

‘Unethical but not instrumental: Expanding our view of workplace malfeasance by examining socially-motivated unethical behavior’

Friday, April 13, 2018 | 1:30-3:00 PM

Room 968, Henry Angus Building, 2053 Main Mall

Keith Leavitt

Associate Professor

Betty S. Henry Amundson Faculty Scholar in Ethics

Oregon State University

Abstract

While research on unethical workplace behavior commonly draws from rational actor (i.e., economic) and self-regulatory (i.e., social cognitive) paradigms, researchers are just beginning to investigate unethical workplace behavior from a symbolic interactionist perspective, wherein unethical acts are not undertaken discretely and for self-gain but often publically for the social-functional purpose of maintaining one’s sense of meaning and place within a social context. In this presentation, I will address this emerging paradigm and present two working papers, which leverage a symbolic interactionist approach to explain misbehavior in the workplace. In the first (empirical) paper (Leavitt, Kouchaki, & Klotz), we draw from the literature on precarious manhood to argue that having one’s gender role status questioned at work can motivate episodes of unethical behavior. In four studies (including two survey field studies and two experiments), we find that emasculation motivates unethical behavior among men as a function of perceived threat to agency; moreover, defeminization does not produce a similar effect among women. In the second (conceptual) paper (Leavitt, Barnes, & Watkins), we introduce and define the construct of illicit workplace romance (i.e., consensual romantic relationships at work that violate standards of justice, organizational policy, or relational obligations to a third party) and generate a dynamic model of its antecedents and consequences. Drawing from Self-Categorization Theory, we theorize that unmet identity-based motives predict the likelihood, structure, and trajectory of illicit workplace romances, with implications for organizational identification, exit, and relationship survival. I will conclude by discussing future directions for workplace ethics research from a symbolic interactionist perspective, including other current working projects.