will likely provide insights into the connections between hierarchy, relational closeness, linguistic strategies, and unethical behavior; for example, hierarchical position and relational closeness may collude to produce ethical silence. Furthermore, the results of this study may also provide important practical recommendations for organizational members.

Finally, *empirical validity* refers to "the degree to which available evidence … support intermediate stages of a research process and its results" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 319). Semantic validation, or the accuracy of coding scheme categories' depiction of accurate meanings within a context, is one means of establishing the empirical validity of a coding scheme. Twelve working adults aided with demonstration of semantic validation (and as such, empirical validation) of this study's coding scheme. Participants were asked to rank five pilot participant responses (one response for each score, 0-4; see examples presented above) in order from no confrontation to extremely direct confrontation. Four of the 12 participant responses were removed because they did not follow instructions to rank-order the five pilot responses. Krippendorff's α was

computed across participants' rankings in order to measure how consistently these *un*trained coders' impressions corresponded with the coding scheme. Participants' rankings were consistent with the coding scheme, $\alpha = .91$. Krippendorff (2004) argues that an additional means of establishing empirical validity is the achievement of functional validity: "the degree to which the analytical construct is vindicated in use" (p. 319). This type of validity was also met, after demonstrating some key statistically significant findings in the study data using the inductively-developed coding scheme (details below).

Results

Hierarchical Position, Relational Closeness, and Confrontationality Strategies

A 3 (subordinate, coworker, supervisor) X 3 (troublesome other, acquaintance, friend) factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted in order to test hypotheses one through four (see *Table 1* for descriptive statistics). These hypotheses predicted effects for hierarchical position, relational closeness, and their interaction on the degree of confrontational strategies used by participants. While the ANOVA indicated no significant interaction between hierarchical position and relational closeness, $F(4, 317) = .84$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .001$, the test did reveal a significant main effect for hierarchical position, $F(2, 317) = 16.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. There was not a significant main effect for relational closeness, $F(2, 317) = .19$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .009$. Results are discussed in greater detail below, and are presented in the order of hypotheses.

Hierarchical position. Hypothesis one predicted that those individuals in the supervisor-subordinate condition use more contemptive confrontational strategies when

confronting the unethical actor than those in the coworker-coworker condition, who use more contemptive confrontational strategies than those in the subordinate-supervisor condition. Results of the ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for the hierarchical condition, $F(2, 317) = 16.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. In order to determine group differences in confrontational strategies across hierarchical positions, when confronting an unethical actor, Tukey HSD post hoc tests were performed, in order to correct for Type I error rate. Post hoc tests revealed a significant difference in confrontationality between subordinates responding to supervisors ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.25$) and coworkers responding to coworkers ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.18$), $p < .001$. There was also a significant difference between subordinates responding to supervisors ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.25$) and supervisors responding to subordinates ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.37$), $p < .05$. Finally, there was also a significant difference between supervisors responding to subordinates ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.37$) and coworkers responding to coworkers ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.18$), $p < .05$. In other words, post hoc tests revealed that coworkers used significantly more contemptive confrontational strategies than did supervisors or subordinates. Also, supervisors were significantly more confrontational with their use of contemptive strategies and face attacks when responding to the subordinate-offender than were subordinates responding to a supervisor-offender.

Thus, results revealed partial support for the first hypothesis. The prediction was that supervisors would use the most contemptive confrontational strategies, followed by coworkers, followed by subordinates. However, analyses revealed that while subordinates were indeed the most likely to abstain from confrontation, use more protective attempts, and invoke less contempt and attack in their responses, *coworkers*

were the most contemptive in their confrontations. The mean of supervisors' confrontationality was between the means of subordinates' and coworkers' confrontationality.

Relational closeness. The second hypothesis predicted that those who are friends with the unethical actor use the least face aggravation strategies when confronting the unethical actor than those who are acquaintances, who will use less face aggravation strategies than those who view the offender as a troublesome other. Results of the ANOVA did not reveal a significant main effect for relational closeness and face aggravation strategies, $F(2, 317) = .19$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .001$. Thus, hypothesis two did not receive statistical support. The mean scores across conditions were similar. Participants who were responding to a troublesome other and those who were responding to an acquaintance had similar mean scores on face aggravation and confrontational directness (respectively, $M_{to} = 2.36$, $SD_{to} = 1.36$; $M_a = 2.36$, $SD_a = 1.33$). When responding to a friend, the mean usage of face aggravation strategies was lessened only slightly ($M_f = 2.31$, $SD_f = 1.30$). These data did not support the notion that confrontationality will differ with regard to closeness. In other words, without considering hierarchical positions, it did not seem to matter (significantly) if the offender is a troublesome other, acquaintance, or friend—participants tended to use a balance of face protection and face attacks (with a slight lean toward aggravation) in their responses to the unethical actor.

Interaction. The final two hypotheses predicted an interaction between hierarchical position and interpersonal relationship closeness when considering face aggravation strategy usage. Specifically, it was hypothesized that the greatest difference

in face aggravation strategies would be between those in the subordinate to supervisor/friend condition and the supervisor to subordinate/troublesome other condition. The smallest difference was hypothesized to exist between those in the supervisor to subordinate/troublesome other condition and the coworker to coworker/troublesome other condition. Results of the 3 X 3 ANOVA revealed no significant interaction between hierarchical position and relational closeness, $F(4, 317) = .84$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .009$. Mean scores for face aggravation across each of the nine conditions, in order from most indirect confrontation and most protective to most direct confrontation and a tendency to use attack strategies can be seen in *Table 1*. In sum, hypotheses three and four regarding the proposed interaction between hierarchical position and relational closeness did not receive statistical support.

Discussion

The goal of this investigation was to better understand the role of communication in the possible perpetuation or negation of unethical behaviors in the workplace. The specific objectives of this study were threefold: (a) to determine which hierarchical relational context—subordinate to supervisor, coworker to coworker, supervisor or subordinate—encouraged the most contemptive confrontationality in participants' responses, (b) to determine which interpersonal relational closeness context—troublesome other, acquaintance, friend—encouraged the most contemptive confrontationality in participants' responses, and (c) to investigate the existence of an interaction effect between these relational contexts. As part of this experiment, a unique dependent variable—confrontationality—was created to test hypotheses. The threefold goals of this language production experiment were achieved.

The first hypothesis predicted a relationship between hierarchical position and communicative confrontationality strategies. Specifically, it was predicted that supervisors would respond to a subordinate's unethical action with more contemptive confrontationality than coworkers to coworkers, who would likewise, use more contemptive confrontationality than subordinates responding to a supervisor. The overall effect of hierarchical relationship on confrontationality was moderate ($\eta^2 = .09$). Restated, the hierarchical relational context accounted for nine percent of the variance in workers' response confrontationality. Significant differences were found between hierarchical roles, though not always in the direction hypothesized. Though supervisors were predicted to use the most contemptive strategies, it was actually peer coworkers who responded to peer coworkers with the most contemptive confrontationality (M = 2.79). Supervisors responding to subordinates were less contemptive in their confrontation strategies (M = 2.33), but were still more contemptive than subordinates responding to supervisors (M = 1.79). In other words, peer coworkers' ratio of face attacks to face protections was significantly greater than that of supervisors and subordinates. Consistent with the hypothesis, subordinates included the fewest attacks in their responses, and tended to use more protection attempts or a balance between protections and attacks. There were statistically significant differences in confrontation strategies across all three levels of hierarchical relations.

This study provides further empirical support for the hierarchical mum effect (Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel, in press). The hierarchical mum effect posits that there exists a "hierarchical constraint on upward information flow created by power differentials…" (¶ 12). The notion predicts that subordinates may use silence and equivocation as a

means to avoid threatening supervisors' public images (i.e., face) when reporting bad news, especially in the case of unethical workplace behaviors. That notion is extended throughout this study by arguing that silence and equivocation may be manifested again by subordinates, through protective confrontationality when responding to an unethical supervisor, thereby reducing the clarity and directness of critical yet ethically instructive messages. For example, rather than saying, "You stole my ideas" (i.e., a face attack and contemptive confrontation), a subordinate engaging in *protective* confrontation might phrase their objection as, "What just happened?" or "I'm confused. I think you may have presented my ideas as though they were your own." The latter, protective communication—which is used more often by subordinates—delays assigning ethical meaning to the event. The ensuing discussion between the wronged worker and the offender may or may not result in assigning moral blame (Bird, 1996; Bisel et al., 2011). While equivocal communication—"nonstraightforward communication; [that] appears ambiguous, contradictory, tangential, obscure, or even evasive" (Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990, p. 28)—may have its place in crisis communication responses (among other practices; see Kline, Simunich, & Weber, 2009), it seems that equivocation may be a dangerous strategy when considering ethics talk. If blame is not assigned, the offender may either knowingly continue or remain ignorant of the moral nature of their actions and the effect their actions had on the wronged worker (see Bird, 1996). As implied by Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003), such employee silence can have harmful repercussions. Furthermore, if blame is not assigned, the wronged worker may begin to doubt their original convictions that the action was unethical. If

nothing else, it would be possible for the offender to avoid the consequences of social or moral sanctioning that may likely arise in contemptive confrontation.

Given that protective and equivocal confrontations were found to be characteristic of subordinates responding to supervisors, the hierarchical mum effect and the notion of upward information distortion is supported. Not only might subordinates be engaging in such facework strategies to protect their supervisors' face (Morand, 2000) or to avoid being viewed or labeled negatively and damaging essential relationships (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003), but also because their reactions to such events—albeit unethical and done against them—may be linked to their "daily bread" (Bisel, Kelley, Ploeger, & Messersmith, 2011). Indeed, "the hierarchical relationship…appears to intensify the mum effect" (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, p. 1455). While Sias (2009) notes that upward information distortion may be achieved through lying or omission, this study illustrates how that upward information distortion may also include communicative strategies such as indirectness, politeness, and protective confrontationality.

When considering the hierarchical mum effect further, it ought to be noted that the coding schemes and unethical behaviors used in this study versus the Ploeger, Kelley, and Bisel (in press) study are different. Ploeger, Kelley, and Bisel evaluated workers' degrees of (in)directness when responding to an unethical request. The study at hand evaluated workers' degrees of confrontationality when responding to another worker who acted unethically against the participant. The workers in this study may have felt more personally wronged when they realized the offender stole their intellectual property and presented it as her own—thus, their own face and esteem is

more threatened than in the Ploeger, Kelley, and Bisel study. Workers were not responding with the organization's petty cash account at stake, but rather their own face and workplace identity. Good ideas—and public recognition of those ideas—are what may allow workers to keep their jobs, advance in their careers, and perhaps earn more money and social capital in the workplace.

That being noted, both studies' focus on gaining a communicative understanding of responses to unethical workplace behaviors parallel sufficiently enough to inform the conclusions of this study. For instance, Ploeger, Kelley, and Bisel (in press) demonstrated that while, "subordinates are *especially* reluctant to confront their supervisors' wrongdoing…coworkers may be as direct as supervisors in confronting wrongdoing" (¶ 34). The investigation at hand actually provided evidence that coworkers are *the most* confrontational and include the most contempt and face attacks in their responses to the offender. As noted by Sias (2009) and Comer (1991), workers will likely have more peer coworker relationships than any other hierarchical relationship and furthermore, will spend the majority of their time with those peer coworkers. Peer coworkers are the most status-equivalent relationships in the workplace. They are, by fact, peers or equals.

Perhaps the nature of the peer coworker relationship explains these findings. On one hand, a peer coworker is *not* especially reliant on fellow coworkers for their daily bread or opportunities for promotion, unlike subordinates. A subordinate responding to a supervisor may feel classic face concerns (protecting the face of their supervisor for reasons listed above) in a similar situation. Thus, it stands to reason that peer coworkers would be less concerned than subordinates with protecting the other's face, resulting in

contemptive confrontational communication, especially if peers perceive the nature of their relationship as competitive rather than cooperative (see Fritz [2002] for a more complete description of competing peers in the workplace—the self-protecting peer and the backstabbing, self-promoting subordinate; see Ray [1993] for a more complete description of the dysfunctions of supportive communication in the workplace).

On the other hand, when considering the intricacies and uniqueness of peer coworker relationships, it is helpful to compare them to the supervisor-subordinate relationship as well. By nature of their position descriptions, supervisors are likely to be at least partially responsible for their subordinates' learning experiences and growth as employees. If their subordinate looks impressive in public—in this case, by presenting strong ideas—that may be a partial reflection on their supervisor. The supervisor, then, while likely still upset for missing the opportunity to receive recognition and credit for their intellectual property, may benefit at least somewhat from the unethical action. Thus, supervisors respond to the subordinate using more balanced confrontationality than would a subordinate or peer coworker. For example, supervisors may make it clear in their response that the action was unethical, but that subordinates should treat it as a lesson learned (e.g., "Let this be a lesson learned and let's not let this become a habit"). Thus, the mentor-mentee positioning that is sometimes indicative of the supervisor-subordinate relationship (Bisel & Barge, 2011; Harre, 2003; Harre & van Langenhove, 1999) is invoked and the supervisor's performance-as-teacher is demonstrated without the subordinate losing face publicly.

The second hypothesis posited a relationship between interpersonal relational closeness—troublesome other, acquaintance, friend—and confrontationality.

Specifically, it was predicted that troublesome others would invoke the most contemptive confrontationality, followed by acquaintances, followed by friends. Results did not confirm these predictions. Rather, it was found (surprisingly) that there were virtually *no* differences in confrontationality between workers of different relational closeness levels. It did not matter if the offender was a troublesome other ($M = 2.36$), a mere acquaintance ($M = 2.36$), or a good friend ($M = 2.31$) who presented the workers' ideas as her own. Across relational conditions, workers' responses to the different relational levels were characterized by slightly contemptive confrontation ($M = 2.34$). Of course, given these results, the interaction between hierarchical relationship and relational closeness was also not significant. The second, third, and fourth hypotheses, all involving relational closeness, will be discussed in tandem.

Interpersonal relationships at work are important. These relationships may serve as sources of support, information exchange, and sensemaking in the workplace (Sias, 2009; Weick, 1995, 2001). However, while it is likely for interpersonal relationships to form in the workplace due to close proximity, frequent contact, and shared tasks (Sias, 2009; Sias & Cahill, 1998), the development of *friendships* in the workplace—similar to friendships outside of the workplace—remains voluntary, not obligatory. Thus, it is natural for working adults to opt to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships of *varying* levels of closeness in their organizations. The study at hand investigated the communicative strategies used by working adults when responding to a coworker's unethical action. For the purposes of this study, the relational closeness between the participant and their coworker existed at one of three levels: (a) troublesome other (enemy-like, someone the participant sought to avoid), (b) acquaintance (similar in

nature to Kram and Isabella's [1985] information peer), and (c) friend (similar to Kram and Isabella's collegial and special peers). The very nature of these levels of relationships—and the specific operationalization of them in this study (see above)—is indicative of different communication patterns and behaviors. However, those differences do not necessarily translate into communication differences in this study as results have shown. In order to understand why this seeming contradiction might be the case, attention must be paid to the importance of context in the meaning-making process. Specifically, in the following paragraphs, it is explained how the contexts of the workplace and the ethical nature of the scenario provide likely alternative explanations for these negligible findings.

While workplace friendships resemble non-workplace friendships in many ways, it seems that the context of the workplace distinguishes them. As noted by Sias (2009), "Workplace friendships are literally defined by the context in which they exist—the workplace" (p. 104). As such, a friend that someone meets through work may always be just that—a friend met *through work*. Thus, while it was predicted that more attempts would be made to protect the face of a workplace friend than an acquaintance or a troublesome other—as may likely be the case with non-workplace friends, acquaintances, and troublesome others—there were *no differences* in the confrontationality with which working adults responded to the offender. This finding begs the following question: Is it unlikely that workplace relationships, and their associated communicative norms, will ever truly mirror non-workplace relationships?

Sias (2009) and others do note differences in communication patterns based on closeness with others *in the workplace*. However, studies comparing differences

between workplace relationships and non-workplace relationships are conspicuously missing from the literature. The results of this study demonstrate that there may be a unique effect of workplace relationships on communication. Perhaps work relationships embody a different context of values and norms than relationships outside of work contexts. Kram and Isabella (1985) discovered that people make distinctions between information, collegial, and special peers in the workplace, but their findings cannot tell us whether participants would treat these peers differently than friends defined similarly outside of the work context. To a certain extent then, forming relationships—granted, of little or even no relational closeness—in the workplace may actually be considered nonvoluntary and necessary in order to function in the workplace, while relationships—especially friendships—outside of work remain largely voluntary. It is posited here that this likely difference (between friends and "work friends") may exist because the context of organizations—where task accomplishment, earning a paycheck, and recognition for one's ideas may supersede relational development—overshadows the context of relational closeness. The communicative strategies employed in workplace relationships reflect the organizational context, such that workers are more confrontational and less protective of coworkers' faces—*across* relational closeness levels—particularly when workers feel they are the victims of intellectual property fraud.

Furthermore, considering the proposed but unsupported interaction between hierarchical position and relational closeness, it is important to reiterate that blended relationships (part professional, part personal—part coworker, part friend; Bridge & Baxter, 1992) may develop across all levels of the hierarchy (e.g., peer coworker-peer

coworker, supervisor-subordinate). Yet, the results of this study suggest that when a hierarchical element is added to interpersonal relationships, hierarchy prevails as the more potent context for shaping communication strategies. A significant main effect was found for hierarchical position, but no main effect was found for relational closeness, nor was there an interaction effect between the two variables. Put simply, these results support the notion that in cases of unethical organizational behaviors, the context of hierarchy trumps the context of relational closeness or the interaction between these two factors in shaping confrontationality, perhaps in part because, "Workplace relationships do not exist in isolation from the workplace itself…the workplace context impacts friendships among employees" (Sias, 2009, p. 104). This notion—the powerful effect of hierarchical relations—is yet another form of support for Ploeger, Kelley, and Bisel's (in press) hierarchical mum effect.

Facework and politeness theorists Brown and Levinson (1987) offered an equation to compute the weightiness of face-threatening actions (i.e., $W = D + P + R$), where weightiness is determined by the sum of social distance between the actors (D), the power one actor has over the other (P), and cultural rating of the imposition (R). Following Goffman's (1959, 1967) contributions, Brown and Levinson's equation was intended to be applied to everyday interactions. However, the findings of this study imply that their equation may not apply to the workplace setting unproblematically. Findings suggest that some parts of the equation are more potent contexts than others in determining the overall weightiness of a face-threatening action in the workplace. Perhaps a more accurate equation, based on the results of this study, would indicate that the power one actor has over another (i.e., P) accounts for more weight than the social

distance between actors (i.e., D). While it was argued above that there may be a threshold by which concern for one's own face surpasses concern for the other's face—and thus, increasing confrontationality—it may now stand to reason that that threshold is contingent upon hierarchical position and that the threshold is not as influenced by relational closeness in the workplace.

Attention must now be devoted to the context of *ethics* in the workplace. Sias and Cahill (1998) found that work friends are more frank and open with each other than they are with acquaintances in the workplace. However, if frankness can be considered akin to the directness of confrontationality (Lewis, 2011; Zadek, 1998), the results of this study demonstrated no such differences. It could be not only that the context of the *workplace* complicates the typical communication within interpersonal relationships; the context of *unethical behaviors in organizations* might be serving to further nuance communicative norms.

Goffman (1959) claimed: "There are occasions when individuals, whether they wish to or not, will feel obliged to destroy an interaction in order to save their honor and their face" (p. 245). Perhaps having a coworker (of any level of relational closeness) engage in unethical action against another coworker is one such occasion. As noted above, confrontationality across relational conditions was slightly contemptive (M = 2.34), meaning that workers' responses to the coworker who stole their idea tended to be more attack-laden than protection-laden. The offense itself—being the victim of idea plagiarism—may be weighty enough that the action quickly undermines any trust or relational closeness that once existed between the wronged actor and the offender. In other words, instead of a responding to Casey as though "they [*sic*]" are a *current*

friend, the wronged actor may now be responding to Casey as though "they [*sic*]" are a *former* friend. Perhaps the offense is severe enough to destroy any friendship or acquaintance ties, thus leading to responses similar to those directed to troublesome others—a potential shift that this analysis did not account for. Taking credit where credit is not due is unethical no matter who engages in the action (e.g., various hierarchical positions, varying relational closeness), yet feelings of betrayal associated with that unethical action may be stronger when the offender is a workplace friend. As noted by Sias (2009), "Given the importance of trust to friendship, it is not surprising that betrayal … can irreparably damage friendships" (p. 108). As such, responses when one feels betrayed by a friend may be represented by greater contemptive confrontationality—and, as noted by Sias, Heath, Perry, Silva, and Fix (2004), the eventual deterioration of the workplace friendship.

Undoubtedly, some workers may consider the unethical behavior analyzed in this scenario—the offender stealing credit for one's ideas—to be a form of interpersonal and professional betrayal. However, if the action was not a one-time occurrence, but rather a *pattern* of behavior in a given workplace, it may also be considered tangentially as a form of workplace bullying. Bullying is generally targeted toward individuals, just as the unethical action in this study was indeed targeted toward the participant. Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts (2006) note that workplace bullying can be enacted through verbal, nonverbal, and/or physical means, with characteristics including repetition, duration, escalation, power disparity, and attributed intent (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). Another defining feature of adult workplace bullying is hostility (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). The public presentation of another's ideas may be one such form of

hostile, verbal communication. It seems unlikely that the offender would unknowingly—and without intent—violate the moral right of idea and intellectual property ownership. Thus, the offender's action can be considered a face-threatening action that, if becomes a habit, may also be a form of bullying.

This study was concerned with workers' responses to such behavior. Again relating this phenomenon to that of workplace bullying, Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) investigated resistance strategies to bullying, many of which were strikingly similar to the responses submitted by participants in this study. For example, exodus refers to strategies involving transfer or intentions to leave (Lutgen-Sandvik) and was observed in this data set through responses such as, "Frankly, I really don't care to continue to work in your department and I'm requesting a transfer to get a new start." Finding influential allies or filing formal/informal grievances are resistance strategies that also emerged in participants' responses (e.g., *You offer me no choice but to go to our supervisor and tell them the true facts*). Direct confrontation was demonstrated as well (e.g., *What you did this morning was unacceptable*). In sum, the responses to the action in this study resemble resistance strategies to workplace bullying, further validating that the original action may be a form of workplace bullying.

However, the following question must now be posed: What strategies (if any) are most effective in deterring or stopping workplace bullying? The response confrontationality in this study was anchored by two conditions: subordinates responding to a supervisor friend ($M = 1.63$) to coworkers responding to a coworker troublesome other ($M = 2.98$), with 1 representing protective confrontation, 2 representing balanced confrontation, and 3 representing contemptive confrontation. As

such, the majority of responses included some degree of contemptive communication or face attack(s). It seems that the original face threat begets face attack(s), leaving implications for employee mistreatment on two levels: the original face threat and the responding face attack. What does this cycle mean for an organization's culture? Schein (2004) explained that an organization's culture comes to being through its associated artifacts, values, and assumptions. Furthermore, Keyton (2005) notes that communication is perhaps the most overarching cultural artifact that humans share. If the face-threat-begets-face-attack-communication-cycle becomes patterned, there is the possibility for that organization's culture to become a culture of adult workplace bullying (Bisel, Messersmith, & Keyton, 2010; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Giddens, 1979; Kaptein, 2011). Additionally, given that coworkers responding to coworkers are the most contemptive in their confrontationality *and* that there is an increased trend in organizational structuring of flattened hierarchies—and thus, more coworker-coworker relationships—future research ought to investigate the possibility that these two features may be linked to the increased observance of adult workplace bullying.

Limitations and Future Directions

No study is without its limitations; yet hindsight leads to fruitful future directions in research. Participants in this language production experiment were assigned randomly into one of nine conditions, with the same unethical action across conditions. The benefit of this approach was discovering specifically what participants would say in response to a standardized unethical action. Such internal control needs to be supplemented by research designs that maximize ecological validity. Future research will solicit retrospective accounts of how workers—as the victims of unethical

behavior—respond to others, describing their hierarchical and interpersonal relationship with the offender, how they responded, and whether their approach was perceived to be effective. In this study, participants were assigned to a specific hierarchical role (subordinate, coworker, supervisor), which may or may not have been reflective of their actual work experience. Subsequent analyses should analyze the relationship between overall work experience and supervisory experience to determine whether confrontationality differences exist with respect to these two important organizational communication variables. Future studies also ought to assess the participants' perceived relational closeness with the unethical actor after the incident occurred. Additionally, though interpersonal relational closeness (troublesome other, acquaintance, friend) was not found to be significant in this study—perhaps due to the weightiness of the unethical action in terms of personal and professional betrayal—it should not be disregarded altogether as a potential influential variable in other workplace communication studies.

In a similar vein, it is important to note that communication is dynamic and transactional. Sias (2009) recommends that scholars ought to begin to study interaction processes and conversations between working adults to better understand the communicative patterns characteristic of workplace relationships. Thus, relevant to this study, future research might be more dyadic in nature and seek to investigate the offender's response to the victim. This approach may result in data more ecologically representative of how the phenomenon may play out in "real life." This study developed, utilized, and validated a unique communication confrontationality coding scheme, and provided results that speak to *descriptions* of workers' confrontationality

when responding to an unethical action. Future studies ought to assess confrontationality and *effectiveness*, which would provide the opportunity to develop *prescriptive* communicative recommendations when workers encounter similar unethical behaviors in various hierarchical and relational closeness contexts.

The ethical (or unethical) decisions employees make on a daily basis have relevance indubitably to their organization's culture. From the perspective of system-level functioning, it would be provocative to study empirically how *seemingly* minor unethical instances such as the one in this study accumulate over time to influence the ethical or unethical culture of an organization.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, employee engagement in unethical behaviors is rampant in today's workplace (King & Hermodson, 2000). Through an investigation of workers' communicative confrontationality when responding to an offender's seemingly minor, commonplace unethical behavior, this study sought to understand the role of communication in the perpetuation of unethical organizational behavior. As noted by Miceli, Near, and Dworkin (2008), "If wrongdoing is overlooked, then—obviously—appropriate corrective action cannot be taken" (p. 21). This study provided insight into the provocative inquiry of confrontationality differences in the workplace both through a hierarchical relational context (subordinate, coworker, supervisor) and an interpersonal relational closeness context (troublesome other, acquaintance, friend). Indeed, the hierarchical role of oneself and the unethical actor is a potent context affecting communicative strategies—to the extent that it appears to trump feelings of relational closeness (or lack thereof) for the offender. This investigation provides an

initial understanding of how organizational ethics may begin to be produced and reproduced systemically by way of our communication about everyday (un)ethical behaviors, and reactions to those behaviors.

CHAPTER 3

Study Two

"There is not a company out there that is perfect": A Study of Organizational Wrongdoing, Organizational Identification, and Linguistic Defensiveness

Despite scholars' and laypersons' growing knowledge of organizational ethics as both a body of literature and a social and cultural phenomenon, unethical organizational behaviors persist. The repercussions of such behaviors affect employees, organizations, stakeholders, and the general public. Consider the recent gender discrimination lawsuit—Dukes v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. (10-277)—based on the claim that female employees are being overlooked in both pay and promotions systemically. The massive lawsuit has been filed on behalf of at least a half million female Wal-Mart employees, with "billions of dollars at stake" (Associated Press, 2011, March 29). The impacts of the lawsuit are predicted to be far-reaching. As stated by Mears (2011, March 29),

> The case is among the most important dealing with corporate versus worker rights that the Justices have ever heard and their ruling…could eventually impact every private employer, large and small (¶ 2)…. Both sides agree the case, however it is resolved in the courts, will irrevocably alter the workplace landscape for generations to come. (¶ 60)

The Wal-Mart gender discrimination case illustrates that organizational wrongdoing has the power to affect multiple individuals and collectives.

The perpetuation of unethical behaviors indicates that what is missing from scholarship are unique and nuanced inquiries that can provide theoretical explanations and practical recommendations for improving organizational ethics. This study reports a

communicative investigation of organizational wrongdoing. The question here is not what constitutes ethical or unethical behavior; nor is the question whether unethical behavior occurs in the workplace. As noted by Miceli, Near, and Dworkin, (2008), "Clearly, if wrongdoing was rare or inexpensive, we would not be concerned with it" (pp. 18-19). Thus, we already know that unethical behavior occurs, with devastating consequences, at times (e.g., financial loss, reputational damage, loss of life). Rather, what is needed—and what this study provides—is an investigation of the communication that enables and constrains the perpetuation of such behavior. The focus of this research study is individuals' usage of various linguistic strategies when communicating *about* unethical organizational behavior.

In order to gain a more complete understanding of the role of communication in organizational (un)ethics, a variety of literatures is consulted. The ways in which working adults communicate about an organizational wrongdoing will be studied using a variable unique to this study—linguistic defensiveness—but relying in part on the ego defense mechanism literature (e.g., Brown & Starkey, 2000). In particular, this study investigates the range of maladaptive identity ego defense mechanisms that can be (and are) used by individual members of organizations as linguistic strategies to protect or maintain individual and collective self-concepts and identities.

It is important to note that a communication as constitutive of organizing (CCO) approach underlies this project (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; McPhee & Zaug, 2000, 2009; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Putnam, Nicotera, & McPhee, 2009). CCO theories stress that the potent role of communication in organization should not be underestimated. I focus specifically on the relationship of employees to their

organization—a relationship developed through communication—which McPhee and Zaug (2000) label as the constitutive flow of membership negotiation. The authors explain that membership negotiation messages are so crucial to organization that in the absence of this flow, the organization itself ceases to exist. A related process, the process of organizational identification—or, a oneness with or belongingness to an organization—is one type of interaction/relationship between an organizational member and the collective, and will be studied with regard to its associated effects on ethics talk.

Next, it is important to understand that the interpretation and experience of unethical situations varies by individual and by context. Say that an employing organization engages in unethical behavior or wrongdoing ("unethical behavior" and "wrongdoing" are used synonymously in this paper). What employees know about their organization's wrongdoing—or more specifically, the *extent* of knowledge about their organization's wrongdoing—may allow for differences in the sensemaking (i.e., one's own interpretation of the event). The nature of ethics or ethical situations may often be ambiguous; thus, fewer known details about the unethical situation could lead to greater flexibility in interpretation and even different attempts at sense*giving* (i.e., influencing others' interpretations of the event). In order to investigate the ambiguity/certainty contextual dynamic further, participants in this study will be assigned randomly to one of two different conditions: (a) the organizational wrongdoing is described as ambiguous and uncertain, or (b) the organizational wrongdoing is described as certain.

This language production experiment seeks to explore how working adults respond when asked about a recent case of wrongdoing by their organization. In this investigation of organizational ethics and the communication of defensiveness through

language use, predictions concerning the following relationships are posed: (a) the effect of organizational identification on linguistic defensiveness (both frequency and intensity), (b) the effect of certainty of organizational wrongdoing on linguistic defensiveness, (c) the moderating capacity of organizational identification on the relationship between certainty of wrongdoing and linguistic defensiveness, and (d) the effect of organizational tenure on organizational identification and linguistic defensiveness. All of these hypotheses are explored in greater detail below.

Framing Organizational Identification

Organizational identification (OI) is a prevalent concept in the social sciences and management literature (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Barker & Tompkins, 1994; Cheney, 1983; Cole & Bruch, 2006; Elsbach, 1999; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Haslam, 2001; Pratt, 2000; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985; van Knippenberg, 1984), often studied to better understand the employee-organization relationship. While OI is a phenomenon worthy of such extended investigation, researchers in the field of management have tended to approach the concept unidimensionally. The vast majority of this research investigates the positive effects of OI as it relates to goal achievement, performance quality, and job satisfaction (Likert, 1967; McGregor, 1967), organizational commitment, task involvement, investment of effort, performance effectiveness, and satisfaction with certain job dimensions (work, pay, supervision, promotion, co-workers; Efraty & Wolfe, 1988). While such ambitious research agendas indeed further the literature, there is a sizable blindspot—similar to Bisel's (2009) mention of the organizing and duality biases as "theoretical myopias" (p. 633)—in exploring potentially negative effects of OI. In other words, research in this area is

overly dedicated to investigating various positive effects of OI, similar to Bisel's notion of focus on the organizing power of communication rather than also considering the potential *dis*organizing power of communication. If we focus too narrowly on finding such positive effects of organizational identification, those are the only types of effects we will discover.

Similarly, consider the process of unobtrusive control (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) and its potential role in investigating a "dark side" of identification. In their analysis of the role of identification within the larger construct of unobtrusive control, Bisel, Ford, and Keyton (2007) define this form of control as, "the process by which members of an organization are guided in making organizationally relevant decisions" (p. 137). Bisel, Ford, and Keyton's research points to the ways in which employees can both be "controlled by and resistant to the influence of their identifications" (p. 155). If employees are controlled by their organizational identification—or oneness with the organization—they may be more influenced by ambiguous messages or values, and thus, may begin to engage in the mindless inculcation of their organization's values (Bisel, Ford, & Keyton). Barker (1993) described concertive control as control that is developed by *workers*, and occurring by "workers…reaching a negotiated consensus on how to shape their behavior according to a set of core values" (p. 411). Barker found that these values and the "value-based normative rules…controlled [employees'] actions more powerfully and completely than the formal system" (p. 408). Furthermore, Zoller (2003) demonstrated how employees—driven by identity issues—may even *consent* to *health hazards* in the workplace through their blind acceptance of organizational norms. As such, it seems that employees, especially those who identify

strongly with their organization, may be more susceptible to the processes of unobtrusive control, concertive control, and even consent, leading to what could be mindless acceptance of their organization's unethical behavior and the enacted organizational norms for responding to such behavior. Thus, we must avoid myopic framing of identification and instead extend and advance our thinking of OI and recognize its potential negative effects (e.g., Islam, 2005; Hekman, 2007), particularly in cases of unethical organizational behavior.

Organizations are not merely objects or static entities, and organizational phenomena should not be studied as though this were the case (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Haslam, 2001; Weick, 2001). There is a growing body of literature that promotes a communicative view of organizations, which best captures the nuances of the dynamic and ever-changing communication-organization relationship. McPhee and Zaug (2000, 2009) support the communication as constitutive of organization (CCO) viewpoint through their framework concerning the four flows of organization. These four communication processes—membership negotiation, organizational self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning—actually *constitute* organizations (McPhee & Zaug). That is, communication may be viewed as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for organizing (Bisel, 2010). McPhee and Zaug's first flow, membership negotiation, addresses the member-organization relationship. One's organizational identification (as a process, not product, e.g., Cheney, 1983) is one way in which members form a connection to their workplace. McPhee and Zaug describe the importance of the membership negotiation flow when they write:

> Why is this process a vital facet of communicative constitution of organizations? One answer is that organizations, like all social forms, exist only as a result of

> human agency (Giddens, 1984). By many definitions of communication, only individual humans can communicate, so when communication constitutes organization, the relation of the communicators to the organization is important… Organizations exist when they draw members in, and lead them to take part in and understand the interactional world unique to the organization. (p. 35)

Furthermore, Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) note that individuals should view organizations themselves as discursive constructions since discourse is the very foundation upon which organizational life is crafted. Organizational identification is developed, maintained, and even diminished through communication and discourse. As an illustrator of this claim, Deetz (2001) describes identity as "a discursive production" (p. 33) and thus, OI can be seen as a communication process that is created by members through a discourse that enacts a common vision (Ferraris, Carveth, & Parrish-Sprowl, 1993). Organizations themselves and the construction of associated identities are inherently communicative and as such, studying OI from a communicative lens seems most appropriate.

Much OI research is rooted in social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Haslam, 2001). Fundamental to SIT is the notion that there are two extremes driving social behaviors: (a) the interpersonal end of the continuum, where people's interactions are "fully determined by their interpersonal relationships and individual characteristics, and not at all affected by various social groups or categories to which they respectively belong" (Tajfel & Turner, p. 16); and (b) the intergroup end of the continuum, where people's interactions are determined by their group memberships alone and not affected by interpersonal factors. It is rare to find a social behavior that is being driven by one of the continuum anchors in its purest form without the influence of the other. With that being said, SIT—and this study—is concerned more with the

effects of intergroup relations and social categorizations (the intergroup side of the continuum) on the development of self-concept and ultimately, one's communication and behavior. Tajfel and Turner describe these social categorizations as "cognitive tools that segment, classify, and order the social environment…. [that serve to] create and define the individual's place in society. Social groups…provide their members with an identification of themselves in social terms" (pp. 15-16).

Individuals can identify with many social categories and experience multiple identities (ranging from personal to social). An individual's social identity was first described by Tajfel (1978) as "that part of an individual's self concept which derives from his [*sic*] knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 68). Social identification, then, involves group level classifications such as organizational affiliation (Epitropaki, 2003). Fuller et al. (2009) summarize Elsbach's (1999) definition of social identification as: "an individual's cognitive connection with a group or the perceived overlap between the individual's identity and a group's identity" (p. 119). *Organizational identification* is a specific form of social identification (Cheney, 1983). Theoretically, Tajfel and Turner (1985) argue that individuals attempt to maintain a positive self-concept and uphold a positive social identity, and strive to belong to groups that are viewed favorable and positive compared to other groups. If these are not being achieved, individuals can leave the group or take steps to improve the group's public impression.

According to SIT, when we identify with any social group we perceive oneness with or belongingness to that group (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Thus, employees with

high levels of OI feel an increased sense of oneness with or belongingness to their organization (Dainton & Zelley, 2005). Highly identified employees define themselves in terms of their organizations (e.g., "*We have been receiving a lot of media attention due to the successful launch of our new product*"; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), are more likely to perform duties with the perceived best interest of the organization in mind (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), and form a psychological bond to the organization, incorporating the organization's attributes and values as their own and acting in ways that reflect those beliefs, values, and norms (van Knippenberg, 2000). Van Knippenberg summarized the research of Smith and Henry (1996) eloquently when he stated: "Identification…blurs the distinction between self and group, and turns the group, psychologically, into a part of the self" (p. 358). Membership in the organization becomes a distinct part of the identity of the individual (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). However, I argue such strong investment and alignment between one's own and their organization's values may not always be healthy, as is explored below. Essential to this argument is the attention Tajfel and Turner (1985) dedicate to the "pressures to evaluate one's own group positively" (p. 16). These pressures can lead to in-group bias and in the case of organizational ethics, an increased likelihood to frame and manipulate an unethical situation in a way that does the least damage to one's self and organizational concepts. Or, rather than trying to create a sense of balance by increasing defensiveness of the organization, another possibility is that the once-identified employee may lower their identification with the organization, and may begin to experience *dis*identification, or the process that occurs when members perceive inconsistencies between their organization's behaviors and values and their own (Scott, 2007).

Bisel, Kelley, Ploeger, and Messersmith (in press) note that how individuals process and experience ethics is highly contextual. The ways in which highly identified individuals process, experience, and make sense of ethical situations may be unique and different from those who are not as highly identified. In their research on the moral mum effect, Bisel et al. describe the differences between ethical knowledge and ethical experience as a question of acontextual/abstract versus contextual/personal. They describe this gap in expectations and experiences as a catalyst for sensegiving, or the tendency to ascribe meaning in manner that conforms to a preferred organizational reality (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). The study at hand investigates sensegiving indirectly by assessing the differences in linguistic strategies employed by individuals reporting varying levels of OI when discussing a case of organizational wrongdoing.

If a given organizational culture is one that permits—or even values—particular practices that may be deemed as *un*ethical by stakeholders, it is argued here that OI can actually be detrimental. An organization's goals may not be ethical, and furthermore, the accomplishment of those goals may involve unethical action or behavior (Hekman, 2007). If an employee's personal values align with those of an unethical organization's culture and she feels a sense of oneness with that organization, the employee may be more likely to use unethical means to reach unethical ends since identified employees act in ways that assist in the achievement of an organization's goals. For example, say that an individual identifies highly with an unethical, corrupt organization—the acts that come to manifest identification would actually reinforce the existing unethical behaviors and unethical means of goal attainment, whether the identified employee can admit, acknowledge, or even notice the unethical or corrupt nature of the organization.

As noted by Dukerich, Kramer, and Parks (1998), highly identified employees may engage in unethical acts, turn a blind eye to evidence of such behaviors, or even make attempts to cover up unethical acts. These behaviors are reminiscent of sensegiving in one's attempts to manipulate and influence the interpretation and meaning of unethical situations in a way that reflects less negatively on the self and/or situation and/or organization. Whether these behaviors are intentional or unintentional largely remains in question due to the highly psychological and automatic nature of organizational identification. Furthermore, how these behaviors are manifested communicatively warrants investigation.

Defense Mechanisms

In organizational science, ego defense mechanisms refer to those automatic strategies used by individuals and organizations to maintain and protect concepts of self (Brown & Starkey, 2000). Defense mechanisms range from maladaptive and immature to adaptive and mature (Segal, Coolidge, & Mizuno, 2007). If functioning at an appropriate balance, defenses can aid individual growth and maturity (Laughlin, 1970). However, in an organizational setting, many ego defenses are actually *mal*adaptive, harmful, and destructive—to both the individual *and* the collective (Brown & Starkey). Strategies such as denial and rationalization can not only prevent organizational learning (e.g., Brown & Starkey), their usage may be key to understanding the persistence of unethical behavior, particularly when utilized by highly identified employees. If a highly identified employee's organization is labeled "unethical," the employee himself—by nature of the identification process or that of Burke's consubstantiation (being of the same substance, in this case, of the organization)—is

also defined as "unethical." The potential to be deemed unethical may drive employees to use defense mechanisms in order to protect the individual and organizational concepts of self (or alternatively, employees may seek to decrease their identification with the organization). Denying unethical behaviors or even avoiding recognition of them are two communicative strategies that could lead to the perpetuation of unethical organizational behaviors, such that sensegiving may delay accountability or the collective recognition that problems exist and are in need of remedy.

Like organizational identification, defense mechanisms, by nature, are psychological phenomena. As such, defense mechanisms have been studied most commonly in psychology and personality research, dating back to Sigmund Freud (more recent investigations include: Davidson & MacGregor, 1998; Laughlin, 1970; Segal et al., 2007). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)* identifies 31 defense mechanisms and defines them as, "automatic psychological processes that protect the individual against anxiety and from the awareness of internal or external dangers or stressors" (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Laughlin uses the label of *ego defenses* (22 major, 26 minor), since these defensive strategies "are evolved automatically by the psyche in order to avoid psychic pain and discomfort through the sought-after resolution of emotional conflicts" (p. 4).

According to Laughlin (1970), defense mechanisms function to produce one or more of the following four effects: (a) prevent anxiety, (b) resolve emotional conflict, (c) reduce emotional discomfort, or (d) prevent *de*repression, or the reduction of anxiety caused from repression and suppression of emotions that are submerged in the unconscious, but are still operant. More specifically, Davidson and MacGregor (1998)

remark that "defense mechanisms operate to protect self-esteem and, in more extreme cases, to protect the integration of the self" (p. 967). Similar to defense mechanisms' protection of self-esteem, identifications (as detailed above) also operate as a contributor to one's self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). In other words, while identification serves as a major resource for how individuals *define* their self-concept, defense mechanisms describe the ways in which individuals *defend* those self-definitions from critical assessments. Thus, a relationship between organizational identification and defense mechanisms (by definition alone) seems not only feasible, but likely.

The Communication of Defense Mechanisms

While the defense mechanism itself is cognitive, the manifestation of that cognition does not have to be. Outward portrayals of defense mechanisms are known as defensive behaviors, or those behaviors that function to decrease threat and reduce anxiety associated with threat. In other words, defense mechanisms may be manifested through communication when an individual feels that there is some sort of threat to the self-concept. Cramer (2000) asserts that defense mechanisms are generally employed in reaction to anxiety and distress. In the case of this investigation, in which workers are asked about their organization's unethical behavior, the threat of them being defined as unethical-by-association with and membership in their organization (i.e., social categorization) is one such source of anxiety. This process could result in multiple linguistic defense mechanism(s) as one communicates about their organizational wrongdoing. Situations involving wrongdoing are likely to provoke anxiety in individuals and thus, defense mechanisms will be enacted as one communicates about

the organizational wrongdoing. Thus, a primary goal of this study is to investigate the linguistic displays of defense mechanisms through participants' responses to an organizational outsider's questioning of the participant's organization's unethical behavior. This communicative approach is more likely to aid in understanding the manifestation of ego defenses and what they "sound like," which would be invaluable for researchers and practitioners alike.

Organizational Identification and Defense Mechanisms

As mentioned above, there is reason to believe that one's level of organizational identification may be related to one's linguistic defensiveness in cases of unethical organizational behavior. Brown and Starkey (2000) provide a psychodynamic analysis of organizational identity and learning, describing the ego defenses that organizations employ to maintain collective self-esteem. Individuals are also likely to use ego defenses in order to protect self-esteem and identity. This practice (whether mindful or mindless) may become an issue when the self and the organization become so intertwined—as is the case for highly identified employees—that even in unethical situations (of ambiguous or certain guilt of organizational wrongdoing), individuals may find it difficult to interpret their organization as guilty of wrongdoing and could possibly defend the organization. While Umpress, Bingham, and Mitchell (2010) explore the possibility of highly identified workers engaging in unethical pro-organizational behaviors, this study proposes an investigation of specific linguistic features and defense mechanisms workers use when discussing their organization's wrongdoing.

Thus, rather than an example of the psychodynamic perspective of ego defenses (i.e., Brown & Starkey), this investigation is indicative of a communico-dynamic approach to the interpretation of and response toward unethical behavior and sensegiving (Bisel, Kelley, Ploeger, & Messersmith, in press). It is posited here that those who are strongly identified will interpret an attack on the organization (questioning of the organization's wrongdoing) as akin to attack on the self. The motivation to protect one's self-identity, self-esteem, and in turn, organization identity is heightened. The vocalization of thoughts on one's organization's wrongdoing will likely contain defense mechanisms, operating to reduce associated guilt and uncertainty (among other feelings; Menzies, 1970) in order to maintain a favorable public organizational (and self) image. These claims draw upon the literature (discussed above) on the dark side of organizational identification. Thus, the extent to which one is identified with an organization—controlling for the unknown effect of certainty of organizational wrongdoing—will affect the degree of linguistic defensiveness present in their response about organizational wrongdoing. Whether the linguistic manifestation of ego defenses occurs "obliquely and intentionally…to protect the organization, perhaps even covering up [unethical acts]" (Dukerich, Kramer, & Parks, 1998, p. 253) remains to be seen. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Organizational identification is associated positively with the intensity of workers' linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization, after controlling for certainty of organizational wrongdoing.

H1b: Organizational identification is associated positively with the frequency of workers' usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization, after controlling for certainty of organizational wrongdoing.

Certainty of Wrongdoing and Defense Mechanisms

As is the case in all investigations of communication and of ethics, the importance of context cannot be underestimated. The degree of certainty with which employees can say that their organization did (or did not) engage in unethical behavior is one such contextual issue. Certainty also acts here as a resource of sorts from which highly identified individuals can draw upon to protect their associated self-concepts from threat. The interpretation and expression of unethical behavior, particularly when tied to one's self-concept and social category, may be a sensitive subject to individuals employed where organizational wrongdoing occurs. Menzies (1970) described defense mechanisms as occurring in order to avoid or reduce uncertainty. Thus, if the unethical situation is ambiguous and few details are known, workers will have more room (so to speak) to manage the ambiguity strategically in order to defend their organization and in turn, themselves. Presumably, such situations afford the opportunity for individuals to evoke defense mechanisms to counteract the threat of being associated with the unethical organization. On the other hand, if details are known and it is almost certain that one's organization is guilty of wrongdoing, the individual may find it more difficult to defend the organization's behavior and thus, display less linguistic defensiveness than someone whose interpretation can draw on the resource of ambiguity. In other words, it is argued here that one's linguistic defensiveness is dependent on the amount

of details that one has about the case of organizational wrongdoing. Thus, the following hypotheses are posited:

H2a: Participants assigned to the ambiguous organizational wrongdoing condition produce higher levels of intensity of linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization than participants assigned to the certain organizational wrongdoing condition, after controlling for participants' levels of organizational identification.

H2b: Participants assigned to the ambiguous organizational wrongdoing condition produce more frequent usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization than participants assigned to the certain organizational wrongdoing condition, after controlling for participants' levels of organizational identification.

The Moderating Effect of Organizational Identification

In addition to the hypotheses above, this study investigates the possibility that one's level of organizational identification moderates the relationship strength between condition and linguistic defensiveness in a linear fashion. While organizational identification is most commonly studied as a predictor or criterion variable, there is at least one case that expands on the potential of OI's significance in interaction hypotheses. In their study on OI and unethical pro-organizational behavior, Umpress et al. (2010) found (unexpectedly) that high organizational identification did *not* alone predict unethical behaviors. However, they did find an interaction between organizational identification and positive reciprocity beliefs on unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), such that reciprocity beliefs moderated the OI and UPB

relationship. Specifically, individuals who report high identification and strong reciprocity beliefs are more likely to engage in UPB. Umpress et al. posit that strong OI alone may not result in employee engagement in unethical behaviors. While OI is tested in this study as a predictor variable, it is also suggested that OI may act as a moderator.

In their well-known and frequently-cited article, Baron and Kenny (1986) state: "a moderator is a…variable that affects the direction and/or strength of the relation between an independent or predictor variable and a dependent or criterion variable" (p. 1174). In this investigation, three causal paths are proposed that relate to the outcome variable of linguistic defensiveness: (a) the impact of condition (ambiguous, certain); (b) impact of organizational identification as a moderator; and (c) the interaction between condition and organizational identification. The effect of condition (a categorical variable) on linguistic defensiveness (the criterion variable) changes linearly with respect to the level of the continuous moderator variable—organizational identification—in that the relationship between condition and linguistic defensiveness is strengthened positively as reported organizational identification increases. Put simply, it is proposed that the positive relationship between condition and linguistic defensiveness is stronger when reported organizational identification is higher. However, the relationship will be strengthened to a greater degree for those in the ambiguous condition versus those in the certain condition. Thus, the following hypotheses are posited, which will be confirmed if the interaction is significant:

H3a: Participants' level of reported organizational identification moderates the relationship between organizational wrongdoing condition and intensity of linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization, such that the relationship between the ambiguity of organizational wrongdoing and intensity of linguistic defensiveness is stronger when reported organizational identification is higher.

H3b: Participants' level of reported organizational identification moderates the relationship between organizational wrongdoing condition and frequency of usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization, such that the relationship between ambiguity of organizational wrongdoing and frequency of defense mechanisms is stronger when reported organizational identification is higher.

Tenure, Organizational Identification, and Linguistic Defensiveness

In alignment with previous research on tenure—or length of time that an employee has been at her current organization (Sass & Canary, 1991)—and organizational communication variables, two final hypotheses are proposed. As tenure with the organization increases, a seasoned employee's relationship to her organization is likely to be stronger—with ties that run deeper—than an employee new to the organization. If an employee chooses to stay at an organization for a long period of time, it is also plausible to predict that her membership in the organization will become a defining feature of her self-concept. In the past, identification has indeed shown to be related positively to length of employment in an organization (e.g., Hall, Schneider, &

Nygren, 1970; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Welsch & LeVan, 1981). A similar relationship may be found in this research. Thus, it is proposed:

H4: Organizational tenure is associated positively with reported levels of organizational identification.

Furthermore, if an employee has been a part of an organization for a longer period of time, her propensity to defend the organization (in most situations) in instances of organizational wrongdoing may be higher. Thus, the following hypotheses will be explored:

H5a: Organizational tenure is associated positively with the intensity of workers' linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization.

H5b: Organizational tenure is associated positively with the frequency of workers' usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization.

Methods

Participants

A total of 318 full-time working adults participated in this language production experiment. The sample consisted of 161 males and 153 females (four participants chose not to answer this question), ranging in age from 21 to 70 ($M = 42.37$, $SD = 12.35$). Participants represent 29 states within the United States; one participant reported living in Australia. Education levels of participants ranged from an earned high school diploma to an earned doctorate degree, with a bachelor's degree being the most common educational level obtained (34%). Participants varied in total working experience, ranging from six months to 48 years ($M = 21.27$, $SD = 13.20$). Participants

work experience with their *current* organization ranged from less than one month (new employee) to 33.25 years (M = 12.79, SD = 12.30). The average amount of supervisory experience across participants was 8.36 years (SD = 10.24), ranging from no experience to 43 years of supervisory experience. Participants also represented a variety of organizational sizes: (a) small office/home office/micro organization (less than 10 employees, 6.6%), (b) small organization (less than 100 employees, 15.7%), (c) medium-sized organization (less than 500 employees, 12.6%), and (d) large organization (more than 500 employees, 64.2%). Three participants did not answer this question.

Procedures and Design

Highly connected individuals from a variety of career fields and organization sizes were recruited to participate in the study through a solicitation email sent by the researcher. Upon receipt of the email, these individuals were asked to consider participation in the study and to also forward the solicitation email to five other working adults. The final wave of recruitment was to have those five individuals forward the email to an additional five working adults. In the email, potential participants were directed by email to an online survey hosted by Qualtrics®.

Each participant read a consent form before participating, in accordance with institutional review board oversight. Once participants granted consent, they provided basic demographic information (described above). Participants were then assigned randomly to one of two conditions (i.e., ambiguous organizational wrongdoing, certain organizational wrongdoing) and were asked to respond as though it was a real situation

(see description below). Lastly, participants completed a brief measure of organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Scenarios. In this experiment, organizational wrongdoing was operationalized by gender discrimination. Gender discrimination is an appropriate operationalization of wrongdoing in that this sort of unethical behavior is applicable to a variety of organizations and industries. The two conditions in this experiment vary by the ambiguity and certainty of the organizational wrongdoing implied in the prompt (see *Appendix C*). The ambiguous organizational wrongdoing condition described the organization's role as ambiguous and the situation as uncertain—there is mention of gender discrimination, but there are no official statements or legal actions. The certain organizational wrongdoing condition indicated unequivocally that the participant's organization was found guilty at the conclusion of a class-action lawsuit. Participants were asked to respond to the prompt as though their organization—the organization they currently work for—is the organization described in the study. Participants were assigned randomly into one of the two conditions. One hundred and sixty eight participants were assigned to the ambiguous condition and 150 participants were assigned to the certain condition. Participants were asked to respond to the hypothetical prompt as though it was a real situation. They crafted their responses to the outsider in a dialogue box; responses were not restricted to a minimum or maximum length.

Manipulation check. A manipulation check was performed in order to confirm that participants likely perceived distinctions between the degree of certainty indicated by the conditions (certain, ambiguous). Results confirmed that the twelve adults who

participated in the manipulation check did indeed perceive intended differences between conditions. See *Appendix E* for manipulation check details.

Measure of organizational identification. Participants completed a brief, six-item organizational identification questionnaire (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; see *Appendix D)*. Questionnaire items are designed to measure participants' level of oneness with or belongingness to an organization. Responses range from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). During analysis, each item was recoded so that a higher score on the measure indicated a higher level of reported identification. This shortened measure of identification has been used successfully in past research. Previous reported coefficient alphas for the six-item questionnaire include: .81 (Mael, 1988) and .87 (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Cronbach's α for this study's use of the measure was .83.

Linguistic defensiveness. Defense mechanisms are most often measured using self-report questionnaires (e.g., the Defense Mechanism Inventory [Gleser & Ihilevich, 1969], the Defense Style Questionnaire [Bond, Gardner, Christian, & Sigal, 1983]), which attempt to capture the psychological reality of ego-defensiveness. However, they argue that the validity of such self-reports is questionable and furthermore, self-reports are unlikely to capture the communicative quality of defense mechanisms that is the interest of this study. After a critique of the theoretical and empirical findings derived from the most prominent self-report measures, Davidson and MacGregor (1998) actually concluded that, "no self-report measure adequately assesses the defining features of defense mechanisms" (p. 965). By context, a communicative analysis better facilitates an understanding of the linguistic manifestations of defense mechanisms. As such, linguistic defensiveness—a variable original to this investigation—describes the

communicative strategies employed by individuals when they respond to questions about their organization's wrongdoing. For the purposes of this study, linguistic defensiveness is measured as two dependent variables: response intensity and defense mechanism frequency.

Response intensity. In order to measure the first component of linguistic defensiveness—response *intensity*—participants responded to a series of four semantic differentials (rather than evaluating intensity with a one-item scale, as was the case with Waldron and Krone [1991]). The four items included: very unintense—very intense, very unforceful—very forceful, very unemotional—very emotional, very unpassionate—very passionate. The scale reliability for this measure of intensity was computed as Cronbach's α, and was sufficient at .88.

Coding Scheme and Content Analysis

Defense mechanism frequency. The *frequency* of defense mechanisms in participant responses was the second method of measuring linguistic defensiveness. For the purposes of this study, an inductive coding scheme was created in order to capture defense mechanism frequency. The researcher relied heavily on the identity defense mechanism work of Laughlin (1970) and Brown and Starkey (2000), and also Benoit's (1995) and Benoit and Hanczor's (1994) work on image restoration strategies (e.g., denial, bolstering) used after "alleged or suspected wrong-doing" (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994, p. 418). The researcher also consulted the methods of Waldron and Krone (1991).

A codebook was created in order to code for frequency of defense mechanisms in open-ended responses to the scenarios. Across two time periods, two coders (both familiar with Brown and Starkey's [2000] study on defense mechanisms as well as

Laughlin's original work [1970], and Benoit's [1995] image restoration strategies and typology) reviewed and analyzed open-ended responses to the scenarios inductively in order to create a codebook of defense mechanisms. In the first stage of codebook development, the coders read and reread the 15 responses gathered in a pilot study to identify recurrent defensive strategies. Using a technique similar to a grounded, constant comparative analytic approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the coders identified categories of linguistic defensiveness strategies. In the second stage of coding development—codebook establishment—coders selected a random subset of responses from the full study data (n = 35) in order to further define and refine the coding scheme, which measured frequency of defense mechanisms. At this point, they moved from an inductive process to a deductive process, until they reached categorical saturation, when no new categories indicative of linguistic defensiveness strategies could be found. Only one response out of 319 was deemed uncodable, which indicates the exhaustiveness of this inductively derived scheme. The coding scheme is described in detail below. Krippendorff's α was used to measure intercoder reliability on yet another randomly selected subset of the data (n = 36). Agreement was sufficiently high at $\alpha = .86$. A second measure of intercoder reliability, calculated at the completion of coding—known as coder drift—was also measured using Krippendorff's α and was also acceptable, $\alpha = .73$.

Since frequency is a true ratio-level variable with the unit of measurement being raw number of defensive strategies employed within the whole response, number of defense mechanisms can range from 0 (*no defenses*) to n (*n defenses*). The first step in the coding process was to assess whether the response readily admitted guilt and

whether the response, as a whole, was non-defensive. If so, the response was assigned a code of 0. If the response did not readily admit guilt and was, as a whole, defensive, the frequency of defense mechanisms within the response was counted and assigned a code.

Defense mechanisms were counted according to each time participants' language performed one of the five following functions. Multiple defense mechanisms—perhaps even multiple defense mechanisms performing the *same* function—can appear in one response. First, participants may attempt to ***bolster the organization*** (e.g., *I have had a great experience with the organization* or *I am proud to be a member of its team*). These responses attempted to enhance the organization's identity and/or the participants' own experiences with the organization. Second, responses could involve ***minimizing the situation*** or trying to produce doubt (e.g., *I think at this point they are just rumors* or *There is not a company out there that is perfect*). References to ambiguity were often characteristic of this type of defense mechanism. However, in order to receive a code for this particular defense mechanism, it needed to be clear to coders that the participant is likely *aware* of the situation but refuses to discuss it at the moment. It could be likely, by the nature of the ambiguous condition, that the participant *had* only heard hearsay. For example, an utterance referencing ambiguity, that did not make it clear that the participant was aware of the situation may sound similar to the following, "I have only heard hearsay." These responses were deemed to be more indicative of the ambiguous condition in which participants were likely placed rather than being employed as a defense mechanism and thus, went uncoded. However, utterances where the participant injected belief into the statement and thus, demonstrated awareness of the situation *were* coded as minimizing

the situation and may sound similar to the following, "It's all just accusations and rumors." Another linguistic defense mechanism was ***attempting discursive closure*** (e.g., *I am not at liberty to comment. Now, go have another beer* or *I don't feel comfortable discussing the accusations since they don't pertain directly to me*). These phrases tended to be short. Fourth, responses could attempt outright ***denial*** (e.g., *No, it is not our organization*). The last defense mechanism that participants employed was ***undermining the accusation or claim*** (e.g., *Don't believe everything you read until the facts come out* or *There are two sides to every story*).

Coding scheme validation. Krippendorff (2004) recommended that coding schemes ought to be assessed for three categories of validation: face validity, social validity, and empirical validity. As *face validity* is associated with a coding scheme's plausibility, I believe the scheme developed for this study—described above and based on existing literature—meets this criterion. Krippendorff describes *social validity* as whether a coding scheme allows content analysts to "address important social issues" (p. 319). Both the history and the persistence of unethical behavior in the workplace meet this criterion of validity as well. Similar to Ploeger, Kelley, and Bisel (in press), that the coding scheme developed for this study allows scholars to understand language production with regard to organizational ethics in novel ways. This new understanding of how defensiveness is manifested in our language when our social group (in this case, our organization) is accused of organizational wrongdoing may provide insights into the connections between language-use and unethical behavior; for example, perhaps ambiguous ethical situations may produce increased levels of linguistic defensiveness. Furthermore, results of this study may also provide important practical

recommendations for limiting unethical organizational behavior(s)—organizational leaders may be given a sense for the importance of reducing "strategic ambiguity" and instead offering employees more details when discussing ethical situations.

Lastly, *empirical validity* refers to "the degree to which available evidence … support intermediate stages of a research process and its results" (p. 319). An important means of establishing the empirical validity of a coding scheme is through *semantic validation*—"the degree to which analytic categories accurately describe meanings and uses in the chosen contexts" (p. 319). The defense mechanism frequency coding scheme was subjected to a test of semantic validity by asking 12 working adults (who participated in the manipulation check) to read and rank order three responses as the least defensive (zero defenses), moderately defensive (contained three defenses), and highly defensive (contained seven defenses). Two of the 12 responses were removed because they did not follow directions to rank-order the three responses. Krippendorff's α was computed across participants' rankings in order to measure how consistently these *un*trained coders assigned meanings of linguistic defensiveness in alignment with the coding scheme. The untrained coders' rankings aligned with the coding scheme, $\alpha = .80$. Lastly, the coding scheme achieved *functional validity* as well (another form of empirical validity), in that it proved valid through its usage for the analysis of this study (Krippendorff, 2004).

Results

Organizational Identification and Linguistic Defensiveness

The first set of hypotheses predicted that workers' organizational identification is associated positively with both intensity of workers' linguistic defensiveness and

workers' usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization, after controlling for certainty of organizational wrongdoing. A multiple regression was performed in order to determine the relationship between organizational identification and the intensity of linguistic defensiveness. The first regression model, including organizational identification as a predictor of one's intensity of linguistic defensiveness, was significant, $R^2 = .05$. $F(1, 312) = 17.20$, $p < .001$ (see *Table 2*). As predicted, as one's level of organizational identification increases, one's felt intensity when crafting their defensive response increases as well ($B = .31$, $\beta = .23$, $p < .001$). The second regression model included the certainty of organizational wrongdoing as well as organizational identification. Results indicate that organizational identification remains a significant predictor of response intensity, even after controlling for the certainty of organizational wrongdoing, $R^2 = .05$, $F(2, 311) = 8.77$, $p < .001$. The R^2 change of .001 between models was not significant (see *Table 2*).

The statistical process described above was repeated in order to determine the relationship between workers' reported levels of organizational identification and usage frequency of linguistic defense mechanisms in their response, after controlling for certainty of organizational wrongdoing (see *Table 3*). The first regression model reveals that organizational identification alone is a significant predictor of the frequency of defense mechanisms, as coded based on the coding scheme described above, $R^2 = .02$, $F(1, 316) = 6.18$, $p < .05$. As one's level of organizational identification increases, one's usage of defense mechanisms also increases ($B = .31$, $\beta = .14$, $p < .05$). The certainty of organizational wrongdoing was added to the second regression model, which was also significant, $R^2 = .07$, $F(2, 315) = 11.41$ $p < .001$. Partial regression coefficients here

illustrated another positive relationship (B = .29, β = .13, p < .05). Results of the analysis indicated that organizational identification accounted for a significant proportion of the usage of defense mechanism variance after controlling for condition, R^2 change = .05, $F(1, 315) = 16.33$, p < .001.

Ambiguity, Certainty, and Linguistic Defensiveness

The second set of hypotheses in this study posited that participants who were assigned randomly to the ambiguous condition (in which organizational wrongdoing was uncertain) produce higher levels of intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness than those who were assigned to the certain condition (in which organizational wrongdoing was certain). An independent samples *t*-test was conducted in order to determine the presence of condition differences in the intensity of linguistic defensiveness in participants' responses. The hypothesis was not supported; results indicate that there was not a significant difference between the conditions in linguistic defensiveness intensity, $t(312) = -.43$, $p > .05$. Those in the ambiguous condition (M = 2.95, SD = .93) and those in the certain condition (M = 2.99, SD = .92) produced very similar levels of intensity of linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization. An additional independent samples *t*-test was performed to determine whether there were differences between conditions in frequency of usage of linguistic defense mechanisms. The test was significant, $t(316) = 2.35$, p < .001, η^2 = .02. Those assigned to the ambiguous condition (M = 1.72, SD = 1.50) produced greater frequency of defense mechanisms than those assigned to the certain condition (M = 1.04, SD = 1.46).

Organizational Identification as a Moderator

An additional set of hypotheses predicted the potential moderating capacity of organizational identification. Specifically, it was predicted that organizational identification moderates the relationship between organizational wrongdoing condition (ambiguous or certain) and linguistic defensiveness (both intensity and frequency). Following Aiken and West's (1991) recommendations for reducing multicollinearity amongst variables in these types of analyses, variables of interest were first standardized to z-scores. Then, multiple regression analyses were conducted in order to test the hypothesis that identification moderates the relationship between organizational wrongdoing condition and workers' intensity of linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization. The first step included the predictor variable of organizational identification. The second step added certainty of organizational wrongdoing. Finally, the third step included the interaction term, organizational identification by certainty of organizational wrongdoing. Results do not provide support for an interaction effect (see *Table 4*).

Additional multiple regression analyses were conducted in order to test the prediction that organizational identification moderates the relationship between organizational wrongdoing condition and workers' usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization. Similar to above, the first step included organizational identification. Then, certainty of organizational wrongdoing was added to the regression equation. Lastly, the interaction term organizational identification by certainty of organizational wrongdoing was added to the model. Results do not provide support for an interaction effect (see *Table 5*). As such, these data did not support the

notion that organizational identification serves as a moderator for the relationship between certainty of wrongdoing and neither workers' intensity of linguistic defensiveness nor their frequency of linguistic defense mechanisms.

Tenure, Organizational Identification, and Linguistic Defensiveness

The final hypotheses predicted the effects of workers' tenure at their current organization. First, it was predicted that organizational tenure is associated positively with reported levels of organizational identification. The results of a bivariate regression indicated that participants with increasingly longer tenures with their current organizations report higher levels of organizational identification, $R^2 = .03$, $F(1, 316) = 9.70$, $p < .01$. In other words, one's organizational tenure is related positively to reported identification ($B = .001$, $\beta = .17$, $p < .01$).

Next, it was hypothesized that organizational tenure is associated positively with the intensity of workers' linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization. Another bivariate regression was performed to test this hypothesis. Results did not reveal statistical support, $R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 312) = 3.15$, $p = .08$.

Lastly, it was posited that organizational tenure is associated positively with the frequency of workers' usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization. Results of a bivariate regression revealed statistical support for the hypothesis, $R^2 = .03$, $F(1, 316) = 8.19$, $p < .01$. In other words, defense mechanism frequency increases as workers' tenure with their organization increases ($B = .002$, $\beta = .16$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

This study sought primarily to understand the relationships between organizational identification, certainty of organizational wrongdoing, tenure, and worker's intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness when workers responded to an organizational outsider about an instance of wrongdoing at the worker's current workplace. The specific objectives of this study were fivefold: (a) to determine the effect of organizational identification on intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness; (b) to determine the effect of certainty of organizational wrongdoing on intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness; (c) to test for a moderating effect of organizational identification on the relationship between certainty of organizational wrongdoing and intensity and frequency of organizational wrongdoing; (d) to determine the effect of organizational tenure on organizational identification; and (e) to determine the effect of organizational tenure on intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness. Each objective was achieved. The major implications of these findings are discussed in the following section.

First, Brown and Starkey (2000) explained that "organizations are prone to ego defenses" (p. 102). This study demonstrates that organizational *members* are prone to ego defenses as well. When workers are highly identified with their current organization, they engage in both increased intensity of linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization and increased frequency of linguistic defense mechanism usage, even after controlling for the certainty of organizational wrongdoing. Organizational identification accounted for 5% of the variance in workers' intensity and 2% of the variance in workers' frequency of defense mechanism usage. When

employees identify with their organization, they experience feelings of oneness with or belongingness to their organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and they feel that their personal values are aligned with their organization's. In other words, workers who feel very identified are likely to view themselves as sharing the same values as their organization.

In the case of this study, then, when questioned by an organizational outsider about a gender discrimination class-action lawsuit at their organization (regardless of certainty), highly identified workers communicated with greater defensiveness. It seems that these highly identified workers may have interpreted the inquiry as an attack, a questioning of the organization's identity and ethicality. Thus, given the nature of organizational identification, the outsider is—in essence—simultaneously questioning the highly identified worker's *own* identity and *own* ethicality. Accordingly, highly identified workers then engage in increased linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization, both in terms of intensity of felt defensiveness and frequency of defense mechanisms. Not only did participants report feeling passionately when they respond to the questioner, but they also they communicated their defensiveness linguistically. These high levels of linguistic defensiveness (as compared to the levels for less identified workers) is perhaps due to a felt need to defend one's organization, given that so much of the worker's self is invested into that organization and a portion of her self-esteem is derived from her membership with that social group. The likelihood for individuals—especially if highly identified—to accept judgment of their organization (and themselves) as unethical for discriminating based on gender without first attempting to defend the organization and themselves for working there, seems unlikely.

Thus, the end result seen in this study was an increased defensiveness and protectiveness of the organization by organizational members. This heightened linguistic defensiveness of workers on behalf of their organization seems to further reinforce the importance of the membership negotiation communication flow (McPhee & Zaug, 2000).

Another major implication from this study regards the relationship between organizational wrongdoing certainty and linguistic defensiveness. Specifically, it was proposed that those in the ambiguous condition would produce higher levels of intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness than those assigned to the certain condition. Interestingly, the ambiguous condition producing increased linguistic defensiveness was only the case for the frequency of defense mechanisms employed in one's response. What this finding seems to demonstrate is that regardless of whether one is certain that the organization is guilty or if the situation is vague and ambiguous, workers reported feeling similar levels of intensity when crafting their response ($M_{\text{ambiguous}} = 2.95$, $M_{\text{certain}} = 2.99$). However, the manifestation of that intensity through spoken defense mechanisms differed significantly based on the certainty of organizational wrongdoing. Specifically, those in the ambiguous condition used a greater number of defense mechanisms ($M = 1.72$) than those in the certain condition ($M = 1.02$), perhaps using the ambiguity of the situation as a discursive resource with which they defend their organization.

The results of these hypotheses seem to speak to the distinction between a psychodynamic perspective (e.g., Brown & Starkey, 2000) and a communicodynamic perspective of unethical organizational behavior (e.g., Bisel, Kelley, Ploeger, &

Messersmith, 2011; Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel, in press). A psychodynamic approach places attention on the "issue of how organizations can deal with the fundamental anxiety that the ego defenses defend against" (Brown & Starkey, p. 108). On the other hand, a communicodynamic perspective highlights the communicative, linguistic strategies and adjustments one uses in the process of defining and defending organization. Interestingly, these data do *not* support that notion that the certainty of organizational wrongdoing affects the psychological, emotional reaction and intensity component of linguistic defensiveness: Workers experienced strong feelings whether organizational wrongdoing was certain or not. However, certainty—or rather ambiguity—was found to alter the amount of defense mechanisms workers incorporate into their responses about the organizational wrongdoing. These findings have implications for sensemaking, which is by definition, "literally…the making of sense" (Weick, 1995, p. 4).

McCaskey (1982) offers 12 characteristics of ambiguous organizational situations. The ambiguity of the ethical situation in this study is closely related to what McCaskey characterizes as a situation of problematical amount and reliability of information. In other words, the problem itself (i.e., whether the organization engaged in gender discrimination) lacks certainty and the information flow about that problem is likely insufficient or unreliable. Weick (1995) notes that such ambiguous situations are ripe opportunities for sensemaking: "A recurrent thread in the organizational literature is that interpretation, sensemaking, and social construction are most influential in settings of uncertainty…" (p. 177). Thus, workers not only have an opportunity to make sense of the situation in a way that suits *themselves*, they are offered the opportunity to

engage in sense*giving*, or the attempt to influence how *others* make sense of the gender discrimination lawsuit at the worker's organization (Choo, 2006; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Huff & Huff, 2000; Weick, 1997, 1995, 2001; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). As such, when workers believed the organizational wrongdoing to be uncertain, they used more defense mechanisms in response about the wrongdoing—perhaps in an attempt to make sense of the situation for themselves and others.

Weick notes that individuals strive to achieve a sense of stability through sensemaking, and he further posits: "A socially constructed world is a stable world…" (p. 154). This craved stability seems to be garnered by workers as they construct the wrongdoing in less unflattering or unfavorable ways. They do so by using defense mechanisms that construct and make sense of the wrongdoing as: simply not true (denial), doubtful (minimizing the situation), less egregious than it may seem (undermining the accusation or claim), unlikely due to the favorable identity of and personal experience with the organization (bolstering the organization), or by denying the topic is worthy of discussion at all (attempting discursive closure).

People draw on certain cues in order to make sense. As noted by Weick (1995), extracted cues are "simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring" (p. 50). What one chooses to extract as a cue depends on context and context in turn affects how a cue is interpreted (Weick). In this study, the ambiguity or certainty of the gender discrimination wrongdoing may actually be serving as a resource or cue for workers' meaning making. Perhaps when a situation is certain, the cue is less likely to be embellished, to the extent that though workers still

feel intensely, they do not have as much rhetorical space to make ego-defending arguments.

There was a relatively ineffectual relationship between certainty of the situation and linguistic defensiveness and the influence organizational identification has on predicting increases in linguistic defensiveness. A primary characteristic of the sensemaking process is the notion that how actors make sense of events aids in constructing their identity (Weick, 1995). Dutton and Dukerich (1991) assert:

> Individuals' self-concepts and personal identities are formed and modified in part by how they believe others view the organization for which they work…. The close link between an individual's character and an organization's image implies that individuals are personally motivated to preserve a positive organizational image and repair a negative one… (p. 21)

This dynamic is readily apparent in these data. A stronger relationship between employees and their organization (increased identification) led to an increased motivation of preserving their organization's image through linguistic defensiveness.

Overall, these data reveal that certainty suppresses the frequency of linguistic defensiveness—likely by limiting the number of rhetorical moves members can use to defend their organizations. Concomitantly, identification enhances both the intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness—likely because one's self-concept is linked to the organization. Thus, the claim that the certainty of organizational wrongdoing mitigates the effect of identification on defensiveness is shown to be dubious; certainty does not outweigh identification when considering the need to defend the collective. Practically, this notion is unfortunate. Furthermore, this tension is quite frankly

frightening when we consider the context of organizational ethics. Given the nonsignificant results when testing the certainty-frequency relationship—written plainly—these data appear to reveal that it does not matter if we are *certain* that our organization has engaged in serious wrongdoing—if we are highly identified, we *defend* our organization linguistically and emotionally.

We must ask the following questions: What does this claim—that we will defend our organization even in cases of certain wrongdoing—mean for organizational learning? What are the implications of this claim with regard to becoming a wise organization, in which members and leaders can admit fault? What does this claim mean for identity defense mechanisms functioning in adaptive or maladaptive ways?

Organizational learning can be described as "a virtuous circle in which new information is used to challenge existing ideas and to develop new perspectives on the future" (Brown & Starkey, 2000, p. 103). This collective, macro-level learning involves members' interpretation of and adaptation to their environment (Bisel, Messersmith, & Kelley, in press; Argyris, 2008; Weick & Ashford, 2001). However, it seems that ignorance (or even *non*learning) may be occurring in the study at hand. When workers defend their organization—whether it be through bolstering the organization, denial, minimizing the situation, undermining the claims, or attempting discursive closure—the defense mechanisms are serving as barriers to both individual and collective learning. Among other reasons, Brown and Starkey attribute organizational ignorance to the notion that "information that threatens an organization's collective self-concept is ignored, rejected, reinterpreted, hidden, or lost…" (p. 103). This notion of ignorance—

or a collective's not knowing (Harvey, Novicevic, Buckely, & Ferris, 2001)—is particularly relevant and salient to the context of the study at hand.

How can an organization engage in critical self-reflection and ultimately become a wise organization (Brown & Starkey, 2000) when it (and its members) cannot admit fault publicly, and instead actually *defend* the organization? Critical self-reflexivity allows for "alternate perspectives of self and institutionalizes the self-questioning of the ongoing viability of existing identity" (Brown & Starkey, p. 110). In organizations where issues such as gender discrimination are occurring, a degree of public critical self-reflexivity seems imperative. Organizations and organizational members ought to hold themselves accountable with regard to the ethicality of their actions. Once organizations do engage in self-questioning, they may collectively adopt what Brown and Starkey label "an attitude of wisdom" (p. 113)—and move toward becoming a wise organization, which is: "one who accepts that a willingness to explore ego-threatening matters is a prerequisite for developing a more mature individuality and identity" (p. 113). One such prerequisite for the organization and its members to become wise (so to speak), is the ability to invoke complex sensemaking (Weick, 1995). If workers continue sensemaking in the fashion reflected in this study, and continue to avoid critical questioning of the groups to which they belong, it seems unlikely that the organization will indeed become wise. Thus, I argue that in the case of organizational (un)ethics, identity defense mechanisms are largely maladaptive in that they prevent organizational learning, critical self-reflexivity, and attaining a culture of wisdom.

Lastly, consider the final set of predictions regarding one's organizational tenure. It was posited—and demonstrated—that a longer organizational tenure would

relate to a higher reported level of organizational identification. Furthermore, tenure accounted for 3% of worker's variance in workers' usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization. However, organizational tenure was not found to be a statistically significant predictor of intensity of workers' linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization. These results may speak to implications for seasoned employees and the socialization processes of organizational newcomers, because, as noted by Kramer (2010), "individuals work in peer groups or teams who collectively influence the socialization process" (p. 132). For instance, long-tenured employees (as a group) will be more strongly identified—and, as discussed above, employees (regardless of organizational tenure) that are more strongly identified will employ greater intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness—and will use an increased frequency of defense mechanisms in their responses about the organizational wrongdoing. We must speculate then, who are these strongly identified, seasoned employees that are engaging in such strong linguistic defensiveness even when the organization is guilty of wrongdoing? It stands to reason that these characteristics may align with profiles of managers and top-level decision makers. Thus, what are the implications for the likelihood of support for an ethical culture? Unfortunately, it seems that these workers may be focused too heavily on protecting the existing, corrupt identity rather than admitting fault or guilt of the wrongdoing. Thus, the fostering of an ethical, healthy organizational culture and the promotion of self-reflexivity by seasoned employees to organizational newcomers seems glum.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study, like all studies, has its limitations. Such limitations offer directions for future research. Through this study, an understanding was gained of how one's identification or knowledge about the certainty of organizational wrongdoing relates to linguistic defensiveness. Given the social aspects of sensemaking and the processual nature of organizational identification, it may be helpful to extend this line of research by investigating how the *dialogue* about organizational wrongdoing unfolds (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004). Does a worker's response affect the questioner's assessment of the wrongdoing? Additional fruitful, methodological extensions may be to interview workers from a given organization that is experiencing large-scale unethical behavior, or to solicit retrospective accounts of a past occurrence. Then, the analysis of the defense mechanisms employed by workers may be more ecologically valid since workers would be responding with regard to an actual case of current or past organizational wrongdoing at their workplace; thus, external validity of the study would be enhanced. Also, the responses that participants constructed in this study were directed toward an organizational outsider. Future studies could investigate whether linguistic defensiveness is similar or dissimilar when conversing with an organizational insider.

Regarding the development of practical recommendations, it would be beneficial to investigate the specific frequencies of each *type* of defense mechanism—which are used most commonly, and by whom. Beyond one's organizational identification and organizational tenure, who—with regard to sex, age, hierarchy role, supervisory experience, and so on—is most likely to engage in linguistic defensiveness? A refined

profile of the most linguistically-defensive workers ought to be developed such that their communicative strategies can be recognized and assessed.

Future research ought to assess the results of this study in conjunction with the process of disidentification. This study provided a form of empirical support for the notion that organizational identification may be detrimental—by inhibiting learning and an honest evaluation of the organization—illustrating the potential dark side of identification. In cases such as this one, disidentification might be considered healthy if the organization is engaging in unethical behaviors. This dynamic is one that deserves scholarly attention.

Lastly, the ways in which individual employees come to understand and discuss their organization's wrongdoing has implications for the organization's overall culture and ethical climate (Elango, Paul, Kundu, & Paudel, 2010; Lewis, 2011; VanSandt & Neck, 2003). A longitudinal analysis of employee's talk about unethical organizational behavior may help to further understand this seemingly complex relationship between employees, the organization, and the collective's culture.

Conclusion

This research explained the interrelationships among organizational identification, certainty of organizational wrongdoing, organizational tenure, and linguistic defensiveness in the context of organizational (un)ethics. Linguistic defensiveness demonstrates one way in which organizational identification, typically viewed a psychological variable, can be manifested through workers' communication. As noted by Bisel et al. (2011), "Communication is the behavior that imbues unethical workplace behavior with meaning" (¶ 2). This study sought to provide an investigation

of the communication—specifically the linguistic defensiveness—that may enable and constrain the perpetuation of unethical organizational behavior. Specifically, this study demonstrated that highly identified, tenured workers—especially in cases of ambiguous organizational wrongdoing—are unlikely to acknowledge and discuss their organization's wrongdoing as unethical. Rather, they engage in linguistic defensiveness strategies, perhaps in an attempt to protect their organization's—and perhaps their own—identity.

CHAPTER 4

Dissertation Conclusion

This two-study dissertation was conducted in order to better understand the role of communication in confronting and defending unethical organizational behavior. The results of these projects speak to the capacity of workers' communication to enable and constrain unethical organizational behavior by exploring how working adults adjust their linguistic responses to unethical behaviors across a variety of contextual situations. Across these studies working adults (a) confronted and defended unethical organizational behaviors, which were committed by (b) individuals and collectives; these confrontations and defenses were given (c) to organizational members and nonmembers, about wrongdoings that were (d) mundane and major, and, all functioned to (d) maintain one's own and the organization's public image. Thus, taken together, these studies constitute an initial, yet ambitious, exploration of the associations among organizational communication and organizational ethics.

Implications derived from these studies suggest recommendations for the practice of organizational ethics. For instance, when contemplating whether confronting an unethical actor is "good" or "bad," consider the similar balance of tact and truth. It seems that rather than choosing between (a) avoiding communicative confrontation and being overly protective of the unethical actor's face or (b) being highly contemptive and only attacking the unethical actor's face; the best approach may be to engage in what the first study described as balanced communicative confrontationality. These confrontations both protect the other's face (and thus, relationship to a certain extent),

yet avoid certain troublesome consequences of the mum effect on organizational learning and cultural development.

This dissertation also offers insight into the potential detriments of high levels of organizational identification. Regardless of whether highly identified workers are certain that their organization is guilty of wrongdoing, the second study presented here seems to suggest that highly identified workers will engage in both a higher frequency and greater intensity of linguistic defensiveness of their organization's public image. Written simply: Such workers will tend to *defend* their organization, even when their organization is at fault. Practically, these findings generate two organizational recommendations. First, since highly identified workers seem to have ethical blindspots, so to speak, it is important to not only promote individual self-reflexivity, but to invite *public* reflexivity and questioning as well. This invitation can be communicated throughout the organizational hierarchy by encouraging the (public) asking of questions such as, "Is our pride, oneness with, and commitment to our organization deterring us from seeing an accurate (un)ethical picture?" Or, "Can I recognize that even though my *organization* may have done something unethical, that does not necessarily make *me*, as an employee, unethical?"

Next, the notion of overidentification may also speak to key elements of groupthink and decision-making. As demonstrated in the second study, tenured workers report higher levels of identification and higher levels of linguistic defensiveness and as discussed above, those that are highly identified (not considering tenure) tend to be more defensive linguistically. Therefore, it stands to reason that decision-making teams ought not be comprised of only seasoned workers and/or workers who have high

identity investment in the organization. Rather, decision-making teams and groups ought to consist of a diverse group of workers, whose collective's first instinct may *not* be to defend the organization to which they feel a strong sense of belonging.

After analyzing the collective results of these studies, implications for the overarching role of communication in the perpetuation of unethical organizational behavior is increasingly clear. The first study found that hierarchical context trumps relational closeness in terms of workers' communicative confrontationality when responding to a worker who presented the participant's ideas as her own. Utilizing a communicodynamic perspective, the results of the second study suggest that highly identified employees, who are long-time members of their organization, employ greater linguistic defensiveness when responding to organizational outsiders about an instance of organizational wrongdoing; generally more so when the certainty of wrongdoing is ambiguous. Across these diverse studies, it stands to reason that regardless of whether individuals are confronting or defending mundane, micro, and individual cases of unethical behavior or even major, macro, and collective cases of unethical behavior, to a member or nonmember of the organization, in order to maintain one's own or the organization's public image, these situations—at their source—have in common the constitutive role of communication.

The scenarios in this dissertation involved unethical *action*. Once we acknowledge that, "Communicative action itself is an ethical (or unethical) doing" (Jovanovic & Wood, 2006, p. 389), we can begin to see more clearly how communication can enable and constrain unethical behaviors. Ethics can be challenged or reinforced with individuals' communication. Whether unethical behavior in the

workplace goes confronted or unconfronted, defended or undefended, the related communication is a manifestation of organizational ethics. Communication has the power to adjust the meaning-making process and to assign value to (un)ethical behaviors in the workplace. Sensemaking is literally the making sense of a given event—how we choose to interpret the event. *Sensegiving* is the attempt to influence how *others* make sense of or interpret a given event. If unconfronted, unethical organizational behaviors will not be assigned appropriate normative meaning. As such, these unethical behaviors and their associated actors may not only avoid being labeled "unethical" but may be interpreted as *benign* and thus, may accumulate, and over time, contribute to an unethical organizational culture. If unethical organizations, actors, and behaviors are not only unconfronted, but *defended* as well, ethical blindspots may come to be characteristic of a workplace, deterring critical self-questioning and overall organizational learning from occurring. As hoped, this dissertation speaks clearly to the role of communication in the perpetuation of unethical organizational behavior, and the capacity of workers' communication to enable and constrain such behaviors.

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics: Hierarchical Position, Relational Closeness, and Level of Confrontationality

Hierarchical Position	Relational Closeness	Confrontationality	
		Mean	SD
Subordinate to Supervisor	Troublesome Other (*n* = 30)	1.80	1.19
	Acquaintance (*n* = 38)	1.89	1.33
	Friend (*n* = 27)	1.63	1.21
	Total (*n* = 95)	1.79	1.25
Coworker to Coworker	Troublesome Other (*n* = 41)	2.98	1.37
	Acquaintance (*n* = 42)	2.69	1.09
	Friend (*n* = 37)	2.70	1.05
	Total (*n* = 120)	2.79	1.18
Supervisor to Subordinate	Troublesome Other (n = 32)	2.09	1.20
	Acquaintance (n = 39)	2.46	1.47
	Friend (n = 40)	2.40	1.41
	Total (n = 111)	2.33	1.37
Total	Troublesome Other (n = 103)	2.36	1.36
	Acquaintance (n = 119)	2.36	1.33
	Friend (n = 104)	2.31	1.30
	Total (*n* = 326)	2.34	1.33

Table 2

Multiple Regression Analysis – Hypothesis 1a

	Intensity of Linguistic Defensiveness					
	Step 1			Step 2		
Variable	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*
Organizational identification	.31***	.08	.23***	.31***	.08	.23***
Certainty of wrongdoing				.06	.10	.03
F	17.20***			8.77***		
R^2	.05			.05		
ΔR^2	-			.001		

Note. ***$p < .001$.
Step 1: $N = 314$, $R^2 = .05$, $F(1, 312) = 17.20$, $p < .001$.
Step 2: $N = 314$, $R^2 = .05$, $F(2, 311) = 8.77$, $p < .001$.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis – Hypothesis 1b

	Frequency of Linguistic Defense Mechanisms					
	Step 1			Step 2		
Variable	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*
Organizational identification	.31*	.12	.14*	.29*	.12	.13*
Certainty of wrongdoing				-.67***	.12	-.22***
F	6.12*			11.41***		
R^2	.02*			.07***		
ΔR^2	-			.05***		

Note. *$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.
Step 1: $N = 318$, $R^2 = .02$, $F(1, 316) = 6.12$, $p < .05$.
Step 2: $N = 318$, $R^2 = .07$, $F(2, 315) = 11.41$, $p < .001$.

Table 4

Multiple Regression Analysis – Hypothesis 3a

	Intensity of Linguistic Defensiveness								
	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
Variable	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*
Organizational identification	.21***	.05	.23***	.21***	.05	.23***	.21***	.05	.22***
Certainty of wrongdoing				.03	.05	.03	.03	.05	.03
OI X Certainty							.04	.05	.04
F	17.20***			8.77***			6.01**$^{+}$		
R^2	.05			.05			.06		
ΔR^2	.05			.001			.002		

Note. ***$p < .001$. **$^{+}p = .001$.
Step 1: $N = 314$. $R^2 = .05$. $F(1, 312) = 17.20$, $p < .001$.
Step 2: $N = 314$. $R^2 = .05$. $F(2, 311) = 8.77$, $p < .001$.
Step 3: $N = 314$. $R^2 = .06$. $F(3, 310) = 6.01$, $p = .001$.

Table 5

Multiple Regression Analysis – Hypothesis 3b

	Frequency of Linguistic Defense Mechanisms								
	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
Variable	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*
Organizational identification	.21*	.08	.14*	.20*	.08	.13*	.19*	.08	.13*
Certainty of wrongdoing				-.33***	.08	-.22***	-.33***	.08	-.22***
OI X Certainty							.05	.08	.03
F	6.18*			11.41***			7.69***		
R^2	.02			.07			.07		
ΔR^2	.02			.05***			.001		

Note. *$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.
Step 1: $N = 318$. $R^2 = .02$. $F(1, 316) = 6.18$, $p < .05$.
Step 2: $N = 318$. $R^2 = .07$. $F(2, 315) = 11.41$, $p < .001$.
Step 3: $N = 318$. $R^2 = .07$. $F(3, 314) = 7.69$, $p < .001$

Appendix A

Study One Scenarios

Subordinate-Supervisor Scenarios

Hypothetical Scenario 1: Subordinate-Supervisor/Troublesome Other

You have been working independently on a project at work. You are looking forward to the opportunity to present your ideas to your coworkers/colleagues at an upcoming meeting. You really want to be prepared, so you decide to do a dry run of your presentation at work the day before the meeting. Your SUPERVISOR, Casey, offers to sit in on this practice presentation and ask potential questions. You accept Casey's offer, hoping that your supervisor's presence will make your rehearsal seem more real. As your supervisor, Casey has authority over you.

You and Casey have a difficult relationship. You have never gotten along with each other. When you first started working at your organization, Casey simply rubbed you the wrong way. You do not appreciate Casey's work ethic or general personality. After a recent hostile incident and confrontation, you try to avoid each other at all costs. If you must communicate with Casey about some work-related issue, it is uncomfortable, unfriendly, and harsh. You definitely do not discuss your personal lives.

It is the morning of your presentation and you are excited to share your ideas with your coworkers/colleagues. Before you can present, your supervisor Casey takes the floor. Casey proceeds to present your ideas as their own, taking credit for the work that you did. Everyone is impressed and is now under the impression that Casey came up with these ideas. You believe this was UNETHICAL of Casey because it was a violation of your intellectual property rights. You decide to handle the situation with your supervisor yourself, in private. In the box below, please construct your message to Casey as though this were a real situation. What do you say?

Hypothetical Scenario 2: Subordinate-Supervisor/Acquaintance

You have been working independently on a project at work. You are looking forward to the opportunity to present your ideas to your coworkers/colleagues at an upcoming meeting. You really want to be prepared, so you decide to do a dry run of your presentation at work the day before the meeting. Your SUPERVISOR, Casey, offers to sit in on this practice presentation and ask potential questions. You accept Casey's offer, hoping that your supervisor's presence will make your rehearsal seem more real. As your supervisor, Casey has authority over you.

Your relationship with Casey exists at a fairly superficial level. You have not had any very positive or very negative experiences with Casey. Your communication consists of mundane, small talk about the weather or what you had for lunch. Neither of you share information about your personal life and as such, you don't know much about each other's families, friends outside of work, or hobbies. You communicate essentially only about work-related responsibilities or topics such as an upcoming meeting, training session, or a new product/service. You consider your supervisor simply as an

acquaintance.

It is the morning of your presentation and you are excited to share your ideas with your coworkers/colleagues. Before you can present, your supervisor Casey takes the floor. Casey proceeds to present your ideas as their own, taking credit for the work that you did. Everyone is impressed and is now under the impression that Casey came up with these ideas. You believe this was UNETHICAL of Casey because it was a violation of your intellectual property rights. You decide to handle the situation with your supervisor yourself, in private. In the box below, please construct your message to Casey as though this were a real situation. What do you say?

Hypothetical Scenario 3: Subordinate-Supervisor/Friend

You have been working independently on a project at work. You are looking forward to the opportunity to present your ideas to your coworkers/colleagues at an upcoming meeting. You really want to be prepared, so you decide to do a dry run of your presentation at work the day before the meeting. Your SUPERVISOR, Casey, offers to sit in on this practice presentation and ask potential questions. You accept Casey's offer, hoping that your supervisor's presence will make your rehearsal seem more real. As your supervisor, Casey has authority over you.

Your relationship with Casey is friendly and close. You discuss both work-related topics and personal topics. You have each shared information about yourselves and your families, friends outside of work, and hobbies. When you talk about Casey, you describe your supervisor as a friend that you met at work. You can discuss virtually any topic with each other—the gathering you both attended at a mutual friend's house last weekend, where to hang out after work, your upbringing and childhoods, upcoming vacations, your goals for your future—and you are confident that there is a high level of trust, closeness, support, and openness between you.

It is the morning of your presentation and you are excited to share your ideas with your coworkers/colleagues. Before you can present, your supervisor Casey takes the floor. Casey proceeds to present your ideas as their own, taking credit for the work that you did. Everyone is impressed and is now under the impression that Casey came up with these ideas. You believe this was UNETHICAL of Casey because it was a violation of your intellectual property rights. You decide to handle the situation with your supervisor yourself, in private. In the box below, please construct your message to Casey as though this were a real situation. What do you say?

Coworker-Coworker Scenarios

Hypothetical Scenario 4: Coworker-Coworker/Troublesome Other

You have been working independently on a project at work. You are looking forward to the opportunity to present your ideas to your supervisor at an upcoming meeting. You really want to be prepared, so you decide to do a dry run of your presentation at work the day before the meeting. One of your PEER COWORKERS, Casey, who sits in the space next to you at work offers to sit in on this practice presentation and ask potential questions. You accept Casey's offer, hoping that your peer coworker's presence will

make your rehearsal seem more real. As coworkers, you do not have authority over Casey and Casey does not have authority over you.

You and Casey have a difficult relationship. You have never gotten along with each other. When you first started working at your organization, Casey simply rubbed you the wrong way. You do not appreciate Casey's work ethic or general personality. After a recent hostile incident and confrontation, you try to avoid each other at all costs. If you must communicate with Casey about some work-related issue, it is uncomfortable, unfriendly, and harsh. You definitely do not discuss your personal lives.

It is the morning of your presentation and you are excited to share your ideas with your supervisor and other coworkers. Before you can present, your peer coworker Casey asks to speak. Casey proceeds to present your ideas as their own, taking credit for the work that you did. Your supervisor acts impressed and everyone is now is under the impression that your peer coworker came up with these ideas. You believe this was UNETHICAL of Casey because it was a violation of your intellectual property rights. You decide to handle the situation with your peer coworker yourself, in private. In the box below, please construct your message to Casey as though this were a real situation. What do you say?

Hypothetical Scenario 5: Coworker-Coworker/Acquaintance

You have been working independently on a project at work. You are looking forward to the opportunity to present your ideas to your supervisor at an upcoming meeting. You really want to be prepared, so you decide to do a dry run of your presentation at work the day before the meeting. One of your PEER COWORKERS, Casey, who sits in the space next to you at work offers to sit in on this practice presentation and ask potential questions. You accept Casey's offer, hoping that your peer coworker's presence will make your rehearsal seem more real. As coworkers, you do not have authority over Casey and Casey does not have authority over you.

Your relationship with Casey exists at a fairly superficial level. You have not had any very positive or very negative experiences with Casey. Your communication consists of mundane, small talk about the weather or what you had for lunch. Neither of you share information about your personal life and as such, you don't know much about each other's families, friends outside of work, or hobbies. You communicate essentially only when required for a work-related responsibility or topic such as an upcoming meeting, training session, or a new product/service. You consider your coworker simply as an acquaintance.

It is the morning of your presentation and you are excited to share your ideas with your supervisor and other coworkers. Before you can present, your peer coworker Casey asks to speak. Casey proceeds to present your ideas as their own, taking credit for the work that you did. Your supervisor acts impressed and everyone is now is under the impression that your peer coworker came up with these ideas. You believe this was UNETHICAL of Casey because it was a violation of your intellectual property rights. You decide to handle the situation with your peer coworker yourself, in private. In the

box below, please construct your message to Casey as though this were a real situation. What do you say?

Hypothetical Scenario 6: Coworker-Coworker/Friend
You have been working independently on a project at work. You are looking forward to the opportunity to present your ideas to your supervisor at an upcoming meeting. You really want to be prepared, so you decide to do a dry run of your presentation at work the day before the meeting. One of your PEER COWORKERS, Casey, who sits in the space next to you at work offers to sit in on this practice presentation and ask potential questions. You accept Casey's offer, hoping that your peer coworker's presence will make your rehearsal seem more real. As coworkers, you do not have authority over Casey and Casey does not have authority over you.

Your relationship with Casey is friendly and close. You discuss both work-related topics and personal topics. You have each shared information about yourselves and your families, friends outside of work, and hobbies. When you talk about Casey, you describe your supervisor as a friend that you met at work. You can discuss virtually any topic with each other—the gathering you both attended at a mutual friend's house last weekend, where to hang out after work, your upbringing and childhoods, upcoming vacations, your goals for your future—and you are confident that there is a high level of trust, closeness, support, and openness between you.

It is the morning of your presentation and you are excited to share your ideas with your supervisor and other coworkers. Before you can present, your peer coworker Casey asks to speak. Casey proceeds to present your ideas as their own, taking credit for the work that you did. Your supervisor acts impressed and everyone is now is under the impression that your peer coworker came up with these ideas. You believe this was UNETHICAL of Casey because it was a violation of your intellectual property rights. You decide to handle the situation with your peer coworker yourself, in private. In the box below, please construct your message to Casey as though this were a real situation. What do you say?

Supervisor-Subordinate Scenarios
Hypothetical Scenario 7: Supervisor-Subordinate/Troublesome Other
You have been working independently on a project at work. You are looking forward to the opportunity to present your ideas at an upcoming meeting. You really want to be prepared, so you decide to do a dry run of your presentation at work the day before the meeting. One of your SUBORDINATES, Casey, offers to sit in on this practice presentation and ask potential questions. You accept Casey's offer, hoping that your subordinate's presence will make your rehearsal seem more real. As the supervisor, you have authority over Casey.

You and Casey have a difficult relationship. You have never gotten along with each other. When you first started working at your organization, Casey simply rubbed you the wrong way. You do not appreciate Casey's work ethic or general personality. After a recent hostile incident and confrontation, you try to avoid each other at all costs. If

you must communicate with Casey about some work-related issue, it is uncomfortable, unfriendly, and harsh. You definitely do not discuss your personal lives.

It is the morning of your presentation and you are excited to share your ideas. Before you can present, your subordinate Casey asks to speak. You give Casey permission. Casey proceeds to present your ideas as their own, taking credit for the work that you did. Everyone is impressed and is now under the impression that your subordinate came up with these ideas. You believe this was UNETHICAL of Casey because it was a violation of your intellectual property rights. You decide to handle the situation with your subordinate yourself, in private. In the box below, please construct your message to Casey as though this were a real situation. What do you say?

Hypothetical Scenario 8: Supervisor-Subordinate/Acquaintance

You have been working independently on a project at work. You are looking forward to the opportunity to present your ideas at an upcoming meeting. You really want to be prepared, so you decide to do a dry run of your presentation at work the day before the meeting. One of your SUBORDINATES, Casey, offers to sit in on this practice presentation and ask potential questions. You accept Casey's offer, hoping that your subordinate's presence will make your rehearsal seem more real. As the supervisor, you have authority over Casey.

Your relationship with Casey exists at a fairly superficial level. You have not had any very positive or very negative experiences with Casey. Your communication consists of mundane, small talk about the weather or what you had for lunch. Neither of you share information about your personal life and as such, you don't know much about each other's families, friends outside of work, or hobbies. You communicate essentially only about work-related responsibilities or topics such as an upcoming meeting, training session, or a new product/service. You consider your subordinate simply as an acquaintance.

It is the morning of your presentation and you are excited to share your ideas. Before you can present, your subordinate Casey asks to speak. You give Casey permission. Casey proceeds to present your ideas as their own, taking credit for the work that you did. Everyone is impressed and is now under the impression that your subordinate came up with these ideas. You believe this was UNETHICAL of Casey because it was a violation of your intellectual property rights. You decide to handle the situation with your subordinate yourself, in private. In the box below, please construct your message to Casey as though this were a real situation. What do you say?

Hypothetical Scenario 9: Supervisor-Subordinate/Friend

You have been working independently on a project at work. You are looking forward to the opportunity to present your ideas at an upcoming meeting. You really want to be prepared, so you decide to do a dry run of your presentation at work the day before the meeting. One of your SUBORDINATES, Casey, offers to sit in on this practice presentation and ask potential questions. You accept Casey's offer, hoping that your subordinate's presence will make your rehearsal seem more real. As the supervisor, you

have authority over Casey.

Your relationship with Casey is friendly and close. You discuss both work-related topics and personal topics. You have each shared information about yourselves and your families, friends outside of work, and hobbies. When you talk about Casey, you describe your supervisor as a friend that you met at work. You can discuss virtually any topic with each other—the gathering you both attended at a mutual friend's house last weekend, where to hang out after work, your upbringing and childhoods, upcoming vacations, your goals for your future—and you are confident that there is a high level of trust, closeness, support, and openness between you.

It is the morning of your presentation and you are excited to share your ideas. Before you can present, your subordinate Casey asks to speak. You give Casey permission. Casey proceeds to present your ideas as their own, taking credit for the work that you did. Everyone is impressed and is now under the impression that your subordinate came up with these ideas. You believe this was UNETHICAL of Casey because it was a violation of your intellectual property rights. You decide to handle the situation with your subordinate yourself, in private. In the box below, please construct your message to Casey as though this were a real situation. What do you say?

Appendix B

Study One Manipulation Check Details

A manipulation check was performed in order to assess whether participants likely perceived distinctions between the relational closeness levels indicated in the conditions (troublesome other, acquaintance, friend) and hierarchical positions (subordinate, coworker, supervisor). Manipulation check participants were also asked whether they perceived the behavior discussed in the scenario to be unethical. Twelve adults were solicited to participate in the manipulation check. The full-time working adults who participated in the full study did not participate in the manipulation check in order to avoid participant fatigue.

After reading each of the nine scenarios, participants responded to 7-point semantic differential scales regarding their perceptions of relational closeness. In order to assess perceived differences in relational closeness, the measures included: 1 (*extremely distant*) to 7 (*extremely close*), 1 (*enemy-like*) to 7 (*friend-like*), 1 (*very interpersonally unfamiliar*) to 7 (*very interpersonally familiar*), and 1 (*very unknown*) to 7 (*very known*). Thus, a higher number on these scales indicates a closer relationship with the unethical actor, Casey. Each scale reliability, computed as Cronbach's α, was high. For relational closeness with the troublesome other, $\alpha = .86$; with acquaintance, $\alpha = .92$; and with friend, $\alpha = .91$. A one-way ANOVA was performed in order to verify that participants perceived a difference in interpersonal closeness between the three relational closeness conditions, regardless of hierarchical relationship. Results confirm that participants did indeed perceive significant differences between conditions, $F(2, 105) = 233.22$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc tests revealed significant differences between each condition, such that participants perceived greater relational closeness in the friend condition ($M = 6.38$, $SD = .74$), than in the acquaintance condition ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .81$), than in the troublesome other condition ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.03$).

The next set of measures in the manipulation check assessed whether participants likely distinguished among hierarchical conditions. These semantic differentials included: 1 (*Casey is like my supervisor*) to 7 (*Casey is my subordinate*), 1 (*I do not have power over Casey in the workplace*) to 7 (*I have great power over Casey in the workplace*), 1 (*I have absolutely no authority over Casey*) to 7 (*I have great authority over Casey*), 1 (*I do not have any supervisory control over Casey*) to 7 (*I have great supervisory control over Casey*). Therefore, a higher number on both scales indicates that the participant is responding as a supervisor speaking with Casey, their subordinate. Each scale reliability was again computed as Cronbach's α, and all were found to be high. Scale reliability for the subordinate-supervisor conditions was $\alpha = .95$; for coworker-coworker conditions, $\alpha = .84$; and for supervisor-subordinate conditions, $\alpha = .93$. A one-way ANOVA was performed to verify that participants perceived differences in the hierarchical conditions, regardless of relational closeness, $F(2, 105) = 312.86$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc tests revealed significant differences between each condition. Participants indicated that the supervisor-subordinate condition demonstrated greatest supervisory authority/control ($M = 6.43$, $SD = .69$), followed by the coworker-coworker condition ($M = 3.94$, $SD = .57$), followed by the subordinate-supervisor condition ($M = 1.97$, $SD = .96$).

Finally, manipulation check participants were asked to rate whether they believe the organizational wrongdoing described in the scenarios is unethical. As such, they answered four, 7-point semantic differential scales for each scenario, the first scale ranging from 1 *(very ethical*) to 7 *(very unethical*), the second ranging from 1 (*very acceptable behavior*) to 7 (*very unacceptable behavior*), the third ranging from 1 (*very just*) to 7 (*very unjust*), and the last ranging from 1 (*very moral*) to 7 (*very immoral*). Accordingly, a higher number on this set of scales represents the perception that the behavior discussed in the scenarios is indeed unethical. The scale reliability for judging ethicality of the behavior was very high, Cronbach's $\alpha = .99$. A one-sample *t*-test revealed that overall, participants perceived the wrongdoing to be significantly more unethical ($M = 6.88$, $SD = .31$) when compared with a test value of 4 (neither ethical nor unethical), $t(107) = 97.09$, $p < .001$.

Appendix C

Study Two Scenarios

You are at your family reunion. Your extended family is together once again and you are discussing many different topics—past reunions and memories, catching up on what you have each been up to, new hobbies, and of course, work. Someone asks you how your job at your current organization is going.

Before you can answer, your cousin interjects: "Hey! I've got a question for you. I've been reading online that your organization might be involved in some sort of class-action lawsuit. There's talk of gender discrimination. What do you think about these accusations?"

> ***AMBIGUOUS****:* Before you answer, you reflect on what you know about the accusations against your organization. At this point, your knowledge on the situation is vague and uncertain. While you have heard mention of the possibility of gender discrimination, there are no official statements. Your knowledge is based mostly on office chitchat and hearsay about unconfirmed reports. No one is certain such discrimination is occurring or that a class-action lawsuit will be filed officially. You know how common gender discrimination is and that it is unethical, but the whole situation at your organization is still quite ambiguous.
>
> ***CERTAIN****:* Before you answer, you reflect on what you know about the accusations against your organization. You are well aware of the class-action lawsuit for discriminating against females in pay and promotions. You have read the official reports, heard trusted female's accounts of hitting the "glass ceiling" within your organization. Your organization just reached a settlement agreement. They've also dedicated a significant amount of money to revising harassment policies and training, improving complaint processes, analyzing the current pay and promotion practices. You know how common gender discrimination is and that it is unethical, and it is quite certain that it is occurring at your organization.

Regardless of how you answer your cousin, you know that the reputation of your organization is at stake. As a member of the organization, you feel that your reputation may be at stake as well. In the box below, please respond to your cousin's questions as though the organization discussed is the organization you currently work for.

Your cousin asked, "What do you think about these accusations?" PLEASE RESPOND TO YOUR COUSIN'S QUESTION IN THE BOX BELOW AS THOUGH THIS WERE A REAL SITUATION.

Appendix D

Organizational Identification Measure (Mael & Ashforth, 1992)

1. When someone criticizes my current organization, it feels like a personal insult.
2. I am very interested in what others think about my current organization.
3. When I talk about my organization, I usually say “we” rather than “they”.
4. This organization’s successes are my successes.
5. When someone praises my organization, it feels like a personal compliment.
6. If a story in the media criticized my current organization, I would feel embarrassed.

Scale: 1 = *strongly agree*; 5 = *strongly disagree*

Appendix E

Study Two Manipulation Check Details

Once revisions were made to the survey following the analysis of the pilot data and after official data collection, a manipulation check was performed in order to assess whether participants likely perceived distinctions between the degree of certainty indicated in the conditions (certain, ambiguous). Twelve adults were solicited to participate in the manipulation check.

After reading each scenario, participants were asked their opinion about how ambiguous or certain it is that their organization—the one portrayed in the study—engaged in the organizational wrongdoing described. Participants responded to four, 7-point semantic differential scales for both scenarios, the first scale ranging from 1 (*very uncertain*) to 7 (*very certain*), the second scale ranging from 1 (*very ambiguous*) to 7 (*very unambiguous*), the third scale ranging from 1 (*very unclear*) to 7 (*very clear*), and a final scale ranging from 1 (*very unsure*) to 7 (*very sure*). Thus, a higher number on all scales represents a greater degree of certainty that the organization has engaged in the wrongdoing portrayed. Cronbach's α was computed to determine scale reliability of certainty for both the ambiguous and certain conditions; both conditions' reliabilities were high ($\alpha = .90$ and $\alpha = .96$, respectively). An independent samples *t*-test was conducted in order to determine if participants perceived differences in certainty of organizational wrongdoing between the ambiguous and certain conditions. Results confirm that participants did indeed perceive greater certainty of wrongdoing in the certain condition ($M = 6.06$, $SD = .76$) than in the ambiguous condition ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(22) = -9.67$, $p < .001$.