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Using a Rhetorical Framework to Predict Corruption

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Abstract

The field of rhetoric provides unique frameworks and tools for understanding the role of language in moral reasoning and corruption. Drawing on a discursive understanding of the self, we focus on how the rhetoric of conversations constructs and shapes our moral reasoning and moral behavior. Using rhetorical appeals and a moral development framework, we construct three propositions that use variation in the rhetoric of conversations to identify and predict corruption. We discuss some of the implications of our model.

Keywords

Ethics, rhetoric, corruption, moral development

Corruption, Rhetoric, and the Self

Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi define corruption as "departure from accepted societal norms" for personal or organizational gain (Anand, et al., 2004: 40). According to Windsor, corruption reflects "a failure of moral regard for the public interest or the commonwealth in favor of illegitimate personal interest" (Windsor, 2004: 141). Banfield defines corruption as, "a socially undesirable deviation (or decay) from some ideal, norm or standard" (Banfield, 1975; Windsor, 2004: 141). Lange defined it as "the pursuit of individual interests by one or more organizational actors through the intentional misdirection of organizational resources or perversion of organizational routines" (Lange, 2008: 710). According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, corruption means "impairment of integrity, virtue, or moral principle", and is synonymous with immorality. Corruption related concepts include fraud, white-collar crime, employee deviance, corporate and organizational illegality (see Baucus and Near, 1991; Daboub, et al., 1995; Payne, 1980; Reiss and Biderman, 1980; Robinson and Bennett, 1995; see Rossouw, 2000; Szwajkowski, 1985). These definitions and associations suggest that "corruption" implies deviance from moral values, and often raises questions about the morality or values of individuals, groups, or organizations that engage in corruption.

Within the management field, there are several theories of ethical decision making (Dubinsky and Loken, 1989; Ferrell and Gresham, 1985; Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Trevino, 1986). Many of these theories examine the psychological processes the decision maker must perform to behave morally, the individual and situational factors moderating these processes, and the characteristics of the moral issue (e.g., Grover, 1993; Jones, 1991: 370-371; e.g., Rest, 1986: 3-4; Trevino, 1986; Weaver, et al., 1999). Although these theories have increased our understanding of ethical decision making in organizations, they fail to generate robust explanations for unethical behaviors such as fraud, lying, deception, and corruption (Grover, 1993: 478; Windsor, 2004: 136), and how these behaviors may spread to other individuals or become embedded in organizational cultures (Ashforth, et al., 2008: 671).

Recently, Anand et al. argued that corruption in organizations is explained in part by the rationalization tactics (e.g., denial of responsibility and injury) collectively employed by organizational members committing these behaviors, and in part by socialization tactics (e.g., cooptation and compromise) that persuade newcomers to accept these rationalizations as well as associated corrupt practices (Anand, et al., 2004: 39). Many of rationalization and socialization processes in organizations are expressed through language, and as Anand et al. argued, "one of the most important factors that abet rationalizing and socializing is the use of euphemistic language, which enables individuals engaging in corruption to describe their acts in ways that make them appear inoffensive" (Anand, et al., 2004: 47). Understanding the role of language in ethical/unethical decision making is important because our language shapes both the world and our selves (Burkitt, 1991; Mead, 1934; Peirce, 1992; Quinn, 1996: 1135; Taylor, 1989). Studies, for example, suggest that the language of neoclassical economic theories may make students who are exposed to this language less cooperative (Frank, 2004: 155-178; Frank, et al., 1993). Thus, examining the language used in managerial conversations may help us understand the effects of an organization on its members, and why otherwise ethical members of an organization engage in unethical behavior.

In order to further our understanding of the role of language in ethical/unethical decision making by individuals in organizations, we use a rhetorical framework. The link between rhetoric and ethics has been stressed both by the sophists and by philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (Herrick, 2001). Modern rhetoricians defined rhetoric as "the art of reasoning together about shared concerns" (Booth, 1988: 105). Rhetoric influences the way we make judgments, and making moral judgments is a main component of ethical decision making and behavior (Aristotle, 1991; Rest, 1986; Solomon, 1994). Within our framework, we view

the self as a product of symbolic exchange (Booth, 1974; Mead, 1934) and as an expanding web of conversations (see May, 1996; Sandel, 1998). Specifically, we argue that conversations shape the self and what the self comes to perceive and label as acceptable or corrupt behavior; put differently, the rhetoric of these conversations persuade the self to make a moral judgment that a particular action, whether in the past, present, or future, is ethical or unethical (Aristotle, 1991; Nienkamp, 2001).

In the following sections, we first describe the role of language and conversations in constructing and shaping the self and its moral reasoning. Second, we develop a series of propositions to identify and predict corruption. Specifically, we propose that the self's propensity to engage in corruption, i.e., to deviate from moral values, is shaped and influenced by the rhetoric of conversations the self is exposed to. We conclude the paper with a discussion of methodological implications.

Corruption, Rhetoric, and Moral Development

From a rhetorical perspective, the varieties of conversations that construct and shape the self are influenced by social interactions. For example, children have most of their social interactions with their immediate family. Thus, during childhood, the self is usually exposed to a small variety of conversations. Exposure to a small variety of conversations reflects the moral immaturity of most children compared to most adults. This is consistent with most legal systems, which hold children to a lower standard of moral reasoning than adults. As children grow up, friends, teachers, and neighbors are added to the variety of conversations surrounding the self. Thus, during adolescence, the self is exposed to a greater variety of conversations than during childhood. As the variety of conversations increases, and the self transitions from childhood to adolescence, parents, teachers, and the larger community expect increases in the sophistication and ability of the self to apply moral reason appropriately. Similarly, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is marked with a further increase in the variety of external conversations. These conversations are characterized by the self's broader social commitments to work, family, the community, the environment, the future generations, and other fellow human beings the self may never meet. In short, as the childhood self develops first into the adolescent self and then into the adult self, the variety of conversations that shape the self increases.

During childhood, the self is more likely to be shaped by a few conversations (i.e., conversations with close and immediate family). During adolescence, the self is shaped by a moderate variety of conversations (i.e., conversations with family, teachers, and friends). During adulthood, the self is shaped by a large variety of conversations. As the self develops to include a larger variety of conversations, some of the conversations that shaped the self in the past become internalized or part of the self. The process of developing and including earlier levels is typical of most theories of development in general and moral development in particular (Gilligan, 1982; Kegan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1981; Piaget, 1977).

Rhetorical appeals. Rhetorical theory provides a potentially robust framework for measuring and connecting the variety of repeated conversations or social interactions that characterize the developing self with the type of rhetorical appeal. For example, pathos, logos, and ethos are appeals that resonate with particular forms of conversations (Aristotle, 1991; Bizzell and Herzberg, 1990; Green Jr., 2004; Herrick, 2001; King and Kugler, 2000; Nohria and Harrington, 1994). Pathos persuades by eliciting emotional responses, ethos persuades by appealing to social mores and values, and logos persuades by appealing to the instrumental, analyzing mind (Green Jr., 2004: 659-660).

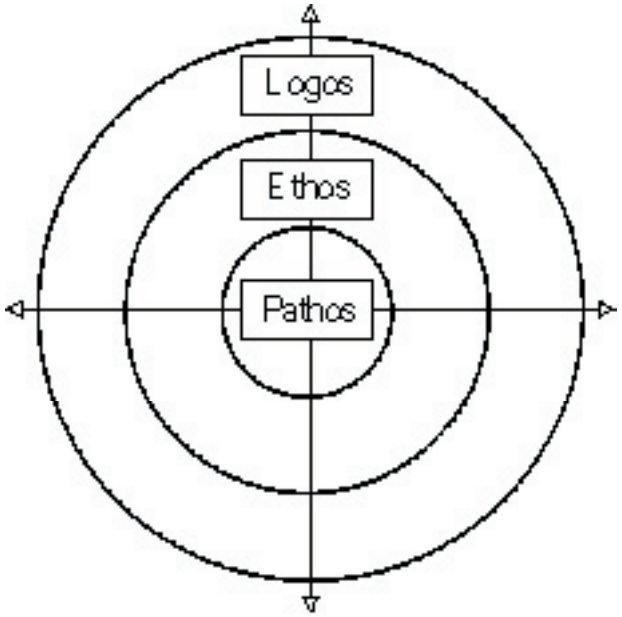


Figure 1. The Developing Self and Rhetorical Appeals

As the self develops, the conversations that shape the self become characterized by different rhetorical appeals (see Figure 1). For example, conversations that shape the self during childhood are often predominated by pathos appeals because most children act more emotionally than adolescents and adults. Similarly, during adolescence, conversations that shape the self are predominated by ethos appeals compared to the conversations during childhood, and most adolescents begin to learn the mores and customs of their community during this period. Conversations that exhibit pathos appeals do not disappear entirely during adolescence because the self develops and has a greater capacity to include a greater variety of conversations. Finally, during adulthood, conversations that shape the self are predominated more by logos appeals, and most adults behave more logically than most children and adolescents. Similarly, pathos and ethos conversations do not disappear entirely during adulthood because the self continues to develop and can include a greater variety of conversations.

In general, conversations that shape the self include one or more of the three rhetorical appeals: pathos, ethos, and logos. Although there may be infinite numbers of conversations characterized by different ratios of pathos, ethos, and logos, for the sake of brevity, we will focus on only three ideal types. (1) pathos predominated (logos and ethos appeals are weak), (2) ethos predominated (pathos appeals are moderately strong, logos appeals are weak but gaining strength), and (3) logos predominated conversations (pathos and ethos appeals are moderately strong).

These three ideal types also resonate with conventional theories of moral development (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1981). The choice of these types and the sequence in which they are presented reflect an increasing variety of conversations, a developing self, an increasing ability to empathize with others or to take a greater number of perspectives, and hence, higher levels of moral development and lower levels of corruption (Kohlberg, 1976). Note that as the self develops, earlier rhetorical appeals that shape the self do not disappear. For example, ethos predominated conversations include a moderate proportion of pathos appeals, and logos predominated conversations include proportions of pathos and ethos appeals.

Pathos predominated conversations. Pathos predominated social interactions are often characterized by a few variety of conversations. For example, the self below a certain age rarely interacts with others outside the family, thus childhood exposes the self to a few highly repeated conversations such as those with family. These conversations often involve pathos appeals reflecting the emotions and passions of a highly attached self, and the self internalizes these conversations on morality not through rational reasoning, but through emotional attachment to parents (Rawls, 1999: 405-407). At this stage, moral behaviors and actions are often shaped by parental love, the fear of the loss of parental love, and feelings of guilt, fear, and anxiety (Rawls, 1999: 405-407). Since most interactions of the self have underlying emotional/pathos commitments, there is little room for other appeals in the self's conversations.

At this stage, the self is shaped mostly by pathos conversations, and is less conscious and inclusive of others. Thus, it can empathize with or take perspectives of a select few. For example, due to the lack of ethos appeals in its conversations, the self is often not fully conscious of its web of commitments or constitutive attachments to society; thus, the self cannot construct or participate in a shared or societal viewpoint (Kohlberg, 1976). Similarly, due to the weakness of logos appeals in conversations the self is exposed to, the self is often unable to differentiate fully between short and long term, or genuine and apparent self-interest; thus, the self rarely reflects on the larger or the longer term consequences of its actions and decisions for itself and others (see Hinman, 2003: 107). In short, the self whose conversations are predominated by pathos appeals has a narrow definition of the self and community, does not identify with many others, is at a low level of moral development, and lacks empathy.

At low levels of empathy or perspective taking, that is, in the absence of a variety of conversations that constitute and shape the self, moral reasoning is self-centric and moral principles are grounded in selfish needs (Gilligan, 1982:73; Kohlberg, 1976). The self does not mind or care when the pursuit of its interests hurts or is unfair to others (Duska, 2000). The goodness or rightness of an act is decided by the strength of internal needs, and this decision is questioned only when the self's needs conflict (Gilligan, 1982: 75; Kohlberg, 1976). The pathos predominated self avoids corrupt behavior when it fears the voices of authority and the negative consequences that result from corruption, such as reprimand or embarrassment in the eyes of family (Rawls, 1999: 407). At this stage, immoral or corrupt behavior means disobedience to the voices of higher authority (Kohlberg, 1976: 34) and the "morality of authority" is needed to make the pathos predominated self understand norms of reciprocity and the importance of helping others (Rawls, 1999: 462-479).

In short, the self who is constantly exposed to conversations that are predominated by pathos appeals will internalize and is shaped by a few variety of conversations. Thus, it cannot empathize with or take perspective of a great number of others. Its limited moral reasoning skills and its lack of empathy ill-equip the self to grasp the kairos of many situations. As a result, the propensity of the self to engage in corrupt behavior is high. We propose:

Proposition 1: The self who is exposed conversations predominated by pathos appeals will exhibit a high frequency of corrupt behavior.

The pathos predominated adult is a product of a small variety of conversations that include deep and extensive discussions about moral issues and justifications, and tends to make business decisions such as hiring and firing, based not on logos or ethos considerations such as merit or fairness, but on pathos considerations such as familiarity and social proximity (Hooper, 1995: 371; Husted, 1998: 242). Thus, pathos predominated conversations can be an indicator of cronyism, a corrupt behavior characterized by "favoritism shown by the superior to his or her subordinate based on their relationship, rather than the latter's capability or qualification, in exchange for the latter's personal loyalty" (Khatri and Tsang, 2003: 289).

Ethos predominated conversations. Ethos predominated social interactions or conversations are often characterized by a moderate variety of conversations. At this stage, while the repetition of earlier pathos conversations in the self's psyche decreases, these conversations do not disappear because the self develops and includes earlier levels. For example, if the self continues to identify and interact socially with others outside of the family such as those at school, then the variety of conversations the self is exposed to increases further. The conversations or social interactions with peers, classmates, and close friends are often characterized by ethos or appeals to loyalty to the group. The self begins to understand the norm of reciprocity and the importance of interacting with others outside of its family. As the self interacts with others outside its immediate circle, there is more opportunity for ethos appeals to be heard in conversations the self is exposed to. As a result, the self begins to internalize the perspectives and moral standards of others with whom the self does not have solely emotional attachments (Rawls, 1999: 409-411).

At this stage, the self is shaped mostly by ethos appeals, and is more conscious and inclusive of others than the pathos predominated selves. Nonetheless, due to the weak logos appeals in its conversations, the self is still relatively more disengaged from the larger community and equates rationality only with self-interest maximizing or acting in the interests of his or her immediate community (Johnson, 1993: 126-149; Quinn, 1996: 1129-1130; Rubin, 1998: 1714-1716; Solomon, 1992: 57-64; Taylor, 1989: 143-176). Self-interest, however, is not the same as the selfishness exhibited by the pathos predominated self (Duska, 2000: 121). Rather, emotions or pathos appeals are sometimes seen as impediments that divert the self from pursuing its interests (Margolis, 1998: 57). Thus, at this stage, the self takes an instrumental stance towards not only others with who the self does not associate, but also its own morals, passions, and peculiarities (Taylor, 1989: 143-176). In short, the self whose conversations are predominated by ethos appeals has a relatively broader definition of the self, identifies with a broader set of others, and is at a higher level of moral development than the pathos predominated self. Nonetheless, the self still lacks empathy for many others who may not affect or interact with the self on a continual basis.

At moderate levels of empathy or perspective taking, moral reasoning and moral principles are seen from a cost-benefit viewpoint. Thus, a decision to deviate from moral principle, such as violating the law, results from a cost-benefit analysis (Becker, 1968; Daboub, et al., 1995; Windsor, 2004). This view of the self and morality is widely utilized within the fields of management and economics: The self is motivated by its interests, and the restrained pursuit of self-interest is believed to lead to the greatest good for the greatest number (Beauchamp and Bowie, 1979; Friedman, 1970; Rand, 1943; Smith, 1776). The self believes that it is corrupt not to seek its interest, because the failure to do so is not in the long-term interests of the self and those with whom the self identifies. The "morality of association" (Rawls, 1999: 462-479) requires the self to maintain so-

cial accord and the functioning of the larger system (Kohlberg, 1976; Trevino, 1986: 605), and to make deliberate sacrifices for those with whom the self interacts (Rawls, 1999: 462-479).

In short, the self whose conversations are predominated by ethos appeals is shaped by a moderate variety of conversations. Thus, it can empathize with or take perspective of a moderate number of others. Its improved moral reasoning capability and increasing empathy better-equip the self to grasp the kairos of many situations. As a result, the propensity of the self to engage in corrupt behaviors is less than that of the pathos predominated self. We propose:

Proposition 2: The self who is exposed to conversations predominated by ethos appeals will exhibit a lower frequency of corrupt behavior than the self who is exposed to conversations predominated by pathos appeals.

The ethos predominated self makes business decisions such as contracting, based on costs and benefits of the transaction for the self and the relatively smaller community or group with which the self identifies. Ethos predominated conversations can be an indicator of crimes that result from cost-benefit analysis (Becker, 1968; Becker, 1974). For example, although Merrill Lynch executives knowingly helped Enron manipulate financial records, they also knew that being loyal to Enron and accommodating them was a low risk high return investment in future relationships with them (Anand, et al., 2004: 44; Swartz and Watkins, 2003). These executives may have thought that a moderate level of corruption is a reasonable cost of doing business, facilitating the economy and allocating resources (Windsor, 2004: 140, 142).

Logos predominated conversations. Logos predominated social interactions are often characterized by a large variety of conversations. At this stage, while the repetition of earlier pathos and ethos conversations in the self's psyche decreases, these conversations do not disappear because the self develops and includes earlier levels. The self realizes that the definitions of the self and community can expand constantly until they become universal and include all others such as the natural environment, the future generations, and all sentient beings (Rawls, 1999: 414-415). As the self becomes aware of its expanding web of commitments, there is a greater opportunity for logos appeals to be heard in conversations that shape the self. As a result, the self begins to internalize the perspectives and moral standards of others with whom the self does not have solely emotional or communal relations (Rawls, 1999: 414-415).

At this stage, the self is shaped mostly by logos conversations, and is more conscious and inclusive of others than the pathos and ethos predominated self. Thus, the self can empathize with or take perspectives of a great number of others (Rawls, 1999: 462-479). Moreover, the logos predominated self can differentiate between the short and the long term, or between the self and others, but sees them as interconnected. In short, the self whose conversations are predominated by logos appeals has an inclusive and expanding definition of community. The self identifies with a larger set of others than both the pathos and the ethos predominated self. Thus, the logos predominated self feels empathy for those who may or may not affect or interact with the self on a repeated basis. From this perspective, altruism is not self-sacrifice but a more inclusive conception of the self and community (Solomon, 1994: 67).

At high levels of empathy or perspective taking, that is, in the presence of a large variety of conversations constituting the self, moral reasoning is world-centric, and grounded in social contracts, individual rights, and universal principles (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1976; Rawls, 1999: 415). The presence of strong logos appeals in conversations facilitates a contextual and rational understanding of emotions and traditions; in a sense, logos appeals place ethos and pathos appeals in a larger and more universal context. The self recognizes that people "hold a variety of values and opinions, and that most values and rules are relative to group" (Kohlberg, 1976: 35). As a principle of justice or human rights, every single voice has the right to be raised or heard in the self's conversations, and the self intends to uphold nonrelative principles and to honor every single voice, "regardless of majority opinion" (Trevino, 1986: 605). Thus, the self learns to question the goodness or rightness of an act by empathizing with others who may or may not interact with the self. The "morality of principle" requires the self to make sacrifices for those with whom the self may not interact, such as the future generations (Rawls, 1999: 462-479). As a result, the self extends care both to others and to one's self, and is able to construct and participate in a shared moral viewpoint, as well as to transcend it (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1976).

In short, the self whose conversations are predominated by logos appeals is more likely to have internalized a greater variety of conversations. Thus, it can empathize with or take perspective of a great number of others. Its superior moral reasoning capability and ever-expanding empathy better-equip the self to grasp the kairos of many situations. As a result, the propensity of the self to engage in corrupt behavior is low. We propose:

Proposition 3: The self who is exposed to conversations predominated by logos appeals will exhibit a lower frequency of corrupt behavior than the selves who are exposed to conversations predominated by pathos or ethos appeals.

Having realized that the very definition of an ethical dilemma involves listening to different perspectives all of which are at least partially right, the self whose conversations include a great variety of conversations often experiences "defining moments", and is forced to choose among alternatives all of which are right according to at least one moral framework (Badaracco, 1987). Thus, the logos predominated self tries to make business decisions never based solely on familiarity, loyalty, or kinship, but on the realization that the self and morality are inextricably intertwined, and each decision redefines the self and its moral stance. Johnson & Johnson executives' conversations, as reflected in the company Credo, include a great variety of voices such as those of doctors, patients, parents, employees, communities, the environment, and the stockholders. This may explain why, during the Tylenol scare in 1982, Johnson & Johnson executives quickly accepted responsibility, ordered Tylenol products off the shelf at the very first hint of the crisis, and shared the details of the situation with the media and the public (Mitroff and Anagnos, 2001).

Discussion

Having questioned the dominant view of the self, we argued that the self and its propensity to engage in ethical or corrupt behavior is shaped by conversations. Specifically, we linked the self's moral development and tendency to be corrupt to the variety of conversations the self is exposed to. We proposed a connection between the variety of conversations that constitute the self and the rhetorical appeals these conversations exhibit. Specifically, we argued that as the variety of conversations that shape or constitute the self increases, the rhetorical appeals in

these conversations follow a particular sequence: pathos predominated (logos and ethos appeals are weak, characterized by a few variety of conversations), ethos predominated (pathos appeals are moderately strong, logos appeals are weak but gaining strength, characterized by a moderate variety of conversations), and logos predominated (pathos and ethos appeals are moderately strong, characterized by a great variety of conversations).

Several methodological and practical implications follow.

Unit of analysis. Scholars of business ethics often focus on the individual and/or the situation as the unit of analysis. Accordingly, the explanations for ethical or unethical behavior involve "strong" individuals and/or "strong" situations (see for example Jones, 1991; see for example Trevino, 1986; Trevino and Youngblood, 1990). A rhetorical perspective, however, emphasizes that language is an action that constructs and shapes the way the self thinks, feels, understands, and acts in the world (Booth, 1974: 134-135; Eccles, et al., 1992: 29; Enos, 1996: 439; Rorty, 1989). According to this approach, individuals and situations are discursively produced, at least partially. Thus, a rhetorical approach shifts the unit of analysis in moral inquiry from individuals or situations to discourse.

Level of analysis. Using rhetorical frameworks and focusing on language as the unit of analysis may help researchers study corruption or unethical behavior at different levels of analysis and diachronically. For example, a rhetorical analysis of conversations taking place in the literatures on business ethics, stakeholder theory, and corporate social responsibility may suggest that the variety of conversations included in management discourse has been increasing. The introduction of the very term "stakeholder", defined as those who can affect and are affected by the firm's actions (Freeman, 1984), itself signifies an expansion of consciousness from a shareholder-centric to a stakeholder-centric view of the firm.

Other examples include the idea of "business citizenship", which represents one of the highest levels of caring and inclusion in recent management discourse (Logsdon and Wood, 2002). Business citizenship requires seeing everyone, peoples of both home and host countries, as us and not as the other (Logsdon and Wood, 2002: 167). Logsdon and Wood's discussion of the movement from individual to corporate citizenship to business citizenship, and the shift in attention from domestic to global resonates with moral development theories (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1976) and the rhetorical model of ethics outlined here. Similarly, the longtime silent voice of the natural environment is becoming stronger as a result of several scholars' efforts (see Ruffin Series in Business Ethics, 2000, No. 2). Whereas some scholars use ethos appeals to make us see the natural environment as a stakeholder with a legitimate voice, both locally and globally (Preston, 2000), others use logos appeals, pointing out the economic benefits of environmental sustainability (Freeman and Reichart, 2000; Shrivastava, 2000). Finally, in another literature, scholars criticize the masculinist voices or language of stakeholder theory, and suggest including feminist voices emphasizing care and relationships (Burton and Dunn, 1996; Liedtka, 1996; Wicks, et al., 1994).

In short, a rhetorical perspective shifts the unit of analysis in business ethics research. It provides tools and frameworks that may initiate a rich domain of theoretical and empirical research, focusing on and linking multiple levels of analysis, accommodating historical and longitudinal approaches, and facilitating cross-cultural studies.

Conclusion

During the last several years, many corruption cases have made the headlines. Examples include Tyco, Enron-Andersen, Healthsouth, Adelphia, and WorldCom. At least partly as a result of these corruption cases, academic journals such as the Academy of Management Review, Academy of Management Executive, Organization, Critical Perspectives in Accounting, and Management Communication Quarterly have devoted special issues to corruption and ethical decision making. Clearly, there is a need for research on corruption, its antecedents and consequences, and how to prevent it.

The field of rhetoric provides unique analytical frameworks for understanding the role of language in moral reasoning and tools to study and predict corruption. Aristotle's rhetorical appeals (pathos, ethos, logos) are one of several such rhetorical tools and frameworks. In this paper, we use these three rhetorical appeals to focus attention on the role and power of language and conversations in moral reasoning and corrupt behavior. In general, we advocate studying managerial conversations, focusing on how different rhetorical strategies influence moral behavior and its justifications.

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