Management Communication Quarterly
2014, Vol. 28(1) 111–129
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DOI: 10.1177/0893318913503382
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Denying What Workers Believe Are Unethical Workplace Requests: Do Workers Use Moral, Operational, or Policy Justifications Publicly?

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Abstract

This message-production experiment demonstrates workers' tendency to use organizational policy justifications when *publicly* denying what they *privately* believe are unethical requests. Working adults (N = 234) responded to an unethical request from a supervisor, coworker, or subordinate. Participants avoided using explicitly moralized justifications for their noncompliance publicly and thus engaged in issue crafting. Specifically, content and statistical analyses revealed that (a) most participants invoked policy justifications to deny requests and (b) differences in hierarchical relationships were not significantly associated with policy justification frequency. These dynamics afford important face-saving functions but hold implications for the moral learning capacity of organizations. The essay concludes with implications for crafting organizational ethics policy.

Keywords

issue crafting, mum effect, ethics, policy, organizational communication

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Organizational ethics matter. Recent events affirm organizational misconduct threatens individuals, groups, institutions (Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008), and even global economic stability (Weitzner & Darroch, 2009). While many scholars and philosophers proposed ethical frameworks for professional conduct (e.g., Quinn & Jones, 1995), less is known about how unethical requests are denied in everyday work life and how this talk prescribes "particular views of organizational reality" (Sonenshein, 2006, p. 1168). Research has examined behavioral and cognitive processes that undergird moral judgments and lead to moral or immoral action, especially in work settings (e.g., Davis & Rothstein, 2006). However, *judging* acts or requests to be unethical does not necessarily imply that such judgments will be *communicated unequivocally*, especially when workplace power imbalances are at play (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002; Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel, 2011).

Instead of examining cognitive processes undergirding ethical determinations, this communication-based study examines organizational messages designed to deny unethical workplace requests—messages that reinforce organizational cultural assumptions about appropriate reasons for selecting courses of action (Keyton, 2005). Jovanovic and Wood (2006) revealed how a system-wide ethics training initiative created culture change when actual and personal experiences with ethically difficult decision making were discussed openly. The discursive moments when workers respond to unethical business requests are ones that could promote sincere ethical dialogue and the moral learning capacity of organizations and individuals. Furthermore, understanding the discursive resources workers use to deny unethical requests could improve the crafting of organizational policies, codes of conduct, and training initiatives (Stevens, 1999) and supply workers with communication tactics for curbing unethical behavior in ways that promote relational maintenance and ethics-based dialogue.

Most communication research on ethical decisions focuses on individuals' responses to accusations of wrongdoing. Accounts, excuses, apologies, and justifications are studied as messaging strategies for managing others' impressions and repairing damaged reputations (Braaten, Cody, & DeTienne, 1993). These works assume that the one voicing a justification is accused of violating some social or moral norm (McLaughlin, Cody, & Rosenstein, 1983).

The need to provide justification is avoided if individuals cannot commit unethical behaviors because another person denies their unethical request, such as with organizational reimbursement for personal expenses. However, denying unethical requests places deniers in tenuous communication situations, too: Denying unethical requests by labeling them as unethical enacts an explicitly moralized justification and risks harming the relationship, the

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requestor's self-impression, and impressions of the request-denier. Kassing (2011) explains that an employee whose supervisor asked her repeatedly to authorize deceptive insurance forms was forced into "an undesirable situation. . . . For not only is the behavior in question unethical, her noncompliance with it is disregarded" (p. 113). Bisel, Kelley, Ploeger, and Messersmith (2011) found participants failed to label unethical requests as unethical in their denials. The absence of explicitly moralized descriptions was labeled the *moral mum effect*. The authors attributed it to participants' politeness and tendency to avoid attacking others' self-image (Morrison, 2011). The moral mum effect theory articulates why people remain silent, or mum, on the ethicality of requests and fail to label requests as unethical, but the authors do not explore message strategies individuals use to deny unethical workplace requests.

Economic justification for denying unethical requests is one such strategy. Sonenshein's (2006) concept of *issue crafting* reveals workers' tendency to display discrepancies between their private and public justifications. Participants held ethical positions privately, while advocating economic justifications publicly (see also Coughlan, 2005). Such private–public discrepancies demonstrate how organizational contexts shape and are shaped by discursive choices workers make to represent themselves (Bolino, 1999) and issues important to them (Morrison, 2011; Sonenshein, 2006, 2007). Issue crafting hints that workers may be self-conscious about normative appeals' legitimacy and use alternatives, such as economic justification, to "portray issues as being congruent with a target's meaning system" (Sonenshein, 2006, p. 1160). The present research adds to the issue crafting literature by explaining how workers may also use policy justifications in lieu of their privately held positions. Furthermore, recurring forms of public justifications, such as economic or policy justifications, are argumentation repertoires that perpetuate discourse-based reasoning structures (Sillince, 1999, 2007) in ways akin to structuration (Giddens, 1984). When workers invoke economic and policy justifications to deny unethical requests, they reinforce ways of talking and reasoning about unethical requests while overlooking the importance of denying unethical request on moral grounds for its own sake.

This research contributes to communication and ethics research by demonstrating that organizational policy is a resource deniers can use to deny unethical requests and avoid more face-threatening tactics such as labeling requests as unethical. The following paragraphs review politeness theory and its application in communication ethics. Then, these ideas are extended by explaining how policy justifications are likely common in unethical workplace request denials.

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Politeness and Unethical Workplace Requests

Through communication, we attempt to manage others' impressions of us and our impressions of them. P. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, drawn from Goffman (1959), articulated how individuals perform their public images (face) through ritualized interaction. When their own or others' public images are threatened, individuals work to remedy threats and restore a sense that public images are worthy of esteem (positive face) and free from impositions (negative face). Communication norms are both protective and corrective of public images (Cupach & Metts, 1994). When situations could damage self or others' public images (face-threatening actions), people attempt to fix the potential damage (facework) either proactively (protection) or reactively (correction). So if a supervisor gives a subordinate a directive that would make him or her complicit in an unethical transaction, the subordinate worries not only about whether the transaction is unethical: Denying the directive as unethical also threatens the supervisor's public image (Morand, 2000) and harming a supervisor's face risks damaging good relational standing. Such a situation is likely to illicit attempts at managing the potential face threat to the supervisor.

Similarly, Ploeger et al. (2011) found that subordinates used more indirect or equivocal language than coworkers or supervisors when denying unethical requests. They contend that subordinates' equivocal responses performed *facework* and softened the face-threatening nature of denying requests by obscuring or avoiding direct assessments of the request's unethical force. Their work on the constrained nature of ethical feedback aligns with work on silence in organizations (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). In fact, Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003) reported 85% of interviewees identified times when they did not speak up to supervisors on important topics out of fear of harming their relationships. Thus, equivocation and silence are likely common in workplace situations that involve important topics, especially ethics (Bisel, Messersmith, & Kelley, 2012).

Politeness could keep workers from denying unethical requests with moral justifications. Bisel et al. (2011) argued that explicitly moralized justifications are uncommon in denying unethical requests because describing them as unethical constitutes a severe face threat. The absence of ethical descriptors, however, may discourage workers from dialogue about ethical topics (Jovanovic & Wood, 2006). Bisel et al. (2011) suggest that the "rhetorical absence" of labeling an unethical request as unethical is associated with facework (p. 156), and confirmed the hypothesis that subordinates more likely used operational justifications (e.g., We can't because it will cost too much) than supervisors. However, they did not specify what communication

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strategies replaced explicitly moralized justifications for denying unethical requests. This study extends the work on organizational communication ethics by exploring those strategies. First, in keeping with rigorous experimental methods of testing for replication before extending theory (Lindsay & Ehrenberg, 1993; Tsang & Kwan, 1999), the following hypotheses and research question, to replicate Bisel et al.'s (2011) findings, were posed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): More workers fail to label requests as unethical (i.e., provide an explicitly moralized justification) than mention the requests' unethical nature explicitly.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): When asked to respond to unethical requests, does hierarchical relationship (i.e., supervisor-to-subordinate, coworker-to-coworker, subordinate-to-supervisor) change the likelihood that workers will label an unethical request as unethical?

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Subordinates responding to supervisors are more likely to provide an operational justification when denying an unethical request than coworkers responding to coworkers or supervisors responding to subordinates.

Policy Justifications as Discursive Resource

When individuals avoid explicitly describing unethical workplace requests as unethical, they use alternative communication strategies. Organizational policy is an aspect of the constitutive text–conversation interplay (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996), part of organizational culture (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001), a kind of organizational structure (McPhee & Poole, 2001), and a structurational rule that may not be influential in worker practices (Kirby & Krone, 2002). Organizational policy can operate as a resource for employees denying unethical workplace requests. A discursive resource is a messaging strategy available during contextualized interaction (Gordon & Stewart, 2009; Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000). For example, employees believe that direct factual appeals, including appeals to organizational policies, are communicatively competent upward dissent strategies (Kassing, 2005, 2009). In other words, policy could serve as a discursive resource that affords face-saving functions for denying unethical workplace requests.

Various discursive resources are available to deny coworkers' unethical requests, and some are more useful than others in achieving the competing goals of denying unethical requests and maintaining positive relationships with requestors. Individuals could act confused, repeat the request, ask for more details, or use other avoidance tactics. However, these strategies only

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delay confrontation if requestors persist. Instead of labeling requests unethical (H1), request-deniers could reject requests on operational grounds to limit threat to requestors' face (H2). Combining strategies could achieve both goals. Thus, ideally, request-deniers give accounts that limit face threats for the request-denier and requestor, and curb requestors' attempts to achieve compliance.

Citing organizational policy achieves these ends. By using policy justifications, request-deniers are not the source of face-threatening determinations about requests' unethical force. Policy is constructed as impersonal: outside of the relationship and partners' control (Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, & Lair, 2004). Actors calling on policy create meanings that align with their goals and invite relationally favorable interpretations of their actions while avoiding relationally unfavorable ones (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). By reifying policy this way, request-deniers put the blame for their denial outside the relational context and protect public images and relationships from potential harm. Citing bureaucratic policy to legitimize actions invokes "rules of evidence and rationality to justify positions" (R. H. Brown, 1978, p. 369). Invoking policy justifications for denying unethical requests is not so much a matter of invoking texts in the struggle over meaning (Mumby, 2005) as a matter of accessing a useful device for protecting identities and relationships. Thus, it was hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): More workers deny unethical requests by using policy justifications than fail to mention policy justifications.

As operational justifications were more common of subordinates interacting with supervisors than in other relationships (Bisel et al., 2011), a similar research question was posed about the association between policy justification usage and hierarchical relationships:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): When responding to unethical requests, does hierarchical relationship change the likelihood that workers will use policy justifications to deny requests?

Politeness theory suggests that policy justifications are a likely communication strategy for denying unethical requests. Research on explicitly moralized (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002) and operational (Bisel et al., 2011) justifications suggests these justification types are *uncommon* in work settings. Thus, policy justifications should be more common than either of these. As request-deniers may provide multiple justifications, evidence is needed to establish the presence of policy justifications as more common than an

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absence of moral, operational, or policy justification, and their possible combinations.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Workers are more likely to deny unethical requests by using policy justifications than to

a. fail to use any type of moral, operational, or policy justification;
b. use moral justifications alone;
c. use operational justifications alone; or
d. use any combination of moral, operational, and policy justifications.

Method

Participants

Working adults ($N = 234$), 59% female and 41% male reportedly living in 29 states and the District of Columbia, participated in this study. Their average age was 41.09 ($SD = 11.49$) with 223.28 months of work experience and 90.55 months of supervisory experience.

Procedures

Researchers recruited participants through personal networks and by offering graduate students credit to send a survey link to working adults. Email messages also requested recipients to forward the message to five more working adults. After reading consent forms, participants were randomly assigned to one of three scenarios designating them as a supervisor receiving a request from a subordinate, a coworker receiving a request from a coworker, or a subordinate receiving a request from a supervisor (e.g., Your boss asks you, the office manager, to write a check from company funds to reimburse him for the cost of his own personal luncheon). Participants were prompted to think that the request violated company policy (You believe the expense is a clear violation of the employee wage policy). Thus, the manipulation implied that the request was both unethical and against policy. Similar to Bisel et al.'s (2011) findings, the request also had an operational component (Furthermore, if you write the check no money will be left in discretionary funds for the rest of the month). Thus, participants were aware of at least three reasons for denying requests (moral, operational, and policy justifications). Furthermore, some participants used none of these justifications (see "Results" section) indicating participants felt free to respond as they saw fit. Participants wrote what they would say to requestors as though it were a real

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situation, had freedom to deny requests in open-ended fashion, and were not limited to close-ended responses.

Manipulation Check

Manipulation checks were conducted to confirm participants *privately* believed that the request was *unethical*. After responding to the scenario, participants were asked, "Thinking about the scenario you just read, do you believe your supervisor's/coworker's/employee's request was unethical?" Respondents who answered negatively ($n = 37$) were removed to achieve the sample of 234. This check ensured participants believed that privately requests were unethical prior to communicating public justification(s) for their denial (Sonenshein, 2006). To further ensure participants perceived requests as unethical, at the end of the survey, 75 randomly selected participants responded to 5-point, Likert-type statements (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) as to whether the request was *unethical, improper, morally wrong*, or *corrupt* (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). A one-sample t test revealed that the mean score ($M = 4.24$, $SD = .70$) differed significantly from the midpoint, $t(75) = 15.51$, $p < .001$; the manipulation aroused participants' belief that the request was unethical. In addition, a manipulation check tested whether participants perceived they were interacting within the scenarios' hierarchical relationship (boss, peer, subordinate). Analysis of variance confirmed that cell means were in the expected direction and significantly different, $F(2, 221) = 125.14$, $p < .001$.

Content Analysis

All open-ended responses were independently content analyzed deductively by two coders. They examined each response 3 times for the presence of moral, operational, or policy justification for denying requests. In other words, data were unitized by the response (i.e., 234 units); each response was coded for the presence or absence of a moral, operational, or policy justification, none of these, or any combination thereof. The resultant coding scheme enabled the coding of each response into one of eight possible categories (i.e., 3 [justification types] + 1 [none] + 4 [any combination of justification types] = 8 categories; see Figure 1). An explicitly *moral justification* was operationalized as responses that included a description of the request as immoral, unethical, wrong, not right, or against one's own integrity. An *operational justification* was operationalized as responses that included a justification of financial harm for the organization. A *policy justification* was operationalized as responses that connected denial to a violation of company policy, standard

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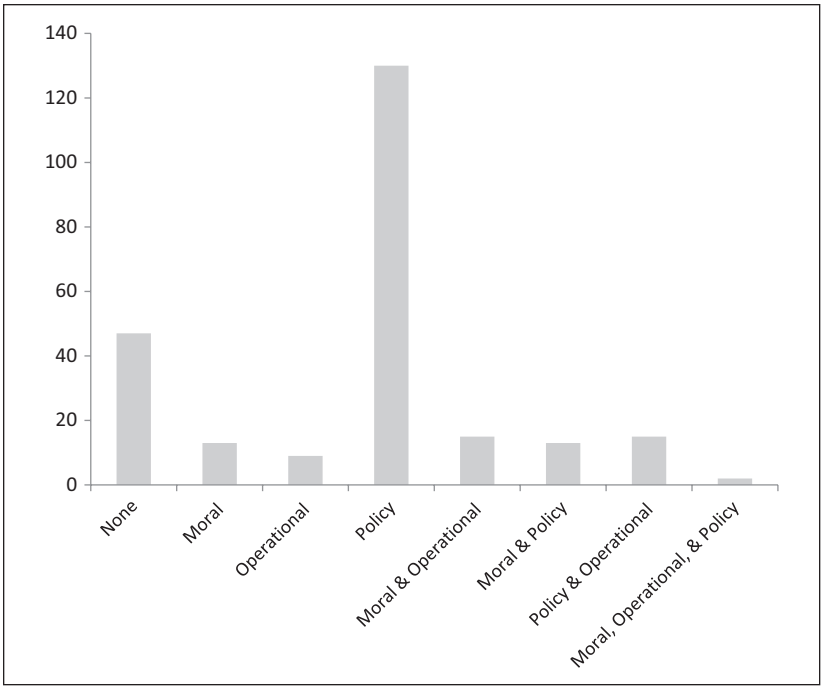


Figure 1. Frequency of justification type in open-ended responses to unethical workplace request.

operations/procedures, bureaucratic rules/regulations, or some higher authority's permission. A response could include all three justification types or none.

Coding reliability was assessed on a randomly selected subsample of 39 responses (n = 16.66%; Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007; Krippendorff, 2004). Results indicated perfect agreement, Krippendorff's $\alpha = 1.0$, for the moral, operational, and policy coding. High consistency was likely due to the manifest and dichotomous nature of coding.

Results

A chi-square test was conducted to test H1. Significantly more participants did not provide an explicitly moralized justification for denying request (86%) than did (14%), $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 234) = 120.62$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .52$. To answer RQ1, a contingency table analysis revealed a hierarchical

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Table 1. Results for Pairwise Comparisons (Hypothesis 2): Hierarchical Relationship by Operational Justification.

Comparison	χ^2	*p* (Bonferroni adjustment)	Cramér's *V*
Subordinate–supervisor vs. Coworker–coworker	22.34	<.001 (.017)	.38
Subordinate–supervisor vs. Supervisor–subordinate	13.37	<.001 (.025)	.29
Supervisor–subordinate vs. Coworker–coworker	2.11	*ns* (.050)	

relationship (between supervisor and supervisor, coworker and coworker, subordinate and supervisor) was not significantly related to frequency of moral justifications, $\chi^2(df = 2, N = 234) = .85$, *ns*. Both findings align with Bisel et al.'s (2011) findings.

To test H2, a contingency table analysis was conducted. Hierarchical relationship and the frequency of operational justifications were significantly related, $\chi^2(df = 2, N = 234) = 29.83$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .36$. Follow-up pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni adjustment to control for Type I error (see Table 1) revealed that significantly more subordinates included operational justifications when interacting with supervisors (30%) than coworkers interacting with coworkers (3%) or supervisors interacting with subordinates (8%). Again, results align with Bisel et al.'s (2011) findings.

A chi-square test provided support for H3, $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 234) = 31.61$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .14$. Participants were 2.1 times more likely to deny unethical requests by using policy justifications (68%) than not including one (32%). In addressing RQ2, a contingency table analysis revealed hierarchical relationship was not significantly related to the frequency of policy justifications, $\chi^2(df = 2, N = 234) = 1.46$, *ns*.

In support of H4, a one-sample chi-square test revealed significant differences among justification categories, $\chi^2(df = 7, N = 234) = 442.31$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .32$ (see Figure 1). Follow-up tests revealed a significantly higher proportion of responses included *only* policy justifications (56%) compared with those that (a) failed to use *any type* of moral, operational, or policy justification (20%), $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 177) = 83.76$, $p < .001$[1]; (b) provided *only* a moral justification (5%), $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 143) = 95.72$, $p < .001$; (c) provided *only* an operational justification (3%), $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 139) = 105.33$, $p < .001$; or (d) used *any possible combination* of moral, operational, and policy justifications (15%), $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 165) = 54.70$, $p < .001$. In sum, results confirmed all four hypotheses.

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Discussion

In this experimental study, 234 working adults denied an unethical business request. Results indicated that request-deniers relied primarily on policy justifications to deny requests rather than labeling requests as unethical. This pattern occurred regardless of whether the request was from a supervisor, peer, or subordinate. Results contribute to the study of ethical organizational communication in a number of ways.

Communication research on unethical behaviors has focused on communication after charges of unethical behaviors (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 1983). This study instead explored communication to prevent one type of unethical behavior, requests to act unethically. Individuals, who privately thought otherwise, infrequently labeled requests unethical in their request denial. Their primary strategy was deferring to company policy, operational problems, or neither to justify their refusals; thus, they engaged in issue crafting by using public communication to portray an issue differently than their private understanding of the issue (Sonenshein, 2006). Similar to Kassing's (2005) findings, perhaps participants believed that appealing to organizational policy is more communicatively competent and less face threatening than appealing to ethics. It remains to be seen whether organizational members respond similarly to other kinds of ethical dilemmas where no clear policy exists by using alternative strategies, such as delaying, feigning misunderstanding, or avoidance rather than confronting unethical behaviors directly.

In avoiding explicitly moralized justifications, request-deniers seemed concerned with face-saving and relational issues (Kassing, 2011; Morrison, 2011). Denying requests as unethical could threaten positive face (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987; Morand, 2000), making it difficult for requesters to maintain positive self-regard. By avoiding labeling behaviors as unethical, request-deniers avoid confronting the requests on ethical fronts and allow requesters to maintain positive self-worth. In addition, unethical requests likely create difficult relationships between request-deniers and requesters (Kassing, 2011). At work, individuals maintain difficult relationships frequently because workplace relationships are usually nonvoluntary. The communication strategies used here are consistent with those Hess (2000) identified for maintaining difficult nonvoluntary relationships. In particular, using policy justifications to deny unethical requests depersonalizes interactions, creating psychological detachment in the relationship. So in addition to saving face for those making unethical requests, using policy to deny requests allows for relationship maintenance, albeit at some distance, whereas labeling requests unethical could antagonize requestors and make relationship maintenance more challenging.

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If policy justifications characterize organizational discourse surrounding ethical requests, it highlights policy's role in encouraging ethical organizational cultures (Sims, 1991). Giddens's (1984) structuration theory suggests organizational policies are rules or resources that, when communicated in workers' practices, create and recreate what appear as organizations' fixed qualities across time (Putnam & McPhee, 2009). Of course, policy statements do not always reflect the apparent fixedness of organizations and their cultures. Kirby and Krone's (2002) analysis demonstrated that federal law and organizational policy are only weakly influential in determining new fathers' paternity leave practices, precisely because other rules and resources, such as familial and societal messages about working fathers, undermined policies. Similarly, organizational ethics policies can become decoupled from actual, everyday decision making when members fail to reinforce those policies in daily interactions (Weaver, Treviño, & Cochran, 1999).

In contrast, these findings imply that organizational policies are discursive resources for denying unethical requests and avoiding relationally unfavorable interpretations of denials (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). From a structurational perspective, invoking policies in denials makes them resources for structuring decision-making (Sillince, 2007) and collective actions that can reinforce workers' perceptions that structures, like policies, are observed and should shape decisions. However, these results raise another, less obvious concern: Clearly, no policy makers could anticipate the range of potential unethical actions and codify them all, and creating an exhaustive policy would render it unusable and impotent (see Boden's, 1994, discussion of the "et cetera clause"). What happens then when no policy exists to justify denying newly emerged unethical behaviors? From a structurational perspective, forming a habit of *scapegoating* policies in organizational talk becomes a structure that enables and constrains action along with policies (Sillince, 1999). Thus, on one hand, these findings suggest the positive view that organizational policies are discursive resources (Hardy et al., 2000) workers can use in denying unethical requests. On the other hand, invoking policy justifications habitually may leave workers unprepared to challenge unethical behaviors without policy justifications and unpracticed at labeling behaviors as unethical in an outright manner.

Here in a few instances (2%), humor was as an alternative discursive resource for denying unethical requests, a resource available whether or not policies exist. For example, one participant wrote, "Ha! What's next, will I be driving the get-away car after you rob the bank across the street!?" This intriguing denial uses positive facework of joking (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987), while equating the request to stealing. Thus, humor might be a resource

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for inviting moralized dialogue creatively and competently, while protecting identities (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995).

Some findings here align closely with Bisel et al.'s (2011), but also extend theorizing on the moral mum effect by suggesting that policy justifications can fill the void of explicitly moralized justifications in organizational discourse. Justifications are redressive actions (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987). By justifying denials, denier attempt to correct potentially face-threatening actions by constructing and reifying deniers as impersonal—outside relationships (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) suggests that as these justifications recur in workplaces, they form a kind of interaction logic: Workers may reason retrospectively that we deny unethical requests for being against policy, not for being unethical. The rise of private–public discrepancies (Sonenshein, 2006) regarding unethical business requests may affect organizations' moral learning capacity by perpetuating the avoidance of discussions about moral and ethical dimensions of organizational decision making and action. This study does not assume that judgments about the unethical nature of a request necessarily lead to explicit communicative confrontation of requests on moral grounds, and explores important divergence between ethical decision-making and ethical sensegiving. Referencing organizational policies presents a discursively created grounding for local action by revealing for those engaged in situated sensemaking a reason for denying unethical requests. That reason (policy forbids it) could reinforce organizational cultural assumptions about what should constitute legitimate and worthwhile organizational courses of action (Keyton, 2005) as these organizational policy discourses recur.

These findings contribute to the emerging literature concerning how behavioral ethics are enacted communicatively in organizations (Bisel et al., 2011; May, 2013; Ploeger et al., 2011). Denying unethical requests with policy justifications represents instances of behavioral ethics in action in which communication is the behavior that imbues workplace behavior with value (Bisel et al., 2011). To imbue behavior with value is to make sense of it (Weick, 1995). But, how do social systems make sense of unethical actions against which no policy exists? Sonenshein's (2007) alternative to rationalist models of workers' moral decision making highlights interpretive processes like sensemaking and intuition by arguing that employees do not usually respond to ethical challenges based on careful deliberation over unequivocal facts but on intuitions justified post hoc. Our findings resonate with Sonenshein's model—perhaps hearing their own and others' post hoc policy justifications shapes the nearly automatic judgments that form workers' intuition in the first place.

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The experimental design allowed for testing whether hierarchical relationships influenced message strategies but limited responses to hypothetical scenarios rather than actual, lived situations. Yet, given the range of working adults, that participants were aware of at least three reasons for denying requests (moral, operational, and policy), and that 20% of participants denied requests in still other ways, it seems likely that responses represent workers' typical communication strategies. Experiments, like all research works, are limited, yet allowed us to investigate unethical deniers' justification-type propensities all things being equal (Platt, 2004). Of course, these exchanges, in situ, could also involve multiple turns at talk, power dynamics beyond hierarchical relationships, and be situated within the context of extant moralizing or corrupting cultural and institutional influences (Misangyi, Weaver, & Elms, 2008). Future research should compare these findings with case studies of actual unethical requests and responses to other forms of unethical requests. For example, Kassing (2011) offers the example of refusing to authorize deceptive insurance forms. May's (2013) characterization of right/wrong and right/right dilemmas may be another important sensemaking influence on workers' selections of communication tactics in responding to unethical behaviors.

Conclusion

These findings have implications for organizational leaders. First, as policy is communicatively useful for denying unethical requests, leaders should craft policies to provide workers this discursive resource. Second, because no set of policies is ever complete, leaders should craft and reinforce ethical principles not covered explicitly by specific policies. Such principles could serve as secondary discursive resources for unethical-request noncompliance. Finally, leaders should model the value of describing unethical requests and actions as unethical. Leaders may provide workers with another discursive resource for managing ethical issues by telling and retelling personal stories of ethical failures. In such scenarios, leaders and workers could label unethical requests as unethical, but then retell the leader's personal story of failure and redemption to frame such labeling as appropriate; furthermore, narrative may function to address the requestor's face concerns via identification.

This study identified ways employees communicate with ethical judgments in mind. Respondents used policy statements more often, when available, to deny unethical requests rather than label requests unethical, regardless of hierarchical relationships. Invoking policy allows individuals denying unethical requests to save face and maintain relationships with requestors. Policy statements provide discursive resources to support many ethical

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decisions, but may not prepare employees to make ethical justifications when no policy exists. Future research can explore how employees communicate when they hold ethical judgments privately but when no policy exists.

Authors' Note

An earlier version of this manuscript won a top paper award from the Organizational and Professional Communication Interest Group at the 2012 annual meeting of the Central States Communication Association.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. The strategy of coding the 234 responses for the presence or absence of each of the three justification types captured important nuance and allowed for detailed analysis and hypothesis testing. For example, to test the subparts of Hypothesis 4, specific data had to be isolated in the data set. Thus, for Hypothesis 4a, only responses that included policy justifications *alone* (i.e., not in combination with other justification types, $n = 130$) or *none* of the three justification types ($n = 47$) were included in the analysis (i.e., 130 + 47 = 177).

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