

HOW ADVERTISING PRACTITIONERS VIEW ETHICS

Moral Muteness, Moral Myopia, and Moral Imagination

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how advertising agency personnel perceive, process, and think about ethical issues. We conducted in-depth, elite interviews with advertising practitioners at all levels in 29 agencies in eight cities. Many of our informants reported few ethical concerns in their own work or in advertising in general. They exhibited "moral myopia," a distortion of moral vision that prevents moral issues from coming into focus, and "moral muteness," meaning that they rarely talk about ethical issues. We find that the reasons for moral muteness and moral myopia are categorizable. There were, however, "seeing/talking" advertising practitioners who demonstrated "moral imagination" when responding to ethical problems. We compare the manner in which the ethically sensitive practitioners contemplate and respond to ethical issues with those characterized as having moral muteness and moral myopia. We also find that the agency context in which advertising practitioners work is important in terms of ethical sensitivity. We discuss implications for theory, research, practice, and education.

Advertising practitioners face ethical issues that are common to all professionals, but they also encounter issues related to factors unique to advertising. Despite some academic and popular discussion of ethics in advertising, ranging from its broad social consequences to consumers' perceptions of potentially objectionable ads, we know little about how advertising practitioners react to ethical issues when they arise. This paper is an attempt to address this relatively neglected area. Our focus is to examine how advertising practitioners perceive, process, and think about ethical issues. Summarizing our findings, within our sample of the advertising community, significant numbers of practitioners either do not see ethical dilemmas that arise or their vision is shortsighted. Reasons or justifications for this visual impairment can be categorized. When ethical issues are recognized, there is little communication about them. There are exceptions, however—some practitioners do see and talk about ethical issues. Finally, the type of organizational community has an impact on awareness of ethical issues and ways of dealing with them.

BACKGROUND

Cunningham (1999, p. 500) defined advertising ethics as "what is right or good in the conduct of the advertising func-

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tion. It is concerned with questions of what ought to be done, not just with what legally must be done." Although ethics is considered a mainstream topic in the advertising literature (Hyman, Tansley, and Clark 1994), the amount of academic research on it has not been commensurate with its importance. Historically, the topic of ethics in advertising has been examined largely through commentary and philosophical debate (Drumwright 1993) and from a "macro" perspective of advertising's effects on society rather than at the "micro" level of the firm and the practitioners working in it (Hunt and Chonko 1987). Drumwright (1993) characterized this work as pertaining to one of two discourses: (1) a legal discourse among lawyers and regulators that focuses largely on the rights of advertisers and on what they can and cannot do vis-à-vis issues such as deception and fraud (e.g., Federal Trade Commission 1980; Preston 1994, 1996; Prosser 1984; Stern and Eovaldi 1984) and (2) a moral discourse primarily among philosophers, social critics, and ethicists that raises broad and far-reaching questions related to advertising's societal effects (e.g., Bishop 1949; Brenkert 1998; Galbraith 1958, 1967;

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Leiser 1979; Pollay 1986; Pontifical Council for Social Communication 1997; Santilli 1983; Waide 1987). These debates and commentaries have a long history and cut across academic disciplines. In recent studies of ethics in advertising, the emphasis has been on developing an understanding of consumers' perceptions of potentially objectionable advertising (e.g., ads with persuasive appeals, ads with idealized imagery, ads for politicians, ads for dangerous products, and ads targeting children) through empirical studies (e.g., Gulas and McKeage 2000; Latour and Henthorne 1994; Tinkham and Waverlarisay 1994; Triese et al. 1994). Much of this work has been descriptive as opposed to normative, as has been the case for research in marketing ethics more generally (Dunfee, Smith, and Ross 1999).

Relatively few studies have examined the views of advertising practitioners. Of those that exist, most have used scenarios to assess the perceptions of respondents regarding the ethics of certain behaviors and practices (e.g., Davis 1994; Ferrell, Zey-Ferrell, and Krugman 1983; James, Pratt, and Smith 1994; Pratt and James 1994). Moon and Franke (2000) provide a thorough review of the literature and proceed to use scenarios to collect data regarding practices that Korean advertising practitioners viewed as objectionable and compared the responses to those of American advertising practitioners in a small survey reported in *Advertising Age* (1988). They found that Koreans were more ethically sensitive in their reactions to the scenarios, on average, than were Americans. Reactions to the ethical scenarios reflected a variety of cultural influences, and Hofstede's (1980, 1983) typology of cultural dimensions helped explain certain patterns of cross-cultural differences. In another study, James, Pratt, and Smith (1994) used scenarios to identify differences in reactions of students versus those of practitioners. For example, students were more likely to apply deontology (i.e., duty-based thinking) to ethical decision making than were practitioners.

A small body of work has surveyed advertising practitioners to ascertain perceived ethical problems. For example, Rotzoll and Christians (1980) and Hunt and Chonko (1987) mailed questionnaires to advertising agency employees and asked them to describe ethical dilemmas they had encountered in response to open-ended questions. In Rotzoll and Christians' study (1980), "most respondents reported that they *did* encounter ethical decision making in their work" (p. 426), and "[m]ost of the responses show a lively interest in doing the right thing" (p. 429). Rotzoll and Christians ascertained that the major areas of ethical concern involved the content and creation of advertising messages and the agency-client relationship. In Hunt and Chonko's study (1987), 85% of respondents reported ethical problems in their daily work, and 43% perceived their most difficult problem occurring with "a frequency significantly beyond the mere 'isolated in-

cident'" (or five to seven on a seven-point scale) (p. 22). They reported that more than half of their respondents saw problems involving treating clients fairly or creating honest, non-misleading, socially desirable advertisements. In a study based on Rotzoll and Christians' and Hunt and Chonko's work, Chen and Liu (1998) surveyed Taiwanese advertising practitioners and found that 67.5% reported that ethical problems were commonplace at work. However, 74.1% said that these ethical problems affected their work "not at all" or "a little." Moon and Franke (2000) replicated Hunt and Chonko's study among advertising practitioners in Korea and found that 55% reported aspects of advertising that posed moral problems in their daily work, and 49% perceived their most difficult problem occurring frequently (five to seven on a seven-point scale). Hunt, Wood, and Chonko (1989) found that advertising agency personnel, in comparison with other marketing professionals, "perceived their companies to have the highest ethical values" (p. 84). As detailed below, our findings were considerably less encouraging.

Mail surveys and scenario analyses are effective in identifying ethical issues and determining which practices are generally accepted or rejected on ethical grounds. Yet they provide little insight into how advertising practitioners think about, approach, and deal with ethical issues—that is, the meanings that ethical issues have for them, the assumptions they make about these issues, and the paradigms from which they operate. Our goal is to examine directly how advertising practitioners perceive, process, and consider these issues.

METHOD

When the goal of research is to understand the meanings that individuals give to their actions rather than to predict their behavior, qualitative methods are often the most appropriate methodology (Braybrooke 1965). Field-based approaches, such as in-depth interviews, are particularly useful when the research objective is to understand tacit perceptions, beliefs, and values, especially when the researcher cannot be sure what interpretation, code, norm, affect, or rule is guiding the actors (Dexter 1970; Fielding and Fielding 1986; Marshall and Rossman 1989; McCracken 1988; Miles and Huberman 1994; Strauss 1990).

In-depth, elite interviews constituted our primary data source. In the social science literature, the term "elite" interviews is commonly used to refer to interviews with decision makers as opposed to consumers, an electorate, or a mass population (Dexter 1970). Elite interviews differ from highly structured survey research interviews in that the latter are useful for predicting behavior and generalizing to populations about behavior, while the former are designed to ascertain decision makers' understanding. For all their inherent benefits, behavioral reports that are produced by survey research often

disregard the meaning to the actors. When one wants to know what the actors think is happening, elite interviews often provide a direct and useful tool. This type of interviewing stresses the informant's definition of the situation, encourages the informant to structure the account of the situation, and allows the informant to reveal his or her notions of what is relevant (Dexter 1970; King 1994; McCracken 1988; Schwartzman 1993). In short, the objectives of the research drove the methodology selected.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol (see Appendix) was developed in consultation with five marketing and advertising professors and four advertising practitioners. It was pretested in personal interviews with seven advertising agency executives. In keeping with accepted practice for elite interviewing, most questions were broad and open-ended to enable informants to define the situation. The interview protocol was designed to prompt informants to engage in what Wallendorf and Brucks (1993, p. 341) called "guided introspection." The protocol explicitly focused on ethical issues, and the purpose was made clear when setting up the interview. Advertising agency personnel were selected as informants because they occupy a critical gatekeeper role between advertisers, the media, and the public. In this role, they may perceive ethical pressures from interacting with diverse stakeholders.

Data Collection and Analysis

A total of 51 personal interviews were conducted in 29 advertising agencies in 8 cities: New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington, DC, Minneapolis, Dallas, and Austin. The informants came from varied departments (e.g., creative, media, account services, account planning) and were at all seniority levels. Their experience spanned from 2 years to more than 40 years. (See Table 1 for demographics of the informants.) The agencies ranged in size from small privately held companies with less than 12 people and about a million dollars in annual billings, to large, publicly held, worldwide companies with thousands of employees and billions of dollars in annual billings. (See Table 2 for demographics of the agencies.)

We cycled back and forth between data collection and analysis, as is recommended in qualitative research, to provide opportunity for the interview protocol and the sample to evolve in a manner that serves the research questions (Strauss 1990). We began our study in major agencies in major markets, and we found, generally speaking, that most of our informants saw few ethical concerns in their own work or in advertising. We then broadened our sample to include a more diverse set of agencies: smaller agencies in major markets and agencies

TABLE 1
Demographics of Informants

	Number of informants
<i>Job assignment</i>	
Senior management/administration (e.g., chairman, president, executive vice president, owner, managing partner)	19
Creative	11
Account services	9
Media	6
Account planning	2
Strategic planning	2
Interactive	1
Relationship marketing	1
<i>Total</i>	51
<i>Years of experience in advertising</i>	
More than 25 years	9
21 to 25 years	6
16 to 20 years	9
11 to 15 years	8
6 to 10 years	15
2 to 5 years	4
<i>Total</i>	51
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	38
Female	13
<i>Total</i>	51
<i>City</i>	
Austin	8
Chicago	16
Dallas	6
Minneapolis	2
New York	14
Philadelphia	2
San Francisco	2
Washington, DC	1
<i>Total</i>	51
<i>Ownership status of agency</i>	
Independent	20
Holding company	31
<i>Total</i>	51

in small and mid-sized markets. When we encountered individuals who seemed to be more ethically attuned, their comments about the contexts in which they were working prompted us to interview others in those agencies to better understand the cultures, climates, and modus operandi of the agencies. Such "snowballing" techniques (Moriarty 1983) were appropriate since we were not using a random sample with a goal to predict behavior within a population. Anonymity was provided for both informants and agencies. Anonymity has obvious disadvantages, but it helps mitigate biases and demand effects related to social desirability and posturing. Absent assurances of anonymity, we likely would not have

TABLE 2
Agency Demographics

	Number of agencies
<i>Annual billings of agency office where interviews were conducted</i>	
Less than \$20 million	4
\$21 million to \$100 million	4
\$101 million to \$500 million	13
\$501 million to \$1 billion	3
More than \$1 billion	5
<i>Total</i>	29
<i>Number of employees in agency office where interviews were conducted</i>	
Less than 25	6
25 to 100	7
101 to 500	10
More than 500	6
<i>Total</i>	29
<i>Agency ownership status</i>	
Independent	10
Holding company	19
<i>Total</i>	29
<i>City of agency office where interviews conducted</i>	
Austin	3
Chicago	8
Dallas	4
Minneapolis	2
New York	8
Philadelphia	2
San Francisco	2
Washington, DC	1
<i>Total</i>	29

been granted many of the interviews. Widely used in the social sciences, anonymity has been employed often in qualitative field research in advertising and marketing (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Dougherty 1990, 1992; Drumwright 1994, 1996; Workman 1993).

The interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed. Data were systematically and intensively analyzed through standard procedures for qualitative analysis (Spiggle 1994; Strauss 1990). Data analysis involved several steps. First, the transcripts were reviewed individually and summarized. Second, in a phase that Strauss called "open coding," the interview transcripts were scrutinized line by line and paragraph by paragraph to suggest initial categories or themes. In the third step, which Strauss called "axial" coding, the transcripts were scrutinized again and again to consider each of the themes across the interviews and to assess the fit of each theme to the data. In a final stage, which Strauss called "selective" coding, the data were examined once again to refine the themes and findings for each.

Limitations

The limitations of this research method are well known, but attempts were made to mitigate their effects. Because some judgment is inevitably required by the analyst (Dexter 1970), a major concern is that of subjectivity in interpreting the data. To guard against subjectivity and to establish reliability, initial data analysis was undertaken by both authors working independently. Findings were identified and agreed upon. Another way to mitigate subjectivity is to be as transparent as possible; that is, we demonstrate as clearly as we can how we came to certain conclusions (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993). Extensive use of quotations can add objectivity as well as depth of understanding. We have quoted liberally, and unless otherwise noted, quotations are representative of what was expressed by several informants. As acknowledged above, anonymity was granted to all informants to help mitigate biases and demand effects related to social desirability and posturing. Finally, the advertising practitioners chosen may not be representative of the total population, but they do vary on many dimensions, including job function, experience level, client base, agency size, and geographic location (see Tables 1 and 2). In keeping with one of the goals of qualitative research, portraying the range and depth of the phenomena is important to developing theory (Bonoma 1985; Eisenhardt 1989; Kover 1995).

FINDINGS

Generally speaking, we found two kinds of advertising practitioners with regard to ethical sensitivity, and as discussed below, generally speaking, this division was a result of where they worked. We first report our findings regarding the group that was less ethically sensitive and then contrast them with findings from the more ethically sensitive group.

We start from a normative position. We assume that ethical issues can and do arise in advertising, and that when and if they do arise, it is best if they are acknowledged and dealt with in what would be considered an ethical way. That said, we acknowledge that reasonable people can disagree over whether a particular situation poses an ethical dilemma, as well as over what the ethical response should be.

Ethical issues did not appear to be on the radar screens of our first group of informants. As one informant noted:

Usually, ethics is something that doesn't seem to apply much. . . . You don't really think about it too much.

Even when ethical issues were noticed, they often were not discussed. As one informant put it in what was an oft-reported phenomenon:

It's unfortunate, but it's [ethics] not a high priority. . . . This line of questioning is so interesting because it has never come up.

"Moral muteness," a term borrowed from Bird and Waters (1989), was pervasive among our first group of informants. Ethical issues did not enter into discourse at either an individual or organizational level. Bird (1996) states that people are morally mute "when they do not recognizably communicate their moral concerns in settings where such communicating would be fitting" (p. 27). When they would be expected to express themselves with respect to ethical concerns, "they either voice no moral sentiments or communicate in ways that obscure their moral beliefs and commitments" (Bird 2002, p. 16).

In addition to moral muteness, we also found what we call "moral myopia."¹ In fact, the myopia helped explain the muteness. We define moral myopia as a distortion of moral vision, ranging from shortsightedness to near blindness, which affects an individual's perception of an ethical dilemma. Moral myopia hinders moral issues from coming clearly into focus, particularly those that are not proximate, and it can be so severe that it may render a person effectively morally blind. If moral issues are not seen at all or are somehow distorted, it is highly unlikely that sound ethical decision making will occur. The most proximate issues and those most likely to be in focus were at the workaday level of the individual, which usually were intimately tied to the individual's personal self-interest (e.g., "Is anyone stealing my ideas?"). Less proximate and more likely to be affected by myopia were issues regarding advertising messages and organizational practices of agencies and clients. Least proximate and most likely to be affected by myopia were issues referred to as "advertising's unintended social consequences." Pollay (1986, p. 19) defined the unintended social consequences of advertising as "the social by-products of the exhortations to 'buy products,'" which tend to occur at the aggregate level of society. While we found evidences of moral myopia regarding ethical issues at all three levels—that of the individual, the organization, and society—moral shortsightedness was most acute at the societal level. We see distinct similarities between moral myopia and Levitt's (1960) marketing myopia in that both involve an inability to "see" certain important issues that are a part of the larger context in which one is working.

Not only did we find moral muteness and moral myopia; we also sought to understand the underlying assumptions, perceptions, and paradigms that support them. To do so, we examined informants' responses in more depth to understand the ways they frame and think about ethical issues. The responses ranged from a rejection of the possibility of ethical concerns in advertising at all to a variety of rationalizations that largely dismissed potential ethical concerns or responsibility. Sometimes multiple rationalizations were used simultaneously by a single individual—woven into a web of supporting rationalizations. Some informants evidenced both myopia and muteness. Indeed, these problems frequently over-

lapped and were reinforcing. Nevertheless, in principle, moral muteness and moral myopia are different. It is helpful to distinguish a perspective that does not really see a problem from a perspective in which the problem is seen but avoided and not discussed.

Moral Myopia

Many of our informants had difficulty seeing ethical issues or seeing them clearly. Our assessment is that people may be affected by moral myopia in varying degrees of severity, ranging from blindness to shortsightedness. While some people fail to see the moral dimension of problems at all, others have distorted moral vision that results largely from rationalization or from an unwillingness to focus on the problem so that it is seen clearly. The rationalizations contribute to and reinforce the perceptual problem. Interestingly, these responses could be categorized. We report the categories that we heard time and again. Although usually only one informant is quoted, the quotation is representative of what others expressed.

Consumers Are Smart

Consumers are really smart, really astute. . . . I feel like I am so unpowerful that if I were unethical in my [creative] presentation [of the advertising message] and were I to oversell, I would be found out so incredibly quickly.

We heard about a strong and unwavering faith in consumers. This faith asserted that consumers are smart and therefore cannot and will not be fooled or led astray by any unethical advertising message. Since consumers will not be misled, the advertising message does not need to be ethically evaluated. This rationalization is understandable, and is certainly not unique to advertising, but in the advertising context, it seems less persuasive. It seems somewhat surprising that people whose professional *raison d'être* is to create advertising that works would simultaneously assert the powerlessness of their endeavors. Some informants seemed to want to have it both ways, claiming that advertising is important, worthy, and effective in selling products, but at the same time asserting that it is also relatively powerless to mislead or have any harmful effects.

Passing the Buck

Personally I haven't thought much about this issue [negative effects of advertising], but now I think the responsibility goes back to families and the law.

Informants rationalized responsibility for the negative effects of advertising by "passing the buck." The number of poten-

tial parties to whom the buck was passed was large and included families, especially parents, peers, the media, the movies, MTV, videos, clients, the regulators, and others. Relatedly, often the buck was passed to society at large. Informants asserted that they are not creating images but merely reflecting the images that already exist in society, which is what society wants. Thus, any responsibility and/or blame should be placed on society, not on advertising. This was another iteration of the age-old debate of whether advertising creates or reflects society (Lantos 1987; Pollay 1986). As one agency president said:

We're more sheep than we are shepherds. We follow the trends. We don't create them. We're too scared to create them; our clients are too scared to create them.

Another practitioner put it this way:

Are you going to use an overweight, short gal with an acne problem to sell that product, or are you going to use a model with big breasts and a lot of skin? Unfortunately, that is more of a reflection of society and what society wants to see than advertisers setting out and creating this false image. . . . I think this is also what society wants to believe about itself.

One need not resolve whether advertising creates or reflects society to admit that advertising bears some responsibility. Taking an example from earlier history, advertising did not create racism, but many would say the industry contributed to it when pandering to racial stereotypes. The "sheep not shepherd" assumption enabled many advertising practitioners to avoid any responsibility for advertising's unintended consequences and for making moral judgments about them.

The buck was also passed to products and clients. The problem was with the products, not with the advertising itself. Clients, not agencies, bore responsibility for the products. Advertising professionals saw themselves as scapegoats. They and their profession were unjust recipients of blame that should be directed at other parties. Because advertising is visible and salient, it is a vulnerable, convenient, and easy target. In a slight variation of this theme with a McLuhanesque twist, one practitioner explained:

We've become the scapegoat for things we don't even create. We're so easy to find on the radar screen. . . . We actually create something. We take the brunt of "Television is bad for you," which has become "Advertising is bad for you."

What Is Legal Is Moral

Related to buck passing, our informants, like many others, often equated the legal with the moral. Writers in ethics generally view the law as the "floor"—the moral minimum—but for some of our informants, if it is legal, it is ethical (Drumwright 1993; Preston 1994). A number of our infor-

mants assumed that because regulations exist and because attorneys are involved, they themselves are off the hook. As an agency president explained:

I think this is probably one of the most ethical businesses there is. It is so regulated. Everything that we do has to go through our lawyers to make sure that it's conforming to law, and then our client's lawyers, and then we have to send it through to the networks and their lawyers. . . . It's really hard to be unethical in this business even if you wanted to.

Another senior ad agency executive framed his comments about a specific product, but his point was that the law, not ethics, should drive advertising.

I don't feel it's ethically wrong to advertise them [cigarettes]. I don't smoke. . . . My feeling is that if they want to make it illegal, fine. But as long as it's a legal product, it should be legally sold.

The two quotes above address slightly different issues. The first is a position generally rejected as a sound basis for an ethical conclusion, that is, the contention that if it is legal, it is moral. The latter perspective is more complicated and has many adherents in advertising and beyond. Whatever one's conclusion on this matter, the potential danger is that it can buffer advertising practitioners (or any other professionals for that matter) from serious consideration of ethical issues. The worrisome thing about the perspectives exemplified by both of the quotes above is that ethical decision making is delegated to attorneys or policymakers, and it assumes that the observance of the law or regulation is sufficient. Preston (1994, p. 128) asserted that "ethics begins only where the law ends." His logic is that "the law tells you what you must do," whereas "ethics prompts you to do things even though you don't have to." As such, Preston observed that for advertisers who believed that the law was sufficient, "ethics never really starts." The "legal is moral" approach is particularly problematic given Preston's arguments that for some advertising claims, the law ends too soon. The law is often a "blunt tool"—a cumbersome and often inefficient method with which to deal with ethical issues.

The First Amendment Misunderstanding

We heard frequent references to the First Amendment as a justification for not "censoring" advertising messages. For example, when an agency president was asked if he had considered developing a code of ethics for his agency and the advertising produced for their clients, he responded, "How could I? It would violate the First Amendment." He then pledged his allegiance to the First Amendment, suggested that everyone was attacking it, and expounded on the need to protect the First Amendment.

A naive understanding, or perhaps a misunderstanding, of the First Amendment was prevalent among some of our informants. The Supreme Court has never afforded absolute protection to speech, despite Justice Hugo Black's literal interpretation that the free speech clause of the First Amendment, "Congress shall make no law," meant that Congress should absolutely make no law that would infringe speech. Moreover, it has determined that "commercial speech" does not receive all the protection of other forms of speech. That said, the commercial speech distinction is being increasingly diminished by the Court (see *Central Hudson v. Public Service Commission* and *44 Liquormart, Inc. v. Rhode Island*).

But these doctrinal issues are not the source of the naiveté to which we refer. The First Amendment prohibits government from abridging freedom of speech; it does not stand for the proposition that all speech is equally worthy and should be uttered or encouraged, or that speakers should not be condemned for the speech that they make. To the extent that informants quoted speech maxims, they only talked about a part of the story. The part they understood was that there are desirable aspects to a "marketplace of ideas" that is free from governmental control. The justification for a "marketplace of ideas" assumes that ideas that are not currently popular should not be prohibited by the government because they may contain kernels of truth. The part informants did not understand or did not remember is that the marketplace metaphor assumes that "bad" ideas are supposed to be exposed for the lies they perpetuate and the damage that they do to the truth. Once exposed, they are to be roundly condemned. Indeed, the justification for the government allowing "bad" (i.e., false, hurtful, misleading) speech to enter the marketplace is so that it can be discredited. That the government does not prosecute those who make racial slurs does not mean that racial epithets should be encouraged. In short, some of our informants misinterpreted free speech law as meaning that they were exonerated from personal and professional responsibility, or perhaps they misunderstood the First Amendment more generally. Advertising professionals, like all speakers, have a responsibility to make judgments about speech. This becomes even more the case as the Supreme Court lessens the distinction between commercial and noncommercial speech.

Going Native

Another reported phenomenon that distorts moral vision involves becoming so close to a client's business and corporate culture that one fails to recognize or ask moral questions. We refer to this as "going native." This phenomenon is often associated with anthropologists, foreign service officers, or others who become overly immersed in foreign cultures to the point that they lose their objectivity. In advertising, going native involves overidentifying with the client's perspective

to the point that one loses the ability to be critical of clients and objective in assessing their behavior and advertising. One informant elaborated on her experience:

When you've got a group of [client] R & D people telling you this [good things about the product], and the demos . . . are showing you that maybe it's not as [good] as they make it out to be, you believe [the good things]. If you're living it every day, you believe it. . . . So, when you tell the consumer about it, you find that you're stretching the truth. This [product] is your life. It becomes your life for a year. So it doesn't feel like you're doing anything wrong.

When advertising practitioners go native, it can render them less able to make critical moral judgments.

The Ostrich Syndrome

Like the ostrich with its head in the sand, when out of sight, looming ethical issues were out of mind. Or as one informant succinctly put it: "Ignorance is bliss." A seasoned veteran with more than 15 years in the business admitted:

I think that if I did a little bit more digging into a company's connections . . . then yes, I'd probably have a problem working on it.

Better not to dig. Again, this is not unique to advertising, but the hectic pace of the advertising business and the transient nature of projects made it easy to adopt this approach. A less experienced practitioner alluded to this:

I don't have a lot of time to sit and think about if the people who make this thing are really evil. You just don't have time to do that. That's just the reality of it.

Moral Muteness

We now turn to moral muteness. Though moral myopia and moral muteness are often intertwined and reinforce one another, it is helpful conceptually to distinguish them. Moral muteness refers to individuals who recognize ethical issues but remain silent and avoid confronting them either personally or organizationally. Moral muteness occurs whenever people fail to communicate moral concerns that they genuinely feel, regardless of how the failure happens. Bird (2002, p. 34) identifies three forms of moral muteness: (1) negative expressions (e.g., not blowing the whistle on observed abuses, not questioning aspects of decisions thought to be morally debatable); (2) positive expressions (e.g., not speaking up for ideals), and (3) not holding others sufficiently accountable (e.g., not providing adequate feedback in supervisory relationships). Upon examination of our informants' responses, we identified four categories of rationalizations that help to explain muteness.

Compartmentalization

One approach that contributed to moral muteness was compartmentalization. The classic form separates one's work life from one's personal life and convictions. The result is having one set of standards for work and another for nonwork matters. When asked about ethical issues at both the organizational and societal level, one young practitioner, a star creative talent, described the classic case of compartmentalization:

I know that things go on. When I'm at home, all of these things sicken me, really. But when I'm here, it's different because I'm so into creatively what I'm doing, it's like a different picture.

Compartmentalization, which can occur for many reasons, is a complex phenomenon that can be driven by positive forces. The comment above illustrates how enjoyment of the work itself, particularly the creative aspect, encourages compartmentalization. Creativity was viewed by our informants as a chief virtue. Perhaps, and this is only speculation, when one is pursuing something that is good—being creative, entertaining the public, increasing wealth, furthering democracy, and so forth—it can serve to further compartmentalization.

Compartmentalization often involved separating one's personal standards from a client's business standards. A seasoned veteran demonstrated this approach:

The [client] company is running a business. They can choose what they want to convey. . . . Therefore, if they want to put in these models who look like they're taking heroin or heroin chic or ultrathin models, then that is their right because it is their business, and they're running it the way that they want to. On a personal level, I find it very offensive.

The informant has a young daughter and expressed concern regarding the potential influence of advertising on children and their conceptions of beauty. Nonetheless, she compartmentalized those concerns, and as the above quote reveals, she did not make a moral judgment or exert influence on the client.

Two issues that some respondents viewed as raising ethical problems were cigarette advertising and advertising to young children, but these, too, were vulnerable to forms of compartmentalization. The informant quoted above illustrates compartmentalization with respect to advertising's effect on children. With respect to cigarettes, we observed a different variation of compartmentalization. Many agencies appeared to allow their employees substantial leeway in declining to work on controversial products, and a number of individuals said, "I'll refuse to work on cigarette advertising." This refrain was sounded often, especially by the more junior advertising practitioners, and it represents a sea change among advertising practitioners, who formerly flocked to the side of the cigarette companies (Rangan 1989). Often, however, informants appeared to ignore the connection between their

personal position and their employers' institutional position. One senior executive did acknowledge the conflict:

I personally never, would never, will never work on a cigarette ad. . . . I'm a hypocrite because . . . if the agency makes money, I get a bonus; part of that is cigarette money. I just won't work on it. I just feel better, but you want to know what it is? It's [expletive]. We shouldn't do cigarettes.

There were many ways to compartmentalize, but they all resulted in the same effect. They permitted informants to avoid taking responsibility for negative effects of advertising.

The Client Is Always Right

Most clients come in saying they want to have really terrific advertising. . . . I found very quickly that what they want is for us to collude with them on issues. And I never can predict what it will be. We can agree to pretend to each other that they have reached excellence in some area. . . . I'm not a hard-ass in that I have people who want to keep their jobs. . . . I collude with them. . . . I always wish that I could be very straightforward with my clients, but they don't want it. They really don't want it. It's just annoying to them.

The client-is-always-right syndrome means that informants did not want to tell clients "no" regarding ethics or anything else. This often led informants into the role of a "please-o-holic" or "yes-person" rather than that of a trusted business collaborator with an eye toward constructive advice that may be critical at times. It reinforced the perception that advertising practitioners do not have the right to pass judgment on clients. As one young practitioner explained:

Obviously, the last thing that you want to do is to tell your client that they're wrong. You're shooting yourself in the foot if you do that.

A senior executive had this to say:

Obviously, agencies don't like saying "No" to a client. They don't like telling a client that he or she cannot do something, whether it's time constraints or budget constraints or it just doesn't make sense.

There were repeated claims that clients did not want to be confronted with critical questioning from their advertising agencies. In response, some informants came to believe that they should not evaluate or pass judgment on their client's ethical values:

So the last thing that you want to do is make them [the client] feel uncomfortable about what they're doing and what their beliefs are.

Along with please-o-holic tendencies, avoidance of criticism means that an agency does not collaborate with the cli-

ent as a full-fledged partner. It keeps an agency in a subordinate position, at times forcing it to censor what could be its most valuable contribution—its criticism, related to ethics or otherwise. It also reinforces the notion that advertising practitioners should not exercise the prerogative of making moral judgments about clients or exerting influence on them. These findings reinforce a description of advertisers, agencies, and the media as an “unholy trinity,” in which all three parties abdicate ethical responsibility and behavior sinks to a low level (Murphy 1998b). Fiduciary responsibility then becomes equated with doing the client’s bidding. To some degree, this tendency exists in other client-related businesses; however, it appears that advertising practitioners may have a special reluctance to assert their opinions. For example, lawyers must represent their clients’ interests, but part of the job of a lawyer is to instruct clients in what is in their best interest.

Ethics Is Bad for Business

Cultural disincentives discouraged talking about ethical considerations. One particularly strong disincentive was that ethics was viewed as a conservative constraint, a sentence to blandness in advertising messages. What could be worse in an industry that strives for scintillating messages that “push the edge of the envelope” and are “over the top” or “edgy”? As the chief creative officer of one agency explained:

Unfortunately, the solution [to ethical dilemmas] is often to do even less interesting advertising that’s even more acceptable to the masses by offending no one.

Another significant disincentive involved inferences that were perceived to be made regarding people who would raise such concerns. For example, there was a fear that clients or co-workers would equate one who raises ethical concerns with a lack of business acumen. The chief creative officer quoted above elaborated on the reasons that advertising practitioners do not raise ethical issues with clients:

The reason the agency doesn’t want to come in and say, “Hey, this isn’t ethical,” is because they would be laughed out of the office. I think that they’re afraid that the client would say, “Well, if you want to run a church, run a church, but if you want to make some money, you’re going to have to do it our way.” . . . I think there is a fear that if they were to talk about it [ethical concerns], then all of a sudden, they are taken less seriously as a business person. And they are looked upon suspiciously as someone who has let their religious philosophies get in the way of their business acumen.

Pandora’s Box Syndrome

Some expressed the view that raising any ethical issues must be avoided for fear of opening a Pandora’s box. As a result,

potentially harmful effects of advertising were simply not confronted or discussed since considering them could be too dangerous. It could lead one to becoming less effective at work or worse. The effects of opening a Pandora’s box could ultimately prompt one to leave the industry. As one senior executive explained:

When you start looking for ethical issues, they are everywhere. . . . You open up a can of worms that just goes on and on and on. . . . You could get so bogged down in wondering if what you are doing is right that you would end up not doing anything. . . . If you look and probe and focus the microscope, you finally get down to, “It’s the darn system.” . . . You pretty much get to the point, “Are we going to be in advertising or not?”

The Pandora’s box syndrome seemed to block reflection and critical thinking. It caused some advertising practitioners to shy away from critically examining issues affecting the larger profession and its impact.

“Seeing, Talking” Advertising Practitioners

I think that one of the things that would be helpful in terms of the advertising industry is to have more communication about marketing ethics. . . . I think it would make for smarter consumers and a smarter agency and smarter clients.

Notable exceptions emerged to our findings of myopia and muteness among advertising practitioners. There were “seeing, talking” advertising practitioners who typically recognized moral issues and talked about them inside the agency with their co-workers and outside the agency with their clients and potential clients. We now examine the themes that differentiated these individuals from others in our sample. We noted no systematic differences between the individuals in the first and second groups in terms of age, seniority level, gender, job assignment, or background. We did note a difference in the contexts in which these individuals worked. Almost without exception, the agencies in which the “seeing, talking” practitioners worked appeared to have organizational cultures and climates that encouraged moral seeing and talking. These agencies appeared to have some authentic norms regarding ethical behavior that were widely held and clearly articulated by members of the community. In addition, the agencies tended to be small, privately held agencies in one location or nearly autonomous units of large conglomerates typically in only one location. As mentioned earlier, we intentionally conducted additional interviews in agencies in which we found ethically sensitive informants to gain a better understanding of both this type of informant and the contexts in which they were working. The ways in which the “seeing, talking” advertising practitioners differed from the others in our sample can be likened to a decision-making pro-

cess: recognition of the issue, communication about it, and the decision itself.

Recognition

The “seeing, talking” advertising practitioners appeared to recognize moral issues readily, evidencing moral discernment and understanding. For example, one informant reported that he and a colleague had recognized an unethical practice when reviewing a potential client’s past advertising and had told the potential client in no uncertain terms that they were unwilling to accept the company as a client if it wanted to continue ethically problematic work of that nature. Another agency executive explained:

Whenever we get a sense that [a promise that can’t be fulfilled] is in the back of a client’s mind, we point it out, and it usually goes away.

Upon recognizing unethical behavior, one individual reported that he and his colleagues ridiculed it, refusing to take it seriously.

If, when we’re getting creative, something that’s unethical comes up, we laugh more than anything else. [We say,] “We can’t do that; that’s ridiculous.” . . .

To me, it’s almost an embarrassment to take something to a client and have them say, “We can’t do that. That’s unethical.” The agency should have felt that way before the client did.

This is in contrast to other advertising practitioners who feared that if they brought up an ethical issue, their co-workers and clients would think that they did not have business savvy. Rather than talking of “smart consumers” who cannot be deceived, these informants talked of “smart clients,” who know that being unethical is not good for business. Again, this is in contrast to other informants who refrained from confronting their clients, thereby supposedly “shooting themselves in the foot.” These “seeing, talking” advertising practitioners did not conceive of their roles as merely doing their clients’ bidding. Instead, their roles encompassed making judgments and asserting opinions, as would be expected of a trusted partner.

There was one notable exception to the moral seeing and speaking of these informants, which frequently tended to be a blind spot. Like our other informants with moral muteness and moral myopia, they too often failed to see or be concerned about advertising’s unintended social consequences. As one said:

I don’t worry about those things. I don’t believe that those are the consequences [of advertising].

Another explained:

I do not subscribe to that theory [that advertising has unintended consequences]. I do not believe it. I think that adver-

tising is a reflection of society. . . . Maybe nobody in this business believes this. Otherwise, we’d be lawyers.

This is in keeping with Rotzoll and Christians’ (1980) finding that the advertising practitioners in their sample, whom they portrayed as ethically sensitive, “generally think in terms of the closest at hand, apparently finding something like ‘consequences to society’ as too amorphous and involving too many results, which are simply incalculable. Social and institutional questions, therefore, receive only meager attention” (p. 429).

Some of our informants did, however, acknowledge advertising’s unintended consequences:

I’ll have to be honest. There is no question that there seems to be a growing degree of expressed interest on the part of people as to advertising’s unintended consequences. I guess we always need to be mindful that the communications that we create can have a ripple effect—unintended and unmeant kinds of consequences. An example is video games and the contribution that those kinds of messages have to promote the nation’s undercurrent of aggressive or violent behavior. Yeah, I do think that we need to be mindful of that.

Communication

The “seeing, talking” advertising practitioners professed a strong belief in the importance of overt, direct communication, and it was not unusual for these communications to have an ethical dimension. As one senior agency executive said, “People need to talk. . . . Communication is good. We talk 15 to 20 times a day.” These individuals tried to be clear in communicating their ethical values as they solicited new business, and they reported instances in which they had been direct and forthright in confronting their clients and prospective clients about their values. They even used the values of potential clients as a screening criterion in accepting new business. As one individual expressed, “We do not want to work with people who are not fair as an organization.” Another informant put it even more frankly:

And we try to be very clear with our clients, from the first time that we meet them, about what we stand for. That it’s about the work, and they need to be able to not just tolerate, but welcome and encourage, bone honesty. And we’re going to give them our opinion, and they’re not always going to like that.

These informants often spoke of agency leaders who communicated the importance of ethics both through the examples that they set and clear statements of their values. More often than not, they reported that their agencies had an official statement that communicated a comprehensive, overarching vision of the kind of culture they wanted the agency to nurture. These visions were based on well thought out principles, and they often had been created by a group of individuals who

had gone through “a lot of soul searching about what kind of community we were going to be.” The visions typically were prominently featured in permanent displays within the agencies and communicated externally as well. The point is not that these agencies had statements or codes, but that the statements or codes appeared to articulate authentic norms of the agency communities and efforts were made to put them into action.

Saying No

Some advertising practitioners had the moral courage to say no to their co-workers and to their clients. For example, one agency CEO walked away from the agency's largest account when the client's COO insisted that he do something that he deemed unfair and unethical. He was widely quoted among workers in his agency as asserting, “It's OK to get fired. It's OK to resign.” He not only said no, he obviously talked about it in his agency. These views were in stark contrast to prevalent sentiments described earlier that the client must be pleased at all costs. A related sentiment that these informants identified as being a part of the agency culture was, “It's OK to make mistakes.” This perception enabled individuals to be straightforward about their mistakes, freeing them from the need to lie about them or cover them up.

Beyond Normal Vision: Moral Imagination

At times, the “seeing, talking” advertising practitioners demonstrated what some scholars have referred to as moral imagination (e.g., Johnson 1993; Werhane 1999). Moral imagination entails being able to see and think outside the box, envisioning moral alternatives that others do not. Our research was not designed to study moral imagination, but as we studied the real problems faced by practitioners, we saw many instances of where imaginative solutions were needed. Moreover, we believe we saw some instances in which moral imagination was employed. For example, the agency CEO who walked away from his largest account when his client insisted that he do something that he considered unethical appeared to exhibit not only moral seeing and talking, but moral imagination. He readily envisioned the implications that the unethical behavior would bring about for him, for his agency, and for his client's competitors. He also knew that resigning the account, which represented more than 25% of the agency's billings, could force him to lay off a number of agency employees, but he did not succumb to thinking he had only two alternatives—act unethically, keep the account, and avoid layoffs or act ethically and lay off a number of workers. He discussed these problems openly and at length with his client and with his co-workers. Through the discussions, the CEO envisioned a resourceful way to keep from laying people off if they lost or

resigned the client. When the client refused to yield, the CEO resigned the account and implemented the alternative, avoiding layoffs. Through the combined use of moral seeing, talking, and imagination, the CEO had found an acceptable and ethical solution.

The “seeing, talking” advertising practitioners appear to have mastered the various aspects of Rest's (1994, p. 23) model of four psychological components determining moral behavior: “1) moral sensitivity (interpreting the situation), 2) moral judgment (judging which action is morally right/wrong), 3) moral motivation (prioritizing moral values relative to other values), and 4) moral character (having courage, persisting, overcoming distractions, implementing skills).” When informants demonstrated moral imagination, they also exhibited an added dimension involving unique insights, inventiveness, and resourcefulness. This enabled them to generate moral alternatives that others had not seen and uniquely equipped them to engage in moral problem solving. This dimension is somewhat akin to what Levitt (1986) identified as “marketing imagination,” through which marketers make “an inspired leap from the obvious to the meaningful,” reconceptualize a problem, and generate an ingenious solution to it.²

DISCUSSION

Our findings differ from what we take to be the thrust of previous conclusions (e.g., Hunt and Chonko 1987; Rotzoll and Christians 1980) in that a substantial portion of informants did not see ethical issues or rationalized them away. It bears repeating that there is very little in the way of previous research that is directly relevant. In attempting to explain the differences in our findings and those of previous research, we note three factors. First, our methods differ. Personal interviews can elicit a different caliber of data that is capable of revealing thought processes that mail surveys cannot. Second, we note the passage of time from the 1980s to the twenty-first century. Time passes, and some social norms and mores change. Third, the advertising industry has undergone dramatic structural changes involving massive consolidation since the time of the previous studies. As such, agencies that historically have been privately owned have been acquired by public companies, which place much more emphasis on short-term financial performance that can work against ethical decision making. Our study was not designed to estimate the proportion of advertising practitioners in the population with moral myopia or moral muteness. What our study does do is help to elucidate the thought worlds of advertising practitioners who do not see and confront ethical issues. Moreover, it categorizes ways in which avoidance of ethical issues occurs. Some of the categories are typical of much human avoidance and rationalizing behavior; others, while not unique to advertising, are certainly exacerbated by that industry's con-

text and demands. Our study also demonstrates, however, that there are and can be successful advertising professionals who are ethically aware and respond accordingly. Our study also finds that the context in which advertising practitioners work matters in terms of their ethical sensitivity.

We do not believe that moral myopia or moral muteness is unique to advertising or marketing. Indeed, the recent round of corporate scandals suggests that moral myopia and moral muteness are apparent in many industries. Our data were collected before the Enron debacle, and as we watched it unfold, we saw evidence of rampant moral muteness and moral myopia, which paved the way for serious ethical breaches by people of both good and ill intent. While we found moral myopia in advertising regarding issues at the individual, organizational, and societal levels, it was more acute at the organizational and societal levels. As with many issues, the first step in dealing with an ethical problem is recognition of it. Unless a problem is recognized, sound ethical decision making is highly unlikely. Thus, myopia is a serious concern. When the problem is recognized but not discussed, moral muteness is also troubling. Often when an ethical issue arises, if it is acknowledged, discussed, and debated, the "ethical" response is sometimes obvious. Other times, of course, ethical people can disagree on what constitutes the ethical response, but rarely is it a good thing to pretend that an ethical concern is nonexistent. Sometimes responses require what some have described as moral imagination (e.g., Johnson 1993; Werhane 1999), which entails being able to see and think outside the box, envisioning moral alternatives that others do not. In addition to correcting moral muteness and moral myopia, advertising practitioners—indeed all of us—should aspire to develop moral imagination.

Theoretical Implications: Individual Morality and the Importance of Community

We did not find a continuum but essentially a bifurcation of both individuals and agencies with regard to ethical sensitivity. Our findings regarding individuals resonate with cognitive theories about the development of moral reasoning by scholars such as Piaget (1965), Kohlberg (1967, 1971, 1984), and Rest (1984, 1986, 1994). We have already noted the theoretical implications of Rest's work for our findings. Drawing on Piaget's work, Kohlberg proposed a hierarchy of moral reasoning in which people move beyond individualistic, instrumental approaches to more complex problem solving that takes into account concepts such as justice, the rights of others, and the welfare of the social system. The "seeing, talking" advertising practitioners appeared to be engaged in moral reasoning characteristic of the higher stages of Kohlberg's model, while those who were myopic or mute appeared to reason in a manner representative of the lower stages.

Our findings regarding the bifurcation of agencies fit comfortably within a broader theoretical context that notes the importance of community. Moral sensitivity appeared to be nurtured and developed best in groups or communities; and the agencies in which we observed moral sensitivity have aspects that were quite different from other agencies. A number of scholars and writers in the business ethics field have noted that a corporation can be seen as a moral community (Hartman 1994, 1996; Nahser 1997; Nesteruk 1996; Solomon 1992, 1999). The agencies with talking, seeing advertising practitioners fit this description. Their employees see and reflect upon ethical issues when others do not and tend to make decisions on a set of principles and norms that are followed not only by the CEO and/or owners but others in the agency. Integrated social contract theory assumes that communities develop "authentic ethical norms . . . supported by the attitudes and behaviors of a substantial majority of the members of the community" (Dunfee, Smith, and Ross 1999). Agencies with talking, seeing advertising practitioners appear to have developed and articulated ethical norms, but it is not clear that agencies with practitioners with moral myopia and moral muteness have done so, at least not in a purposeful, premeditated manner. Moral virtues among individuals are best cultivated and sustained in communities as Woodruff (2001) expressed:

Virtues grow in us through being used, and they are used mainly by people living or working together. . . . If you are surrounded by vice, you will find it hard to stay in tune with virtue. . . . Virtue ethics, then, deals with strengths that people develop in communities. Communities, in turn, depend on the strengths of their members. (p. 6)

Virtues are cultivated over time, and they have the greatest lasting power in close-knit communities. (p. 24)

This concept of community draws heavily from Aristotelian ethics. Aristotle spoke of a "good community" as one where good habits are cultivated and nurtured (Aristotle 1962). Solomon (1992) and others have explicitly noted that the morals of executives, especially those most visible in the firm, are important influences on corporate morality. Equally important, he asserted, are the nature and power of institutions in shaping and sanctioning an individual's morals. It seems safe to say that only a portion of the industry falls into a moral interpretation of community.

Directions for Future Research

Our study points to a number of important directions for future research. A more thorough examination of advertising agencies that have successfully cultivated ethical sensitivity could increase our understanding of best ethical practices. If the advertising industry is to place a higher premium on ethics, more should be known about firms that appear to have

ethics as a core feature. Such research is likely to glean a more thorough profile of both the leadership and the rank-and-file employees at these "talking, seeing" agencies. Examining and understanding the organizational policies, processes, cultures, and climates in which ethically aware decision makers work is at least as important as profiling the decision makers themselves. As a step toward advancing further research in advertising ethics, we offer a few research propositions that ultimately could become testable hypotheses. We leave it to future researchers to operationalize the propositions in a manner that leads to hypothesis generation.

The first proposition links the notion of community with actual ethical behavior within organizations, particularly advertising firms. The immediate leadership within the agency offices in which the interviews were conducted appeared to be central to the development of "seeing, talking" practitioners within those offices. Many of these leaders were presidents or CEOs of smaller agencies, but in larger firms, local managing directors exerted similar positive ethical influence.

P1: Leaders create a context in which moral imagination can flourish in the offices in which they work.

Several characteristics were typical of the agencies with high levels of ethical awareness. A high degree of communication typified these organizations. Furthermore, the communication between upper management and lower-level employees was frequent and dealt openly with the agency's core values and with tough ethical issues. In addition, all of these firms had a statement of values or ethics that was prominently displayed and that had been disseminated and discussed throughout the organization.

P2: Agencies with a highly communicative corporate culture demonstrate a higher level of ethical sensitivity.

P3: Agencies with frequent internal communication about core values demonstrate a higher level of ethical sensitivity.

P4: Agencies with frequent communication between upper management and lower-level employees about tough ethical issues demonstrate a higher level of ethical sensitivity.

P5: Agencies with formal ethics policies that have been widely disseminated within the organization and discussed among co-workers demonstrate a higher level of ethical sensitivity.

Moral myopia also seems to be more prevalent when there is a lack of communication with clients about values—the agency's and client's core values and the values upon which the advertising is based.

P6: Failure to communicate with clients about values leads to moral myopia.

Other questions regarding moral muteness and moral myo-

opia must be answered. For example, how prevalent are they in the advertising profession and in marketing more generally? Are some aspects of advertising or marketing more vulnerable to myopia and muteness? What are the antecedents of moral muteness and myopia? For instance, we did not have a large enough sample to compare whether creative, account management, or media personnel in an agency are more likely to experience muteness and/or myopia. Obviously, the specific ethical issues faced by account management (e.g., client interaction and entertaining) are somewhat different from those experienced by creatives (e.g., stealing ideas) and likewise dissimilar from people working in media (e.g., interaction with representatives of the print and broadcast media, negotiation of contracts). Upper management experiences still another level of ethical challenge (e.g., compromising organizational values to meet client demands).

P7: The position held within an agency (e.g., creative, account management, media, or senior management) is related to specific forms of moral muteness.

P8: The position held within an agency is related to specific types of moral myopia.

We found the type of community within an agency to be a correlate of myopia and muteness, but what other correlates may come into play? Does the type of educational background (e.g., liberal arts versus business majors) matter? Does it make a difference if practitioners have had formal instruction in advertising ethics as a part of a collegiate program or in workplace training programs? Are people with particular religious backgrounds more or less inclined to develop myopia or muteness than others? Is the difference between agencies with regard to ethical sensitivity better explained by something the agency does, or is it explained by the type of people who are attracted to that type of agency. We suspect there is an interactive effect. More generally, research is warranted that treats moral imagination, moral myopia, and moral muteness as dependent variables and tries to identify independent variables. Of course, this would require operationalization and specification of the dependent variables. Scenarios analysis designed to detect and examine myopia and muteness could be helpful.

More needs to be understood about enabling ethical sensitivity to take root and flourish in worldwide organizations with multiple locations. The agencies in which our talking, seeing informants worked were, almost without exception, either privately held agencies with one location or relatively autonomous units of conglomerates with one location. Because the advertising industry has undergone massive consolidation, understanding how to cultivate agency offices with talking, seeing advertising practitioners within worldwide networks composed of many different subsidiaries with offices in many far-flung locations is a particularly important

endeavor. This line of inquiry would also be relevant to the marketing functions of multinational corporations. How can moral sensitivity best be cultivated in a worldwide network? What impact does the parent company have, and how can its power and influence be leveraged to encourage the development of moral sensitivity?

Our study has focused on a commercial context. Ethical sensitivity is vital to problem solving in social and nonprofit marketing. In addition, it is particularly important in corporate societal marketing (e.g., cause-related marketing, social alliances), which is at the nexus of the commercial and nonprofit or public sectors. For example, what forms does ethical sensitivity take when one is applying marketing to the complicated needs of society or trying to manage the interdependence between a company's interests and society's needs? In what ways is cultivating ethical sensitivity among social and nonprofit marketers different from encouraging it among commercial marketers? Do skills transfer directly between commercial and nonprofit or public sectors, or do they have to be adapted, depending upon the context?

Finally, we believe that it is imperative that scholars continue to examine the advertising and marketing professions critically. The advertising profession especially is one in which the positive is accentuated. In such a fast-paced, competitive, creative industry, there is little time or encouragement to focus on deep and troubling concerns to the individual, organization, or society. Nevertheless, critical examination plays a fundamentally important role in any profession. In fact, one of the characteristics of any profession is the obligation to examine, monitor, and revise its ethical standards and practices. We encourage future researchers to follow the advice of Pollay:

Critical inquiry does not require researchers to believe that advertising will be absolved of all charges as much as it requires having faith that the institutions of advertising have some potential for self-correction and a capacity for moral action in light of new knowledge. Let us hope that marketing and advertising scholars have this faith and carry out the needed research. Let us hope that such faith is well-founded. (1986, pp. 33–34)

Pollay asserted that the institutions of advertising have potential for self-correction and the capacity for moral action. There is always "potential," but likelihood is another matter. In the final sections of this paper, we address the implications of our findings for practice and for education with the hope that such a faith is indeed warranted.

Managerial Implications

The implications of this study appear to apply not only to advertising practitioners but also to marketing practitioners more generally. They all face serious challenges if they want

to make moral vision, discussion, and imagination more central to their firms. Some of our recommendations involve paradigm shifts in prevailing perspectives and conceptualization of the roles of advertising and marketing practitioners, while others involve changes in organizational cultures, policies, and practices.

A paradigm shift seems to be needed regarding what it means to serve clients well. Many of our informants generally expressed a strong sense that advertising practitioners are to do the client's bidding. Fiduciary responsibility, then, is equated with pleasing clients and doing exactly what they want done. We found this to be a norm so strong among some of our informants that it became something of a countervailing "moral" good in and of itself. The stronger the norm that the duty of advertising practitioners is to do the client's bidding, the more difficult it becomes for them to interject their own ethical judgments. To some degree this exists in other client-based businesses; however, there are often counterweights. For example, good lawyers see their job as instructing their clients as to what their best interest is, not simply doing what the client wants. Whatever the moral myopia of other professions, the more one feels obligated to defer to the client, the harder it is to assert one's own ethical judgment. Thus, one recommendation is that the conception of an advertising professional's responsibilities be reformulated and expanded, including a more sophisticated understanding of fiduciary responsibility. Undoubtedly, education and training must play a role in this paradigm shift.

The shift described above cannot occur if organizational practices and policies are not altered. For example, clients and potential clients—both their products and their business practices—should be examined and discussed with an eye toward potential ethical problems. Not all clients can be considered to be a "good" client who must be attracted to the agency and retained at all costs. Overt discussions of ethical values, both the agency's and the client's, should be initiated in the "pitch" stage and continued through the life of the relationship. Refusing to take on potential clients and dropping existing clients can and should be viewed as acceptable alternatives. When accounts are refused or resigned on ethical grounds, managers should be rewarded. Agencies also should set up procedures and systems that encourage workers to blow the whistle on questionable behavior.

Leaders, of course, play an important role. CEOs, owners, and/or managing partners should provide extensive ethical leadership, as was the case in the agencies with ethically sensitive practitioners in our sample. This role is dramatically different from the roles that self-interested CEOs with exorbitant salaries and golden parachutes often appear to play. Agency leaders should model moral seeing and speaking both individually and organizationally. Too often our respondents reported that ethical views at their agencies were implicit

and not overtly expressed. Leaders should seize every opportunity to express their ethical values in face-to-face communications with employees and with clients. They also should initiate processes to formulate and articulate ethical visions and policies. The processes ideally should be participative, prompting discussion among workers at all levels and in all agency functions. If agencies have ethics statements and policies, leaders should initiate processes to revise, communicate, and promote them internally and externally (Murphy 1998a).

We recognize that paradigm shifts such as the ones that we call for are always difficult and may presently, in the context of advertising in particular and in business more generally, appear unlikely. However, when paradigm shifts do occur, they typically are undergirded by major shifts in public sentiment, cultural norms, and regulation. As an example, we cite the sea change in advertising practitioners' sentiments toward cigarette advertising that we referenced earlier. We are encouraged that in response to the recent corporate scandals, ethical behavior in business appears to be on the national agenda in a renewed way. Legislation is changing as evidenced by the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, and the public appears to be demanding that attention be given to issues of ethical behavior in business. Whether paradigm shifts occur or whether ethics concerns are a fleeting fancy remains to be seen. When public sentiment and cultural norms meaningfully change, education certainly plays a role. We turn now to the implications of our findings for educators.

Implications for Educators

We believe that educators should expose and sensitize students to ethical questions and dilemmas that they are likely to encounter as practitioners. After all, to be forewarned is to be forearmed. Forethought as to how one might deal with a situation before it occurs often leads to better decisions at the time of dilemma or crisis. This is a cardinal rule in business generally—indeed, in many of life's activities—and yet for some reason, educators shy away from this fundamental teaching goal when it comes to ethical situations. What constitutes the ethical thing to do is sometimes debatable, but it does not follow that we should therefore ignore the fact that one should be the best prepared to wrestle with it when it occurs. What constitutes the "right" action plan for a business may also be debatable, but there often is a set of helpful principles or concepts. Likewise, there are principles and concepts that can be helpful in ethical decision making. Case teaching assumes a value to forethought irrespective of whether there is a "right" answer.

Yet the educational task is even broader than simply identifying possible ethical issues. To combat moral muteness and moral myopia, students must also understand the issues of organizational culture and climate that encourage ethical be-

havior. Because moral myopia was most acute regarding issues related to advertising's unintended social consequences, educators must help students learn to think critically about the advertising and marketing communications industries as well as their effects on society. To accomplish this, universities should offer specialized courses dealing with advertising and marketing ethics and also integrate ethics into required courses dealing with advertising management, creative strategies, advertising campaigns, and marketing management.

The question "Can ethics be taught to undergraduate and graduate students?" is often raised.³ Again, that often is not the right question for the reasons stated above. Nevertheless, we assert that professors consciously or unconsciously influence their students' attitudes and values, and that adults of all ages are capable of learning that will prompt them to change their attitudes and values. The question is not "Can we influence our students' attitudes and values?" but rather "How will we influence our students' attitudes and values?" However, even if one assumes that students' values are not subject to influence in the classroom, identifying ethical issues in an unfamiliar and complex professional context can be difficult. Students with the highest values and intentions need guidance in recognizing ethical issues. Some universities do not have required or elective courses in advertising ethics or even in marketing or business ethics. When universities do have such courses, they are often upper division elective courses that students take as seniors. Because industry socialization begins early as students engage in projects and internships, we believe that exposure to ethics should ideally occur early in a student's academic career. Textbook authors should increase the coverage that they give to ethics in both textual material and in cases. Often, ethics material is relegated to a single chapter or part of a chapter at the end of a textbook, which in itself sends a signal. In the light of recent scandals, many businesses and professional corporations are realizing the need for training their employees to recognize and deal with ethical dilemmas. It would be embarrassing for the educational community to lag behind the professional one. As educators, we can help guide this effort in ways that are likely to be more productive and long-lasting after the current attention begins to fade.

CONCLUSIONS

The first step in solving a problem is identifying it and developing a better understanding of it. In this paper, we have identified moral muteness and moral myopia and tried to shed light on the rationalizations and communities that support or counteract them. We have also reported evidence of moral imagination and identified the characteristics of the communities in which it, along with moral seeing and talking, flourishes. We hope that the directions for future research that our

study has produced will serve as a catalyst for improving the theory and practice of advertising and marketing ethics in academic and advertising communities.

NOTES

1. In *The Muted Conscience*, Bird (1996) described various moral shortcomings, including moral silence, moral blindness, and moral deafness. Moral myopia is similar to his notion. We simply label it a bit differently as it applies to our informants' answers. We use the term "moral" as a synonym for "ethical" to describe muteness and myopia. This interpretation is slightly different from some of the moral philosophical accounts, which define morality as more of a systemwide practice and ethics to be more individually focused (DeGeorge 1999, p. 19).

2. The commonality between "marketing imagination" and "moral imagination" was suggested to us by George Brenkert of Georgetown University.

3. See Piper, Gentile, and Parks (1993) for an extensive examination of this question.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

1. How do your clients communicate their values to you?

Prompts: Is this something that people talk about? Do you ever ask your clients to tell you about their values?

2. What are the ethical issues that advertising professionals deal with?

Prompts: Which are the easiest to deal with? Which are the most difficult? Which concern you the most?

3. Have you ever been asked to do something that you did not feel comfortable doing?

Prompt: Do you know of anyone who has refused to do something he or she wasn't comfortable with?

4. Let's talk about potentially deceptive ads specifically. Do you worry much about deception in advertising?

Prompts: Have you ever been asked to use an approach that was potentially deceptive, or have you ever used an approach that turned out to be potentially deceptive? What criteria do you use to guard against deceptive ads?

5. Are you concerned about what some people call advertising's unintended consequences?

Prompts: For example, does advertising help create unrealistic conceptions of beauty among teenage girls that might contribute to eating disorders? Does advertising play a role in making smoking or drinking appealing to underage individuals?

6. Changing gears, have you been involved in pro bono campaigns, and if so, what was your experience like?

Prompts: If yes, how and why did you become involved? How did you feel about your involvement?

7. What image does your agency try to project, and how would you describe its culture?

8. We all have our personal value systems. What do you think is the source of yours?