Ethics of care in action: Overview of holistic framework with application to employee engagement

Laura L. Lemon [*], Courtney D. Boman

Department of Advertising & Public Relations, The University of Alabama, Box 870172, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, United States

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ABSTRACT

At the heart of public relations is the act of creating relationships that facilitate dialog, collaboration, and ongoing trust. This paper aims to conceptualize a framework based on ethics of care (EoC) that harnesses these core underpinnings, which propel the public relations industry, to enhance employee engagement. The ethics of care applied to employee engagement (EoCAEE) framework combines the success found within the EoC phases, along with the landscapes presented in the Applied Model of Care Considerations (AMCC), to ensure ethical, holistic decision making. EoCAEE repositions employee engagement as an ethical practice for organizations to prioritize with actionable steps.

1. Introduction

Ethics are fundamental to the public relations profession (Verčic et al., 1996) and vital to organizational decision making (Bowen, 2004b). Many professional associations like the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA), and the Public Relations Council have ethical guidelines or offer a code of ethics for professionals to follow. Other organizations like the Institute for Public Relations and the Arthur W. Page Center provide training for educators, students, and professionals that focus on ethics. September has even been dubbed "Ethics Month" with various online events for professionals and students like live Twitter chats and interactive webinars. On a global level, ethical frameworks, such as care ethics, can be seen providing opportunities to maintain caring relations and guide interactions that can surpass animosities through its sensitivity to cultural differences. This ongoing application of EoC can be seen through work done on the diplomatic-level, along with the work of international nongovernmental organizations.

Public relations scholars have contributed to these conversations surrounding ethics by examining the role of ethics in crises (e.g., Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018); corporate social responsibility (e.g., Formentin & Bortree, 2018); and media relations (e.g., Bowen, 2016). However, most scholarship on ethics focuses on external audiences (e.g., Bowen, 2016; Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018), leaving employees or internal audiences absent from the conversation. In addition, the relevant theoretical framework of ethics of care is minimally addressed in the

engagement literature (Francis & Keegan, 2020) or public relations literature (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). Therefore, the focus of this paper is to conceptualize employee engagement within public relations scholars' discussion of ethics by offering an ethics of care (EoC) framework. The proposed framework combines the EoC phases with the landscapes in the Applied Model of Care Considerations (AMCC) and suggests the inclusion of a new *holistic landscape.* In doing so, employee engagement is repositioned as an ethical practice for organizations to prioritize with concrete and actionable steps.

The paper begins by overviewing previous employee engagement scholarship and concludes how the co-creational approach rooted in dialog is the most ethical approach for employee engagement. The paper then transitions to discuss the ethics of care literature as it relates to the field of public relations. The next section proposes an applied framework that combines EoC and AMCC with employee engagement. Last, we offer future research suggestions incorporating the newly suggested framework.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Employee engagement

The management scholar Kahn (1990) was the first to define and study employee engagement by offering the seminal definition of employee engagement as the: "harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: lemon@apr.ua.edu (L.L. Lemon), boman@apr.ua.edu (C.D. Boman).

themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694). Psychological presence was later added to the amended definition and model "as the experiential state accompanying the behaviors of personally engaged role performances" (Kahn, 1992, p. 339). Specifically, the model demonstrated that availability, meaningfulness, and safety drive how psychologically present an employee may be while at work (Kahn, 1992). Meaningfulness is determined by assessing the return on the investment for performing a particular role. Safety is being able to show one's true self without fear of potential negative repercussions. Availability includes the physical, emotional, and psychological resources one might need to enact the role performance. When an employee demonstrates psychological presence, the results are experience outcomes, performance, and growth (Kahn, 1992).

Schaufeli et al. (2002) offered the next definition almost a decade later, shifting the focus away from role performances to employee engagement being recognized as a state of mind. Specifically, employee engagement is understood as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74). In this way, employee engagement is conceptualized as "an experienced psychological state which mediates the impact of job resources and personal resources on organizational outcomes" (Schaufeli, 2013, p. 8).

In terms of public relations scholars using and advancing employee engagement theory, some have adopted and investigated the role performance perspective (e.g., Men, 2012; Welch, 2011), while others have conceptualized employee engagement as a psychological state (e.g., Verčič & Vokič, 2017). Men (2012) applied the concept of psychological presence to better understand how role performances are enacted. Welch (2011) suggested that employee engagement is "a dynamic, changeable psychological state which links employees to their organizations, manifest in organization member role performances expressed physically, cognitively and emotionally, and influenced by organization-level internal communication" (p. 337). In addition, others have relied on Schaufeli (2013) proposed dimensions of absorption, dedication, and vigor (e.g., Shen & Jiang, 2019; Verčič & Vokič, 2017).

Furthermore, some public relations scholars have suggested that engagement is a process (e.g., Johnston, 2014) instead of a state or based solely on role performances. Specifically, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) offered the zones of engagement, where employee engagement is viewed as a meaning-making process. Within this conceptual framework, the six proposed zones of meaning, including non-work-related experiences; freedom in the workplace; going above and beyond job responsibilities; work as a vocational calling; creating value; and building connection, demonstrated the many complex ways in which employees create meaning from their lived engagement experiences. This conceptualization of employee engagement aligns with Johnston and Taylor (2018) notion that engagement is an iterative and dynamic process co-created through interactions rooted in dialog. A further discussion of employee engagement and dialog is addressed in the next section.

2.2. The value of employee engagement and dialog

Taylor (2018) suggested that engagement could be a paradigmatic framework for the field of public relations since it prioritizes connection building rooted in co-creational, meaning making, instead of focusing on organizational outcomes that fulfill managerial objectives. Co-creational engagement transitions the field away from the functionalistic approach that sees communication and relationships as entities that need to be managed (Taylor, 2018). When public relations is framed as a meaning-making mechanism from the co-creational perspective, the inherent organizational power constructs are revealed, and value is now dispersed among diverse audiences (Johnston, 2014). In this way, engagement leads to the construction of meaningful connections across various stakeholder groups (Kang, 2014), since engagement is facilitated by more than two-way communication (Heath, 2014).

Public relations scholars have recognized the common links between engagement and dialog (Lane & Kent, 2018). Kent and Taylor (2002) articulated the connection between engagement and dialog under the dialogic tenet of propinquity, where participants engaging in dialog must exercise respectful and inclusive attitudes. The authors further clarified the interconnectedness of engagement and dialog by stating that engagement is, in fact, a component of dialog (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Lane and Kent (2018) proposed a multilevel model of dialogic engagement, suggesting that "dialog provides an orientation among participants to each other and the process of communication, thus providing a context for engagement to occur" (p. 62).

A dialogic orientation plays a major role in cultivating employee engagement (Lemon, 2019a). Dialog among employees at all levels in the organization is different than two-way communication (Lane & Kent, 2018). Instead, dialog requires repeated communication that encourages participation, where communicators take time to listen, reflect, and then respond (Lane & Kent, 2018), thus reducing power dynamics that are oftentimes inherent between management and non-management employees. The result of this unique dialogic exchange is employee engagement, where active listening, rooted in respect and understanding, cultivates dialog and, in turn, employee engagement (Lemon, 2019a). Verčič (2021) suggested that public relations professionals should oversee internal communication, including dialog, and be held responsible for overseeing an organization's relationship with employees. When a dialogic approach to employee engagement is adopted, it sets the foundation to avoid the potential paradoxes that sometimes underpin employee engagement.

2.3. The employee engagement paradox

Francis and Keegan (2020) argued that employee engagement is inherently paradoxical because of the tensions that bolster the employee experience. Specifically, employees are often expected to do more with less, yet they want to be supported and understood. In addition, research has demonstrated that to be an engaged employee requires a higher level of discretionary effort (Lemon, 2019b). Heide and Simonsson (2018) suggested that employee engagement is a strategic process fostered by management to increase worker output, or discretionary effort, to increase the bottom line and organizational success. Pieczka (2018) also asserted a critical, paradoxical view, arguing that employee engagement is used as a means to control the work experience of employees to the extent that the organization monetizes employees for the sake of improving efficiency and productivity.

Engagement scholars Johnston and Taylor (2018) cautioned against the use of engagement strategies that are used with the intention of extracting a particular action or response from the audience. Employee engagement often fulfills this cautionary tale since employees are only considered engaged when doing more than what is expected (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018), fulfilling the paradoxical nature of a strategy that favors processes over people (Heath, 2013).

This paradox could be eradicated by adopting an ethics of care strategy that facilitates a supportive organizational culture. Scholars have called for organizations to act more ethical and caring toward the lived experiences of internal audiences (e.g., Shen & Jiang, 2019), suggesting that when management and organizations adopt a more transparent, authentic, and accountable approach, employees will exercise greater presence in the workplace (Kahn, 1992). Given that much of the employee engagement literature takes a functional approach (see Heide & Simonsson, 2018) with greater emphasis on the employee as an asset or resource that needs to be managed, the ethics of care approach is a missed opportunity to re-envision the workplace and the process of employee engagement (Francis & Keegan, 2020).

Just as the crisis literature tends to be dominated by a masculine perspective using the justice approach, where the focus is on rules and standards (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018; Tao & Kim, 2017), much of the employee engagement literature falls into the same category.

Specifically, employee engagement is often understood and investigated from a functionalistic perspective, where internal stakeholders are assumed to be a manageable resource, not human beings, that impacts the bottom line and are used to serve the organization's needs (Lane & Kent, 2018). When management adopts a functionalistic perspective, it minimizes or disregards the fundamental human nature of engagement, which should recognize that employee engagement is focused on the lived experiences of human beings. Over time, this minimization results in a devaluing of nonmanagement employees.

Functionalism is conceptualized as an ideology or perspective solely focused on advancing the organization's needs and identifying the antecedents that make organizational success possible with minimal concern for the repercussions on stakeholders for such efforts (Heide & Simonsson, 2018). Repercussions could include job burnout, which may impact an employee's personal health or life outside the workplace, such as relationships or child-rearing. These ramifications are a result of not valuing the other and recognizing the humanness of employees.

More recently, the co-creational perspective has been argued as the ideal approach for employee engagement (e.g., Heide & Simonsson, 2018; Lemon, 2019a). The co-creational approach is grounded in meaning-making (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Botan, 2018; Taylor, 2018), where stakeholders are no longer an asset that needs to be managed but are seen as having intrinsic value. Through co-creation, stakeholders become meaning-making partners that are appreciated and understood (Botan & Taylor, 2004). When organizations adopt a co-creational approach, all stakeholders across the organization are bound together in a way that ensures goals and objectives fulfill the pluralistic needs of everyone (Botan, 2018; Heide & Simonsson, 2018), not just management or the organization. This view recognizes the fluid nature of organizational life and remains open to changes as they may present themselves (Botan, 2018).

The co-creational position aligns with a more traditional feminist understanding, which values and champions a relational perspective. The relational perspective recognizes the "human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence. As we examine what it means to care and to be cared for, we shall see that both parties contribute to the relation" (Noddings, 2013, p. 4). This perspective is the foundation of ethics of care, which is discussed in detail next.

3. Ethics of care

3.1. Ethics in public relations

Prior to delving into the particulars of ethics within the field of public relations, it is first necessary to define the concept. According to Jaksa and Pritchard (1994), "ethics is concerned with how we should live our lives. It focuses on questions about what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, caring or uncaring, good or bad, responsible or irresponsible, and the like" (p. 3). Public relations professionals are involved daily in ethical decision-making through essential job functions such as research, strategic planning, issues management, and interpersonal skills (Bowen, 2004a; Neil, 2019). As stated by Bowen (2004a), "public relations is a field fraught with ethical dilemmas" (p. 65). Guiding these ethical dilemmas are often professional codes such as PRSA's code of ethics, which highlights the importance of advocacy, honesty, expertize, independence, loyalty, and fairness (PRSA, 2022). While the deontological approaches of professional codes provide guidance to the field, issues arise when considering limitations on enforcement and accountability (Bowen, 2004a; Tilley, 2005).

In addition, a common critique from PR scholars is that these professional codes emphasize broad responsibilities, and ethics are merely implied by highlighting responsible professional practices (Formentin & Bortree, 2018). As such, public relations scholars have worked to emphasize the ethical dimensions within the industry by incorporating normative philosophy and theories to aid in ethical decision-making and management. The use of ethical frameworks can assist public relations

professionals with decision-making necessary when communicating with both internal and external stakeholders.

Broadly, the concept of ethical decision-making in PR "involves making rational choices between what is good and bad, between what is morally justifiable action and what is not" (Patterson & Wilkins, 2005, p. 4). This work has been done through integrating moral philosophy frameworks such as business ethics (e.g., Rossi et al., 2021; Somerville & Wood, 2008); ethics of leadership (e.g., Lee & Cheng, 2012); virtue ethics (e.g., Seeger & Ulmer, 2001); ethics of justice (e.g., Simola, 2003); and ethics of care (e.g., Linsley & Slack, 2013; Madden & Alt, 2021). Each ethical framework brings a particular lens that can be used to determine what behaviors and actions are appropriate (Somerville & Wood, 2000). For instance, business ethics emphasizes the relationship between free, intentional organizational behaviors and how those actions affect or hold consequences for publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Within public relations literature, business ethics has been used as a lens to explore the relationship between social responsibility and brand attitudes from both normative and descriptive perspectives (Ferrell et al., 2019).

Another framework that has appeared within public relations literature is virtue ethics. Within public relations, virtue ethics can be defined as "how an organization interacts with integrity and wisdom in a society, fulfilling its duty to foster human flourishing by acting with ethical rectitude, consistently reflecting on the moral worth of on its own actions" (Bowen, 2016, p. 566). Virtue ethics looks at broader components than business ethics, such as the character of not just an individual or institution, but also of an action (Bowen, 2016). One of the earliest applications of ethical frameworks within the field of crisis communication was completed by Seeger and Ulmer (2001) through the use of virtue ethics. Through analyzing two crisis events, Seeger and Ulmer highlighted three important actions that were taken during the events guided by the virtue framework, which included reducing uncertainty for stakeholders, providing support and value for employees, and optimistic rebuilding and renewal (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001).

Simola (2003) extended Seeger and Ulmer's examination of ethics within public relations to distinguish ethics of justice and ethics of care (EoC). The ethics of justice assumes that individuals of a society pursue conflicting goals, and to reconcile these conflicts, a set of principles must be implemented (Tao & Kim, 2017). These principles are guided by universal rules and absolute standards of judgment, which require an organization to take this approach to have an objective and unbiased evaluation when approaching conflict (Noddings, 1999; Simola, 2003). Scholars have noted that the ethics of justice embodies what is considered a relatively masculine view of ethics, focusing on elements that lend themselves to codification, including rights, rules, and standards (Linsley & Slack, 2013; Sandin, 2009).

Ethics of care is an ethical framework that emerged from the criticism of this more masculine approach. EoC is centered upon relationship nurturing, rather than character traits. By taking this approach, EoC asserts that human flourishing relies on mutually beneficial relationships (Formentin & Bortree, 2018). Through two case studies, Simola (2003) concluded that both ethics of justice and ethics of care frameworks were applicable in guiding ethical management practices in response to crises. However, it was suggested that further research is needed to determine if differing circumstances make one approach more appropriate than the other. This sentiment is found throughout scholarly discussion surrounding ethics of justice and EoC, with many scholars of moral philosophy believing that the two approaches are distinct and incompatible with one another (Simola, 2003). Simola (2003) states that "ethic of care is reflected in concern about how to fulfill conflicting responsibilities to different people, as opposed to questions of how to resolve claims of conflicting rights among them" (p. 354). It has also been contended that the two frameworks are interrelated and that adoption of one does not impede the adoption of another (Ta & Kim, 2017). Liedtka (1996) suggests that while ethics of care does not focus on personal liberty and social contract found within justice, it does hold

similar tenants not to treat persons as a means to an end. However, Sandin (2009) concludes that, unlike the justice approach, organizations cannot opt-in and out of caring depending on situations. A caring approach stems from not only actions, but the ongoing caring intent behind those actions (Sandin, 2009), which leads to it being infused into organizational culture.

A strength of EoC is that it places focus on building relationships, which aligns seamlessly with the overarching goal of public relations to build "mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, 2012, para. 3). Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) note that "given the focus on relationships in both ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982) and public relations (Ledingham, 2006), it is surprising how seldom ethics of care appears in public relations literature" (p. 22). Instead of focusing on how to resolve claims of conflict through formal logic (ethics of justice), personal values (ethical leadership), or organizational outcomes (business ethics), ethics of care work to assess the narrative and contextual complexities of relationships among people. In contrast to other frameworks, EoC emphasizes the concern of others and the community as a whole, versus more rule-based impersonal approaches to ethics (Held, 2005).

4. Defining ethics of care

Stemming from feminist moral judgment, the ethics of care (EoC) framework is closely tied with research conducted by Gilligan (1977). Unlike many approaches within moral philosophy at the time, Gilligan worked to understand moral development from a female perspective (Simola, 2003). Through her work, along with other moral philosopher scholars, it was realized that women progressed through decision making by caring for themselves and others (Gilligan, 1977; Liedtka, 1996). Differing from more masculine ethical frameworks that establish universal rules centered on abstract reasoning, EoC suggests that relational connections often "guide moral decision making and suggests ethics are best explored through contextually relevant experiences" (Formentin & Bortree, 2018, p. 3). The idea of interdependency and moral behaviors involving caring and empathy for others is at the theory's core (Place, 2021). To do so, EoC focuses on addressing gender, race, and class, through actions such as sustaining connections, listening and considering all voices, and supporting the community.

Through the lens of EoC, more focus is put on relationship-based instead of character-based ethics. This focus emphasizes the importance of building trust, showing mutual concern, promoting human flourishing, and being responsive to needs (Formentin & Bortree, 2018). As such, EoC works to strengthen relationships among people by reflecting on "how to fulfill conflicting responsibilities to different people, as opposed to questions of how to resolve claims of conflicting right among them" (Simola, 2003, p. 354). This approach requires understanding the context and differing views individuals may have, as each individual is unique and deserving. Through actions such as moral listening and critical reflection (Tompkins, 2009), responses to ethical dilemmas can embody equity, sensitivity, and empathy (Place, 2021).

Although EoC embraces a feminine perspective, its use is not constricted by gender (Simola, 2003). The framework moves beyond prescribed gender roles to account for all individuals' interconnectedness and lived experiences (Formentin & Bortree, 2018). In addition, EoC recognizes that relationships are filled with power discrepancies that must be considered. With this approach, EoC extends past a one-way communication model that manages relationships with stakeholders, to instead encompass dialogic engagement that strives to build relationships in ethical decision making. To do so, Tronto (1993) emphasized that EoC cannot be achieved solely through abstract intentions but must also be reflected in action. To aid in the application of care, Tronto and Fisher (1990) devised what is considered a second-generation of EoC with four phases, including *caring about* (recognizing needs through attentiveness), *caring for* (accepting responsibility), *care giving* (actual work of caring through competence),

and *care receiving* (reception of care and evaluation through responsiveness). Tronto (2013) eventually expanded the model to also include *caring with* through ongoing care, which requires solidarity and trust.

The five phases begin with *caring about,* which is initiated through noticing an individual's or group's caring needs through attentiveness (Groot et al., 2018). *Caring about* can occur when both the caregiver and care recipient listen, are present, note signals, have mutual affections, and hold interest in one another (Rykkje et al., 2015). The second phase is *caring for,* which "take[s] on the burden of meeting the needs identified in step one" (Tronto, 2013, p. 34). Groot et al. (2018) conceptualizes this as creating a safe and communicative space that must acknowledge power dynamics. This leads to the third phase of *care giving*, which is the act of providing care. The fourth phase observes the care given within the third phase to translate and make judgments on the actions (Groot et al., 2018). This reflective stage of *care receiving* requires the continued safe and communicative space built in the second and third phases for both the caregiver and receiver to find the meaning of the actions through a collaborative approach. The final phase of *caring with* takes the previous stages covered within the framework and incorporates them to allow for a feedback loop. The fifth phase can occur once trust and solidarity are developed from phases one through four continually transpiring. This feedback loop allows for ongoing engagement and care to become expected.

Tronto's model works to illuminate the connection between care to ongoing attitudes and actions, highlighting the focus EoC shifts onto relationship building, compared to other ethical frameworks. As such, EoC has been proposed as an ideal lens when considering ethical decision making in the field of public relations (Place, 2021).

5. Previous ethics of care scholarship in PR

As previously stated, ethics of care and public relations appear innately connected through the focus and emphasis on relationship building. However, within the context of ethics in public relations, there has been a minimal embrace of EoC within the literature and practice (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). This limited focus on EoC has been attributed to several factors, including its perceived biological focus on what is seen as traditionally feminine virtues and values competing with the traditional operating ideals of organizations with managing stakeholder relationships (Linsley & Slack, 2013; Noddings, 1984). However, more recent dialog has pushed there to be less focus on gendered stereotypes and more emphasis on psychological elements of building trust, mutual benefit and elevation in social, political and economic settings (Formentin & Bortree, 2018). In addition, much of the literature exploring EoC remains in the conceptualization phase of exploring ethical approaches to various scenarios faced by the public relations field (Tao & Kim, 2017). This application aligns with the historical use of the framework as a critical lens to highlight ideal ideas, rather than at a concrete level that could aid in the practicality and implementation of EoC (Stensöta, 2015). However, recent application of the EoC framework within public relations can be seen through literature regarding corporate social responsibility (CSR) (e.g., Formentin & Bortree, 2018); crisis communication (e.g., Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018; Madden & Alt, 2021); and social media management (e.g., Place, 2021).

While many iterations of care ethics research outside of PR have focused on the notions of gendered, maternal relationships, Formentin and Bortree (2018) focused on care in ethical decision making through the context of privilege, practicality, respect, and mutually beneficial relationships. Through interviews with professionals in the nonprofit sector, the researchers were able to provide insight into how EoC is present among nonprofit relationships with sports organizations. In addition, Formentin and Bortree (2018) operationalized EoC's dimensions to include building trust, showing mutual concern, promoting human flourishing, and responsiveness to needs. The dimensions presented in this study were echoed by Place (2021), who explored ethical engagement of social media directed to or on behalf of marginalized

publics. Based on interviews with public relations and strategic communication professionals, Place (2021) suggests that an empathetic, genuine, and reflexive practice must be used to ethically accommodate publics' psychological, emotional, and interactive needs when engaging with social media content.

In addition to examining how EoC can aid professionals charged with overseeing CSR and social media efforts, the theory has also been applied to support crisis communication professionals. Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) proposed the applied model of care considerations (AMCC) for PR and crisis communication to aid professionals in concrete decision making when using more abstract ethical theory. In addition to addressing foundational care concepts previously discussed (i.e., relationships, reciprocity, vulnerabilities, interdependence), AMCC proposes a set of care considerations across four landscapes, including *physical, cultural, political/economic,* and *human* (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018).

These landscapes work to address times, places, and spaces relevant to crisis and public relations-based management situations in a way that appreciates there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. For instance, the *physical landscape* addresses the lived experiences of individuals, including taking into consideration "access to material resources such as utility infrastructures, dwellings, and businesses; geographical constraints such as distances in traversing to work, school, hospitals, and support systems; transportation; and technology access" (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018, p. 31). Within the *cultural landscape,* AMCC promotes the idea that public relations professionals acknowledge the message receiver's social, spatial, and temporal locations. This requires the message sender to recognize and respect differences in cultural characteristics such as age, gender, social norms, individual versus collectivism, and religion. The third landscape of *political and economics* calls attention to the need to acknowledge the political and economic systems that influence wealth, labor rates, public service, censorship, and military access (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). Lastly, AMCC proposes the *human landscape* that highlights "situational and contextual sensitivities in tailored communications efforts" (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018, p. 34). The *human landscape* focuses on characteristics such as relationships, education, health, and literacy.

When viewed as a whole, the AMCC framework's cross-cutting care considerations and proposed landscapes provide a higher level of concrete guidance for PR professionals when approaching situations through the lens of EoC. Its development demonstrates the ability of EoC to be applied as a model in PR and challenges scholars to continue "explicating and building a model of care that is both flexible enough to accommodate a diverse range of situations and contexts, while also conceptualizing what living well as a species or public might mean" (Jones, 2021, p. 78). To respond to the call to continue building and exercising a model of care in public relations, we offer an ethics of care applied to employee engagement framework, which is covered next.

6. Employee engagement and ethics of care framework

As mentioned, investigations using ethics of care are minimal in the public relations discipline (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). Ethics within organizations have mostly been examined from a top-level, applying ethics to leadership or viewing ethics from a business lens, with Carmeli and associates (2017) arguing for more research on how ethics occur within organizations. In addition, to the best of our knowledge at this point in time, the field of human resources is the only field to look at employee engagement as an ethical imperative (Francis & Keegan, 2020). Specifically, the authors offer an ethical human resource management framework that focuses on the organization and management of engagement (2020). Therefore, there is an opportunity for the field of public relations to offer an applied framework that brings together a co-creational view of employee engagement and ethics of care. In doing so, the human resources framework can shift to re-envision employee engagement as an ethical imperative rooted in understanding and

meaning instead of a process that fulfills managements' objectives.

For an organization to be considered ethical, it must value ethical decision making and encourage ethical behavior internally (Bowen, 2004a). Such attentions are important when considering internal audiences and developing processes that promote employee engagement. An ethical framework helps transition internal audiences away from being solely measured on productivity, where employees are monetized and only seen as assets calculated on a balance sheet, to being held with the highest regard and treated with intrinsic value. Ethics of care assumes an intrinsic value for all and embodies a level of equity, sensitivity, and empathy (Place, 2021), through actions such as moral listening and critical reflection (Tompkins, 2009). Here, the emphasis is on social connection, where the focus is on building and strengthening connections with special focus on being sensitive and understanding towards others (Bauman, 2011). In doing so, the ethics of care model takes into account all internal audiences' lived experiences and embraces diverse perspectives to ensure decisions are made that benefit the whole organization, not just management.

In addition, through upholding the ideals of both genuine and ethical caring offered through ethics of care, there is also effort to keep lines of communication open (Noddings, 2013). As suggested by Noddings (2013), this does not mean there will always be a mutual understanding or a positive two-way dialog. This is especially true when thinking of the polarized environment we find ourselves in today where both the cared-for and the concern for others within the organization needs to be taken into consideration. The use of EoC suggests the caregiver, or employer, must be cautious and reflect on the level of response or action that will best serve the web of those being cared for within the organization (Noddings, 2013).

Given the possibilities that exist when the ideas that underpin the ethics of care are applied to employee engagement, we are proposing the ethics of care applied to employee engagement (EoCAEE) framework that demonstrates what this might look like within organizations. Ethics of care is more than a set of rules or guidelines that advocate for what is right and wrong—it is a framework that can be built into work environments in a way that is flexible enough to adapt to a wide range of audiences and situations (Jones, 2021). In addition, when the ethics of care framework is applied to employee engagement, it sets the foundation for long-term sustainability for both employees and the organization (Carmeli et al., 2017). The next section further explains the proposed framework.

7. Proposed framework

The ethics of care applied to employee engagement (EoCAEE) framework offered here combines two theoretical models: Ethics of Care (EoC) actional model proposed by Tronto (1993) and Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) Applied Model of Care Considerations (AMCC) for crisis communication. As mentioned, the EoC model connects attitude and action in five phases: 1) *caring about*; 2) *caring for*; 3) *caring*; 4) *care receiving*; and 5) *caring with*. The caring with phase requires a feedback loop, which ensures that solidarity and truth continue to be achieved over time by constantly revisiting each one of the phases. The AMCC proposes four landscapes: 1) *human landscape*; 2) *political/economic landscape*; 3) *cultural landscape*; and 4) *physical landscape*. In combining these models, it aids in the concrete application of these ethical frameworks that are often treated as abstractions. Furthermore, when the combined models are applied to employee engagement, public relations professionals and scholars are able to visualize and thus, better understand how EoC can be carried out in the workplace.

In addition to combining the models, our EoCAEE framework offers a fifth landscape that we believe was missing from the original AMCC model. Just as the *caring with* phase of EoC assumes the ongoing, interwoven nature of caring, the AMCC landscapes also need an all-encompassing pillar to ensure a holistic approach and application. All of the landscapes need to be considered and evaluated to safeguard

ongoing care, where value is continuously dispersed. Therefore, the fifth phase of AMCC assumes a holistic lens, where all of the landscapes are interwoven and taken into account as a whole. Thus, our proposed fifth landscape is the *holistic landscape*.

Adding a fifth landscape moves AMCC forward and in complete alignment with the EoC framework. The feedback loop of the first four EoC phases or the *caring with* phase ensures care is ongoing and can be expected by others. Such a component is missing from the AMCC model. Therefore, the *holistic landscape* is needed to represent the idea that all landscapes need to be continuously addressed and improved over time. In doing so, the AMCC, and subsequent application to employee engagement, ensure EoC is fully enacted within this unique context. By looking at the totality of the landscapes within the AMCC and the ongoing nature of EoC, the EoCAEE framework honors the diverse perspectives and lived experiences of internal audiences, a collective made up of individuals, where each individual is seen and treated as a whole person with intrinsic value. Given this fundamental assumption that underpins the nature of the framework, the *human landscape* can be found in each EoC phase. Below are the five phases of the EoCAEE framework explained in detail and summarized in Fig. 1.

7.1. Caring about in the human landscape

The *caring about* phase recognizes the needs of others through attentiveness (Tronto & Fisher, 1990). In addition, the *human landscape* understands and appreciates the role of connections, relationships, and networks, recognizing that individuals are comprised of emotions and experiences (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). When applied to employee engagement, *caring about* in the human landscape is fulfilled through active listening, dialog, and a level of vulnerability that results from being present in the communication exchanges that occur within the workplace. Specifically, dialog and active listening are how the needs of employees are recognized and met. When employees engage in dialog, it requires a certain level of vulnerability and presence to fully engage in the exchange (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Active listening is an ethical practice where a dialogic partner recognizes the other's point of view, strives to understand and value the viewpoint, and responds in a way that demonstrates appreciation to the other for sharing (Macnamara, 2016). Therefore, the needs of employees at the individual level and as a collective are recognized through active listening and dialog.

7.2. Caring for in the human and political/economic landscapes

The *caring for* phase accepts responsibility for the action of caring (Tronto & Fisher, 1990). The *human landscape* underscores that the responsibility for caring falls on the individuals that make up the organization. Furthermore, the *political/economic landscape* understands how political systems and hierarchical structures impact one's experience (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). When applied to employee engagement, the inherent organizational power dynamics of privileged management over employees are recognized. The co-creational approach should be the goal to appropriately care for internal audiences within this landscape. As mentioned, the co-creational approach assumes that all stakeholders within an organization have value because everyone is considered a meaning-making partner (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Co-creation strives to minimize power discrepancies within organizations by developing objectives and strategies that ensure everyone's needs are met (Botan, 2018; Heide & Simonsson, 2018), since the organization is responsible for everyone, not just management. In addition, professionals and scholars should investigate the ways in which the co-creational perspective is enacted in the workplace to challenge the pervasive functionalistic perspective.

7.3. Caring in the human and cultural landscapes

The *caring* phase is the actual work of taking care of and for another (Tronto & Fisher, 1990). The relationships, connections, and networks from the *human landscape* help organizational members determine how taking care should be carried out; communication helps build these connections. The *cultural landscape* attempts to understand the cultural differences, recognizing that situations are contextually based and socially constructed through communication and connections (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). Here, the value is placed on an empathetic, socially constructed organizational culture, rooted in authenticity and trust. Formal internal communication channels must authentically inform employees and ensure transparency to build trust. In addition, the dialogic tenant of *empathy* assumes support and acceptance of everyone involved in the communicative exchange, even if there are differences (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Therefore, in combining formal internal communication channels with dialog, an empathetic culture is constructed and maintained, which leads to richer employee engagement.

7.4. Care receiving in the human, cultural, and physical landscapes

The *care receiving* phase ensures that the recipients of care are responsive, and the care practices are evaluated for success or need for improvement (Tronto & Fisher, 1990). Therefore, the *human* and *cultural landscapes* need to be considered. The *human landscape* places value on understanding the individual lived experiences and emotions, while the *cultural landscape* seeks to understand the cultural differences that are inherent in organizations (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). The *physical landscape* assesses that the appropriate resources are available, and if
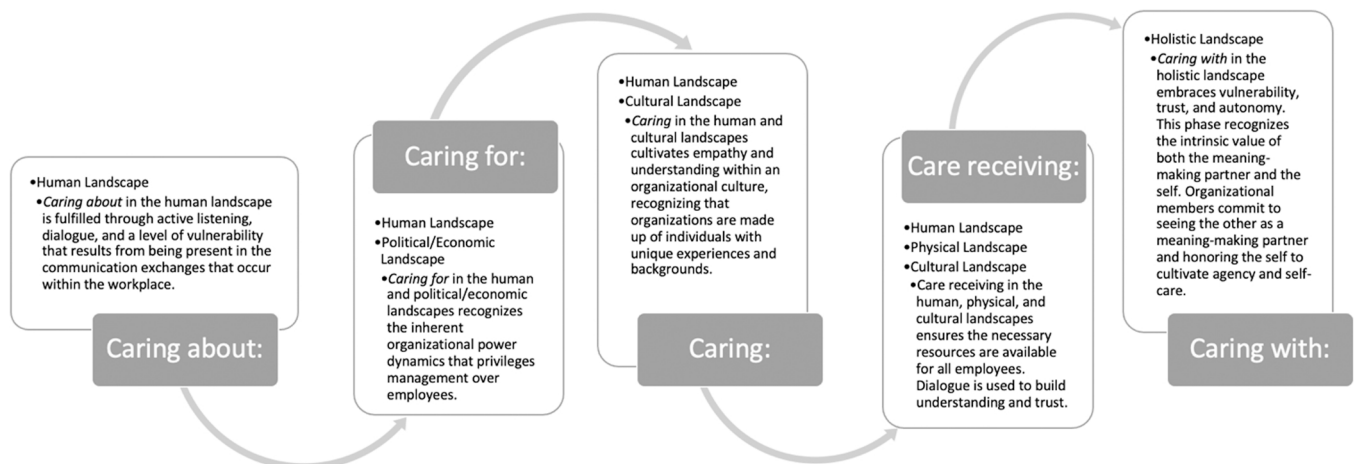

Fig. 1. Ethics of Care Applied to Employee Engagement (EoCAEE).

not, that those resources are made available (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). In practice, organizations would continuously assess organizational culture, networks, structures, and processes to ensure ethics of care is the foundation for employee engagement experiences and strategies. In the event that the *human, cultural, or physical landscapes* are not meeting employees' needs, management will need to make adjustments and shift resources so that they are available for all. Employees also need to be empowered to share what they need to ensure they receive the appropriate level of care and consideration.

7.5. Caring with in the holistic landscape

In the *caring with* phase, all phases are taken into account so that care is ongoing and maintained through solidarity and trust (Tronto, 2013). To ensure the AMCC model includes an encompassing aspect, we offer the *holistic landscape*. Here, all landscapes are considered, addressed, and evaluated to ensure value is dispersed throughout. The *holistic landscape* recognizes the interwovenness to ensure the *caring with* phase is maintained. When applied to employee engagement, the totality of the framework embraces vulnerability, trust, and autonomy. The delicate balance of recognizing the intrinsic meaning of the self and other is also achieved, with special commitment to honor the self and the other. The commitment to the self is fulfilled through self-care and agency. The commitment to the other is developed through co-creational processes with all meaning-making partners. When taken together, *caring with* becomes ongoing and constantly fulfilled throughout all of the landscapes to ensure the employee experience is rich, meaningful, but most importantly, respectful.

8. Practical implications

The EoCAEE framework sets the expectation for humans to care. However, an organization or person cannot MAKE someone care. Instead, organizations and individuals can embrace and "live" the framework, striving for care-based actions and tasks, such as caregiving—all of which can take place with or without the other truly caring. In doing so, these instances of caring incubate the development of care, which leads to an acceptance of and carrying out the proposed EoCAEE framework within an organization. In other words, "one must meet the other in caring. From this requirement there is no escape for one who would be moral" (Noddings, 2013, p. 201).

To aid in this effort, Liedtka (1996) states that an organization must provide support through its goals, systems, strategies, and values. However, the application of this framework goes beyond looking at the actions of an organization as an entity and focuses on and emphasizes the motives and actions of individuals who make up the company. Our framework lays out realistic, concrete steps to uphold the ideal of EoC, where members of the organization embody it and demonstrate care. In doing so, an organization can encourage an environment that creates opportunities for "genuine caring-for" (Noddings, 2013, p. xv).

In the COVID-19 era, which has changed the workplace as we know it, organizations should consider applying an ethics of care framework to employee engagement. When ethics of care is incorporated as an employee engagement strategy as demonstrated in the EoCAEE, employees are no longer viewed as a monetized asset on the balance sheet and are held in the highest esteem. Strategizing with an ethics of care would lead organizations to consider unconventional programs and initiatives such as providing childcare resources, encouraging continuing education, and offering and ensuring employees take competitive vacation packages. Ethics of care would also be baked into organizational strategies and objectives. In doing so, global organizations with internationally based employees would honor the cultural differences, where the unique cultural identities and experiences drive the type of care one might give and receive instead of finding a one-size-fits-all approach. Employees would be recognized for their distinctive differences instead of management trying to have them fit a particular

mold or meet certain expectations to offer and accept care. Additionally, developing organization systems to support employees who belong to marginalized groups based on culture, age, gender, ability status, and race would present another opportunity for the ethics of care framework to be carried out.

9. Future research direction

The current study works to provide more concrete guidance into how ethics of care can be further extended into the public relations paradigm by applying its framework to employee engagement. As this is an initial conceptualization of the ethics of care applied to employee engagement, suggested future lines of inquiry stem directly from the conceptual nature of this study. Specifically, as this is a first step towards exploring how the five phases of EoC and AMCC can be intertwined to create an applied framework, ongoing research opportunities exist to further conceptualize and empirically test the EoCAEE framework. For example, future research should explore how EoCAEE can be used to advance Noddings (2013) schools of care within an organizational setting. Although the schools of care are applied to the "deprofessionalization" of education, the same approach could be adapted and integrated into the workplace (Noddings, 2013, p. 197). In what ways can organizations deprofessionalize reward systems, organizational hierarchies, formal communication structures, or even employee evaluations? How would this innovative approach impact employee buy-in and retention? Future research should explore these questions with professionals via interviews and/or focus groups.

An additional proposed area within this future research stems back to AMCC's origins within the field of crisis communication. In adopting the proposed EoCAEE framework, which expands upon AMCC, a common critique of current crisis communication frameworks being linear and focusing solely on post-crisis reputation can be addressed. A particular strength of the proposed framework when considering research examining crisis lifecycles is its acknowledgment that dialog and engagement are not linear through its inherit use of a feedback loop. This loop adopts the idea that "issues do not necessarily follow a linear, sequential path, but instead follow paths that reflect the intensity and diversity of the values and interests stakeholders bring to an issue" (Bigelow et al., 1993, p. 29). Future crisis communication research should examine how organizations can take a long-term caring approach to engage with both internal and external stakeholders, instead of solely focusing on the three separate phases of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. Secondly, due to the proposed framework addressing a feedback loop, it provides a framework that can be applied to address the totality of crises and extend upon the idea that crises don't always operate as one single incident but are a culmination of events over time.

This holistic approach to studying crises is important when thinking about ongoing crises or considering crisis-prone industries which experience crisis contagions or spillovers such as the financial, technology, and healthcare fields. Lastly, the proposed EoCAEE framework, combining the five phases of EoC and AMCC, provides defined considerations that should be considered when applying it to employee engagement. Future research should continue driving this framework to be pliable, adaptable, and operationalized to the diverse ethical decision-making scenarios that public relations professionals encounter.

10. Conclusion

It has been noted within PR literature that the "practice of public relations is about relationships, and relationships are at the heart of ethics'' (Gower, 2003, p. 1). The current research endeavor works to strengthen the connection between PR and ethics by providing a holistic yet tangible framework for approaching ethics of care through the lens of employee engagement. The proposed EoCAEE framework was formed by reflecting on the five phases of EoC (Tronto & Fisher, 1990; Fisher, 2013), along with the applied model of care considerations (Fraustino &

Kennedy, 2018). Over the last twenty-two years, both frameworks have provided a more concrete compass on how EoC can be applied to tangible scenarios such as those involving political climates, healthcare, and crisis communication. However, as Jones (2021) highlighted, there is an ongoing need to continue building upon the EoC framework.

To aid in the evolution of EoC's framework within work environments, the proposed framework presents a fifth landscape to AMCC, the *holistic landscape*. The addition of the *holistic landscape* works to move AMCC forward in stronger alignment with the EoC framework. Just as Fisher (2013) introduced the fifth phase of EoC after the initial development in 1992, the proposed expansion of adding the *holistic landscape* works to propel AMCC forward for stronger alignment with EoC. As such, the proposed ethics of care applied to employee engagement framework honors the diverse perspectives and lived experiences of internal stakeholders by acknowledging the delicate process of providing such an environment requires continuous dialog and engagement. Consideration of such a framework within public relations, especially within the realm of employee engagement, allows for acknowledgment of conflict and diverse interests, ultimately leading to an environment that facilitates a supportive organizational culture.

Funding Sources

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