



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Private, the Public, and the Published

Barbara Couture, Thomas Kent

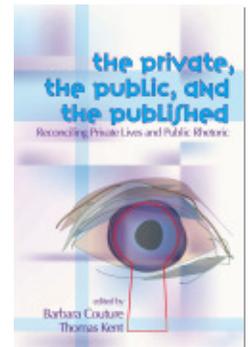
Published by Utah State University Press

Couture, Barbara and Thomas Kent.

Private, the Public, and the Published: Reconciling Private Lives and Public Rhetoric.

Utah State University Press, 2004.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/9280](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9280).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9280>

## ETHICAL DELIBERATION AND TRUST IN DIVERSE-GROUP COLLABORATION

Geoffrey A. Cross

Public interaction can expose private beliefs. In deliberating a public policy, discussants may have to reveal personal values or privately held information. This disclosure can make them vulnerable because some people in positions of authority are not trustworthy recipients of sensitive information and may punish dissensus. How does one determine when to reveal personal values or proprietary information in public settings? The answer to this question has important implications for solving problems—particularly ethical problems—when writing and speaking in collaborative groups. For instance, if group members are reluctant to reveal differing private values, how can they work publicly to resolve an ethical dilemma?

The question of when to reveal private beliefs in public settings is of particular relevance today. Survey researchers report that while ethics indicators are improving and a majority of employees are positive about ethical standards in their organizations, one out of three American workers in 1999–2000 observed behaviors that violated either the law or their organizations' ethical standards. One-third of the survey respondents also said that if they reported their observations, they would be treated as "troublemakers by management or snitches by their coworkers" (Daigneault). Although managers play a significant role in setting the norms of ethical behavior by example (Pettit, Vaught, and Pulley), flattened organizational hierarchies have distributed more responsibility for ethical policies across individuals and teams (Sanders, "Technical" 111). More companies today have developed ethical standards than in 1994 (Daigneault), yet an examination of forty codes of companies recruiting at Cornell University revealed that such written codes provide little guidance to employees regarding potential ethical dilemmas (Stevens 79). This finding is consistent with those reported in three other studies conducted within the last twenty-five years (White and

Montgomery; Cressey and Moore; Matthews); researchers here found that written ethical codes are focused upon legalities and profits rather than “community, personal character issues, or values” (Stevens 79).

In collaborative writing groups, different people are brought to teams chiefly to share their different viewpoints and resources. With such diversity, conflict is nearly inevitable. As Clark notes, we need to value differences so that groups can cooperate as equals—“competing viewpoints must be recognized and attended to” (Clark, “Professional Ethics” 38, cited in Sanders 111). Although everyone may not get his or her way in the end, research suggests that groups that engage in substantive conflict (conflict over ideas) are more productive than groups that try to smooth over differences (Burnett; Karis; Putnam). Yet “affective conflict,” conflict involving personal or emotional issues, has been found to be disruptive to the group’s goal (Cross, *Collaboration*; Falk; Guetzkow and Gyr). Private conviction with its accompanying emotions, however, cannot always be neatly separated from public action.

Habermas has advanced an approach to ethics that addresses the problem of stakeholders with diverse values in public deliberation (McCarthy, *Critical*). Instead of relying upon principles that are not universally acknowledged, this approach requires that the group provisionally arrive at a governing set of common interests and rationally settle moral issues by using a method of argumentation and analysis of argument that is closely related to Toulmin’s.

The goal of this approach is agreement that the group outcome has been arrived at fairly. To enter into ethical dialogue, participants must adhere to several ground rules. Group members must hold the premise that the best argument will prevail, even though this triumph of reason may not occur. Members must start with this assumption or their search for the best solution is invalidated. To achieve consensual action, participants also have to assume that the other group members know what they are doing and why, that their beliefs and goals are intentional, and that they can support them with reasons if necessary. Group members must assume this even though it often may not be true. Another prerequisite is that discussants choose language that will allow them to discuss the subject precisely and as much as possible without biases such as sexism or ethnic prejudice. Such language is crucial to ethical deliberation, as Rentz and Debs have noted.

Having established the necessary attitude of participants toward the dialogue and toward each other, group members must next consider the

nature of the statements in the arguments. For a statement to be valid, it must meet the following standards:

1. The statement must be comprehensible.
2. The statement must have true content.
3. The speaker must express his or her intentions truthfully.
4. The utterance must be right in the light of the existing norms of the group.

Norms are “binding reciprocal expectations of behavior” (McCarthy, *Critical* 313). An easy way to capture the function of norms in arguments is to see them as “warrants,” as proposed in Toulmin’s argumentative scheme. Norms are backed, in Toulmin’s sense of “backing,” by their essential role in satisfying generally accepted needs that are related to the issue at hand. So for all collaborators there is “something in it for them” in adhering to the norms. An example of a norm might be the ground rule “silence means dissent.” If one agrees with the point at issue, one says why. If not, one reveals one’s position. The ostensible advantage for all here is that competing viewpoints are expressed.

Of course, to set up these norms for group participation so that following them becomes mutually beneficial, people must be capable in the situation of “nondeceptive recognition of common needs and interests in the light of adequate knowledge of existing and effectible conditions, likely consequences, and so forth” (McCarthy, *Critical* 315). Habermas asserts that we need the condition of the “ideal speech act” for his method to work—that is, unlimited discussion that is free from open domination, strategic competition, and/or communication problems caused by self deception (McCarthy, *Critical* 306). Therein lies a part of the rub: to speak the truth in dialogue and reveal our true intentions we make ourselves vulnerable. How forthright can people be when responding to authority? Results of the survey cited earlier suggest that a significant number of actions in the workplace are unethical and/or illegal. If superiors and/or peers abuse their positions of authority and mistrust is logical, then taking the rational approach to a “consensus ethics” outlined earlier is not wise.

Consensus and logic per se are not enough to assure ethical outcomes in deliberation. A problem with Habermas’s reliance upon logic, pointed out by Couture (190), is that in an extreme case a circumscribed, pragmatic logic may override ethics, as Steven Katz has shown in his evaluation of the rhetoric of a technical document recommending

the improvement of portable gas chambers during the Holocaust. The recommendations in the document, if followed, would make the gas chambers more efficient, but here logic and efficiency only advance the monstrous. Another factor supporting the Holocaust was consensual judgment—what Popper called “juridical positivism”—or mistaking norms for facts (*Open Society*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 71). Just because a group of people find something is acceptable or “true” does not make it so: the Nazis’ holocaust, egregiously wrong, was accepted by many. With this example in mind, we must be careful about accepting any group’s consensus as “truth.” Yet, we must also be aware that a diverse group, that is, one with divergent and conflicting values, may still assess something truly. Most countries and their inhabitants agree that there are crimes against humanity that can be identified; thus, there are underlying values of right and wrong that we all share at some level that may be ignored or voted out but not erased. A diverse group of individuals may be able to speak their minds and illuminate the subject in full relief because of their multiple perspectives. Group diversity can, in fact, be insurance against the juridical positivistic groupthink that destroyed both the Nazis and their divergent victims.

So aside from avoiding obvious breaches in ethics, an organization should not demand agreement but instead thrive on constructive dissent, productive “collaborative fighting” (Cross, *Collaboration* 133). But for conflict to produce more than a pugilistic catharsis, for it to achieve mutual understanding depends, as Habermas notes, upon “a capacity for learning, both at the cultural and political level” (*Between Facts*, 324). Sometimes a cross-functional group includes members of such different departmental/disciplinary cultures that members find it difficult to create a common mental model and translations are needed before deliberation can be productive (Cross, *Forming*). More important than translation across divergent groups is the political climate established for collaboration: people have to trust the organization they are in sufficiently that they do not fear losing face when speaking out and learning from one another. In short, the organization where they work must be in touch with core values of humanity.

The conditions for trust that I have described are straightforward, but they are not always apparent in real situations: what does one do when it is unclear whether we should extend trust or not? Let’s consider a hypothetical “real-world” situation. People are working on a business

plan in a company that has recently acquired another company. The finance professionals in the acquired company are reluctant to collaborate on the plan—to share their techniques and knowledge of operations with the finance people in the parent company—because they fear that they will become expendable once their knowledge is no longer theirs only. Not only are they reluctant to work on an intercompany business plan, they also are thinking about getting their former president (now a vice president of the parent corporation) to lobby against this plan, employing the rationale that the parent company doesn't need to micromanage them. In working together on the intercompany plan, should they try to come up with a common set of ground rules, perhaps considering rules such as “what we say won't be used to replace us?”

The outcome is quite uncertain: on the one hand, perhaps the acquiring company will indeed fire the acquired financial professionals, but on the other hand, perhaps they will bring them into the company more substantially, promote them, otherwise empower them, and financially reward them. Should the acquired employees trust the acquirers enough to reveal intentions? Or even enough to reveal their distrust by recommending ground rules that prohibit knowledge transfer leading to the firing of those who shared their knowledge? Is Habermas's approach applicable here? The essential problem that this example illustrates is that trust is needed for collaboration to work, but it is not always clear to individuals whether they can safely extend trust. To help solve such dilemmas, we first need to define what is meant by *trust*.

Baier observes that trust is a cooperative activity in which we assist one another in the care of goods or, I would add, people for whom we are responsible. To be specific, allowing someone else to take care of our goods (or people for whom we are responsible) is trust. Because we cannot alone take care of everything valuable to us, we all must trust or rely upon others to some extent. As Baier notes, trust changes the power relations between people, causing the truster to depend upon the trustee, risking disappointment, betrayal and/or harm to self. A good deal of responsibility is thus given to the trustee, who may or may not accept this responsibility, explicitly by refusing the role requested, or tacitly by accepting the role but not fulfilling the responsibilities. Problems with trust often result from power imbalances, imbalances that occur in many of our personal and professional relationships. Power imbalances in the workplace become amplified for those people who trust authority

too readily, adding the vulnerability of trust to the vulnerability of the subordinate position. Those in positions of power must guard against unintentionally taking advantage of trusting subordinates, as Potter notes (unpublished manuscript).

It is not surprising, as H. J. N. Horsburgh has identified, that, on the one hand, full trust can be extended to one person just for a particular situation, and, on the other hand, extended to another person absolutely (353). In many situations what occurs is not trust but reliance: we are uncertain what the person will do but trust them to some degree anyway (Potter).

When should we *not* entrust someone else with our intentions and needs or accept their trust? As Baier notes, it is when people have motives and loyalties that conflict fiercely with ours. These conflicting motives and loyalties may be the result of conflicting organizational goals, or they may reflect individual priorities. For example, Maccoby has identified “jungle fighters” as workers who in their lust for empires not only always try to best their competition but also eliminate them from the organization. Because of the possibility of untrustworthy acquirers—to come back to our workplace example—the acquired company may want to probe the acquiring company to find out its leadership’s motives. Logic suggests that we also probably should not extend trust to people who have betrayed trust in the past, even though they do not have conflicting motives, loyalties, or ethical codes. A company can adopt very impressive ethical codes, but they will not be engaged if employees do not have integrity, that is, the moral will to act on these ethical principles. In the case of the employees in our example, the acquired employees should scrutinize the acquiring individual employees’ track records in dealings with others. Such scrutiny may reveal whether they can be predicted to act with integrity.

When the institution of which any group is part is corrupt, it would be unwise to extend its representatives full trust. Aristotle asserted that we are by nature political, and how good we are is determined by how good our institutions are. I would think that Thoreau, Gandhi, and King would disagree to an extent, but institutions clearly influence people’s behavior, as is indicated by even these nonconformists’ attacks on institutions. To apply this principle to our example, the acquired finance employees should go beyond scrutinizing the ethical behavior of a few individuals and check out the acquiring institution’s track record in dealings with the acquired company and with others.

Habermas points out that in cases where we cannot extend trust, typically we choose to break off communication, resort to force, or engage in strategic competition (perhaps less euphemistically known as “bureaucratic infighting”) (McCarthy, *Critical* 289). Thus, it is not surprising, as Potter tells us, that chronic distrust can be demoralizing, divisive, and contagious in organizations. When groups with diverse identities, values, and goals interface in a company, distrust may dominate, undermining cooperation, self-respect, and moral action. Widespread distrust is a major problem because, as was pointed out before, trusting some people is necessary since we cannot care for all that we are responsible for all the time.

Having noted now when distrust is appropriate, when is it most favorable to extend trust? I propose these conditions:

1. When the trustee cares about what I care about—shared norms are already operative.
2. When the trustee loves us (perhaps not *always* the case in every workplace).
3. When the trustee places a high priority on being trustworthy.
4. When the trustee’s past actions have indicated trustworthiness.
5. When the trustee has a genuine interest in others’ successes.

While these conditions for trustworthiness are fairly clear, often we do not know people well enough to tell if they will or can meet them, so we begin with some reliance and take baby steps toward full trust. This approach exemplifies what Wiggins calls the temporal aspect of trust: trust is often a quality and a process that develops over time. Trust resembles induction; the degree of trust develops as data accrues to the one considering extending trust.

How may we agree and get anything done in an American society of increasing diversity? Rather than try to overtly engage universal principles that all members may not acknowledge, collaborators can try to agree upon Habermasian operating rules that provide ethical direction. But individuals need to determine if the atmosphere is appropriate for this kind of rational consensus building—by gathering information about the motives, loyalties, values, and integrity of both the potential collaborators and the sponsoring institution or institutions. When we cannot tell whether to extend trust to reveal private values or privileged information in public, it may be prudent to extend trust gradually. For

instance, in our example, employees in the acquired company might choose to work on only a part of the business plan with the acquiring company. If trust is not merited, individuals should, it would seem, use other strategies to defend themselves.

Rather than taking baby steps in every unsure situation and frequently lapsing into unconditional bureaucratic warfare resulting from poor communication and trigger-happiness, there is probably also a time for leading by extending trust and fully discussing ethical problems. As Potter notes, if we value responsibility and responsiveness to others, we need to—within our abilities—encourage moral actions in ourselves and others to enlarge the sphere of the moral. Because being trustworthy is a praiseworthy quality, being trusted can build a group member's self-image and trustworthiness. Knowing that one is being trusted can increase one's desire to be trustworthy (Potter).

If one wishes to achieve a moral world, one may need in some cases to "act as if" it existed, leading by example, acting in good faith even in some cases with people whose trustworthiness is questionable. To paraphrase Antoine de Saint Exupery, one cannot just be a dweller in a moral community; one must be a contributor too. To Saint Exupery, this contribution allows one to understand others: "I can be bound to no men except to whom I give. I can understand no men except those to whom I am bound" (120).

As Ruskin and Saint Exupery have noted, the devotion to a moral humanity and sacrifice of a diverse group of people has given the great cathedrals of Europe their idiosyncratic majesty. These triumphs of group effort were produced by the community's entrusting labor, goods, visions, and lives. A common trust drives successful collaboration, even more than the remuneration for achieving the group goal because, to paraphrase an adage, when you are up to your belt in bureaucratic alligators, it's hard to remember your purpose was to drain the swamp. Destructive infighting keeps groups from achieving their goals. Through a rational extension of trust where warranted and through risking trust in some situations where a positive outcome is less sure, the collaborative group has a chance to deal with ethical issues and otherwise flourish. Without a common understanding/trust, group diversity becomes a multidimensional barrier. Diversity without underlying trust is an empty surrealism: a surrealism without the unifying power of the subconscious.

The appeal to our sense of virtue or ethos, as Aristotle said, may be the most persuasive appeal of all. To motivate group members to achieve the synergy possible through a common understanding, we must at times risk going beyond the Habermasian rational—the *logos* of collaboration—into the ethos—the *spirit*—of collaboration. Enacting trust in these situations risks the private for the improvement of both the private and public, which in the end are but two sides of the same life.

