Proposed in this article is one possible framework for classifying multiple types of ethical issues in risk communication research and practice to help continue a discussion initiated in 1990 by Morgan and Lave. Some of the questions that each stage of the process for planning risk communication strategies appears to pose for ethics are discussed (e.g., selecting issues to be communicated, knowing the issue, dealing with constraints). Also discussed briefly are some issues raised by the possibility that risk communicators aspire to the status of a profession. The purpose is to foster discussion rather than issue a conclusive statement on the topic, because its very nature makes a definitive pronouncement indefensible.

KEY WORDS: ethics; risk communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1990 Morgan and Lave raised in these pages the important question of ethics in risk communication research and practice. Several other articles have appeared since on this topic. Despite their useful perspectives, none of these articles has offered a comprehensive view of the ethical issues in elements of risk communication. For example, Morgan and Lave focused only on issues pertinent to goal setting and testing messages intended to convey information from technical experts to laypeople, leaving other important aspects of the field undiscussed.

In this article, I propose one possible framework for classifying multiple types of ethical issues, and discuss some of the not-so-obvious questions that they pose. I aim to foster discussion rather than be

2. SCOPE

A review of any topic is not likely to be all-encompassing, and the subject of ethics in risk communication is new and diverse enough to make that a certainty. It should be noted that I do not discuss the choice to tell an unequivocal lie in risk communication, and that my perspective is that of a risk communication specialist rather than that of an ethicist.

Outright lies present a black-and-white, right-versus-wrong choice to the potential lie-teller, or to the observer privy to the lie who must decide whether to become a whistle-blower, that most people can recognize within cultural norms for honesty and accepted dishonesty (e.g., “white lies”). As Jungermann has put it, “The identification of the ethically correct choice is easy, but ensuring that this choice is made may require willpower and/or laws and rules”
It is possible to say something useful about honesty in risk communication. For example, Valenti and Wilkins (3) endorsed the rule of “don’t lie” over its seeming equivalent of “tell the truth,” because the latter is difficult given that any one view of hazard provides, at best, a range of truth (p. 183). However, choosing right over wrong is an ethical choice rather than an ethical dilemma.(4) I stress here situations that involve right-versus-right rather than right-versus-wrong challenges.

I am a practitioner and researcher on risk communication, not an ethicist or philosopher. Anonymous reviewers with the latter background thought that some “ethical” issues I raise in this article are more properly termed “practical” issues. Among their examples were decisions given limited time and resources, or uncertainty about the impacts of different message frames. These trade-offs may challenge risk communicators, they argued, but do not pose the ethical dilemmas of competing norms. For example, the issue of limited resources would be resolved by the meta-norm “ought implies can.” The reviewers therefore asked that I specify the norms violated by alternate choices, and distinguish ethical from practical issues (or not discuss the latter).

After much reflection, I chose not to follow their advice. First, I found it difficult without explicit training in ethics to make these distinctions, and doubted that wider discussion would be promoted any better by an inept attempt at distinctions than by failure to make them. Second, the quotations later from other commentaries on this topic (none of whom, I believe, has ethics training either) show that they also seem to be ignorant of this distinction between ethics proper and practical issues that might have eventual roots in “normative considerations.” In addition, some of these commentators state explicit norms without equivocation or exceptions in which “can” outweighs a universal “ought.” Their tone implying that there is little or no justifiable violation of these norms deserves some response. Third, my experience and discussion with other practitioners suggests that practical trade-offs often offer no less emotional pain than “real” ethical conflicts. Even if such pain is an inadequate indicator of ethical problems, acknowledging practical conflicts seems to be a useful contribution. Fourth, it seems as presumptuous for me to decide that a given issue is definitively ethical or practical as (I note at the end of this article) it would be for me to decide how to resolve the issue. Others might make quite different distinctions. In fact, a possible benefit of publishing this article in this form is that it can stimulate professional ethicists to offer better distinctions than I could ever offer, thus advancing the discussion of ethics and risk communication considerably.

3. A FRAMEWORK OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

The diversity of communicators and their ethical situations within and across government, business, academic, and activist organizations is rarely highlighted in risk communication literature, and few of those who communicate about risk to the public are formally designated or trained as “risk communicators.” Ethics provides only one of many means to generalize improperly about their varied opportunities and constraints. How does one avoid this trap?

I cannot frame ethical discussions within a risk communication theory that does not yet exist: At best we have a few minitheories, such as those from cognitive psychology and decision analysis about message content. I thus propose to frame ethical issues within a model of the practice of developing and implementing specific risk communication initiatives. By focusing on practical steps likely to occur across most communication situations, I hope to reduce undue variation in the ethical issues posed, noting potential differences where applicable.

The model I use, of which I am a coauthor, was developed for planning a risk communication strategy.(5) It posits several stages of planning (plus regular reevaluations of decisions about prior stages, a proviso that need not concern us here):

- identifying the issue
- setting goals
- knowing the issue
- knowing the audiences
- knowing the constraints
- assessing audiences
- identifying messages
- identifying methods
- (after implementing the strategy) debriefing and final evaluation.

I use this model as seemingly useful for current aims. As the fields of risk communication and its ethics mature, I expect our conceptions of useful frameworks also will evolve.

I end this discussion with brief comments on ethical issues for the field (rather than a specific strat-