

## CRAFTING SOCIAL ISSUES AT WORK

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**I present and test a model of issue crafting, in which individuals shape the meaning of social issues by intentionally using language in public that portrays those issues in ways that differ from the individuals' private understandings of the issues. Using statements collected with an experimental design, I found that the public language individuals used was more economic and less normative than were their private understandings. Issue crafting varies with organizational values and power relationships. It calls attention to the use of language for seeking influence and extends theories of influence, including sensegiving, issue selling, and influence tactics.**

Organization members have opportunities to portray organizational life in ways that not only report, but also shape, reality (Boje, Oswick, & Ford, 2004). When organization members shape reality, they influence how others view and respond to important issues at work (Dutton & Jackson, 1987). Several areas of research provide useful foundations for addressing how and when individuals shape the meaning of issues at work. "Sensegiving" research focuses on leaders' attempts to influence the meaning construction of others to match a preferred view (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Issue selling research addresses middle managers' efforts to get the attention of senior managers through making claims about what issues mean to an organization (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). And influence tactics research concerns how power affects the techniques individuals use to influence others (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980).

Sensegiving, issue selling, and influence tactics research identifies important tactics that individuals use to seek influence. The importance of language to many of these tactics has been assumed, but little prior work has directly theorized and measured the *meaning of the language* used during an influence attempt. In the current study, I develop a view of "issue crafting"—the intentional use of public language to portray an issue in a way that differs from an individual's private understanding of that issue. I integrate perspectives from sensegiving, issue selling, and influence tactics research, informed by concepts from discourse the-

ory, to theorize and test how and when individuals use language to shape the meaning of issues.

Exploring how and when issue crafting is used reveals subtle ways that individuals shape organizational reality with words and sentences. It also raises an important distinction between how individuals privately view the meaning of issues prior to an influence attempt and how they publicly portray those issues during the influence attempt. Accounting for this distinction extends theories of influence, addresses previously unanswerable questions in the influence literature, and raises new questions about the individual and organizational effects of issue crafting.

I used an experimental scenario method to test uses of issue crafting in the context of social issues. A focus on social issues is theoretically important because it includes issues often treated as less central to an organization's strategy (Crane, 2000). As a result, this focus affords an opportunity to explore how individuals make discursive claims to shape social issues into more strategically oriented accounts intended to resonate with organizational actors (Barry & Elmes, 1997).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

I review three areas of research that provide important theoretical foundations for issue crafting: sensegiving, issue selling, and influence tactics.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although work on impression management also focuses on meaning shaping, this research focuses primarily on presenting a particular view of the self, as opposed to a particular view of an issue (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980).

## Foundational Areas of Research

**Sensegiving.** Sensegiving research focuses on “the process of attempting to influence the sense-making and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991: 442). This research has usually concentrated on leader behavior and uncovers a range of tactics that individuals use to shape meaning—both symbolic tactics, such as making personnel changes, reallocating resources, and holding meetings (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), and discursive tactics, such as making messages appear logical, contesting a proposal, explaining a situation, and expressing an opinion (Bartunek, Krim, Necochea, & Humphries, 1999; Maitlis, 2005). However, sensegiving research has not thoroughly addressed the use of specific types of language (their semantic content or underlying meanings) to shape meaning. For example, although sensegiving research identifies the presence of discursive acts, such as expressing opinions, it does not focus on the *language* contained within these acts.

In some exploratory work in sensegiving, researchers have proposed the possibility of discrepancies between private and public meanings. Hill and Levenhagen (1995), studying entrepreneurial visions, claimed that discrepancies arise because individuals may privately wrestle with the meaning of a vision but need to articulate more certainty about that vision in public. Bartunek and her colleagues (1999) found less consistency between private sensemaking and public sensegiving when leaders felt personally threatened. This research, though promising, leaves several questions unresolved. For example, do non-leaders also have discrepancies between private and public meanings? How does organizational context affect the size and nature of these discrepancies? And do individuals intentionally use language to create these discrepancies?

**Issue selling.** Issue selling research has focused on middle managers’ attempts to get the attention of top managers (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Individuals get attention by making specific claims about the meaning of issues (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977), which are discursively constructed through social processes, as opposed to having a priori meanings. Previous research has focused on a set of factors that affect individuals’ willingness to sell issues, such as organizational support and trusting relationships and norms (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998), and factors that predict organizational responses to issue selling, such as organizational values (Bansal, 2004). Other research has explored how individuals sell issues. For example, Dutton,

Ashford, O’Neill, and Lawrence (2001) analyzed stories of issue selling attempts and found that individuals frequently used “packaging moves” that highlighted the financial implications of an issue. But do individuals predominately sell issues that they privately think about in financial terms, or use issue crafting to reshape issues they privately understand one way into issues that *appear* to have a financial impact? Accounting for both private and public meaning enabled me to adjudicate between these explanations.

**Influence tactics.** Influence tactics research converges on six main tactics: assertiveness, ingratiation, rationality, administrative sanction, exchange, and appealing to higher levels of authority (Kipnis et al., 1980). Researchers have relied on this taxonomy to assess the motivations for (Erez, Rim, & Keider, 1986) and consequences of using (Yukl & Tracey, 1992) influence tactics over a range of power relationships. Many of the six tactics imply the importance of the meaning of language, but researchers typically have not collected linguistic data (e.g., Erez et al., 1986; Kipnis et al., 1980; Yukl & Falbe, 1990) and have not fully specified the linguistic implications of the tactics they do measure. For example, the “rationality” tactic includes using logic, providing reasons for requests, presenting information, writing detailed plans, and so forth. But researchers have overlooked how individuals construct logical arguments with specific words and sentences, what types of reasons individuals present to support their claims, and the content of written plans. As such, influence tactics work provides only limited insight into how *language* is used to shape an issue’s public meaning and virtually ignores private and public discrepancies in meaning.

## Defining Issue Crafting

Sensegiving, issue selling, and influence tactics research are important foundations for understanding how and when individuals shape the meaning of issues, but I find two important areas in need of further development. First, the literatures predominately focus on a set of tactics that categorize symbolic and discursive activity in ways that underexplore the meaning of language used by individuals in the influence process. Issue crafting, following work in discourse theory (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004), calls attention to the use of language to shape the meaning of an issue. Language is not simply descriptive but constructs organizational reality through historically and socially embedded texts (oral or written communications) that are produced, consumed, and disseminated by indi-

viduals (Hardy, 2001). Studying this language reveals how and when individuals advance meaning claims to alter others' views of (Fairclough, 1989) and responses to (Dunford & Jones, 2000) reality.

Second, prior research has not accounted for both private, prior reasons before an influence attempt and public meanings during an influence attempt. Individuals may adopt a publicly legitimate language to justify an issue they privately think about in different terms. Put another way, individuals may be reframing issues publicly in ways that they think will resonate with specific audiences (Scully & Segal, 2002). Issue crafting calls attention to the use of these alternative, public languages and how and when individuals use them to seek influence.

To account for private and public meanings, I distinguish between private reasons and public justifications. *Private reasons* are individuals' personal rationales for wanting to advocate a particular issue. They come from individuals' personal goals and desires, often encapsulated in the "private self" (Scheier & Carver, 1983), and arise as individuals make sense of issues (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). For example, in advocating a diversity program, a human resources manager may privately reason that a diverse workforce is required to rectify past discrimination. *Public justifications* are arguments that individuals provide to audiences to capture attention and start discussions about issue adoption (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). They reflect the idea that individuals present themselves and ideas in ways that account for immediate contexts (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). To return to the example above, the manager may publicly justify the diversity program by pointing out that a diverse workforce helps reach a broader range of customers. The public justification does not address the need to rectify past discrimination, substituting instead a sales-based justification.

Issue crafting is indicated by the gap in the number of arguments between private reasons and public justifications. Individuals can use an embellishing approach to emphasize certain types of arguments or a subtracting approach to deemphasize other types of arguments. The embellishing or subtracting of arguments affects the saliency of features of issues (Bruner, 1957), thereby shaping the meaning of issues. Individuals can also be consistent if their private reasons and public justifications contain an equal amount of a particular type of argument, indicating the absence of issue crafting.

## HYPOTHESES AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

### How Individuals Craft Issues

Issue crafting is one approach individuals use for making an issue appear more legitimate by ascribing meanings that increase its legitimacy (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000). These attempts to gain legitimacy involve constructing public justifications that portray issues as being congruent with a target's meaning system (Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002). To the extent that individuals create legitimate public justifications, they are more likely to get decision makers to pay attention to their issues (Ocasio, 1997), have their statements viewed as more trustworthy (Elsbach & Eloffson, 2000), and increase the credibility of their message (Cheney, Christensen, Thøger, Conrad, & Lair, 2004). For example, Green (2004) proposed that innovations are adopted because managers use language that legitimates the use of an innovation, independent of the inherent merits of that innovation.

In this study, I focus on two domains of meaning shaping (types of language) that individuals use to make discursive claims about social issues to increase an issue's legitimacy. First, the concept of a normative domain acknowledges that individuals have relatively stable personal values and beliefs about the world that influence their behavior (Rokeach, 1973). The normative domain includes appeals to deontological principles based on "a commitment to values" (Etzioni, 1988: 5) and is manifested by arguments that focus on "doing the right thing," fairness, and duties and obligations. Second, the concept of an economic domain accounts for the view that business organizations are often seen as economic institutions, a point most strongly made by neoclassical economists (Friedman, 1962). The economic domain includes appeals to an issue's financial consequences for an organization, such as profits. I selected the normative and economic domains because they are often viewed as representing opposing spheres of legitimacy, with the economic domain representing the objective, rational, and business-oriented view and the normative domain representing the subjective, value-laden, and moral view (Sen, 1987).

Individuals craft issues by altering the frequency (embellishing or subtracting) of language in a specific domain of meaning (economic or normative) in their public justifications, compared to its frequency in their private reasons. Table 1 presents a typology of approaches to meaning shaping. The presence of embellishing and subtracting (as opposed to consistency) indicates that issue crafting occurs, and the distribution of embellishing and

**TABLE 1**  
**Typology and Illustrative Examples**

		Approaches to Meaning Shaping	
Domains of Meaning Shaping	Subtracting	Consistency	Embellishing
Economic			
Private reasons	The community in which business exists has a lot to give up because of the existence of that business. By building a good relationship with the community that will create a better reputation for the company as a social responsible company which will attract better talents and so on.	This issue/question is important since it defines: (1) Ethics standards: when you use company's money/resources would you do the same if it was your money/resources? (2) Common objective personal and company objective come together (involvement). Raising this issue would make people reflect more on the consequences of their work habits and overall would make their act more responsibly. I wanted to share with you some thoughts on an issue which I believe would be very beneficial to our company. The issue is based on the ideas of making each employee identify themselves with a shareholder. I strongly believe that having a stake in something would make people act more responsibly. I believe our company should promote and reward this behavior. For this reason, I need your support in carrying forward this idea so that it can be adopted and integrated into our organization.	The issue of equality is important to me because it is a fundamental core value of our society. From the Declaration of Independence ("All men are created equal") to the civil rights movement of Dr. King, to the Civil Rights Act, our society has repeatedly emphasized the need for an equal treatment of all people. Without equal treatment, those discriminated against lose their basic human right to dignity self-worth. The issue of equality is highly important to the financial success of [Company]. Equal treatment of all employees in the workplace is not only mandated by state and federal law, it is an essential component of employee morale. . . . If irrelevant factors (such as race and sex) are used to favor certain classes of employees over others the result will be the perception of unfairness and a disincentive for those who are discriminated again to perform at their highest level.
Public justifications	We need to give back to the community. We are rallying for high school tutors in Math, English and Science. Your contribution, effort and time will be well appreciated by the students whom you help to get better grades and their families. You will see the reward on the faces of the students after they pass the SAT.		
Normative			
Private reasons	This issue is important because it enriches the existence of our country as a whole. This happens through broader perspective being presented in the work place and the betterment of communities by individuals who come from disenfranchised areas that are given a chance. Furthermore it would put people who ordinarily don't come in contact with each other in contact. [Company] I strongly believe our firm should address the issue of diversity. This issue if properly addressed and negotiated will allow [Company] to increase its standing in the community, increase revenue and exist as a better corporate citizen.	The issue, casual overtime expectations and practices is important because policies and practices with regard to unpaid overtime should be uniform plant-wide. Variations in unpaid overtime depending upon a given manager is unfair. There is in practice of variety of expectations among managers concurring unpaid (i.e. casual) overtime. The personnel director has been receiving complaints about unpaid overtime in that it is an unfairly employed policy. A significant number of complaints have as well come from within my organization. Some managers expect little or no unpaid overtime. Whereas others expect a minimum of one hour per day. Those expected to work the extra hour resent the fact that others may not have the same requirement in spite of plant policy.	The support of K-12 arts programs is important to me because I was involved in these programs during my childhood. I am a better person (more well rounded) as a result. In the spirit of the "We Care" program, I recommend that [Company] give back to the community by providing financial support to local K-12 arts programs. Not only will this create positive exposure and social good-will for [Company], but it is a powerful way to fulfill our social mission. Numerous studies show that children involved in the arts perform better in the more traditional academic subjects. This cross-over benefit is often ignored when schools get their budgets. We have an opportunity to have great and positive influence on the local youth.
Public justifications			

subtracting provides insight into how individuals craft issues.

The normative domain lacks legitimacy in business organizations, compared to the economic one (Jackall, 1988), something also reflected in more general organizational scholarship (Margolis & Walsh, 2003). Social psychological research also suggests that normative arguments have less legitimacy than those based on rational self-interest, a central tenet of economics (Miller, 1999). For example, individuals who make charitable donations justify those contributions on economic grounds, even when they are clearly acting for more altruistic reasons (Holmes, Miller, & Lerner, 2002). As a result of the greater legitimacy of the economic domain compared to the normative domain, I expected individuals to craft issues in ways that shaped the issues (even social issues with strong, *private* normative underpinnings) to appear more economic and less normative.

*Hypothesis 1a. Individuals who shape the meaning of social issues in business organizations are more likely to use economic embellishing than economic subtracting or economic consistency.*

*Hypothesis 1b. Individuals who shape the meaning of social issues in business organizations are more likely to use normative subtracting than normative embellishing or normative consistency.*

Hypotheses 1a and 1b concern *how* individuals craft issues; I now turn to contextual factors (organizational values and power) that affect *when* individuals use issue crafting.

### Organizational Values

Prior research has examined the affect of context on the *willingness* of individuals to sell issues (Ashford et al., 1998) but has not adequately explained how context may *change the way* in which individuals sell issues. Individuals may initiate influence attempts in unfavorable contexts but use issue crafting as a strategy for coping with these contexts.

One aspect of context likely to affect how individuals shape issues is an organization's values (Bansal, 2004). Individuals pay particular attention to local contextual conditions in formulating influence strategies (Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997). They may read and respond to local contexts and advance public justifications they view as congruent with organizational values while avoiding public justifications incongruent with or-

ganizational values. For example, faced with an organizational context that values the bottom line (financial values), as opposed to social causes (social values), individuals will more likely have private-public consistency for economic arguments but use issue crafting for normative arguments.

*Hypothesis 2a. Organizational values moderate the relationship between economic private reasons and economic public justifications in such a way that when an organization emphasizes financial values, there is a smaller discrepancy between economic private reasons and economic public justifications than when it does not emphasize financial values.*

*Hypothesis 2b. Organizational values moderate the relationship between normative private reasons and normative public justifications in such a way that when an organization emphasizes social values, there is a smaller discrepancy between normative private reasons and normative public justifications than when it does not emphasize social values.*

### Power Relationships

According to previous research, individuals often use language to manage meanings in ways that privilege their interests over those of others, but individuals also often need formal power, vital resources, or connections to others to be successful, (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). Not surprisingly, sense-giving research has focused on leaders (who have formal power), and issue selling research has shown that having a connection to top managers increases an individual's willingness to sell an issue (Dutton et al., 1997). Yet those without formal power may also exercise influence. Individuals can employ rational, "hard" tactics (Yukl & Tracey, 1992), such as use of economic language, to sell issues (Dutton et al., 2001). Although individuals may publicly portray issues using hard (in this case, economic language) tactics, it remains unclear if they privately view issues in such economic terms. Without accounting for private and public meanings, one cannot know why scholars have observed a greater frequency of "hard" tactics. The explanation consistent with issue crafting is that the prevalence of publicly observable economic language for individuals with relatively low power is a consequence of discursively constructed claims used to shape the meaning of an issue and does not reflect the private meanings individuals attach to issues. Lower-power individuals use public economic language to increase the perceived legitimacy of an issue they privately think about in dif-

ferent terms and avoid softer normative language that could decrease the perceived legitimacy of the issue. For those with more power, issue crafting will be less prominent because these individuals can use their formal power to coerce others to adopt issues and can also use more direct sensegiving tactics, such as resource allocations and personnel changes (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

*Hypothesis 3a. Power relationships moderate the relationship between economic private reasons and economic public justifications: When an individual has more power than a target, the discrepancy between private reasons and public justifications is smaller than it is when the individual's power is equal to or less than the target's.*

*Hypothesis 3b. Power relationships moderate the relationship between normative private reasons and normative public justifications: When an individual has more power than a target, the discrepancy between private reasons and public justifications is smaller than it is when the individual's power is equal to or less than the target's.*

### The Role of Agency

If individuals are unaware of their own private/public discrepancies, such differences may be driven by the unconscious saliency of either a private or public self (Scheier & Carver, 1983) or by the dominance of hegemonic discourse (Foucault, 2002), suggesting that issue crafting is not an influence strategy but an unconscious reaction to the surrounding environment. Psychologists consider most human behavior to be unintentional and unconscious, but they also recognize that an extensive use of "autopilot" enables individuals to direct energy toward their most valuable projects (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999), which for many may include a self-identified important social issue. Additionally, in most influence literatures it is assumed that individuals are motivated agents who are consciously attempting to influence top managers (e.g., Ashford et al., 1998), a view increasingly popular in social psychology (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). Therefore, I posit that issue crafting will be purposeful, as indicated by individuals' cognizance of their issue crafting:

*Hypothesis 4. Issue crafting is positively related to individuals' recognition that they engaged in issue crafting.*

## METHODS

### Sample

I administered an experimental questionnaire in two separate evening MBA classes at a large mid-western university. I selected an experimental design to overcome recall biases present in previous studies (Ashford et al., 1998; Kipnis et al., 1980). Using evening MBA students was appropriate for this study because of their prior work experience ( $x = 7.0$  years), which suggested that they would be familiar with influence attempts at work. Eighty-two percent of the sample's members were male, and they had an average age of 30 years. The instrument took approximately 30 minutes to complete, and all 116 that were handed out were returned, of which 95 were filled out completely. The remaining 21 questionnaires were discarded as incomplete.

### Questionnaire

In a  $2 \times 2 \times 3$  design (private reasons/public justifications by organizational values by power relationships), participants first described a social issue that they viewed as important. By having participants select issues personally important to them, the study improved task realism and overcame problems with single-issue studies (e.g., Ashford et al., 1998). Participants next completed a personal statement by identifying reasons why the social issue was important to them—that is, their private reasons. Participants then read a scenario that described a hypothetical company and randomly received one of two paragraphs describing the company's values (please contact the author for the scenarios). The "social values" paragraph stated that the company encouraged proposals on social issues and had a program in place to help it fulfill its social mission. The "financial values" paragraph indicated that the company's management focused on strategy, that the company did not have time for social issues, and that such initiatives rarely got supported.

Participants then wrote a memo to a target (based on random assignment to a power relationship condition: upward, across, or downward) to influence the target about the issue; the memo thus represented participants' public justifications. By collecting premanipulation personal statements and postmanipulation memos, I measured a participant's base level of economic and normative arguments for the issue and compared them to induced levels. This procedure captured the change of the meaning of arguments between private and public positions.

## Measures

**Language coding.** A research assistant who was blind to the experimental conditions and I counted the number of references to a set of a priori categories (Berelson, 1952): economic, normative, and other. This approach to content analysis is particularly useful for accounting for changes in language usage over contexts (Fiol, 1994). The recording unit, or minimal form in which a category occurred, was a participant's

argument to support an issue. Coders independently extracted each argument (a discrete reason/justification for supporting an issue) from the personal statements/memos (the context unit). Coders then counted and classified arguments as economic, normative, or other. A test of interrater reliability for the counted arguments per category using the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC; Shrout & Fleiss, 1979) showed acceptable levels of reliability. Table 2 summarizes

**TABLE 2**  
Language Coding Definitions and Illustrative Examples

Language and Variants <sup>a</sup>	Definition	Key Linguistic Markers	Illustrative Examples
Economic			
Explicit	Arguments that more directly mention economic benefits for the focal organization.	Sales, market share profits, revenue	This issue "will generate more revenues for the firm."  "To make the revenues as sustainable and long-lasting as possible." It "is highly important to the financial success of the company."
Implicit	Arguments that less directly mention economic arguments. The reader must make a leap (albeit usually a small one) between the concept and its benefit on a firm's economic performance.	Reputation, branding, employee morale	"By building a good relationship with the community that will create a better reputation for the company as a social responsible company."  "This [will] create positive exposure and social good-will for [the company]." It will "allow our company to obtain a favorable name in the immediate area."
Normative			
Moral obligations	Arguments that emphasize support for an issue, independent of its consequences.	Duty, responsibility, obligation	"It is our civic duty to become active partners with the community in improving the livelihood of its population." "[The company] has a duty to develop products sustainable with all stakeholders in mind." "So I think we have [a] social responsibility to help those countries."
Values	Arguments that are laden with language about moral values.	Values, ethical, integrity	"On an ethical level, it is morally unacceptable to . . ."  "It is the right thing to do from a professional and ethical standpoint." "It is a fundamental core value of our society."
Fairness	Arguments that focus on equity or equality.	Equal treatment, discrimination	"All individuals irrespective of their origin should have equal opportunity to pursue their goals and succeed." "Everyone should be treated fairly or equally."

<sup>a</sup> For economic private reasons, ICC = .86; for economic public justifications, ICC = .93. For normative private reasons, ICC = .71; for normative public justifications, ICC = .75. All ICCs were calculated for a two-way mixed model averaging over two raters.

category definitions, provides illustrative examples, and reports ICC values for interrater agreement.

**Dependent variables.** The study had two sets of dependent variables. *Economic justifications embellished/subtracted/consistent* and *normative justifications embellished/subtracted/consistent* (used for Hypotheses 1a and 1b and 4) were nominal variables for each domain of meaning shaping that categorized participants' use of embellishing, subtracting, or consistency. For example, those using more economic arguments and fewer normative arguments in their public justifications than in their private reasons would have values of "economic embellishing" for the economic justifications dependent variable and "normative subtracting" for the normative justifications dependent variable. *Number of public economic justifications* and *number of public normative justifications* (Hypotheses 2a–2b and 3a–3b) were continuous variables containing the number of public economic and public normative arguments used, respectively. These were derived using the language coding explained above.

**Independent and control variables.** As indicated above, I experimentally manipulated *power relationships (upward, lateral [across], and downward)* and *organizational values (social and financial)*. I also accounted for a participant's base level of economic or normative arguments by controlling for private reasons, which were derived from the language coding discussed above. I centered the private reasons variables using their means (Aiken & West, 1991).

To assess participants' recognition of issue crafting, I presented them with eight sets of circles ranging in their degree of overlap, from no overlap (separate circles) to complete overlap (one circle). I asked participants to select the pair of circles that best represented the relationship between their personal statements and public memos. This approach is an effective way to measure variations in the perceived overlap of concepts, such as overlapping identities (Bartel, 2001). This measure, *perceived issue crafting*, ranged from 1 (complete overlap in circles, indicating no perceived issue crafting) to 8 (two far-apart circles, indicating high perceived issue crafting).

Because my main focus was on context (power and organizational values), I controlled for *personal motivations*, to account for the direct benefits that participants thought they would receive for advocating an issue. These direct benefits might provide a stronger motivation for individuals to advocate the issue, because they would personally gain from the issue's adoption. I used an approach

similar to the construction of language coding, but coders identified arguments that indicated direct benefits for the research participant in the personal statement (ICC = .71).

Although some influence studies have used women exclusively (Ashford et al., 1998), others have had a significant overrepresentation of males (Kipnis et al., 1980). My sample overweighed males. These sample differences are important because, according to politeness theory, women and men may act differently in revealing information, especially given power asymmetries (Lee, 1993). To account for this, I used self-reported *gender* as a control variable.

I also controlled for the degree to which an issue was a social one because certain types of issues may be inherently more prone to issue crafting. To compose this measure, two research assistants, blind to the experimental conditions, rated each participant's description of his or her issue on four items. The social issue scale is the average of four items capturing the extent to which the issue served shareholder interests (reverse-coded), served society's interests, improved social welfare, and focused on a participant's own interests (reverse-coded). Item codings ranged from 1 ("not at all") to 7 ("definitely"). Scale reliability using Cronbach's alpha, which was calculated after averaging the coders' ratings, was .74. All ICC calculations used for interrater reliability analysis of the individual items were greater than .73.

## RESULTS

### Manipulation Checks

Two questions assessed if a participant's reading of the context depicted in the scenario matched his or her assigned condition. Independent samples *t*-tests indicated that there were significant differences in the expected direction in how respondents answered based on their condition assignment ( $t_{93} = 2.27, p < .05$ ) and ( $t_{93} = -3.21, p < .01$ ), for the first and second questions, respectively. A third question assessed whether participants were aware of the power difference to which they were assigned. A chi-square test indicated a successful manipulation ( $\chi^2_{4, 94} = 82.26, p < .001$ ).

### Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 3 reports means, standard deviations, correlations, and scale reliabilities of the dependent, independent, and control variables. Table 4 reports a frequency distribution of the type of issues in this study.

**TABLE 3**  
Descriptive Statistics<sup>a</sup>

Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Economic private reasons	0.67	1.08										
2. Economic public justifications	1.63	1.46	.17									
3. Normative private reasons	0.83	0.80	-.29**	-.09								
4. Normative public justifications	0.53	0.58	-.18 <sup>†</sup>	.23*	.19 <sup>†</sup>							
5. Financial organizational values <sup>b</sup>	0.48	0.50	-.04	-.02	-.07	.06						
6. Downward power relationships <sup>b</sup>	0.33	0.47	-.08	-.21*	.03	.02	.00					
7. Lateral power relationships <sup>b</sup>	0.37	0.48	.03	-.14	-.09	-.04	-.13	-.53**				
8. Perceived issue crafting	3.46	1.78	-.19 <sup>†</sup>	.16	.10	-.21*	-.02	-.11	.01			
9. Male gender <sup>b</sup>	0.82	0.39	-.20 <sup>†</sup>	-.20*	.11	.05	.07	-.09	.24*	.03		
10. Social issue	4.36	1.05	-.33**	.04	.27**	.35**	.09	-.02	-.23*	.16	-.04	(.74)
11. Personal motivations	0.53	0.66	-.10	.22*	-.24	-.08	.03	-.13	.15	-.11	.04	-.17 <sup>†</sup>

<sup>a</sup>  $n = 95$ , with listwise deletion. Scale reliabilities (Cronbach alphas) are along the diagonal in parentheses.

<sup>b</sup> Dichotomous variables with the indicated category coded 1.

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

**TABLE 4**  
Frequency of Types of Social Issues

Type	Examples	Number of Participants	Percentage of Frequency in Sample <sup>a</sup>
Employee issue	Employee-management relations, worker rights	32	33.7
Diversity issue	Race and gender discrimination, diverse work force, religion at work	20	21.1
Community issue	Community service programs, charitable contribution programs	14	14.7
Ethical issue	More honest communications, programs to increase integrity	13	13.7
Environmental issue	Sustainable manufacturing, recycling, environmentally friendly products	11	11.6
Other issues	Poor performance	5	5.3

<sup>a</sup> The column does not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

### Typology of Issue Crafting

To assess Hypotheses 1a–1b, I ran frequency counts of the nominal variables, economic (normative) arguments embellished/subtracted/consistent, representing all six cells in the issue crafting typology (see Table 1), and then used chi-square tests to determine if the frequency distributions of the categories differed from the expected equal distributions. Results showed that 66.3 percent of participants engaged in economic embellishing, com-

pared to only 13.7 percent for economic subtracting and 20.0 percent for economic consistency. Chi-square tests showed that economic embellishing was more likely than both economic subtracting ( $\chi^2_{1,76} = 32.90, p < .001$ ) and economic consistency ( $\chi^2_{1,82} = 23.61, p < .001$ ). This finding supports Hypothesis 1a, which predicts that economic embellishing is more common than economic subtracting or economic consistency. For normative arguments, 42.1 percent of participants engaged in

normative subtracting, compared to 26.3 percent for normative embellishing and 31.6 percent for normative consistency. Chi-square tests showed that normative subtracting was marginally more likely than normative embellishing ( $\chi^2_{1,65} = 3.46$ ,  $p < .10$ ) but not more likely than normative consistency ( $\chi^2_{1,70} = 1.43$ ,  $p > .10$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 1b was only partially supported.

### The Role of Organizational Values and Power Relationships

The next part of the analysis determined whether organizational values and power relationships moderated the relationship between public justifications and private reasons using hierarchical linear regression. This method assesses the degree of consistency between a private and public justification (weaker correspondences indicated issue craft-

ing) while overcoming problems with difference scores (Edwards, 1994).

Table 5 reports results from the hierarchical linear regressions for the numbers of economic and normative public justifications. For economic arguments, model 1, the base model, included only private reasons and the three controls as independent variables; its fit was adequate ( $R^2 = .14$ ,  $F_{4,90} = 3.51$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Model 2 significantly improved on model 1 by adding organizational values and power relationship ( $R^2 = .23$ ,  $F_{7,87} = 3.76$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The two negative and significant coefficients in model 2 for power relationships indicated that participants in the downward and lateral power conditions used fewer economic public justifications than those in the upward condition.

Although model 2 showed less use of economic public justifications for the downward and lateral power relationship conditions, only model 3 tested

**TABLE 5**  
**Results of Hierarchical Linear Regression Analysis<sup>a</sup>**

Independent Variables	Number of Economic Public Justifications			Number of Normative Public Justifications		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Private arguments and controls						
Private reasons	0.28 <sup>†</sup>	0.23	-0.19	0.07	0.08	0.06
Male gender <sup>b</sup>	-0.64 <sup>†</sup>	-0.47	-0.59	0.08	0.05	0.05
Degree of social issue scale	0.20	0.08	0.09	0.18**	0.19**	0.19**
Personal motivations	0.61**	0.57**	0.61**	0.00	0.00	0.00
Context variables						
Downward power relationships <sup>b</sup>		-1.08**	-1.02**		0.08	0.08
Lateral power relationships		-1.00**	-0.98**		0.10	0.09
Financial organizational values <sup>b</sup>		-0.18	-0.17		0.05	0.05
Moderating variables						
Private reasons × downward power relationships			0.79*			0.07
Private reasons × lateral power relationships			0.20			-0.03
Private reasons × financial organizational values			0.75*			0.00
$R^2$	.14*	.23**	.32***	.14*	.14 <sup>†</sup>	.15
Adjusted $R^2$	.10	.17	.24	.10	.07	.05
Change in $R^2$		.09**	.09*		.00	.10
df (regression, residual)	4, 90	7, 87	10, 84	4, 90	7, 87	10, 84

<sup>a</sup>  $n = 95$ , with listwise deletion.

<sup>b</sup> Dichotomous variable with the indicated category coded 1 and the alternate coded 0.

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

for issue crafting. By adding a set of interaction terms, I used model 3 to test how organizational values and power relationships moderated the consistency of arguments between the private and public. Model 3 ( $R^2 = .32$ ,  $F_{10, 84} = 4.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ) significantly improved upon model 2 ( $\Delta R^2 = .09$ ,  $F_{3, 84} = 3.82$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

The positive and significant coefficient for private reasons interacting with organizational values in model 3 indicated a moderation effect: participants assigned to the financial values condition had more consistency between their private and public economic arguments than those assigned to the social values condition. However, when organizational values favored social issues explicitly, participants were less consistent with their economic arguments. This pattern of findings supports Hypothesis 2a.

In model 3, the positive and significant coefficient for private reasons interacting with a downward power relationship indicated that those in the downward selling condition had more consistency between their private reasons and public justifications than those in the upward condition. This finding supports Hypothesis 3a, which predicts that individuals with more power have a stronger overlap between private reasons and public justifications. However, the nonsignificant coefficient for private reasons interacting with a lateral power relationship is contrary to the prediction of Hypothesis 3a.

Results for normative justifications (model 6) failed to support either Hypothesis 2b or 3b. However, there was a significant and positive coefficient for the variable measuring the degree to which an issue was a social one. I address these unexpected findings in the discussion below.

### Issue Crafting and Agency

To test Hypothesis 4, which predicts a positive relationship between issue crafting and perceived issue crafting, I performed a set of logistic regression analyses using the nominal dependent variables, economic justifications embellished/subtracted/consistent and normative justifications embellished/subtracted/consistent. I transformed these variables into binary variables in which 1 indicated the presence of an issue crafting approach, 0 its absence. I limited this analysis to economic embellishing and normative subtracting because of their more frequent occurrence and theoretical relevance for social issues. I regressed the dependent measure on the control variables (social issue, gender, and personal motivations) and the perceived issue crafting measure. For both economic embellishing ( $p < .05$ ) and normative sub-

tracting ( $p < .05$ ), the coefficients for perceived issue crafting were significant and positive, indicating that the odds ratio of economic embellishing and normative subtracting increased for each one-unit increase in perceived issue crafting. To facilitate interpretation, I transformed the odds ratio using the natural log transformation called the log odds in such a way that the percentage of change from each unit in the independent measure equaled  $100 \times (e^\beta - 1)$ . I found that economic embellishing was 38.3 percent more likely and normative embellishing was 28.8 percent more likely for each one-unit increase in the perceived issues crafting measure. These findings support Hypothesis 4.

## DISCUSSION

This study takes an important step toward understanding how and when individuals use language to shape the meaning of issues in public, and when these public meanings differ from private understandings. I found that individuals primarily used economic embellishing and normative subtracting to shape issues in public and that issue crafting occurred when individuals had relatively less power and when organizational values conflicted with private reasons.

This study makes several contributions. First, prior work on influence has called attention to the importance of the meaning of language but has not thoroughly collected linguistic data or specified how such an approach improves understanding of theories of influence. I build on theories of influence by showing that language use itself is a skill that individuals have and use to shape the meaning of issues. By showing how and when individuals linguistically weave issues into legitimate public logics, I find concrete examples of individuals using language to establish "facts" (Guerin, 2003). Public language claims that individuals make are not simply descriptions, but attempts to prescribe particular views of organizational reality (Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 1998: 1).

A focus on language reveals the subtleties of how individuals endeavor to shape the meaning of issues in organizations, subtleties that often go undetected by scholars who do not account for the meaning of individuals' language. Sensegiving research has identified important discursive and symbolic tactics individuals use to shape the meaning of issues but has not adequately explored how specific language forms the very foundation of these behaviors. For example, individuals do not simply express opinions; they express opinions in ways that weave private reasons into legitimate organizational logics to attempt to increase the le-

gitimacy of an issue. Individuals give sense to issues not only through the use of tactics such as expressing an opinion, but also through the specific language contained within those opinions.

Issue crafting research also contributes to issue selling research, which has primarily focused on individuals' willingness to seek influence (Ashford et al., 1998) as opposed to how individuals attempt to accomplish influence. Individuals sell issues by using language to create particular public portrayals of issues, and these public portrayals are often different from the individuals' private understandings.

Although influence tactics researchers have paid particular attention to power (Kipnis et al., 1980), sensegiving and issue selling research primarily represent theories of unidirectional influence (but see Maitlis [2005] for an important exception), with each examining, in isolation, either downward (sensegiving) or upward (issue selling) influence. The current study builds on the multipower focus of influence tactics with the more meaning-focused views of sensegiving and issue selling. By accounting for both power relationships and the meaning of the language used, I found that individuals are not privately adopting the views of higher-power individuals but are attempting to influence the very understandings that leaders have of issues. This conclusion is supported by the prominence of issue crafting in the upward direction and is consistent with work in discourse analysis showing that employees can exercise agency through how they give meaning to discursive objects (Hardy et al., 2000; Knights & McCabe, 2000).

Second, previous research has given little attention to potential discrepancies between private and public meanings, mostly focusing on leaders (Bartunek et al., 1999). I extend this work by showing that private/public discrepancies occur in a variety of power relationships, are measurable through the language individuals use, and are regulated by context. More importantly, I demonstrate that accounting for these discrepancies better captures the process of how individuals seek influence. Individuals start from a set of private reasons that provide the basis for their support of an issue but then linguistically weave issues into alternative sets of public justifications. Observing the movement of language from the private to the public helps settle questions over whether individuals limit the types of issues they advocate or use language to reconstruct issues in public so that they appear more legitimate. I find that the limits of issues organization members advance are less defined by the inherent meaning of the issues than they are by the public linguistic claims individuals can make (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977), irrespective of their private reasons.

The private/public meaning gap also raises questions over the psychological outcomes of issue crafting. Meyerson (2001) found that individuals who manage dual identities, such as feminists who work in patriarchal organizations, suffer anxiety and stress when trying to create change because of their conflicting allegiances. Similarly, when individuals shape a social issue with economic language when their private reason for concern with the issue is not (wholly) economic, they may unearth ambivalence by calling attention to their private/public inconsistencies about the issue.

One surprising finding of this study was the more even distribution of issue crafting in the normative domain, although there was a marginally significant greater use of normative subtracting than normative embellishing. Normative arguments typically lack legitimacy inside of organizational contexts (Jackall, 1988), yet Bansal (2004) recently found that calling attention to the normative aspect of issues may be a *successful* influence strategy. One way of teasing apart these conflicting findings is to study a variety of issues, which Maitlis (2005) identified as something for future sensegiving research to address. The multi-issue approach of the current study supports this view because I find that issues scoring higher on the degree to which they are social contain more normative public justifications. This finding suggests that issues may vary in the degree to which individuals can shape their meaning.

## FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

### Individual and Organizational Outcomes

**Individual level.** Although this study does not address the likelihood that issue crafting will be an effective approach to influence, future research can address two contingencies to help answer this question. First, since issue crafting involves creating public justifications that influence targets view as legitimate, the success of issue crafting will likely depend on a target's perception of the legitimacy of a public justification. Research on the attention-based view of the firm suggests that decision makers in organizations pay attention to, and subsequently act on, ideas considered to be legitimate (Ocasio, 1997). A fundamental premise of rhetoric theory is that language that successfully rationalizes an action increases its chances of adoption (Green, 2004). And Meyerson's (2001) theory of tempered radicalism stresses the importance of using language that is familiar and legitimate to insiders when advocating change.

Second, the extent to which issue crafters have perceived credibility may increase their chances of

succeeding in an influence attempt. Rhetoric theory captures credibility as a cornerstone idea with the term *ethos* (Cheney et al., 2004). One aspect of *ethos* is the virtue, in the Aristotelian sense, of a speaker—something that will be undermined if an influence target perceives inconsistencies between an influencer's private reasons and public justifications. For example, if an influence target knows that an organization member with environmental values makes an economic case for a more environmentally friendly factory, the target may discount the public justification on the basis of a conflict of interest.

**Organizational level.** At least two contingencies will likely affect whether issue crafting will help or hinder organizational decision making. First, this study calls attention to the linguistic claims individuals make about issues. The degree to which influence targets critically examine these claims will be important because public justifications are discursive constructions, which are often different from individuals' private reasons. Psychological research has identified several factors that affect the degree to which individuals critically examine claims, such as their level of accountability for an issue's implications and the amount of discussion about the issue (Petty & Wegener, 1998). Often, however, influence targets accept even nonsensical public justifications (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978), suggesting both the opportunity for individuals to gain influence using issue crafting and also the concomitant danger for organizations that accompanies uncritical acceptance of discursive claims.

Second, issue crafting may also play a role when individuals with divergent values and beliefs seek to reach agreement. By allowing individuals to linguistically weave issue advocacy based on private reasons into a legitimate (and more common) public discourse, issue crafting may allow organization members to reach "equifinality" (dissimilar interpretations with similar implications) (Gray, Bougon, & Donnellon, 1985). Individuals may have their own, varying reasons for supporting an issue but use ambiguous (or in this case, less transparent) language to reach agreement by allowing for multiple private views to simultaneously exist (Eisenberg, 1984). This benefit will likely arise when organization members have divergent private reasons about an issue with similar behavioral implications.

### Other Domains of Meaning

By calling attention to how and when individuals use language to create differences between private reasons and public justifications, the current study contributes a more general theoretical framework applicable to a wide range of issues and cor-

responding domains of meaning. Although economic and normative domains of meaning are important categories for social issues, other categories of language may be relevant for strategic issues, such as strategic or political language (Gioia & Thomas, 1996) and threat or opportunity (Dutton & Jackson, 1987) language. Influence scholars have also stressed getting support for "personal issues" as an important motivation for influence attempts (Kipnis et al., 1980). All issues are to some extent personal (i.e., concern about them is based on private reasons), but personal issues imply more direct benefits for an influencer. Issue crafting can help researchers understand how and when individuals linguistically weave "selfish" issues into legitimate domains of meaning that are presented in ways that appear to match an organization's goals.

### Limitations

This study is an important first effort to examine how and when individuals craft issues. An experimental design was appropriate for this initial attempt. I took care to make the experimental task reasonable, but future research should examine the construct in more natural settings, with more balanced samples. The use of evening MBA students is a common practice in organizational studies, including those examining influence (Kipnis et al., 1980), but the present study's sample may not be representative of actors inside natural organizations. For example, MBA students are often socialized using economic theories that may become self-fulfilling, leading to a potential overemphasis on economic embellishing (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005).

### Conclusion

I developed and tested a model of crafting social issues at work. Organizational values and power relationships affect how individuals purposefully, publicly shape the meaning of issues by embellishing and subtracting economic and normative language. Issue crafting extends theories of influence by focusing on the meaning of language and private/public discrepancies in meaning. I articulated several areas of research that scholars can pursue next to understand the effects of issue crafting on individuals and organizations. For now, researchers know that issue crafting is often recognizable by the individuals using it; occurs in normative and economic domains for social issues; and is affected by context, including organizational values and power relationships. These findings are important for developing

understanding of how and when individuals shape the meaning of issues at work.

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