

ATTITUDES REGARDING THE COMPONENTS OF ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between components of ethical communication. Based on survey data (N = 319), Principal Components Analysis revealed four positively loaded factors (honesty, integrity, modesty and patience) and two negatively loaded factors (arrogance and deception). As predicted, components of ethics are correlated. In particular, the ethical virtues of honesty, integrity, modesty and patience are positively interrelated. Additionally, the ethical virtues of honesty, integrity and patience are negatively related to the vices of arrogance and deception. Other relationships between ethical virtues and vices and various demographic variables are discussed.

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between ethics and communication has been studied formally since the dawn of the Western academy. Interestingly, Isocrates (436-338 BCE) argues in *Against the Sophists* that teaching rhetoric with disregard for truth is abhorrent (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1990). Twenty-five hundred years later the importance of the relationship between ethics and communication can be seen due to the rapid development of communication technologies and globalization. Indeed, Beckett (2003) argues that communication ethics must be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective and applied to management in the information age.

To understand the relationship between communication and ethics, careful examination of the nature of ethics from philosophical, psychological and practical perspectives must be conducted. The current study investigated recent scholarship on ethical communication and surveyed individuals' attitudes about core components of ethical communication.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Current debates regarding ethics in Western culture appear polarized between ethical relativism and ethical absolutism. Where one favors tolerance to the exclusion of guiding principles, the other applies a single set of rules to all situations regardless of whether those rules are relevant. As Ni (2005) posited, both approaches have serious consequences. Ni argued that ethical relativism can do serious harm to communication professions such as public relations in that it undermines the public confidence in the profession. On the other hand, an absolutist position can also have dire consequences. Kupfer (2003) describes arrogance as the result of belief in one's own moral superiority

and the importance of one's own concerns over the concerns of others. Campbell (2003) agrees arguing that the "principled" approach often suffers from oversimplification of issues and excessive claims to universality.

Hare (1996) describes humility as a virtue that involves not overly valuing one's own merits out of respect for the equal moral worth of all persons. This definition describes moderation between the two diametrically opposed positions of relativism and absolutism. This type of moderation may result from a developing wisdom based on experience over a period of time. As Freeman (2004) described in his self-reflection, he grew from a position of ignorance to paternalism and arrogance, to a position of humility.

Freeman's description came from a person in a position of authority, in this case a medical practitioner. Crigger (2004) echoed Freeman's sentiments in the medical profession of nursing where the health professional often has to cope with the outcome of mistakes. Crigger suggested that honesty and humility are important virtues for ethical response.

These descriptions of the ethical person suggest possible underlying personality characteristics. In an empirical study, Lee and Ashton (2004) specified six underlying dimensions of personality: a) honesty-humility, b) emotionality, c) extraversion, d) agreeableness, e) conscientiousness, and f) openness to experience. Each of these dimensions of personality could influence communicative behaviors. Given their findings, the following research question is proposed:

RQ₁ What are the components of ethical communication?

In a subsequent study, Ashton and Lee (2005) discovered strong positive correlations between honesty-humility and agreeableness. Lee and Ashton (2005) also found a strong negative correlation between honesty-humility and what they termed the "Dark Triad" of personality traits: psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and Narcissism. If, in fact, personality influences communicative behavior, then relationships between ethical virtues and vices should be observable. To test these possible relationships, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₁ Ethical virtues of communication are positively correlated.

H₂ Ethical vices of communication are negatively related to ethical virtues of communication.

III. METHOD

Respondents

Two subsamples were selected for this study. The first group (n = 122, 38.2%) was a convenience sample of undergraduate communication majors at a large public research institution. This subsample was deemed appropriate to the study due to the content of the investigation. As communication majors, learning about ethical communication practices is part of their curriculum. The second group (n = 197, 61.8%) was systematically random sampled from the public telephone directory of residential households of a large southwestern city. The two subsamples were pooled for the primary analyses of this study. The total sample size was 319. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The sample consisted of 57.7% females and 41.4% males (0.9% not responding). There were significant differences in numbers of males and females in each subgroup. A breakdown of the ethnic characteristics and education level of subjects are provided in Table I. Comparison of students to non-students failed to find any significant difference in ethnic mix. However it should be noted that all students fell in the category of some college for education level.

TABLE I. CONTINGENCY TABLE FOR ETHNICITY AND EDUCATION LEVEL

Ethnicity	Total		Education level	Total	
	N	%		N	%
Latino/Latina	137	42.9	Some high school	7	2.2
African-American	26	8.2	High school graduate	45	14.1
Asian-American	10	3.1	Some college	174	54.5
Caucasian	139	43.6	College graduate	85	26.6
Other	7	2.2	Other	8	2.5

The average age of participants was 35.94 years. An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference between the students ($M = 23.88$, $SD = 4.76$) and non-students ($M = 43.69$, $SD = 15.48$) in terms of average age $t(309) = -13.69$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = 0.37$.

Measurement

The Communication and Ethics survey was developed based constructs of ethical behavior specified by Verschoor (2003), Zauderer (1994), and Klenke (2005). Thirty 7-point Likert-type scale items were utilized to measure attitudes about ethical communication behaviors in personal and professional contexts. The survey measured attitudes about the subjects on behaviors as well as their expectations about others, including coworkers and organizational leaders. Of the 30 items, 19 were positively loaded to measure ethical virtues, and 11 were negatively loaded to measure vices. In general, the survey was reliable. Cronbach's alpha revealed a reliability score of .73 for the positively loaded items, and a reliability score of .71 for the negatively loaded items. For the positively loaded items, a high score represents strong agreement with ethical virtues. For the negatively loaded items, a high score represents strong agreement with vices.

IV. RESULTS

The research question asked what are the components of ethical communication. To answer that, a Principal Components Factor Analysis using varimax rotation was conducted on positively loaded and negatively loaded items separately. Results of the analysis of positively loaded items revealed four factors related to ethical virtues: a) honesty, b) integrity, c) modesty, and d) patience. The honesty factor accounted for

18.98% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 2.16, Rotated SS = 2.08). The integrity factor accounted for 15.86% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.29, Rotated SS = 1.74). The modesty factor accounted for 14.06% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.12, Rotated SS = 1.55). The patience factor accounted for 12.38% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.05, Rotated SS = 1.36). Reliability measure for the ethical virtues factors was $\alpha = .74$.

Results of the analysis of negatively loaded items revealed two factors related to ethical vices: a) arrogance, and b) deception. The arrogance factor accounted for 23.06% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 2.69, Rotated SS = 2.08). The deception factor accounted for 22.61% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.43, Rotated SS = 2.04). Reliability measure for the ethical vices factors was $\alpha = .70$.

Hypothesis testing was conducted using the ethical virtues and vices revealed through Factor Analysis. In general, both hypotheses were supported. For Hypothesis 1, positive relationships were found between each of the ethical virtues. In particular, the strongest relationships were found between the virtue of honesty and the other virtues. Table II illustrates the positive correlations between each of the four virtuous factors (N = 319).

TABLE II. PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE FOUR VIRTUES OF ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

	Honesty	Integrity	Modesty
Integrity	0.44		
Modesty	0.31	0.19	
Patience	0.22	0.26	0.14*

Note: All correlations were significant below .01, except * which was significant below .05.

For Hypothesis 2, negative relationships were found between ethical virtues and vices of communication. The strongest relationships were found between arrogance and ethical virtues. Table III illustrates the negative correlations between communication vices and communication virtues (N = 319). Interestingly, modesty was not significantly correlated with either arrogance or deception. As with the ethical virtues, the vices of arrogance and deception were positively correlated ($r = .28, p < .01, N = 319$).

Table III. PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE VICES AND VIRTUES OF COMMUNICATION

	Arrogance	Deception
Honesty	-0.29	-0.19
Integrity	-0.13*	-0.18
Patience	-0.24	-0.14*

Note: All correlations were significant below .01, except * which was significant below .05.

To determine if any of the demographic variables played a role in the findings, several post-tests were conducted. First, to determine if gender influenced attitudes regarding ethical communication, an independent samples t-test was conducted. Results indicated a small but significant difference between males ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 0.80$) and females ($M = 6.24$, $SD = 0.78$) in their attitudes about honesty, $t(314) = -2.01$, $p = .046$, $\omega^2 = .009$, where females agreed more strongly regarding its importance. Similarly, males ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.05$) felt deception was more acceptable than females ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.21$), $t(314) = 3.479$, $p = .001$, $\omega^2 = .034$. Males and females did not differ on any of the other factors.

Second, to determine if level of educational attainment played a role, a one-way ANOVA was performed. Results revealed a significant difference between groups on their attitudes regarding arrogance, $F(4,314) = 4.21$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .051$. A Bonferroni post-hoc test revealed significant mean differences between those who had not attended college and those that had at least some college experience. To confirm the results, data were recoded into two groups, and an independent samples t-test revealed that subjects who had at least some college ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.02$, $n = 259$) were more negatively predisposed toward arrogance than those who had not attended college ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.27$, $n = 52$), $t(309) = 3.46$, $p = .001$, $\omega^2 = .034$.

Given that the student subgroup included only communication majors, a test for differences between subsamples was conducted. Interestingly, results indicated that communication majors were significantly less likely to agree about the importance of honesty and integrity in communication than non-students. Specifically, students attitudes about honesty were less strong ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 0.81$, $n = 122$), than non-students ($M = 6.32$, $SD = 0.70$, $n = 174$), $t(294) = -3.820$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .044$. Likewise, students attitudes about integrity were less strong ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 0.91$), than non-students ($M = 6.11$, $SD = 0.80$), $t(294) = -2.520$, $p = .012$, $\omega^2 = .018$.

Finally, given the significant difference in average age between the student and non-student groups, a series of Pearson product-moment correlation tests were run to determine if significant relationships could be found between age and attitudes regarding ethical communication for each of the two groups. For the student group, age was positively related to attitudes about honesty ($r = .197$, $p = .030$). For the non-student group, age was positively related to both integrity ($r = .196$, $p = .011$), and arrogance ($r = .163$, $p = .034$).

V. CONCLUSION

These findings suggest that individuals do recognize underlying components of ethical communication and those components that are virtuous are positively related. Additionally, individuals also recognize that ethical virtues and vices are not equal but rather are negatively related. Furthermore, as Freeman (2004) suggested, persons might develop more balanced, moderate or humble attitudes about ethics as they gain in

experience, although the findings suggested a positive relationship between age and arrogance.

These findings have implications for practitioners as well as educators. Glick (1994) suggests that teaching ethics requires attention to the immediate dilemmas of students and modeling of ethical behavior with humility. For practitioners, the practice of ethical communication could lead to more favorable long-term outcomes such as increased credibility individually and in regards to the public view of their profession.

Despite these findings, the study did have some significant limitations. The study assumed that individuals would distinguish between potential underlying components of ethical communication and developed a questionnaire based on those potential components. Although a factor analysis did bring those underlying components to light, to some degree the results may have been predicted by the wording of the items on the survey. The study did not test directly the six factors predicted by Lee and Ashton (2004), but presumed an influence on ethical behaviors from personality characteristics. Certainly individuals do not always act in accordance with either their personality characteristics or their internalized values. However, there can be personal consequences for not doing so as proposed by Heider's Balance theory or Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance theory.

In light of these findings and limitations, future studies might investigate more fully what characterizes ethical communication. Conversely, future studies might investigate the nature of unethical communication and the relationship between humility and ethics as well as the relationship between arrogance and communicative vices. Additionally, further study should investigate whether ethical communication is a function of experience.

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