

Narrative justification of ethically questionable practices: between ethical doubts and entitlement

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Abstract

From petty bribes to subtle rule-bending, ethically questionable practices are pervasive in organizational life. Despite a growing interest in our field in studying ethically questionable practices in organizational settings, less attention has been paid to how such practices are communicatively justified and sustained in their situational occurrence, often due to a lack of empirical accessibility. To address this shortcoming, our study investigates the narrative justifications of an ethically questionable business practice called the ‘\$20 Sandwich Trick’, a bribery-tipping practice used by guests at Las Vegas hotels to attain room upgrades. The dataset includes more than 15 years of self-reports publicly posted to the digital platform Frontdesktip.com, from which we identify six main narratives that reflect different degrees of how individual actors justify this practice. Overall, we contribute to extant knowledge (1) by exploring how actors mobilize narratives to justify ethically questionable behaviors and share them with other actors; (2) by developing, based on these findings, the ‘M model of narrative justification’, a new approach to trace patterns and changes in the communicative portrayal of ethically questionable practices; and (3) by showcasing how narratives as visible on publicly available online platforms can be utilized for the analysis of ethically questionable practices.

Keywords

communication, ethically questionable practices, justification, narratives, digital media