



THE KENAN  
INSTITUTE FOR ETHICS  
at Duke University

# INSTITUTIONS IN CRISIS

## Case Study Assignment

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The Institutions in Crisis (IIC) curriculum is composed of an analytic framework, a set of case studies with classroom discussion guides, and a case-study student assignment. The curriculum is designed to promote reflection, understanding, and analysis of the nature and potential for change in ethical cultures in organizations and institutions. This case study assignment is designed for students in courses in sociology, ethics, and organizational studies to deepen their understanding of the normative dimensions of crisis and change within organizations and how ethical cultures in organizations are related to broader changes in society.

## ***Institutions in Crisis* Case Studies Compared to “Standard” Ethics Cases**

A typical topic for a case study in ethics is a real or hypothetical instance of misconduct, such as embezzlement or corruption. A common ethical dilemma may be presented; for example, the inherent tension between the virtues of loyalty and courage that is encountered when a friend cheats on an exam. Such case studies are very much in the vein of *applied ethics*, where particular standards of right and wrong, good and evil, are applied to a value-laden experience. Case studies in applied ethics often analyze a single ethical issue from the standpoint of differing philosophical perspectives—utilitarianism or virtue ethics, for example—considering the outcomes and merits of each.

The *Institutions in Crisis* (IIC) case studies diverge from this standard model in two important ways. First, events or phenomena that are the focus of the case study are guided by considerations of *normative*, rather than applied, ethics. *Normative ethics* focuses on how understandings of good and evil, right and wrong, manifest within organizations (for example, in the nature of relationships, in mission statements, in operating procedures); how these understandings guide decision-making; and how they affect individual and societal well-being. The cases seek to explain how and why an ethical conflict or crisis arose and in what organizational structures or processes the conflict or crisis was manifested. An ethical crisis entails a challenge to an existing ethical culture—defined as a set of standards of evaluation and understanding of what constitutes “good” and “right” within a social group.

A second difference between the IIC cases and typical ethics case studies is that the organization and situations analyzed are much more fully embedded in social, cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts. IIC cases consider the interplay of many variables, providing a relatively “thick description” of an event. This approach is more in keeping with the method and intention of the research case method as used in social science research. This method entails the intensive study of a single group, incident, or community in order to gain greater understanding of the “how” and “why” of an observed phenomenon.

### **Choosing the Topic**

The strength of case studies is that they can present rich, complex descriptions of phenomena within particular settings. While the time period covered in the typical IIC case does not extend over more than a few months to a few years, the background context supplied in the case text can stretch back for decades or even centuries. Within the case the writer must establish what trends—industrialization, increasing technological sophistication, democratization, etc.—are important in setting the stage for the ethical conflict or crisis. The case text sets the contextual stage for the case, fully describes the organization embedded in this context, and narrates events leading to the conflict or crisis.

When choosing a potential case topic, keep the following suggestions in mind. Look for high-profile events that took place within a single organization. Events perceived to have been controversial and symptomatic of organizational conflicts or crises are readily available in news media. Instances of crime, corruption, and misconduct in organizational settings, however, should typically NOT be the primary focus of an IIC case. IIC examines the more general phenomena of clashing ethos and the conflict between sets of ethical standards within an organization and in the institutional environment more generally (see the orientation document for a fuller explanation of ethical crisis and other conceptual elements in the IIC framework). For example, an ethical crisis within a single organization (e.g., a particular university) can be symptomatic of a burgeoning crisis in the institutional realm (e.g., higher education).<sup>1</sup>

When choosing a case also look for events that can be used as exemplars of ethical conflicts as they exist at the institutional level. In other words, choose cases that reveal tensions in society between ethical standards. For

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<sup>1</sup> See the case studies related to higher education for exemplars, at <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/education/case-studies-in-ethics/institutions-in-crisis/>

example, the case of commercial surrogacy in India—with a child born to three mothers with varying claims to parentage—was not simply a crisis for the family or the fertility clinic.<sup>2</sup> The issues brought to the fore in this case highlight the ethical conflicts arising from the appearance of new reproductive technologies which challenge traditional normative understandings of family and parenthood. The pharmaceutical company Merck, which continued to aggressively market its pain drug Vioxx even in the face of mounting evidence of the danger to consumers, is a suitable case focus because the crisis exemplifies a clash of ethical standards between divisions within a single company.<sup>3</sup> This crisis is reflective of the inherent conflict that likely exists within all consumer products companies—between an ethos (i.e., set of evaluative standards) of profitability and one of consumer protection.

Thus, when considering a potential case, think about where the organization is situated institutionally and how the single event generalizes across similar organizations operating within the same institutional realm (e.g. all fertility clinics and more broadly across the institutions of reproductive health care and of the family; all consumer products businesses and all market entities). Obvious social institutions include higher education, the military, religion, family, and the market. Yet other institutional realms could be creatively addressed. For example, consider the ethical conflicts arising from differing conceptions of art centered on the Corcoran scandal in 1989, when the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., refused to exhibit controversial work by the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe; or ethical conflicts exposed in sports when a well-known athlete is accused of adultery or the use of performance enhancing drugs.

## Audience and Approach

Two approaches can be taken for writing an IIC case: developing the case as a teaching case or writing the case as an analytic research case study. In an analytic research case, the case is built around an explicit analysis of a phenomenon. The data (the facts of the case presented in narrative form) are presented side-by-side with the author's theoretical interpretation. This means that the case is built around theoretical propositions which explain how and why the event(s) took place. Facts and analysis are presented concurrently in the text. Analytic cases are considered part of a research tradition whereby exploratory cases build theory and theory-testing cases test previously generated hypothesis.

The second approach is the teaching case. In a teaching case the case background and narrative are presented as an objective set of facts, and it is in the teaching notes that the analysis of the case takes place. The case text presages salient issues and topics for discussion, providing the facts in the case text and leaving the bulk of the analysis to the notes. Teaching notes, therefore, are as critical a component of the teaching case study as is the case text.

The IIC cases posted on the Kenan Institute for Ethics' website are all teaching cases, with the analytic dimensions almost exclusively confined to the teaching notes. The teaching cases are used as tools to sensitize students to the underlying ethical frameworks that influence decision-making within organizations and to the possibility of ethical change in organizations and in social institutions.

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<sup>2</sup> See the IIC case study and teaching notes, "Commercial Surrogacy and Fertility Tourism in India: The Case of Baby Manji," at <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/education/case-studies-in-ethics/institutions-in-crisis/>.

<sup>3</sup> See the IIC case study and teaching notes, "Vioxx and the Merck Team Effort," at <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/education/case-studies-in-ethics/institutions-in-crisis/>.

## Writing the Case

Each case study should contain the following components (although the section headings and subheadings may vary):

### 1. Opening Paragraph

This is the portal to the world presented in the case study. It describes the controversy, conflict, or crisis being explored in the organization under study. The opening paragraph should draw in and focus the reader on why the question and/or controversy associated with the ethical conflict or crisis is important for deepening the understanding of ethical change (or stasis) within organizations. It should also answer the who, what, when, and where questions that will be elaborated upon in the body of the case.

### 2. Background and Context

This section contains information relevant to the event or phenomenon presented in the case. It should include a description of the organization's internal environment. For example:

- The founding and history of the organization
- The organization's mission
- Its organizational and decision-making structures and processes
- Its performance
- Relations among members of the organization and those associated with the organization

This section also includes a description of the external environment of the organization. For example:

- Social expectations of the organization
- The extent of government regulation
- Information about the organization's performance in relation to its peers
- Overview of the organizations' industry or sector

### 3. Case Narrative

The case narrative is most often organized chronologically, though other methods of organization, such as a description of the problem from the point of view of key actors, may also be suitable.

Interviews, documents from the organization, and library research including newspaper and magazine articles from the time of the case, should be used to provide the reader with a sense of the complexities faced at specific points in the narrative.

As your readers prepare to discuss the case, they should be able to reflect on the following questions using details and inferences from the narrative:

- What structural features of the organization contributed to the ethical crisis or conflict? Are there incentive systems that function in perverse ways? Do these derive from differing bases of accountability? Is dialogue encouraged across the organization or only in "silos"?
- Are the actors in the case aware of the ethical issues at hand? Should they be, given their position relative to the accountability and governance structures of the organization?

- What are the underlying ethical conflicts? How are these conflicts in ethical positions manifested within the organization or in its relationship to individuals or entities outside of the organization? What is the degree of shared ethos at different levels and within different units of the organization?
- How are the ethical issues that are revealed in the case reflected in social institutions more generally? What is the implication for ethical change in these institutions?

#### **4. Conclusion or Post-Script**

The purpose of the conclusion is to highlight the important tensions, key decisions, and variables that surface in the case narrative. The conclusion recapitulates the normative issues at stake. It may also raise new questions for consideration by the class. Teaching cases can end somewhat abruptly. A post-script paragraph that gives limited information on what subsequently happened to key actors or entities in the case is appropriate. Analysis of the case and possible conclusions reached from the analysis are confined to the teaching notes.

#### **5. Teaching Notes**

Teaching cases should include teaching notes that will be used to help plan the classroom presentation. The following components are suggested for the teaching notes:

- The teaching objective—what issue does the case illuminate? What concepts do you want students to remember after the class?
- A brief (one paragraph) synopsis of the case.
- A teaching plan that suggests ways to present the case during class and possible classroom activities, such as role play, use of visual aids, team debates, or open discussion.
- A set of discussion questions, how they relate to the teaching objectives, and how they relate to analytic concepts that inform the case.
- Suggested student assignments.

#### **5. Formatting Concerns**

Keep the following in mind when preparing the case and teaching notes:

- Use verb tense consistently throughout the case.
- The case should be divided into sections labeled with clear headings to guide the reader throughout.
- Cases should be written as objectively as possible.
- Tables and figures may be used in the text.
- Information that is helpful but too lengthy for inclusion in the text may be presented in appendices. This may include: financial data for recent years, timelines of important dates in the organization's history or important events discussed in the case, mission statements or codes of ethics, details of relevant internal rules or government laws and regulations, charts of organizational structures, pages from the organization's website, etc.