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COMMUNICATION ETHICS AND BULLYING

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Relationships are central to human well-being, providing comfort, connection, support, and meaning throughout the lifespan. Relationships can also be sources of intense distress and pain. One particularly distressing relationship occurring across the lifespan is bullying. The communicative phenomenon of bullying is an ever-present reminder of the dark side of interpersonal interaction (e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998, 2007). Bullying demonstrates the power of communication to bring harm to human beings. Continuing research on the causes and consequences of bullying highlights the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. Multiple contextual, social, structural, and personal factors contribute to bullying and its outcomes, inviting careful analysis of the varied dimensions of this problematic and complex interpersonal process. An examination of bullying from a communication ethics perspective reveals why bullying is not only pragmatically harmful but also problematic from a broader perspective rooted in philosophical understandings of the good for human beings.

Communication Ethics

Bullying results in short- and long-term harm. This harm emerges from communicative practices of bullying across contexts ranging from childhood (e.g., Hymel & Swearer, 2015, De Lara, 2016) to adult professional life (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007). Research on bullying highlights the importance of considering bullying from the perspective of communication ethics. The subfield of communication ethics emerged formally in the 1980s and has grown in importance over the last few decades. Although communication ethics is typically associated with “clearly communicative phenomena as deception, openness, [and] free expression,” communication ethics encompasses an increasingly broad domain of phenomena (Cheney, Munshi, May, & Ortiz, 2011, p. 1). Indeed, communication itself can be understood to have “inherently moral or ethical dimensions,” a position that can be traced back to Plato, who considered how messages can seduce and corrupt (Cheney et al., 2011, p. 1).

Postmodernism’s deconstruction of foundations for morality and ethics, such as universal moral principles and individual moral autonomy, has generated challenges for scholarly work in communication ethics (B. C. Taylor & Hawes, 2011). However, we experience life as a moral enterprise, involving judgments about right and wrong (C. Taylor, 1989). Despite disagreements about issues of right and wrong human communicative behavior, we must make ethical judgments with whatever resources we have at our disposal. We are called to be thoughtful ethical communicators, acknowledging the messiness of human life and the reality of multiplicity of goods; one singular
communication ethics stance is not within reach (Arnett, 2011). To begin, communication ethics perspectives, theories, and frameworks provide us with argumentative parameters to engage questions arising from different understandings of the good guiding human communities and individual lives.

Ethical practices are habituated and typically operate implicitly, with understandings of right and wrong guiding communicative choices with minimal awareness (e.g., C. Taylor, 1989). We work from taken-for-granted assumptions about justice and care, rights and obligations, and autonomy and choice. We become mindful of these assumptions when they are violated or when we are faced with a situation in which (1) competing alternatives for communicative action present themselves, (2) a decision must be made, and (3) one or more of those decisions violate ethical principles but may be attractive for securing desired outcomes. Hence, communication ethics becomes salient, according to Johannesen (2001), when persons face a conscious behavioral choice regarding means and ends, when that choice can be judged according to standards of right or wrong behavior, and the outcome holds significant consequences for others. From this perspective, bullying can be assessed within a traditional purview of communication ethics. The next section addresses several ways to think about communication ethics in the context of bullying, beginning with elements of Johannesen’s (2001) coordinates of consequences, right and wrong behavior, and communicative choice.

**Bullying: Implications for Communication Ethics**

As other chapters in this volume assert, bullying brings about deleterious consequences for persons bullied, the extended groups of which bullied persons are a part, and bullies themselves. Workplace bullying generates destructive consequences for persons and organizations (Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2011; Tye-Williams, this volume), and childhood bullying experiences have enduring negative consequences in many domains for both targets of bullying and bully perpetrators (Eisenberg, Gower, McMorris, & Bucchianeri, 2015; Spitzberg, this volume). Some of these consequences emerge from the process of interaction, in which repeated practices of destructive communication work reflexively to make such practices more likely through labeling by others or self-labeling, reinforcing the bully identity and associated behaviors (deLara & Garabino, 2003; Duck, Foley, & Kirkpatrick, 2006; Fast, Fanelli, & Salen, 2003). Furthermore, bullying may perpetuate itself in that those who are bullied may become bullies themselves (Haynie et al., 2001; Turner & West, this volume).

Current understandings of bullying recognize it as a violation of the dignity and implicit value of human beings, a foundational principle of most ethical, moral, and religious systems serving as a minimalist universal standard for human conduct across cultures (e.g., Christians & Traber, 1997). Its communicative manifestations are broad, including ostracism, demeaning comments, threats, and aggressive utterances (e.g., Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011b; Olweus, 1993a). We understand bullying to be wrong, violating ethical expectations by denying another person respect and acknowledgement (e.g., Hyde, 2005). We could consider such violations breaches of interpersonal justice, a refusal to grant others what is owed to them as human beings. Planalp and Fitness (2011) discussed such ethical implications connected to the human need for interaction and the experience of mutual care (p. 137). Although cultural practices often lead to violation of these norms, lack of adherence does not relativize or invalidate them. Cultural variations may occur in specific embodiments of these minimal standards while conforming to their underlying principles (e.g., Appiah, 2006).

The question of communicator choice between means and ends raises a question important to how scholars and practitioners conceptualize bullying and the assumptions that undergird ethical frameworks. For example, intentionality is a contested term, included in some, but not all, definitions of bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011b; Keashly & Jagatic, 2011; Turner & West, this volume). Some scholars interrogate the issue of agency in the act of bullying; for example, Horton (2016), in his brief history of the study of bullying, urged a wide view focused on the broader social and
institutional context of power relations within which bullying emerges, rather than on the individual person alone. Behavior associated with bullying, when envisioned as unintentional, may shape the nature and extent of consequent harm experienced by those bullied (Keashly & Rogers, 2001, cited in Keashly & Jagatic, 2011). For example, if I attribute a repeated pattern of aggressive behavior toward me as stemming from cultural differences in communication styles rather than as a desire to bully me, I may reinterpret the behavior and be less distressed. The question of extent of accountability and responsibility for choice may vary with age of the bully perpetrator, as well as with other demographic factors. Recent research, for example, suggests that vulnerable populations, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youths, are more likely than their straight counterparts to be both perpetrators and targets of bullying (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Peguero, 2012).

In some ethical systems, such as virtue ethics, individuals enact decisions not through a calculation of means and ends or rational choice but through habituation—one’s character inclines toward virtue or vice through repeated practice. For example, my colleague may not have to think twice if I come to her to apologize for a wrong that I have done. Her inclination to be magnanimous and forgive me may be her first impulse if it is habituated as part of her character. Stewart (2011) noted that many of our treatments of communication ethics are insufficient because they do not take into account the temporally situated nature of ethical choice. In the end, we must attend not only to a given decision at one point in time, but to what comes next, so our responsibility for choosing is ongoing and inflected in complicated ways. With these caveats in mind, regardless of intention to harm and the nature of our choosing, the target experiences bullying as problematic, and bullying does result in negative personal and organizational consequences. Finally, we do make choices about actions to take, even as those choices bring about differently configured contexts to which we must then respond anew.

From a communication ethics perspective, scholars and practitioners must agree on how and why bullying violates ethical standards of communication with others so that coordinated efforts can be directed toward combating these practices. Just as such efforts are directed toward other communicative violations of human dignity such as sexual and racial harassment, so must efforts be directed toward mitigating the practice of bullying (Kinney, 2012). The National Communication Association (NCA), for example, generated a code of ethics that ostensibly guides its members, highlighting principles for ethical communication to provide a common, public center of professional agreement about acceptable and unacceptable communicative behavior, an explicit good protected and promoted for this academic group. This code of ethics, the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication, has been applied to organizational contexts as a touchpoint for ethical communicative behavior in the workplace (e.g., Fritz, 2013a). Likewise, school bullying has become a rallying point for development of programs for prevention and anti-bullying policies (e.g., National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2011; P. Smith, Ananiadou, & Cowie, 2003; Luurs, this volume; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2014b).

Because scholars and practitioners conceptualize bullying in the context of dyadic relationships (e.g., Einarsen et al., 2011b), it falls within the scope of interpersonal communication ethics. Interpersonal communication ethics focuses on communicative practices that hold implications for the flourishing of a relationship and the relational partners (Fritz, 2016). For instance, honesty is an important ethical practice in personal relationships connected to intimacy (LaFollette & Graham, 1986). Much interpersonal communication research, and hence issues of interpersonal communication ethics, focuses on close relationships (e.g., Planalp and Fitness, 2011). However, professional and role-related relationships are also sites within which persons seek and secure both constitutive, or internal (e.g., self-worth, friendship, love), and external (e.g., assistance with tasks, information) life goods. The bullying that occurs in personal and professional relationships compromises those goods by generating hurt and emotional pain, taking energy away from tasks, and reducing the quality of life of persons bullied.
Workplace bullying is relevant to organizational communication ethics as well because of its implications for organizational culture and climate as well as for individual outcomes (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2009; Fritz, 2013b; Seeger, 1997). In the corporate context, bullying becomes a matter relevant to leadership ethics, given the responsibility of organizational leaders to protect and promote the good of institutional settings (Arnett et al., 2009; Fritz, 2014). Organizational leaders who take action to stop bullying demonstrate commitment to a bully-free workplace and offer hope for those who experience bullying.

Communication Ethics Frameworks

A focus on contextual areas, as locations for bullying, highlights elements relevant to conceptualizations of bullying as unethical communicative behavior specific to particular sites of human interaction. Concentrating on specific locations for bullying helps identify harms specific to those contexts and highlight issues of ethics relevant to those harms. Bullying in the context of school, the workplace, or in private relational contexts may emphasize different issues relevant to the good of persons, relationships, and/or institutions and point to ethical considerations tied to those issues. For example, as Kahle and Peguero (2017) noted, “understanding and addressing bullying victimization that occurs in schools is essential for establishing a safe and healthy learning environment for all youth” (p. 324).

Ethical frameworks for decision making derive from specific assumptions about the nature of the good, with each representing a particular bias or standpoint on the good (Arnett et al., 2009). These frameworks define general principles guiding decision making and are not necessarily tied to particular contexts. However, some ethical frameworks fit particularly well with particular contexts. For instance, virtue ethics has been highlighted as a fitting approach to professional ethics because of similarities in the concerns each system brings to its understanding of the human community, its purpose, or telos, and the accountability and obligation of persons to the greater social good (e.g., Oakley & Cocking, 2001). Bullying may be approached fruitfully from multiple ethical frameworks. Therefore, in order to explicate bullying as unethical communicative behavior, I review several approaches to communication ethics, limiting my treatment to deontological, utilitarian, codes, procedures, and standards, and virtue-based ethics, noting how each perspective provides resources for understanding bullying as a violation of communication ethics. The following is limited to the workplace context, recognizing, however, that the general principles may also be applied, with some modification, to other contexts that are seeking to remedy bullying behavior.

Communication Ethics Frameworks Applied to Bullying

Deontological Ethics

Each ethical framework rests on particular assumptions relevant to the human good. Kantian deontological, or duty-based, ethics focuses on duties understood as universal principles (Arnett et al., 2009). Kantian duty-based ethics is based on considering how the human community would function if everyone performed a particular action subject to ethical prohibition, such as lying. If everyone were to lie, language itself would lose its meaning for the human community. One of the most recognized ethical injunctions associated with deontological ethics is to treat people as ends, never as means.

The unethical nature of bullying in any context rests in the bully’s treatment of another human being as a means to an end. In the context of the workplace, Kinney, drawing on the work of Dillard (e.g., Dillard, 1990; Dillard, Segrin, & Harden, 1989), suggested that persons with goals for advancement may place those goals as primary, particularly if they see no other way for advancement. Use of negative influence strategies, aggression, manipulation, and other bullying behaviors directed against others become means to a desired end. For instance, bullies may threaten or coerce colleagues to do
extra work on a particular project in order to advance bullies’ interests. This aggressive action against others makes those others a means to a desired end, thereby violating deontological ethics.

The context of childhood bullying can also be understood from a deontological perspective. To the extent that bullies in the school context direct their destructive efforts at others in order to gain power, recognition, or material goods, as in the case of instrumental targeting (e.g., Faris & Felmlee, 2014), other children become means to ends. In the case of those provocative victims who may elicit bullying (Olweus, 1993a), the end sought by the bully may be to stop the annoying behavior, but in a way that fails to honor the humanity of the provoking victim. For example, Sandra has victimized Eliza again and again by snatching away her lunch and devouring the chocolate-chip cookies. One day, Eliza decides to get revenge by baking stones into the cookies. This time, when Sandra bites into what she thinks is a tasty chocolate-chip cookie that she has confiscated from Eliza, she breaks a tooth.

To the extent that structural and cultural factors in the workplace environment foster bullying behavior, and to the extent that organizational leaders fail to take action against it, the organization itself could become hostile to the persons who work there. The result is an uncivil culture (Pearson & Porath, 2009) marked by fear (Rayner, 1999, cited in Hoel et al., 2011). In this case, the organization could be understood as treating people as a means to an end. Despite the contracted nature of work for pay, an implicit understanding of organizational life honored at least in theory is that employees are valued participants in the process of accomplishing organizational goals, not mere means to ends. The popularity of approaches to management such as servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) and the status of corporate social responsibility as a recognized benchmark for corporate ethics in the West (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2011) indicate at least an espoused commitment on the part of organizations to the value of human beings as ends rather than means. These approaches to leadership and management suggest that workplaces do value persons as ends rather than means. To be consistent with professed ethical values, such workplaces would also seek to prevent bullying in order to promote the value of persons as ends rather than means.

**Utilitarian Ethics**

Often held up as a contrast to duty-based ethics, utilitarian ethics measures ethical action by the extent to which a given decision secures the greatest good for the greatest number of persons. Utilitarian ethics rests on an assumed shared good, similar to deontological ethics. In the workplace context, to the extent that bullying compromises the productivity and other contributions of the person being bullied, the organization suffers to some degree, not just the one bullied. In addition, those witnessing the bullying may suffer specific harm, as suggested by Porath and Erez’s (2009) study of the effects of observations of rudeness on bystanders in a workplace context. Their results showed that employees who witnessed rude behavior in the workplace exhibited decreased performance, creativity, and organizational citizenship behaviors and were more likely to think in aggressive terms. The cost of both workplace incivility (Pearson & Porath, 2009) and workplace bullying (Hoel et al., 2011) appear to be significant.

It could be argued that a utilitarian ethic in the workplace could promote the behavior of mobbing, in which multiple persons direct coercive, abusive, or controlling action toward another person for a perceived violation of cultural norms or workplace expectations (e.g., Leymann, 1996). The phenomenon of rate-busting documented in early industrial settings, for instance, comprises one example. In rate-busting, one person works far beyond the expected productivity of others. Such a high level of performance might be seen to jeopardize the wages paid to everyone and thereby prompt the wrath of co-workers, who attempt to slow down this highly productive rule violator. In this case, the bullying or mobbing would be directed toward protecting the good of the many, defined as the workers. The question then focuses on the means by which the greater good is
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protected. A deontological approach results in a different outcome than a utilitarian ethic, given the duty-based injunction against treating people as ends rather than means.

A utilitarian ethic raises questions about the standard upon which understandings of “the greater good” is based: the greater good for whom? The workers? The organization? The leaders? The community? In the case of school bullying, because of the disruption to learning that happens as a result of bullying practices, bullying is pragmatically useless for the greater good. In this context, stakeholders elevate the good of learning over the good sought by the bully, whether that good is self-esteem, power, or some other outcome. Given the nature of the educational system, the publicly announced purposes of the enterprise provide a standard to define the good, which is governed by public oversight, such as school boards and state and federal regulations. In the case of the corporation, although organizational goals and purposes protect productivity, those performing the work hold expectations about what a reasonable rate of work might be, which might be at variance with those of management. Perceived injustice may shape understandings of the greater good in ways at variance with representatives of the organization. The issue of publicly stated standards moves the discussion to another framework for ethics: codes, procedures, and standards.

**Codes, Procedures, and Standards Approaches to Ethics**

A codes, procedures, and standards (CPS) approach to ethics looks to agreed-upon guidelines generated by a group, such as an organization or professional community, to define ethical principles applicable to members of that organization or group (Arnett, 1987; Arnett et al., 2009; Chesebro, 1969). Policies against bullying provide a standard against which behavior can be measured and perpetrators called into account (Kinney, 2012). From this perspective, bullying is unethical because it violates the public standard of expectations for ethical communicative behavior. When anti-bullying policies become a vital element of an organization’s mission, organizational leaders can model support for the mission by enforcing the policy, thereby connecting word and deed and inspiring employees’ intent to comply with organizational ethical standards (Fritz, O’Neil, Popp, Williams, & Arnett, 2013). In school settings, adoption of policies against bullying provide a public display of expectations for student behavior, an explicitly stated commitment on the school’s part to provide a safe learning environment for all students.

**Virtue Ethics**

The fourth and final framework for application to the phenomenon of bullying is virtue ethics. Virtue ethics has experienced a resurgence of attention over the last two decades in many fields of study, including the broad field of communication (Fritz, 2018). Virtue ethics looks to the idea of a human telos anchored in excellences of various types, focusing on the notion of human flourishing or well-being. From this perspective, we can potentially identify human capabilities and capacities that, when developed, permit human beings to express and exhibit these excellences to varying degrees. The goods of human life become criteria for evaluating practices leading to excellence. Through development of moral character, in which right actions become habituated, the virtuous person is inclined toward right action, embodying the good through prudential judgment and practical wisdom. The question representing virtue ethics is “What would a good person do?”

From a virtue ethics perspective, bullying behavior is not virtuous, but demonstrative of vice. In classical Aristotelian virtue ethics, bullying could be considered a violation of temperance, showing appropriate restraint, or magnanimity, a form of generosity. Some might consider bullying a form of cowardice, the vicious counterpart of courage. Bullying behavior does not contribute to human excellence through any of the goods proper to human beings. The focus in virtue ethics is on practices of excellence that both define the good and lead to human flourishing.
Childhood bullying enacts practices that define the worst a human being can be and develops corrupt character in the perpetrator, while creating conditions under which human well-being is thwarted. Some recipients of bullying behavior in both work-related and school-related contexts may respond with—or further develop—resilience and resourcefulness (e.g., Hinduja & Patchin, 2017; MacIntosh, Wuest, Gray, & Aldous, 2010). Such attributes and practices are valuable for human life, leading to strength and self-efficacy. In this case, the bullying behavior becomes an element of the environment requiring practical wisdom, or phronesis. Phronesis guides the one bullied through unwanted circumstances, making the unpleasant experience into an opportunity to gain strength or to learn (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017, point in this direction). Bullying behavior, however, remains in the category of vice, regardless of responses to it.

One approach to organizational life from a virtue ethics perspective is professional civility (Fritz, 2013a, 2013b). Professional civility protects and promotes productivity, or the work accomplished in and on behalf of the organization; place, or the organization and its mission and purpose; and persons, the employees who carry out the work of the organization. The professional civility framework was generated in response to the crisis of incivility in the workplace (Fritz, 2013b) but holds implications for more intense forms of problematic behavior. From a professional civility perspective, bullying compromises goods of the workplace in several ways.

When persons are bullied, their productivity likely suffers (Cowan & Bochantin, this volume; Hoel et al., 2011). Not only is the instrumental end of productivity compromised, but the telos of the practice defining the good of the product or service is lessened in value because the person working on the task is not performing as well as might be possible if the bullying were not taking place. Bullying thereby damages productivity as the purpose of the organization and the inherent goods connected with the product, service, or other outcome defining productivity as an element of professional practice or craft excellence (Fritz, 2013a). Bullying practices, as suggested earlier, can compromise organizational culture and climate. Intentions to leave the organization and absenteeism and effects on those witnessing bullying will also be detrimental to the organization (Hoel et al., 2011, pp. 136–137). Threats to the good of persons are perhaps the most documented results of bullying (Hogh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Damage to physical and psychological health indicates compromised human well-being. These effects are particularly pernicious from a virtue ethics perspective, since the well-being of the human person is tied to meaningful engagements in the world, including the experience of work.

**Ethical Responses to Bullying**

Thus far, this chapter’s focus has centered on bullying behavior as a violation of communication ethics. Yet, an equally important avenue to consider relates to ethical responses to bullying. If perpetration of bullying behavior is unethical, then it rests with the leaders in various environments where bullying takes place (schools, workplace, etc.) to identify both macro- and micro-level practices in order to address this problem. Failure to ameliorate or eliminate unethical contact perpetuates problematic practices and encourages further bullying. As noted earlier and elsewhere (Luurs, this volume), educational institutions are developing policies to address prevention of and responses to bullying, including programs that focus on the whole person. These programs, although working within the framework of a CPS rubric, possess content closer to a virtue ethics approach. That is, schools provide children with opportunities to develop responses and practices of resilience that become part of their character, resources for living that tap their capabilities (e.g., Hinduja & Patchin, 2017).

In the workplace context, officials and scholars are beginning to address bullying. Scholars are calling for anti-bullying policies (see Cowan, 2011; Cowan & Bochantin, this volume), and some highlight the necessity of recognizing bullying as interpersonal violence, with accompanying...
sanctions (Kinney, 2012). Cowan’s research reveals that many organizations do not have policies targeted explicitly to bullying behavior. If they understand bullying as a violation of ethics, then they should employ the strategy of adopting policies that explicitly define and target bullying behavior.

From a CPS approach, adoption and enforcement of these standards constitutes a formal approach to ethics operating through identification and sanction. From a deontological perspective, these policies contain within them the recognition of the value of human beings as ends rather than means, with inherent dignity demanding respect. From a utilitarian perspective, anti-bullying legislation works to the ethical end of the greatest good for the greatest number: Everyone benefits from a defined good articulated and enforced by the organization. From a virtue ethics perspective, such policies encourage and support the well-being of organizational participants.

As bullying behavior decreases, opportunities for positive experiences in the workplace can increase. Lutgen-Sandvik, Riforgiate, and Fletcher (2007) provided vivid evidence of the deeply meaningful and even joyful experiences that working with others can bring. Workplaces that protect and promote the good of productivity, persons, and the place of work itself contribute to human flourishing by working against workplace bullying. The long history of public education’s quest to protect and promote the good of learning for some of the most vulnerable members of society—children—highlights the role of dedicated professionals in service to the greater good of society and its members through development of human potential (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). Educational institutions continue their noble purposes as they enact and enforce policies against bullying and find ways to develop resourcefulness and resilience in their charges. Through these approaches to the unethical behavior of bullying, our institutions can meet multiple goods despite the messiness and complexity of human existence. Communication ethics scholarship contributes resources—both ancient and contemporary—to the ongoing quest for the human good, highlighting communicative practices that are problematic and those that hold the potential for healing, moving us in the direction of a more caring culture that promotes personal and communal well-being.