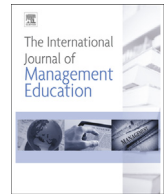




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Research notes

Moral muteness of faculty in management education



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ABSTRACT

Many have long criticized management education for poorly training managers to recognize and address ethical and moral issues in the workplace and society. These criticisms point to bad management theories, institutional pressure on business schools and corporations, misdirected pedagogy and an overwhelming reliance on economic rationality in the curriculum. Researchers may not have considered the specific behaviors in the classroom, however, as a cause for poor ethical behavior. For various reasons, faculty members do not express moral considerations on many issues in the classroom. Moral muteness of faculty in management education sends a loud and clear message to aspiring managers that moral considerations are unimportant. An institutional perspective is used to develop the concept of moral muteness of faculty and explain the causes and effects of moral muteness.

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Teaching is a messy, indeterminate, inscrutable, often intimidating, and highly uncertain task. Against this uncertainty, teachers construct defenses.

Richard Elmore in *Education for Judgment*, 1991: ix

Bird and Waters (1989) introduced the idea of moral muteness—that managers routinely avoid moral explanations and prefer to justify actions with economic rationality. The moral muteness among managers may arise from perceived threats to the organization and personal efficacy according to Bird and Waters, but is it possible that it arises from norms that have been socialized in business schools? Are managers taught to be mute? Is there a moral muteness among faculty that is diffused into industry?

Moral muteness of faculty is the failure among faculty to express moral considerations in their role as teachers. Moral muteness occurs when faculty members avoid, ignore, are inattentive or simply unaware of ethical issues in course content, teaching practices, and advocating for sound education. These ethical issues are inescapable and mundane but appear in disguise in selecting and assigning readings, presenting ideas, grading, deciding whom to call or shut down in class discussions, and the power faculty members wield over students in terms of whom and when to praise (Garvin, 1991). There are two forms of silence that are worth distinguishing. One form occurs with an educational motive when faculty intentionally remain silent in order to allow students to reveal or discover their own moral conclusions on managerial issues (e.g., Anteby, 2013). The second form is much more insidious in that it arises from immoral or amoral bases (Carroll, 1987). This form occurs when faculty unconsciously avoid moral considerations for action or consciously relegate moral justifications or explanations away to another time, or worse to another course.

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Bird and Waters suggest that muteness is a response to a personal threat but other scholars have long criticized management educators for propagating amoral theories and practices. *Khurana (2007)* observes that management education was born of a need to train a professional to fairly adjudicate competing claims between owners of capital, labor unions and community needs; but has now descended into training managers merely as hired guns—a professional program that has gone awry. The use of amoral management theories absolves managers from considering ethical principles, according to *Ghoshal (2005)*. The very thrust of the MBA program is “subversive” to management education because of the dominance of economic ideology (*Hühn, 2014*) and the drive toward ever-increasing profits (*Ortenblad, Koris, Farquharson, & Hsu, 2013*). *Mitroff (2004: 185)* levels a criticism at business schools for having promulgated a “mean-spirited and distorted view of human nature.” *Khurana and Nohria (2008)* claim that the public has lost trust in managers and their education. And, while more ethics courses for business students have become available, the extent of training has not kept up with schools’ claims (*Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Rasche, Gilbert, & Schedel, 2013*). While all these criticisms are leveled at business schools, *Nussbaum (2010)* argues too that the American university, in general, has moved away from developing critical thinkers and reduced itself to job training and this make-profit-at-all-costs mentality will undermine democracy.

The objective in this paper, however real the other threats are to the management education, is to develop the concept of moral muteness of faculty and theorize the causes and effects of that muteness. Moral muteness of faculty in management education sends a loud and clear message to aspiring managers that moral considerations are unimportant. Unlike others that are critical of faculty behavior, this paper does not take the position that individual faculty members in management education are evil nor that they are teaching the “wrong” things, and instead takes an institutional perspective (*Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin-Andersson, & Suddaby, 2008*) to explain how the profession has arrived at this problematic condition and make hopeful proposals to enact change. The profession must act now because faculty influence on management takes a long time to take effect and because it creates an impact that is society-wide (*Barley, 2007; Margolis & Walsh, 2003*). Moral muteness as an institutionalized problem also poses an urgent risk because many practices spread worldwide once they become entrenched in leading universities (*DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Jamil, 2015; Juusola, Kettunen, & Alajoutsijärvi, 2015*).

This paper makes three contributions to management education. First, the paper pulls together disparate themes in organizational and educational theories to conceptualize the phenomenon and problem of moral muteness of faculty. Others have made pleas to increase the volume of ethics education (*Gentile & Samuelson, 2005*), but the concept of moral muteness of faculty is much broader. By conceptualizing the idea, researchers can foster conversations about the extent of the problem; can further debate the causes and effects; and can formally study the problem in a less threatening manner. Hopefully the concepts will bring about change in both the classroom and education policy in the field.

The second contribution is to bring an institutional theory perspective to the concept. Where others have opined or admonished colleagues to improve ethics education as part of a criticism on educational content, institutional theory (*Meyer & Rowan, 1977*) is used to examine the field of management faculty practices across many business schools, and to theorize causes and effects. A theory is developed to explain what led to the moral muteness of faculty, and what ill effects it has on organizations and society.

The third contribution lies in the motivations for addressing organizational silence and to link silence to social responsibility. The current literature on organizational silence is primarily motivated by the need to improve organizational performance. When organizational silence concepts are applied to an educational context the motivation should become a need to improve human development and society, rather than merely improving the performance of a business school. Because organizational silence, today, is aimed at organizational performance, researchers merely study the end result as effects on the organization. Many, however, have called on management theorists to look beyond the organization (*Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Stern & Barley, 1996*), and thus by showing how moral muteness has effects on society this paper elevates the relevance and impact of organizational silence. Having framed silence as having important effects on society, one sees that business schools must address silence as a social responsibility.

The structure of this conceptual development is straightforward. After having more fully theorized the idea of moral muteness of faculty, the paper will offer some possible causes and effects. Finally, a few suggestions are made to overcome the problem of moral muteness of faculty.

1. Moral silence

Related concepts in organizational and moral silence are reviewed first before more fully conceptualizing the moral muteness of faculty. First and foremost, silence is not the absence of speech nor is it the absence of voice.

1.1. Silence

Silence is a form of communication (*Tannen, 1985*). Humans communicate with each other through symbols, and can process symbols in the form of actions as well as language (*Blumer, 1998; Deacon, 1998; Mead, 1923*). How the symbols are interpreted, however, is defined in large part through our culture. Tannen points out that some actions, those called silence, are often ambiguously understood. Silence can be either positively or negatively interpreted but is clearly meaningful communication. For example, silence can arise from agreement with the situation (i.e., acquiescence or resignation) or from disagreement with the situation (i.e., quiescence from fear or to defend oneself) (*Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003*). Silence can mean the person has something to hide (*Clemente & Roulet, 2015*), denial that there is an

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