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The Role of Identification in Giving Sense to Unethical Organizational Behavior: Defending the Organization

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Abstract

This language production experiment investigates communication's role in defending, and therefore giving sense to, organizational wrongdoing. The study suggests identification may possibly reduce organizations' moral learning capacity by encouraging highly identified members to engage in ethical sensegiving of their organizations' wrongdoing in defensive ways. Working adults (N = 318) responded to an organizational outsider regarding a gender discrimination lawsuit filed against their organization in one of two scenarios, which presented the organization's guilt as either ambiguous or certain. Highly identified members used more linguistic defense mechanisms and reported more intense feelings. Additionally, participants in the ambiguous condition used more linguistic defense mechanisms than those in the certain condition. Veteran members reported higher levels of organizational identification and used more linguistic defense mechanisms than newcomers.

Keywords

organizational communication, organizational identification, organizational ethics, sensegiving, sensemaking

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Unethical organizational behaviors persist, despite a growing awareness of organizational ethics. Repercussions of such behaviors affect members, organizations, stakeholders, and societies. Consider the recent gender discrimination lawsuit: *Dukes v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc*. (10-277). The lawsuit was filed on behalf of a half million female Wal-Mart employees, with "billions of dollars at stake" (Associated Press, 2011, March 29). As noted by Miceli, Near, and Dworkin (2008), "If wrongdoing was rare or inexpensive, we would not be concerned with it" (pp. 18-19). Clearly, unethical organizational behavior occurs with devastating consequences for many (e.g., financial and reputational loss, injury, and death).

The purpose of this investigation is to understand the communicative resources that form the substance of organizational members' sensegiving. Rather than seeking to define what constitutes unethical behavior or question whether unethical organizational behavior occurs (for excellent reviews of organizational ethics research in communication see May, 2006; Meisenbach, 2006), this study reports a communicative investigation of organizational wrongdoing. This article contributes to the sensegiving literature (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) the notion of *ethical* sensegiving in organizational contexts. Here, ethical sensegiving refers to communicative attempts to influence how others assign moral meaning to events or actions. Specifically, this study catalogues a range of maladaptive identity defense mechanisms that can be used by organizational members as discursive strategies to protect or maintain favorable individual and collective identities in light of accusations against one's organization. The following paragraphs describe (a) how organizational identification may manifest itself communicatively as ego defensiveness, (b) how situational ambiguity may manifest itself as an interpretive resource for giving sense to collective wrongdoing in ways that foster ego defensiveness, and (c) how organizational tenure may encourage feelings of oneness with and a willingness to defend one's organization.

Framing Organizational Identification

Organizational identification (OI), or "the degree to which a member defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization" (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994, p. 293), is a popular concept in communication and management (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Barker & Tompkins, 1994; Chaput, Brummans, & Cooren, 2011; Cheney, 1983; Elsbach, 1999; Pratt, 2000; Stephens & Dailey, 2012). Much OI research is rooted in social identity theory (SIT; Haslam, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Fundamental to many permutations of SIT is the notion that two poles motivate social action: (a) idiosyncratic characteristics; and (b) social classification

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characteristics, in which actions are determined by group memberships and not affected by interpersonal factors. Individuals can identify with many social categories and experience multiple, overlapping, and even conflicting identities. 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. *Organizational identification* is a specific form of social classification (Cheney, 1983). Tajfel and Turner 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 favorably when compared to other groups.

According to SIT, when we identify with any social group we perceive oneness with or belongingness to that group (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Thus members with high levels of OI feel an increased sense of oneness with or belongingness to their organization (Dainton & Zelley, 2005). Highly identified members who define themselves in terms of their organizations (e.g., "*We* have been receiving a lot of media attention;" Mael & Ashforth) 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). Membership in the organization becomes a distinct part of the identity of the individual (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). However, we argue such strong investment and alignment between one's own and one's organization's values may not always be favorable, 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 biases and—in the case of organizational ethics—an increased likelihood to frame and give sense to potentially unethical situations in ways that do the least damage to one's positive sense of self.

Scholarship on identity work (e.g., Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008) emphasizes that identity and identification are processual, complex, and everchanging. Individuals may identify with multiple targets—individual, work group, organizational, professional (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998)—which may be conflicting, converging, or combined (for a review, see Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008) and may give preference to one over another at a given time (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). Intensity of identifications fluctuates. This fluctuation may be a result of a negative event associated

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with an identification target. Another possibility when one's identity is threatened is that once-identified members may lower their identification with the organization and experience *dis*identification (Scott, 2007). Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) define organizational disidentification as "a self-perception based on (1) a cognitive separation between one's identity and one's perception of the identity of an organization, and (2) a negative relational categorization of oneself and the organization" (p. 397). The process of disidentification may be triggered when identified members perceive incongruences between an organization's values and their own or when members feel that their own reputation is threatened by the organization's reputation (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Thus it is plausible that identified members of an organization accused of wrongdoing may begin to distance or separate themselves from that organization, cognitively and communicatively, or be motivated to work internally to correct the perceived misalignment (i.e., issue selling; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997).

Organizational identification is worthy of extensive investigation; yet in the past, management researchers tended to investigate the positive effects of OI for organizational outcomes like goal achievement, performance quality, and job satisfaction (e.g., Likert, 1967; McGregor, 1967), task involvement, and satisfaction with work, pay, supervision, and promotion (e.g., Efraty & Wolfe, 1988). Ashforth et al. (2008) advocate a multifaceted understanding of identification when they state, ". . . It is important to understand the dynamics, risks, and potential of identification in today's organizations" (p. 360). Yet explorations of the negative effects or risks of OI for organizational outcomes (e.g., Gossett, 2002) remain less common in communication and management.

Consider, for example, communication scholars' explication of unobtrusive control (Barker, 1993; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) and its potential to highlight a dark side of identification for organizational members. Bisel, Ford, and Keyton (2007) define unobtrusive control as "the process by which members of an organization are guided [by organizations] in making organizationally relevant decisions" (p. 137). The researchers point out how members can be both "controlled by and resistant to the influence of their identifications" (p. 155). Barker (1993) described the related dynamic of concertive control as control that is developed by *members* and occurring by "members . . . reaching a negotiated consensus on how to shape their behavior according to a set of core values" (p. 411). Barker found these values and the "value-based normative rules . . . controlled [members'] actions more powerfully and completely than the formal system" (p. 408). Similarly, Zoller (2003) demonstrated how members—driven by identity needs—may even

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consent to dangerous working conditions by accepting and enacting organizational and community norms, and in doing so, control themselves in ways that appear to cause bodily danger and harm. These sophisticated communication studies have in common the notion that OI can be detrimental for *members*. This study, however, demonstrates how high OI may be potentially detrimental for *organizations'* capacities to engage in ethical learning because highly identified members' communication tends to give sense to organizational wrongdoing in insular and defensive ways instead of ways that readily admit fault and accept responsibility.

If a given organizational culture values practices that may be deemed *un*ethical by stakeholders, it is argued here that members' identification with that organization is detrimental not only to members but also for the organization's moral learning capacity. Being highly identified with an unethical organization could alter members' ability and willingness to notice and acknowledge the unethical nature of the organization because doing so is akin to noticing and acknowledging their own unethical nature. As noted by Dukerich, Kramer, and Parks (1998), highly identified members may engage in unethical acts, turn a blind eye to evidence of such behaviors, or even make cover-up attempts as means of protecting their own positive senses of self. Similarly, we describe *ethical sensegiving* as communicative attempts to influence how moral meaning is assigned to events or actions. We argue that, for highly identified members of organizations accused of wrongdoing, this process tends to unfold as a defensiveness that invites others to assign moral meaning favorably (or, at least less negatively) on their organization and themselves. Next, we describe ego defense and its connection to ethical sensegiving.

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 *mal*adaptive, harmful, and destructive—to both members *and* their collectives (Brown & Starkey). Strategies such as denial and rationalization 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

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members. If a highly identified member's organization is labeled "unethical," the member—by nature of identification—is also defined as "unethical." The potential to be deemed unethical may drive members to engage in defensive sensegiving to protect their self-concepts.

Like organizational identification, defense mechanisms are often thought of as psychological phenomena. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)* defines defense mechanisms 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 (1970) uses the label of *ego defenses* 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).

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 also contribute to one's self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). In other words, while identifications serve as resources for how individuals *define* their self-concept, defense mechanisms describe how individuals *defend* those self-definitions from critical assessments. Thus a relationship between OI and defense mechanisms seems likely.

The Communication of Ethical Sensegiving

While the defense mechanism itself is cognitive, that cognition can be manifested communicatively. Outward portrayals of defense mechanisms are known as defensive behaviors or those behaviors that decrease threat and reduce anxiety. Cramer (2000) asserts that defense mechanisms are generally employed in reaction to anxiety and distress. In the case of being asked about an organization's unethical behavior, the threat of being defined as unethical-by-association through organizational membership is one such source of anxiety. This process could result in defense mechanisms in members' messaging about their organization's guilt.

Sensegiving refers to attempts at influencing how the self and others interpret the meaning of action (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Studies of sensegiving emerged from studies of sense*making* (e.g., Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Broadly defined, sensemaking is akin to interpreting and understanding—processes often initiated in efforts to reduce equivocal inputs (Weick, 1995). Research indicates sensemaking is an important function of organizational leaders who grapple with ambiguous, complex, and weak environmental

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signals. Leaders must make sense of these inputs to plan and learn (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Gioia and Chittipeddi observed that organizational leaders not only seek to make sense of their environments but they also must engage in influence to move members to action (i.e., sense*giving*). Subsequent studies of sensegiving demonstrate middle managers and workers also engage in sensegiving with other members and important constituents external to the organization in carrying out the will of management (Rouleau, 2005). Likewise, Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) explained how sensegiving attempts were often triggered by situations perceived as important and uncertain. Matters involving group-level wrongdoing are likely important and, at times, uncertain for organizational members. Thus these moments likely present highly identified members with a perception that a gap exists in their understanding of the meaning of their membership to the organization and the related identity implications. We show later that denying or avoiding recognition of wrongdoing are communicative sensegiving strategies that may delay admissions of error. These sensegiving attempts are ethics-based because they attempt to influence how others assign moral meaning to events or actions and are thus, moments of ethical sensegiving.

Organizational Identification and Defense Mechanisms

As explained above, it stands to reason that employees' organizational identification may be related to their 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. Such ego defense practices may create a barrier for organizations' moral learning capacity (or, their ability to recognize, learn, and grow from [un]ethical situations in which they find themselves). Highly identified members may find it difficult to interpret their organization—and by extension, themselves—as guilty of wrongdoing and, instead, engage in defensive sensegiving in an attempt to maintain their own and others' positive impressions of the organization. While Umpress, Bingham, and Mitchell (2010) explored the possibility that highly identified members engage in unethical proorganizational behaviors, this study proposes an investigation of the specific communicative features and defense mechanisms members use when discussing and giving sense to their organization's wrongdoing.

Thus, rather than a psychodynamic perspective of ego defenses (i.e., Brown & Starkey, 2000), this investigation is indicative of a communicodynamic

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approach to the interpretation of and response to organizational wrongdoing and sensegiving (Bisel, Kelley, Ploeger, & Messersmith, 2011). It is posited here that those who are highly identified will interpret an attack on the organization (i.e., questioning the organization's innocence) as akin to an attack on the self, in which case motivation to protect one's self-identity, and in turn, organizational identity is activated. The vocalization of thoughts on one's organization's wrongdoing will likely contain intense and frequent defense mechanisms, operating to reduce associated guilt and uncertainty (Menzies, 1970) to maintain a favorable public organizational (and self) image. Thus the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): Organizational identification is positively associated with the felt intensity of members' linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization, after controlling for certainty of organizational wrongdoing.

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): Organizational identification is positively associated with the frequency of members' 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 members can say that their organization did (or did not) engage in unethical behavior is one such contextual issue. Ambiguity acts here as an interpretive resource from which highly identified individuals can draw to make sense of wrongdoing in ways that protect their self-concepts from threat. Menzies (1970) described defense mechanisms as occurring to avoid or reduce uncertainty. Thus it stands to reason that if the unethical situation is ambiguous and few details are known, members will have more discursive resources to manage the ambiguity strategically and defend their organization and, in turn, themselves. Again, ambiguous environments can actually serve as triggers for sensegiving (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Presumably then, ambiguity affords 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 organizational guilt is certain, members may find it more difficult to defend the organization's behavior and image and thus display less intense and frequent defensiveness than a member whose sensegiving can draw on the resource of ambiguity. Thus the following hypotheses are posited:

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Hypothesis 2a (H2a): Participants assigned to the ambiguous organizational wrongdoing condition report higher levels of felt 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.

Hypothesis 2b (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.

Tenure, Organizational Identification, and Linguistic Defensiveness

In alignment with previous research on tenure—or membership length (Sass & Canary, 1991)—three final hypotheses are proposed. Veteran members' organizational identification is likely to be stronger than newcomers' organizational identification in that psychological associations in veterans have more opportunities to be reinforced. If a member remains with an organization, it is also plausible to predict that an individual's membership in the organization will be increasingly likely to represent a defining feature of the individual's self-concept. Organizational identification has been shown to be related positively to length of employment (e.g., Hall, Schneider, & Nygren, 1970; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). A similar finding seems likely in the context of this study as well. Thus it is proposed as follows:

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): Organizational tenure is positively associated with reported levels of organizational identification.

Furthermore, it stands to reason that veteran members, because of the increasing likelihood the organization will represent a defining feature of their self-concepts, likely also show a higher propensity to defend their organization intensely and with frequent defense mechanisms in instances of organizational wrongdoing. Thus the following hypotheses are explored:

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): Organizational tenure is positively associated with the felt intensity of members' linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization.

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Hypothesis 3c (H3c): Organizational tenure is positively associated with the frequency of members' usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization.

Method

Participants

Full-time working adults ($N = 318$) participated in this language production experiment. The sample consisted of 161 males and 153 females (4 did not answer), ranging in age from 21 to 70 ($M = 42.37$, $SD = 12.35$). Participants resided in 29 of the United States; 1 participant resided in Australia. Education levels ranged from a high school diploma to a doctorate; bachelor's degrees were the most common educational level obtained (34%). Participants' total working experience ranged from 6 months to 48 years ($M = 21.27$, $SD = 13.20$). Participants' work experience with their *current* organization ranged from less than 1 month to 33.25 years ($M = 12.79$, $SD = 12.30$). The average amount of supervisory experience was 8.36 years ($SD = 10.24$), ranging from none to 43 years. Participants worked in a variety of organizational sizes: (a) small/home/micro organization (< 10 members, 6.6%); (b) small organization (< 100 members, 15.7%); (c) medium-sized organization (< 500 members, 12.6%); and (d) large organization (> 500 members, 64.2%; 3 did not answer).

Procedures and Design

The researchers recruited participants from their professional and social networks. All solicited participants were asked to forward a solicitation email to five other working adults, who were asked to forward the email to five more working adults and so on. Participants were directed to an online survey hosted by Qualtrics®. Each participant read a consent form before participating and provided basic demographic information. Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of two scenario conditions (i.e., ambiguous or certain organizational wrongdoing) and responded to a prompt (see description below). Lastly, participants completed a measure of organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Each section of the survey is described below, presented in the order in which participants completed the survey.

Scenarios. Organizational wrongdoing was operationalized by gender discrimination. Gender discrimination is an appropriate operationalization of

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wrongdoing in that this sort of unethical organizational behavior is applicable to a wide-variety of organizations and industries. The two scenario conditions in this experiment vary by the degree of ambiguity regarding the organization's guilt in committing gender discrimination (see Appendix A). The ambiguous organizational wrongdoing condition described the organization's role ambiguously and the situation as uncertain—no official determinations of guilt or legal sanctions had been taken against the organization. Conversely, the certain organizational wrongdoing scenario condition indicated that the participant's organization was found guilty at the end of a class action lawsuit. Participants were then asked to respond to one open-ended question from a family member who inquired about the situation (i.e., *What do you think about these accusations?*). Details about the manipulation check are available from the corresponding author.

Measure of Organizational Identification. Participants completed a brief, six-item organizational identification questionnaire (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Questionnaire items are designed to measure participants' perceptions of oneness with or belongingness to an organization (e.g., *When I talk about my organization, I usually say "we" rather than "they."*). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Each item was recoded so higher scores on the measure indicated greater identification. Coefficient alphas for the shortened, six-item identification questionnaire have been reported as .81 (Mael, 1988) and .87 (Mael & Ashforth). 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]), which attempt to capture the psychological reality of ego-defensiveness. However, self-reports are unlikely to capture the *communicative* reality of ego-defensiveness. By contrast, analysis of message defensiveness better facilitates an understanding of communicative manifestations of ego-defensiveness. As such, linguistic defensiveness—a concept original to this investigation—was used to describe the communicative strategies employed by individuals as they defended and gave sense to their organization's wrongdoing. For the purposes of this study, linguistic defensiveness is measured as two dependent variables: response intensity and defense mechanism frequency. While related, these variables differ both conceptually and pragmatically; response intensity measures the degree of affective arousal respondents experienced psychologically as they responded—which may or may not be reflected communicatively. Defense mechanism frequency measures the number of defense mechanisms invoked by respondents in their messaging. This distinction highlights

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the possibility that internal feelings of defensiveness may not necessarily be expressed outwardly.

Response intensity. To measure a first aspect of linguistic defensiveness—response *intensity*—participants responded to a series of four, 7-point semantic differential scales after reading and responding to the scenario (cf. Waldron & Krone [1991]). Items to measure participants' felt intensity included *very unintense/very intense, very unforceful/very forceful, very unemotional/very emotional*, and *very unpassionate/very passionate*. Scale reliability was sufficient, Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$.

Content Analysis

Defense Mechanism Frequency. The *frequency* of defense mechanisms in participant responses was a second method of measuring linguistic defensiveness. To this end, an inductive coding scheme was created. The researchers relied partly on the identity and ego defense strategies described by Laughlin (1970), Brown and Starkey (2000), Benoit (1995), and Benoit and Hanczor (1994), such as denial and rationalization, among others.

Across two stages, two coders reviewed and analyzed open-ended responses to the scenarios to create a codebook of defense mechanisms. In the first stage of codebook development, coders read and reread 15 responses gathered in a pilot study to identify recurrent defensive communication strategies. Using a technique similar to open-coding in constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), coders identified similar groups of defensive strategies. In the second stage of codebook development, coders selected a random subset of responses from the full study data ($n = 35$), first to refine the coding scheme by seeking out response strategies that could not be easily coded and then to incorporate those responses by modifying the coding scheme. At the conclusion of the second stage of codebook development, categorical saturation was achieved in the sense that no new categories indicative of linguistic defensiveness could be located. Only one response of the total data set of 319 responses was deemed uncodable, which indicates coding scheme exhaustiveness. Krippendorff's α was computed on yet another randomly selected subset of the data ($n = 36$). Intercoder reliability was sufficiently high at $\alpha = .86$. Intercoder reliability was again calculated at the completion of coding and was also acceptable, $\alpha = .73$ (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

Coding Scheme. The first step in the coding process was to assess whether a response readily admitted guilt. If so, the response was assigned a code of

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0. If the response did not readily admit guilt and was, as a whole, defensive, the number of defense mechanisms within the response was summed. Defense mechanisms were counted according to each time participants' language performed one of the five following functions. Multiple defense mechanisms performing the *same* function could appear in one response. First, some defense mechanisms attempted to (a) *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*). Second, some defense mechanisms attempted to (b) *create 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*). Third, some responses were defensive by attempting outright (c) *denial* (e.g., *No, it is not our organization*). Fourth, some defense mechanisms attempted to (d) *undermine 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*). Finally, and similarly, some participants attempted to defend their organization by (e) *minimizing the situation* (e.g., *I think at this point they are just rumors* or *There is not a company out there that is perfect*). It is important to note that for minimizing the situation to be coded, responses had to admit an awareness of the situation explicitly and characterize the accusation as illegitimate. For example, an utterance like, "I have only heard hearsay" did not make it apparent the participant was minimizing the situation because it could have been a statement of fact, drawn from the ambiguous scenario condition. Thus, such utterances were not coded as minimizing the situation. However, utterances in which participants characterized and demonstrated awareness of the situation explicitly were coded as minimizing the situation. To further illustrate the coding scheme, the following participant response received a code of 4 because it contained four defense mechanisms:

> I haven't personally experienced any problems [*bolster the organization*], I think there can often be extenuating circumstances [*undermining the accusation or claim*] when litigation is involved as well as policy change. ABC Corp is a good company [*bolster the organization*] and will do the right thing [*bolster the organization*].

Likewise, the following response received a code of 1 for containing a single defense mechanism: "I can't really comment on whether I think that the accusations are true or false, but there is not a company out there that is perfect [*minimizing the situation*]."

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Coding Scheme Validation. Krippendorff (2004) recommended coding schemes be assessed for three categories of validation: face, social, and empirical validity. As *face validity* is associated with a coding scheme's plausibility, we believe the scheme, based on existing literature and induction, meets this criterion. Krippendorff describes *social validity* as whether a coding scheme allows content analysts to "address important social issues" (p. 319). The history of organizational wrongdoing meets this criterion well. *Empirical validity* refers to "the degree to which available evidence . . . support . . . [the] research process and its results" (Krippendorff, 2004, 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" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 319). The scheme was subjected to a test of semantic validity by asking 10 working adults to read and rank order three responses from least to most defensive. Krippendorff's α was computed across participants' rankings to measure how consistently these *un*trained coders assigned meanings of linguistic defensiveness in alignment with the coding scheme. The untrained coders' rankings aligned well with the coding scheme, $\alpha = .80$. Lastly, the coding scheme achieved *functional validity* (another form of empirical validity) through its success in detecting differences described in the results section.

Results

Organizational Identification and Linguistic Defensiveness

Given the nature of this ethical scenario—gender discrimination—male and female responses were compared for systematic differences for both linguistic defensiveness variables. No significant differences between sexes were detected, which suggested that collapsing the sample was reasonable (cf. Dalton & Ortegren's [2011] argument that the relationship between gender and ethical decision making is often dubious). Means, standard deviations, and correlations are reported in Table 1. The first set of hypotheses predicted that members' organizational identification is positively associated with both intensity of members' linguistic defensiveness and members' usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization, after controlling for certainty of organizational wrongdoing. A regression was computed to determine the relationship between organizational identification and the intensity of linguistic defensiveness. As employees' level of organizational identification increases, their felt intensity when delivering their defensive response increases as well ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$). A second model included the

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Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Defense Mechanism Frequency, Response Intensity, Organizational Identification, Wrongdoing Certainty (High), and Organizational Tenure (in Months).

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Defense mechanism frequency	1.40	1.51				
2. Response intensity	2.98	0.92	.15*			
3. Organizational identification	3.81	0.68	.14*	.22**		
4. Wrongdoing certainty	0.47	0.50	−.23**	.02	−.04	
4. Organizational tenure	144.53	142.37	.16**	.11†	.17**	−.05

†p = .05. *p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 2. Intensity of Linguistic Defensiveness, Hypothesis 1a.

	Model 1			Model 2		
Variable	*B*	*SE*	β	*B*	*SE*	β
Certainty of wrongdoing	.05	.10	.02	.06	.10	.03
Organizational identification				.31***	.08	.23***
F		.18			8.80***	
R^2		.001			.05***	
ΔR^2		–			.05***	

Note: Model 1: N = 314, R^2 = .001, $F(1, 313)$ = .18, *ns*. Model 2: N = 314, R^2 = .05, $F(2, 312)$ = 8.80, p < .001.
***p < .001.

certainty of organizational wrongdoing as well as organizational identification. As predicted, results indicated that organizational identification remains a significant predictor of response intensity, even after controlling for the certainty of organizational wrongdoing, p < .001. The R^2 change of .001 between models was not significant (see Table 2).

The statistical process described above was repeated to determine the relationship between members' reported levels of organizational identification and frequency of linguistic defense mechanisms in their response, after controlling for certainty of organizational wrongdoing (see Table 3). As employees' level of organizational identification increases, their usage of defense mechanisms also significantly increases (β = .14, p < .05). As predicted, results of the analysis indicated that organizational identification accounted for a significant proportion of the usage of defense mechanism

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Table 3. Frequency of Linguistic Defense Mechanisms, Hypothesis 1b.

	Model 1			Model 2		
Variable	*B*	*SE*	β	*B*	*SE*	β
Certainty of wrongdoing	−.68***	.17	−.23***	−.67***	.17	−.22***
Organizational identification				.30	.12	.13*
F		16.80***			11.41***	
R^2		.05***			.07***	
ΔR^2		–			.02*	

Note: Model 1: $N = 317$, $R^2 = .05$, $F(1, 316) = 16.80$, $p < .001$. Model 2: $N = 317$, $R^2 = .07$, $F(2, 315) = 11.41$, $p < .001$.
*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

variance even after controlling for certainty of wrongdoing, $p < .001$. Thus H1a and H1b were supported.

Ambiguity of Wrongdoing and Linguistic Defensiveness

The second set of hypotheses posited that participants who were randomly assigned to the ambiguous scenario condition produce higher levels of intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness than those assigned to the certain scenario condition. An independent samples *t* test was computed to determine whether differences in the intensity of linguistic defensiveness in participants' responses were present. Results indicated that there was not a significant difference between responses to scenario conditions in terms of linguistic defensiveness intensity, $t(312) = –.43$, *ns*. In other words, those assigned to the ambiguous condition ($M = 2.95$, $SD = .93$) and those in the certain condition ($M = 2.99$, $SD = .92$) did not report significantly different levels of intensity of linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization. However, an additional independent samples *t* test was performed to determine whether there were differences between responses to scenario conditions in terms of frequency of linguistic defense mechanism usage. Those assigned to the ambiguous scenario condition ($M = 1.72$, $SD = 1.50$) produced more defense mechanisms than those assigned to the certain condition ($M = 1.04$, $SD = 1.46$), $t(316) = 2.35$, $p < .001$. Thus H2b was supported.

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Tenure, Organizational Identification, and Linguistic Defensiveness

The first hypothesis in the final set of hypotheses predicted that organizational tenure is positively associated with reported levels of organizational identification. Results indicated participants with increasingly longer tenures with their current organizations report higher levels of organizational identification, $R^2 = .03$, $F(1, 326) = 10.05$, $p < .01$. In other words, one's organizational tenure is positively related to identification ($\beta = .17$, $p < .01$). Second, it was hypothesized that organizational tenure is positively associated with the intensity of members' linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization. Results did not reveal statistical support, $R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 312) = 3.15$, $p = .08$. Lastly, it was posited that organizational tenure is positively associated with the frequency of members' usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization. Results revealed support for the hypothesis, $R^2 = .03$, $F(1, 316) = 8.19$, $p < .01$. In other words, defense mechanism frequency increases as members' tenure with their organization increases ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$). Thus H3a and H3c were supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to describe communicative tendencies in organizational members' ethical sensegiving. The specific objectives of this study were threefold: (a) to determine the effect of *organizational identification* on intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness; (b) to determine the effect of organizational wrongdoing *ambiguity* on intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness; and (c) to determine the effect of *organizational tenure* on organizational identification and on the intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness. Each objective was achieved. The implications of these findings are discussed here.

Brown and Starkey (2000) explained that "organizations are prone to ego defenses" (p. 102). We found that when members are highly identified with their current organization, they engage in both increased intensity of linguistic defensiveness and increased frequency of linguistic defense mechanism usage on behalf of their organization even after controlling for the certainty of organizational wrongdoing. Organizational identification accounted for 5% of the variance in members' intensity and 2% of the variance in members' frequency of defense mechanism usage. When members identify with their organization, they experience feelings of oneness with or belongingness to their organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and feel that their personal values align with their organization.

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When questioned by an organizational outsider about a gender discrimination class action lawsuit against their organization (regardless of certainty), highly identified participants communicated with greater defensiveness. Rather than interpreting the unethical behavior as a "turning point" (Bullis & Bach, 1989) to reassess their feelings about their organization, it seems that these highly identified members may have interpreted the inquiry as a potential attack on their organization's identity and ethicality. Given the nature of organizational identification, highly identified participants responded to the outsider as if the outsider was questioning the member's *own* identity and ethicality. Accordingly, highly identified members then engaged in increased linguistic defensiveness and defensive sensegiving on behalf of their organization, both in terms of intensity of felt defensiveness and frequency of defense mechanisms employed. Not only did highly identified participants report *feeling* intensely when they responded to the organizational outsider, they also *communicated* their defensiveness. Highly identified members were protective of the organization, which was manifested as communicative attempts at giving sense to the wrongdoing in ways that defended the organization's ethical image (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

Another major implication from this study is with regard to the relationship between the certainty of organizational wrongdoing and linguistic defensiveness. Specifically, it was proposed that those in the ambiguous scenario condition would produce higher levels of intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness than those assigned to the certain condition. Findings did not support the notion that ambiguity or certainty of the organization's guilt changed the intensity of respondents' feelings. However, findings revealed that the number of defense mechanisms respondents employed differed significantly between the certain and ambiguous wrongdoing conditions. Specifically, those in the ambiguous scenario condition used a greater number of defense mechanisms than those assigned to the certain condition. Participants likely used the situational ambiguity as a discursive resource from which to defend their organization and make sense of the situation in ways that were amicable to their positive sense of self.

Thus these results speak to a distinction between a psychodynamic perspective (e.g., Brown & Starkey, 2000) and a communicodynamic perspective of unethical organizational behavior (e.g., Bisel et al., 2011; Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel, 2011). A psychodynamic approach places attention on the "issue of how organizations can deal with the fundamental *anxiety* [emphasis added] 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 making

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sense of and defending organizational identity. Interestingly, these data do not support that the certainty of organizational wrongdoing affected the psychological and emotional reactions captured by participants' felt intensity in defending their organization. However, the ambiguous nature of organizational guilt was found to alter the frequency with which participants incorporated defense mechanisms into their characterizations of their organization's wrongdoing.

In the ambiguous scenario, the problem itself (i.e., whether the organization engaged in gender discrimination) lacks certainty and the information regarding that problem was likely perceived as insufficient as well. Weick (1995) notes that such ambiguities 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). Ambiguity allows members the opportunity to make sense of the situation in a way that suits their identities as well as offers the opportunity to engage in ego-defensive sense*giving* (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Weick, 1995). As such, when members were uncertain about their organization's guilt, they drew on that uncertainty and used more defense mechanisms in characterizing the wrongdoing—perhaps in an attempt to make sense of the situation in ways that were favorable for their own and others' identities.

Weick (1995) notes that individuals strive to achieve a sense of stability through sensemaking: "A socially constructed world is a stable world . . ." (p. 154). This desire for a sense of stability seems to undergird members' attempts to construct the wrongdoing in less unflattering or less unfavorable ways. They do so by using defense mechanisms that construct and make sense of the wrongdoing: by presenting wrongdoing as unlikely due to the favorable identity of and personal experience with the organization (bolstering the organization); by denying the topic is worthy of discussion at all (attempting discursive closure); by depicting the situation as less egregious than it may seem (undermining the accusation or claim); by claiming the accusation is simply not true (denial); or by casting the accusation as doubtful (minimizing the situation).

People draw on certain cues to interpret their worlds. 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, 1995). In this study, the ambiguity of the wrongdoing may have served as a kind of interpretive resource or cue for members' meaning making. Conversely, when a situation is certain,

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sense-givers may be less able to be open to new frames and meaning-play to the extent that, though members still *feel* intensely defensive, they do not have as much rhetorical space to offer ego-defending frames. This dynamic is similar to Sonenshein's (2006) notion of issue crafting (i.e., individuals' private views on an issue may not align with how they choose to portray the issue publicly).

Also, these data imply that certainty suppresses the frequency of linguistic defensiveness—likely by limiting the number of rhetorical moves members can use to defend and give sense to their organizations' image in favorable ways. Concomitantly, identification enhances both the intensity and frequency of linguistic defensiveness—likely because one's self-concept is linked to the social group or organization. Thus the claim that the certainty of organizational wrongdoing mitigates the effect of identification on defensiveness is shown to be dubious; certainty of collective wrongdoing does not necessarily overcome social identification when deciding whether and how to defend the collective's image.

Furthermore, this notion is unfortunate when applied specifically in the context of organizational ethics: What does it mean for organizational moral learning (an organization's capacity to learn and grow from ethical or unethical situations) that highly identified members defend their organizations, even when collective wrongdoing is certain? 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 environments (Argyris, 2008; Bisel, Messersmith, & Kelley, 2012). However, these data imply that organizational ignorance (or *non*learning) may likely persist in matters motivated by ego-defense against accusations of collective wrongdoing. When members defend their organization, their defensive sensegiving comes to form barriers to individual and collective moral learning and could lead to what may become a "self-fueling cycle" (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007, p. 81). Among other reasons, Brown and Starkey attributed organizational ignorance to the dynamic in which "information that threatens an organization's collective self-concept is ignored, rejected, reinterpreted, hidden, or lost . . ." (p. 103). This dynamic of organizational ignorance—or a collective's not knowing (Harvey, Novicevic, Buckley, & Ferris, 2001)—is particularly relevant considering the perpetuation of organizational wrongdoing.

How can an organization engage in critical self-reflection (Brown & Starkey, 2000) when it (and its members) cannot admit fault publicly and instead engages in defensive sensegiving? Critical self-reflexivity allows for

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"alternate perspectives of self and institutionalizes the self-questioning of the ongoing viability of existing identity" (Brown & Starkey, 2000, 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 adopt what Brown and Starkey (2000) labeled "an attitude of wisdom" (p. 113) and move toward becoming a wise organization—or a collective that "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 is the ability to invoke complex ethical sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and ethical sensegiving (Bisel et al., 2011). Thus we argue that in the case of organizational ethics, identity defense mechanisms are largely maladaptive in that they likely form a barrier to moral learning, critical self-reflexivity, and the emergence of wise organizational cultures.

Lastly, consider the final set of predictions regarding organizational tenure. Results revealed that longer organizational tenure relates to higher organizational identification. Furthermore, tenure accounted for 3% of variance in members' usage of linguistic defense mechanisms on behalf of their organization. However, organizational tenure was not found to be a significant predictor of intensity of members' linguistic defensiveness on behalf of their organization. These results may speak to implications for veteran members 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, members with longer tenure—who will tend to be more highly identified as compared to newcomers and will tend to employ greater frequency of linguistic defense mechanisms—are the individuals who are at least partly socializing newcomers.

The dilemma implied by these findings begs the question of what recommendations can be made to encourage more honest assessments of organizational wrongdoing, particularly when organizational identification is high. Bridgman (2010) has begun to encourage specific "dark side" business ethics cases in education to "provide students with a deeper understanding of the complexity of business ethics" (p. 311). Incorporating cases such as one that could be developed from this research would provide workers with discursive resources—both in terms of awareness and action—to make sense of and give sense to "dark side" instances in their work life. Perhaps another managerial tactic would be to encourage members to view critical self-reflexivity as a major value definitive of the organization with which they identify.

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Limitations and Future Directions

This study, like all studies, has its limitations. 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 dialogue about organizational wrongdoing unfolds (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004). Additional fruitful, methodological extensions may be to interview organizational members who are experiencing large-scale unethical behavior (or accusations of unethical behavior) or to solicit and collect retrospective accounts, which would provide richer accounts of the ethical sensegiving phenomena that is occurring here. Similarly, a longitudinal analysis focused on organizations' moral learning in a variety of instances of organizational wrongdoing would provide valuable insight into the phenomena. Also, the responses 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.

A limitation of this research was that the types of defense mechanism were not tabulated and analyzed. Future research could investigate the specific frequencies of each defense mechanisms type. Also, future research could answer what demographic characteristics beyond tenure (e.g., sex, age, hierarchy role, supervisory experience) relate to linguistic defensiveness. A refined profile of the most linguistically defensive members ought to be developed such that their communicative strategies can be recognized and assessed. Future research could assess the results of this study in conjunction with the process of disidentification. This study provided empirical support for the notion that organizational identification may be detrimental for organizations by skewing ethical sensegiving and inhibiting moral learning—a point that illustrates the potential dark side of identification for organizations, not just members (Dukerich et al., 1998). In cases such as this one, members' disidentification might be considered important if the organization is engaging in unethical behaviors. In addition, the ways in which individual members come to understand and discuss their organization's wrongdoing has implications for the organization's ethical culture and climate (Elango, Paul, Kundu, & Paudel, 2010; Lewis, 2011). A longitudinal analysis of members' talk about unethical organizational behavior may help to understand further this seemingly complex relationship between members' defensive sensegiving and the development of ethical cultures and may also speak to the potential of such communication as enabling or constraining the perpetuation of unethical organizational behavior. Lastly, multiple samples ought to be collected to avoid potential dangers associated with common method variance.

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Conclusion

This research begins to explain some of the potential interrelationships among organizational identification, ambiguity of organizational wrongdoing, organizational tenure, and linguistic defensiveness in the context of organizational ethics. Linguistic defensiveness demonstrates one way in which organizational identification can be manifested through members' communication. As noted by Bisel et al. (2011), "Communication itself is the *behavior* that imbues workplace (ethical or unethical) behavior with *value*" (p. 154). This study investigated the communication—specifically the linguistic defensiveness—of organizational members when discussing their organization's unethical behavior and "reveals subtle ways that individuals shape organizational reality with words" (Sonenshein, 2006, p. 1158). Specifically, this study demonstrated that highly identified, tenured members, especially in cases where organization guilt remains uncertain, are unlikely to acknowledge and discuss their organization's wrongdoing as unethical. Rather, they will likely tend to engage in defensive sensegiving—shaping their own and others' assignments of moral meaning—in an attempt to protect their organization's image and, by extension, their own identity.

Appendix A

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

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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.

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