"The findings in these two studies suggest that there is an important place for at least some forms of anonymous communication in organizations."

ANONYMOUS COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONS
Assessing Use and Appropriateness

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The two exploratory studies reported here examine use and appropriateness of anonymous communication in the workplace and how they relate to key demographic and organizational variables. In Study 1, use of traditional suggestion boxes, written feedback, and caller-identification blocking were the three most used forms of anonymous communication. In addition, open-ended responses suggested several situations and explanations for anonymity appropriateness. Study 2 identified six types of situations that differ in the extent to which anonymous organizational communication is appropriate (from highest to lowest): organizational surveys and/or assessments, formal evaluations, use of technology, informal evaluations, general use, and firing. In both studies, anonymity use and appropriateness are significantly related to the quality of relationships with key others at work.

Anonymous communication has a relatively long and interesting history in American politics and the media. Beginning with the anonymous publishing of the *Federalist Papers* more than two centuries ago, anonymity has played a unique role in American culture. Even the recent revelation by Mark Felt that he was the anonymous source known as "Deep Throat" during the Watergate scandal (O'Connor, 2005) serves as evidence of the power and intrigue of anonymity. The right to communicate anonymously is generally viewed as part of our basic right to free speech—an interpretation generally upheld in U.S. courts (Bowman, 2001). However, concerns and debates about anonymous communication seem to be at an all-time high. The anthrax-laced letters anonymously sent to various influential individuals in the United States in late 2001, coupled with the growing use of new communication technologies that afford users at least some anonymity, have propelled discussion of anonymity to the national stage. As one columnist for *Fast Company* magazine recently proclaimed, "We're entering an era of anonymity" (Godin, 2001, p. 86).

The role of anonymity is not, however, limited to the political realm or major news events. Its use is an option for individuals in a variety of settings—not the least of which are the organizations in which we are members. The "anonymous memo" at Enron provides a recent example. That scandal led to the passage of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which requires publicly traded organizations to provide a channel for employees to report wrongdoing anony-

mously (D. Jones, 2003; McDowell, 2004). Indeed, a growing concern about ethics—which E. Jones, Watson, Gardner, and Gallois (2004) identified as one of the key challenges for organizational communication in the new century—demands that we examine the role of anonymous communication in reporting organizational wrongdoing. Yet in other ways, this is not a new issue, as suggestion boxes, whistle-blowing, and certain types of feedback involving anonymity have existed in organizations for decades. Today, with the variety of new communication technologies available and participatory movements in the workplace that seek greater consideration of everyone's input (e.g., multi-rater feedback programs), organizational members have more opportunities for some degree of anonymity than ever before. It is ironic to note, those technologies providing anonymity often allow organizations to engage in greater surveillance and/or monitoring of workers (see Botan, 1996), and those efforts to be more participative may result in concertive forms of control among work teams (see Barker, 1993; Barker & Tompkins, 1994), both of which may foster a perceived need for anonymous communication in various workplace settings.

Despite the historical use of anonymity in the workplace and current forces that seem to contribute to its relevance in organizations today, surprisingly little theory or research exists relevant to anonymous organizational communication. In light of the current interest in the subject, this article attempts to help remedy that situation by examining various forms of anonymous communication relevant to organizational members. More specifically, our goals here are to (a) assess the use of various known forms of anonymous communication, (b) identify situations where anonymous organizational communication might be viewed as appropriate and examine the reasons why it is seen this way, and (c) explore how issues such as anonymity use and appropriateness relate to key demographics and other organizational variables. Thus, we begin by reviewing literature related to anonymous communication generally and anonymous organizational communication specifically, which leads to a series of research questions related to use and appropriateness issues. From there, we describe the methods and results from two separate studies to answer those research questions. Finally, key conclusions are discussed, implications considered, and directions for future research offered.

STUDY 1

ANONYMOUS ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Williams's (1988) claim that "anonymity is a notion that ought to be thought, taught and written about much more than it is at present" (p. 765) still resonates today, especially when it comes to the development of theory in this area. However, recent analyses of anonymity have emerged from a variety of perspectives, including sociology (Marx, 1999), legal studies (see Ekstrand, 2003; Froomkin, 1999; Levine, 1996; Levmore, 1996; Lipinski, 2002; Mostyn, 2000; Wieland, 2001), information technology (Pinsonneault & Heppel, 1998) and even social psychology (see work on social identity and deindividuation by Lea, Spears, & deGroot, 2001; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). Although such work from these various disciplines is important for understanding anonymity, none of them takes an especially communicative approach to this fundamentally communicative construct. One effort to bridge that gap is the communication model of anonymous communication (Anonymous, 1998). That work provides a model for describing when someone might choose to send a message anonymously, how a receiver might react to such anonymity, and the likely effectiveness of efforts to be anonymous (or identify someone). The model also notes that anonymity is very much a perception of the communicators involved and that usage behavior depends more on such perceptions than claims of any communication channel to be objectively "anonymous." Although several of the situations described in the model where one might attempt to be anonymous are relevant to an organizational context (e.g., when in a position of less power, when one has access to anonymous channels), this model is relatively general and does not speak to anonymous organizational communication directly. This seems to be true also of other existing research on anonymity in the field of communication, which tends to be more rhetorical (see Erickson & Fleuriet, 1991), journalistic (see Wulfemeyer & McFadden, 1986), legalistic (Bronco, in press), critical-cultural (see Rodriquez & Clair, 1999) or technological (see Joinson, 2001; O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003; Scott, 1999b;

Scott, Quinn, Timmerman, & Garrett, 1999) than organizational in nature.[1]

Thus, anonymity in organizations, or anonymous organizational communication, is clearly an under-theorized and under-researched area in our field. Yet, anonymity is highly relevant in organizations. Several scholars have noted a variety of organizational situations where anonymity might be found. Marx (1999), for example, listed informational audits, anonymous gift giving, caller-identification (ID) blocking, and review of applications without pictures and gender known. Anonymous (1998) discussed organizational flyers, upward appraisals, some forms of electronic mail, and some types of online workplace meetings as all involving at least partial anonymity. Although these examples emphasize organizationally sanctioned forms of anonymous communication, other examples exist as well. Whistle-blowing represents the most obvious example historically—and has gained renewed interest in light of recent corporate scandals. And though it is beyond the focus of the current study, the growing occurrence of "cybersmearing" and "John Doe" cases where organizations attempt to uncover the identity of individuals who have anonymously made negative comments about a company further points to the importance of anonymous organizational communication (see Bronco, in press; Chiger, 2002; Ekstrand, 2003; O'Brien, 2002). In spite of the prevalence of anonymity in organizational communication, it has usually been considered as only a part of larger communication research efforts. Three areas of research related to anonymous organizational communication receiving notable attention are whistle-blowing, feedback and appraisal, and use of electronic meeting technologies.

Whistle-blowing, as a form of organizational dissent, makes a disagreement with a majority or authority policy or view public (Bok, 1982). Going public may be necessary if internal options for registering dissent, such as one's supervisor or top management, are involved or are not seen as supportive. Because such an act often involves the reporting of substantial wrongdoing, many whistle-blowers will engage in this dissent anonymously in an effort to avoid retaliation for their actions. Miceli, Roach, and Near (1988) concluded in their study of federal employee reports of abuses and/ or frauds that the decision to anonymously blow the whistle to an external party is complex and related to a variety of factors, includ-

ing the seriousness of the wrongdoing, retaliatory culture of the organization, perceptions about the ability of an outsider to be responsive and protective of one's anonymity, and personal characteristics of the whistle-blower. Decisions to be anonymous may also relate to the likelihood of being perceived as an effective and credible source when whistle-blowing. Indeed, at least one study of whistle-blowers suggests that cases where the complainant was anonymous were much less likely to result in findings of misconduct (see Price, 1998). Other efforts have examined legality and effectiveness of various anonymous and confidential whistle-blowing mechanisms, especially in light of the recent Sarbanes-Oxley Act (McDowell, 2004).

Upward feedback and appraisal in organizations may use anonymity as a way to lessen employee fears about retaliation when evaluating a supervisor. Anonymity is almost always a key component of 360-degree appraisal programs commonly used in many organizations today (Westerman & Rosse, 1997). In a field experiment that directly manipulated whether feedback providers were anonymous or accountable, Antonioni (1994) found that feedback providers in the anonymous condition perceived the process more positively than did those in the accountability condition. He reported that post-study comments indicated a fear of reprisal for providing constructive feedback was the primary reason why most people preferred to provide the feedback anonymously. Conversely, the managers receiving the feedback in the accountability condition perceived the feedback process more positively than those in the anonymity condition (perhaps because their leadership qualities were rated more positively in the accountability condition). In closing, Antonioni recommended full anonymity in such upward appraisal programs. Although anonymity is generally regarded as producing more honest feedback, Ghorpade (2000) offered an extensive critique of whether it is more valid—suggesting that anonymity may allow inaccurate, biased, and self-serving information to factor into such assessments.

As a final area of research relevant to anonymity in organizations, several studies have been conducted on the use of electronic group-meeting systems to aid in team decision making (see recent reviews by Fulk & Collins-Jarvis, 2001; Postmes & Lea, 2000;

Scott, 1999a). These technologies typically use anonymous communication to encourage participation, minimize undue influence, and focus on the merit of ideas without concerns about the status of the contributor. Nunamaker, Dennis, Valacich, Vogel, and George (1991) noted in their review of these electronic meeting systems that several field studies found anonymity was important when power and/or status differences existed on the team. In a meta-analysis, Baltes, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer, and Laganke (2002) concluded that anonymous groups were more effective, but less satisfied, and took longer to make decisions than those groups that were identified. In addition, evidence suggests users make faulty attributions about the identity of group members when interacting via these anonymous meeting systems (Hayne, Pollard, & Rice, 2003; Hayne & Rice, 1997).

KEY ASPECTS OF ANONYMOUS ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Having briefly reviewed the relevant literature on anonymity in general and major areas of anonymous organizational communication, we now turn to two specific issues suggested by the intersection of work on anonymity and organizational communication. Collectively, these provide a way to assess actual usage behaviors and perceived values related to anonymous communication in organizations. For each, we offer research questions to guide our exploratory work in this area.

Anonymity use. We believe a useful starting point is to gauge actual anonymous communication behavior of organizational members. Given the various forms of anonymous communication one might use in a workplace setting, it is worth noting which are actually utilized. We are aware of no empirical research documenting the extent to which organizational members have used various forms of anonymous communication. Yet measures of this behavior are vital for knowing if, and to what degree, organizational members are engaging in anonymous communication. Thus, we pose an initial research question:

> *Research Question 1:* Which forms of anonymous communication are most used by organizational members?

Appropriate situations. As noted, existing scholarship does suggest several situations where one might find anonymous organizational communication. Because these existing lists are each slightly different (and thus likely incomplete), further assessment of these situations is warranted to capture organizational members' views about contexts where anonymity is appropriate. Beyond issues of use, there is also a need to explore more value-based assessments of the appropriateness of various anonymous forms of communication. Although Teich, Frankel, Kling, and Lee (1999) claimed that "anonymous communication online is morally neutral" (p. 72), Marx (1999) suggested that anonymity is inherently value laden; thus, issues of acceptability and appropriateness in how it is used are central here. Although we find no existing work on this topic specifically, an assessment from organizational members about appropriate situations for anonymous organizational communication, and explanations for why it is appropriate in such situations, seems an important supplement to usage data. Thus, we ask the following:

> *Research Question 2a:* In which organizational situations is anonymity considered appropriate?
> *Research Question 2b:* What explanations are provided accounting for anonymity appropriateness?

RELATED ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION VARIABLES

Finally, anonymity use and appropriateness may relate in important ways to other organizational variables. Two general categories examined are demographic differences (focusing on sex of respondent and organizational type) and other key workplace variables (including work satisfaction, organizational identification, intent to leave, and relationship quality measures with coworkers, supervisor, and top management).

Demographic differences. First, the research on electronic meeting systems suggests that there may be respondent sex differences related to anonymity. Savicki, Kelley, and Lingenfelter's (1996) study of anonymous meeting system users revealed significant sex differences in language use and satisfaction with the group process. Members of male-only groups used significantly fewer individually oriented pronouns, changed their opinions less as a result of group activity, and were less satisfied with the group process than members of mixed groups and female-only groups. Gopal, Miranda, Robichaux, and Bostrom (1997) also found that females had more positive attitudes toward anonymous electronic meeting system use than did males. In a more recent study, Flanagin, Tiyaamornwong, O'Conner, and Seibold (2002) reported that men and women have different perceptions of anonymous computer-mediated interaction that influences their behavior. Women, they argued, recognize the benefits of anonymity and the accompanying reduced social cues, while men make attempts to disclose more information to "regain interactional advantages[s] lost through anonymity" (p. 82). Given these related findings, we ask the following:

> *Research Question 3a:* How does respondent sex relate to anonymity (a) use and (b) appropriateness?

Second, it seems possible that anonymous communication may vary across different types of organizations. Patterson and Wilson (1969) examined differences in occupation type, conservatism, and preference for anonymity, reporting that substantially more businesspeople and unskilled workers preferred anonymity in comparison with laboratory technicians and professionals. Though their findings are dated, Patterson and Wilson's research suggests that there may be systematic differences in perceptions of anonymous communication across different types of organizations. For example, in the high-tech industry, where secrecy and privacy are coveted to secure new products that are being developed, anonymity may be appropriate; however, in such cultures, the use of teams and forces advocating accountability may also limit anonymity. As another example, in more public organizations where full disclosure is typically the norm, anonymous communication may be

deemed inappropriate; yet public and bureaucratic organizations may also foster structures that create a need for anonymous organizational communication. As these examples illustrate, differences based on organizational type clearly seem possible—especially when following institutional school arguments about mimicry and other congruencies between organizations (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Perrow, 1986). Thus, we ask the following:

>   *Research Question 3b:* How does organizational type relate to anonymity (a) use and (b) appropriateness?

Key organizational variables. We suspect some type of connection between anonymous organizational communication and one's relationship with key organizational members (coworkers, supervisor, and top management). In the feedback literature reviewed above, anonymity was deemed necessary when evaluating a supervisor or other high-status official. Furthermore, external whistle-blowing is more likely when one is unable to approach others internally. It is possible that a strained relationship with one's coworker, supervisor, or top management may make anonymous communication more necessary or may lead to situations that are best handled anonymously. Thus, we inquire:

>   *Research Question 4a:* How do one's relationships with others at work relate to anonymity (a) use and (b) appropriateness?

In addition, situations demanding greater use of anonymity and/ or perceptions of greater appropriateness may also relate to key workplace outcomes—including work satisfaction, organizational identification, and intent to leave the organization. For example, reviews of anonymous electronic meeting systems generally suggest that use of these anonymous tools is related to member satisfaction in work settings. In at least one experimental study linking identification to anonymity, Scott (1999b) found that discursive anonymity was generally associated with less identification to relevant targets of attachment. Furthermore, it is possible that use and appropriateness of anonymous communication may make it possible for one to stay with an organization longer (whereas identified disclosures about problems in the organization can result in one's

leaving the organization). Given the potential value of knowing how various measures of anonymity relate to key organizational outcomes, we ask a final research question:

> *Research Question 4b:* How do key organizational outcomes relate to anonymity (a) use and (b) appropriateness?

METHOD

RESPONDENTS

Data for this first study was collected in November 1999 in a metropolitan area in the southwest United States. A total of 156 surveys were given to students in an upper-level communication course, who then solicited organizational members to complete them. A total of 145 questionnaires were returned for a 93% response rate (in addition, no student reported any potential participants declining requests to complete the questionnaire).[2] Respondents in this sample came from at least 73 different organizations, with another 20 respondents not indicating their organization. Multiple surveys were returned from different employees in 21 of the 73 organizations. Respondents had worked at their organization for just under 4 years on average and were only slightly more likely (51%) to be men than women. More than two thirds of those responding had at least a college degree.

CATEGORIES AND MEASURES

Anonymous communication was defined on the questionnaire as follows (based on Anonymous, 1998): "Anonymous communication occurs when the identity of the sender of a message is not known or specified for the receiver of that message. It is based on people's perceptions." Unless otherwise stated, all items used a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*.

TABLE 1:   Use of Anonymous Communication in the Workplace

Usage Type	Number of Users	Users % of Users
Unidentified comments in a traditional suggestion box	51	35.9
Caller-identification blocking	50	35.7
Anonymous feedback via written form	44	31
Anonymous phone calls	40	28.2
Unsigned fax	32	22.7
Anonymous feedback via electronic channels	32	22.5
Unsigned memo/flyer/note	31	21.8
Anonymous e-mail and/or remailers	31	22
Anonymous/pseudonymous posts to bulletin boards or chat rooms	30	21.6
Unidentified comments in an electronic suggestion box	25	17.9
Whistle-blowing via electronic channels	14	9.9
Anonymous electronic group meeting systems	12	8.6

NOTE: Percentage of users is based on the number of participants who reported a valid answer for the question. Overall $N = 145$.

Anonymity use. Respondents were asked to indicate if they had ever experienced 12 different uses of anonymous communication found in the workplace. For use behavior, we employed an inclusive approach to communication (including either sending or receiving) to tap a general level of involvement in anonymous interactions. Although the original questionnaire responses allowed participants to indicate if they were even familiar with the various options and how often they had engaged in such communication (rarely or on several occasions), the findings divide responses into "used" and "not used" to facilitate data analysis. Table 1 lists the 12 uses of anonymous communication and their usage levels.

Anonymity appropriateness. In an open-ended portion of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to briefly describe up to three situations where anonymous communication is appropriate in a workplace setting and to briefly explain why anonymity would be appropriate in those situations. Responses here likely reflect a general value orientation toward anonymity—transcending sender-receiver distinctions. In the absence of existing classification systems for describing situations where anonymity might be appropriate, we began by independently reading through all the situations

described and then developing categories based on them—following a constant-comparative method and grounded approach (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Next, we refined categories by comparing one another's lists and looking for overlap and unique categories. This process eventually resulted in 18 categories that we thought fully captured the range of situations described and were still distinct from one another.

After discussing each to ensure we understood all the categories, we then individually coded the situations into one of the 18 categories. Of the 171 situations, we coded 136 identically, for an acceptable 80% rater agreement. In resolving differences, we decided to revise two of the categories. Furthermore, in a final pass through the data, two of the smaller categories with substantial conceptual overlap to other categories were eliminated. The responses in the two eliminated categories were placed into several of the remaining categories. Both of these changes were made to increase the clarity and parsimony of the classification system. This resulted in 16 categories, 14 of which dealt specifically with situations where anonymity was seen as appropriate (the remaining two categories and 48 situations respondents included were actually about privacy appropriateness or included statements indicating anonymity was never appropriate). Table 2 contains the final categories and sample items.

The same analytic procedure was used to code the explanations of why anonymity was appropriate. After an initial comparison of our independently derived categories, we had nine explanation types. Further discussion and consideration resulted in the elimination of two categories (one with substantial overlap to others and another concerned more with privacy than anonymity). Ultimately, this produced seven types of explanations, described in the Results section.

Finally, we also created an appropriateness profile for each respondent and then classified individuals into one of four categories based on the number and tenor of their appropriateness contributions. *Never appropriate* described the 13 individuals who stated that anonymous communication was inappropriate in any organizational setting. *Minimally appropriate* described 38 individuals who only identified one situation that was appropriate (or who had multiple situations but hedged that with a comment such as "I gen-

TABLE 2:   Categories of Appropriate Anonymous Organizational Communication

Category	Mentions	Example
Complaints and/or suggestions—organization and/or management	36	Feedback or criticism of management action
Complaints and/or critique—coworkers and/or peers	13	To report a colleague's inappropriate behavior
Whistle-blowing	12	Whistle-blowing—key to bring situations to light
Organizational surveys and/or assessments	12	Surveys and/or questionnaires for research purposes—electronic or not electronic
Performance feedback—coworker and/or peer	11	Peer reviews—to allow for full input
General suggestions	9	Suggestion box—printed or electronic
General event and/or announcement	8	E-mail notifications of company-wide events or warnings
Performance feedback—supervisor and/or manager	7	When they submit performance appraisals on their bosses
Internal and/or external inquiries	5	It is appropriate for a potential client to call anonymously when casually inquiring about services
Brainstorming	3	Brainstorming—people should feel comfortable brainstorming
Going around supervisor w/out his or her knowledge	3	If you have a problem that your immediate supervisor doesn't respond to, you could go around him or her
Evaluation of training	2	Feedback to evaluate training so that it can improved if necessary
Fun and/or recreation	1	Anonymous communication is appropriate in cases such as "Secret Santa"
Firing	1	Firing—no one to hold a grudge against

NOTE: Mentions = the number of times a category was mentioned by respondents.

erally don't think anonymity is appropriate, but . . . "). *Appropriate* described those 33 individuals who identified two or more different situations in which anonymous communication is appropriate. The last potentially relevant category, *nonrespondents*, described the 49 participants who did not offer any suggestions for when anonymous communication is appropriate in the workplace.

Relevant demographics. Respondent sex was based on a single self-report item in the demographics section of the questionnaire. Organizational type was assessed by thematically coding responses to survey questions asking about an employer and/or the type of organization in which a respondent worked. The lead author and two trained organizational communication Ph.D. candidates began the coding by each generating a list of organizational types based on their independent review of every third questionnaire. These categories were then compared, discussed, expanded, collapsed, and clarified by the three researchers until an agreeable set of 13 categories emerged. Next, each person coded two thirds of the responses, so that two different researchers independently coded all questionnaires. We then compared results, which produced agreement on 130 of the 145 questionnaires (90% agreement rate). Disagreements were discussed between all three coders until a final code could be decided. The eight categories and percentage of total respondents are as follows: engineering/construction/architecture/ energy (7%), computer technology manufacturing and/or development (25%), computer technology sales and/or service (14%), insurance/finance/property (12%), health care (9%), retail and general service (9%), public—government and education (12%), and advertising/public relations/marketing/media (6%). An other/none (6%) category was not included in the analysis.

Key organizational variables. Communicative relations with coworkers (α = .77), supervisor (α = .91), and top management (α = .91) were taken from the International Communication Association (ICA) Communication Audit (Downs, 1988). Each of these scales was composed of three items shown to be reliable in previous work (see Scott, Connaughton, et al., 1999). Organizational identification was assessed with five suitable items from Cheney's (1982) Organizational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ). After

removing one problematic item in the current study, reliability was acceptable (α = .77). Work satisfaction was measured with the Job Descriptive Index (JDI; Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969), which is based on 18 workplace descriptors. The current reliability for this scale was α = .79. Intent to leave was assessed with a four-item scale based on research by O'Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell (1991). The reliability for this scale in the current study was α = .86.

RESULTS

The research questions explored here were answered through general descriptive statistics, chi-square, ANOVA, and correlations. A statistical significance criterion of p < .10 was adopted, which "sometimes is used in exploratory or pilot research . . . to see whether the suspected difference or relationship is worth pursuing in more detailed, follow-up studies" (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000, p. 328). Where multiple post hoc tests were run following a significant overall finding, Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference Test was used to adjust the overall error rate (Keppel, 1991). Results are presented separately for anonymity use and appropriateness. For each, we also report any differences related to the demographic or other organizational variables.

ANONYMITY USE

Research Question 1 asks about usage of anonymous communication by organizational members. Table 1 lists 12 possible uses of anonymous organizational communication and the number of people indicating they have sent and/or received anonymous messages this way. The three largest categories were for use of traditional anonymous suggestion boxes, caller- ID blocking, and anonymous written feedback, with 30% to 35% of respondents reporting sending or receiving these types of anonymous communication. As the table also indicates, whistle-blowing communication via electronic channels and use of anonymous electronic group meeting systems were the least frequently used forms (less than 10% of respon-

dents). Other forms had been experienced by 18% to 28% of respondents.

To examine the demographic differences related to anonymity use from Research Question 3a and Research Question 3b, we first ran chi-squares comparing users and nonusers by sex of respondent and by organizational type. Chi-squares revealed only one significant difference for sex of respondent related to usage. Males were significantly more likely to use remailers, $\chi^2(1, 138) = 2.44, p < .10$. Similarly, the only significant difference across organizational types was for the use of caller-ID blocking, $\chi^2(7, 131) = 12.72, p < .10$. Whereas every other organizational type had more nonusers than users, 9 of the 11 respondents in the public sector (government and/or education) category were users. Although the overall difference among organizational types was not significant for use of either traditional suggestion boxes or written feedback, the same pattern emerged with these categories. Only among the public sector respondents were there more users than nonusers of these forms of anonymous organizational communication.

Research Question 4a and Research Question 4b ask, in part, about anonymity use related to several other organizational variables. ANOVA comparing users and nonusers revealed several differences related to relations with one's supervisor. Specifically, relations with one's supervisor are lower for users than nonusers for the following four anonymous forms of communication: whistle-blowing via electronic channels ($M = 3.88$ and 4.37), $F(1, 138) = 3.98, p < .05$, anonymous electronic group-meeting systems ($M = 3.89$ and 4.36), $F(1, 138) = 3.28, p < .10$, unidentified comments in an electronic suggestion box ($M = 4.04$ and 4.39), $F(1, 138) = 3.24, p < .10$, and anonymous e-mails and/or remailers ($M = 3.97$ and 4.41), $F(1, 139) = 6.34, p < .05$. In addition, those who reported using caller-ID blocking ($M = 1.91$) were less satisfied with their work than those not using it ($M = 2.08$), $F(1, 135) = 2.77, p < .10$.

ANONYMITY APPROPRIATENESS

The second set of research questions asks in which organizational situations is anonymity considered appropriate and why. Table 2 lists the categories of appropriate situations that were con-

structed in our qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses, sample situations, and the size of those categories. Fourteen distinct categories of situations where anonymity was seen as appropriate were constructed. The largest of those was complaints and/or suggestions about organization and/or management. Other sizable categories included complaints and/or criticisms about coworkers and/or peers, organizational surveys and/or assessments, whistle-blowing, and performance feedback on a peer and/or coworker. Several fairly traditional categories emerged with a moderate frequency of mention: performance feedback—supervisor and/or boss, general suggestions, blanket announcements of general events, and various information inquiries. Other categories were distinct but barely mentioned, either because they occur so rarely (e.g., fun and/or recreation uses such as "Secret Santa," formal brainstorming sessions, and evaluation of training sessions) or because they likely were not seen as appropriate by most respondents (e.g., going around one's supervisor without his or her knowledge, and even anonymously firing someone). One additional informative category included 13 statements where people indicated explicitly that anonymity is never appropriate. The following reflects the strong feelings that at least some of these respondents had:

> I don't really believe it's appropriate. I want accountability. I answer the telephone with my full name. I put my full name on my answering machine at home and work. I feel that America's obsession with "anonymity" is a copout; it breeds irresponsibility, nonaccountability, and shabby work. In the extreme case, it breeds a lifestyle of sinfulness and overindulgence.

Given the possible differences between respondents with views such as this as opposed to those who identified one or more situations where anonymity is appropriate in an organizational setting, we further analyzed respondents based on their appropriateness profile. In addition to the 13 individuals profiled as never appropriate, we identified profiles labeled minimally appropriate ($n = 38$), appropriate ($n = 33$), and nonrespondents ($n = 49$). We then compared those four groups on the two demographic variables examined in Research Question 3. Chi-square values for sex of respondent and organizational type were nonsignificant, suggesting no

differences in profile membership across those two demographics. However, ANOVA comparing the four profiles on the six organizational variables examined in Research Question 4 revealed several significant differences. The profile groups differed in terms of work satisfaction, $F(3, 127) = 2.18$, $p < .10$, relations with coworkers, $F(3, 129) = 2.31$, $p < .10$, relations with supervisor, $F(3, 127) = 2.59$, $p < .10$, and relations with top management, $F(3, 128) = 3.67$, $p < .05$. Although post hoc tests revealed no significant pairwise differences for coworker relations, for supervisor relations and work satisfaction the never appropriate ($M = 4.72$ and 2.37, respectively) group had significantly higher scores than the nonrespondents ($M = 4.04$ and 1.93, respectively). For relations with top management, the appropriate group ($M = 3.34$) had significantly less favorable relations than did the never appropriate ($M = 4.33$) and minimally appropriate ($M = 3.96$) groups. For each of the relationship variables and work satisfaction, the pattern of means was similar in that the strongest outcomes were for the never appropriate group.

Finally, our examination of the explanations offered by respondents as to why anonymity was appropriate in certain situations resulted in seven explanation types. Those categories are avoiding personal retribution, discomfort with confrontation, communicating sensitive topics, protection of others, promoting honesty/openness, no need to identify, and recreational. Although most of these explanations were offered multiple times, avoiding personal retribution was clearly the most prominent. Examples and explanations of each category are provided in Table 3.

STUDY 2

RATIONALE

Although Study 1 identified 14 different situations where anonymous organizational communication was seen as appropriate, the nature of this open-ended data made it impossible to answer several

TABLE 3: Explanations for the Appropriateness of Anonymous Communication in Organizations

Reason	Examples
Avoiding personal retribution	hesitant to give negative feedback to managers in fear of retribution people are afraid to come forward for fear of retaliation opportunity to express . . . without worrying about negative repercussions to voice opinions to supervisors without fearing consequences
Discomfort with confrontation	when an employee wants change but does not want to directly confront her or his supervisor you could go around him or her [supervisor] without stepping on his or her toes when conflict arises among staff members you work closely with people don't want to seem as if they are going above their supervisor's head
Communicating sensitive topics	touchy topics such as personal habits or hygiene that affect one's coworkers in a racially sensitive environment to avoid hurt feelings
Protection of others	where blame would be apparent without getting another coworker or boss in trouble keep individuals anonymous who are the subjects of these problems
Promoting honesty and/or openness	to give accurate feedback to someone who may be a friend where you are trying to get honest responses from others promotes openness so that ideas can be relayed freely lets you objectively review . . . performance to promote free expression of ideas
No need to identify	when casually inquiring about services unnecessary for someone to claim . . . does not need admission of a person for the purpose of finding out addresses, titles, etc. [when cold calling]
Recreational	where the intent is fun and encouragement

important questions about anonymity appropriateness. First, there was no way to determine the level of appropriateness associated with each anonymous situation. Second, it was impossible to determine how some of the anonymous situations might relate to one another in terms of the appropriateness associated with each. Finally, there was no way to directly tie the key demographics and other organizational variables to these anonymous situations in the absence of specific appropriateness scores for each. Thus, we conducted a second study to examine anonymity appropriateness scores and to answer the following:

> *Research Question 1a:* How appropriate is anonymous communication in various organizational situations?
>
> *Research Question 1b:* What underlying factors, based on anonymity appropriateness scores, best characterize various organizational situations?
>
> *Research Question 2:* Are respondent demographic differences related to anonymity appropriateness?
>
> *Research Question 3:* Are key organizational relationship variables related to anonymity appropriateness?

METHOD

RESPONDENTS AND PROCEDURE

Data for Study 2 were collected during the spring of 2002 as part of a larger study of anonymous performance feedback. The data collection procedure was nearly identical to the procedure used in Study 1, except as noted. Ninety-eight participants completed this as part of an online questionnaire.[3] Respondents in Study 2 came from approximately 70 different organizations, with 7 participants not reporting the organization at which they were employed. A slightly larger portion of the respondents were women (51.6%), and the mean age for respondents was approximately 40 years. A majority of respondents (68.4%) reported having earned at least a bachelor's degree. The same procedure described in Study 1 was used to ensure the validity of the sample.[4]

MEASURES

Anonymous communication appropriateness. Participants were asked to rate the appropriateness of 19 anonymous activities. All but 5 of these were derived from the grounded analysis reported in Study 1 (see Table 2). Five other activities (using remailers, Web surfing, making donations, calling helplines and/or hotlines, and using caller-ID blocking) were included based on reviews of past literature. Each of the activities was rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*highly inappropriate*) to 5 (*highly appropriate*).

Relationship with supervisor and coworker. The same three items from Study 1 were used to measure the quality of one's relationship with a supervisor and coworkers.[5] The reliability for both scales in Study 2 was acceptable (α = .86). Other organizational variables in Study 1, which were generally less related to anonymity, were excluded from this second study.

Demographic measures. As in Study 1, respondent sex was based on a single self-report item in the demographics section of the questionnaire. Two additional demographics not included in Study 1 were assessed here given their possible relevance: age (in years) and job position (staff and/or clerical, lower-level management, midlevel management, or upper-level management). Finally, organizational type was assessed by coding the responses to a question on type of organization (with additional clues sought as necessary based on response to questions about current profession or the e-mail contact information provided). Specifically, responses were independently coded by the two authors into one of the nine categories that emerged in Study 1. Intercoder reliability was 81%. Disagreements were discussed and resolved by both authors. The categories and percentage of total respondents are as follows: engineering/construction/architecture/energy (30%), computer technology manufacturing and/or development (8%), computer technology sales and/or service (5%), insurance/finance/property (11%), retail and general service (7%), public—government and education (13%), and advertising/public relations/media/marketing (5%). Health care (3%) and all other organizational types that did

not fit into one of the above classifications were placed in an other/ none category and not included in further analysis (20% total).

RESULTS

The research questions for this second study were answered through general descriptive statistics, principal components analysis, ANOVA, and correlations. Because of the exploratory nature of this analysis, a statistical significance criterion of $p < .10$ was once again adopted. Where multiple post hoc tests were run following a significant overall finding, Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference Test was used to adjust the overall Type I error rate.

MEAN APPROPRIATENESS SCORES

Research Question 1a for Study 2 asks how appropriate anonymous communication is in various organizational situations. Table 4 displays the mean anonymity appropriateness score for each of the 19 situations listed on the questionnaire. The 2 situations where anonymity is seen as most appropriate, with scores above a 4 on the 1-to-5 scale, are performance evaluations of one's manager and helplines and/or hotlines. Nine other situations had averages above the scale midpoint, suggesting that anonymous communication was seen as more appropriate than inappropriate. Conversely, 8 situations had scores below the scale midpoint—with anonymously going around one's supervisor, use of anonymous remailers, and anonymously firing someone viewed as most inappropriate.

APPROPRIATENESS FACTOR SCORES

Research Question 1b for Study 2 asks about underlying factors, based on anonymity appropriateness scores, that best characterize various organizational situations. Table 4 also displays results of a principal components analysis of the appropriateness scores. Using

TABLE 4:   Anonymity Appropriateness Mean Scores, Scale Reliabilities, and Factor Loadings

Factor (and % Variance Explained) and Situations Loading on Each	Mean Appropriateness (and SD)	Factor Scale Reliability and Primary Factor Loading
Factor 1: General Use (29%)	2.79 (1.01)	α = .80
Brainstorming	2.64 (1.31)	.69
General suggestions	3.16 (1.23)	.82
Fun/recreation	2.71 (1.26)	.67
General announcements	2.63 (1.33)	.81
Factor 2: Technology Use (14%)	3.36 (1.06)	α = .76
Surfing Web	2.88 (1.52)	.83
Making donations	3.37 (1.36)	.75
Calling helplines and/or hotlines	4.13 (1.25)	.60
Using caller-identification blocking	3.06 (1.38)	.62
Factor 3: Informal Evaluation (8%)	3.20 (1.05)	α = .76
Going around supervisor	2.43 (1.49)	.69
Whistle-blowing	3.65 (1.40)	.59
Complaints and/or critiques of coworkers	3.19 (1.32)	.72
Complaints of management and/or organization	3.53 (1.30)	.78
Factor 4: Formal Evaluation (7%)	3.79 (1.08)	α = .73
Evaluation of training	3.49 (1.42)	.69
Performance evaluation—supervisor	4.03 (1.31)	.63
Performance evaluation—coworker	3.86 (1.29)	.82
Factor 5: Firing (6%)	2.58 (1.71)	.78
Factor 6: Organizational Assessment (5%)	3.88 (1.07)	.70
No factor: Internal and/or external inquiries	2.78 (1.18)	
Remailers	2.14 (1.37)	

NOTE: Mean appropriateness scores range from 1 to 5, with higher numbers indicating greater appropriateness of using anonymity in such situations.

varimax rotation, that analysis produced six clear factors accounting for 68% of the variance among the scores. Using the 60-40 guideline (items load > .6 on one factor and < .4 on all other factors), all but two items were retained (internal and/or external information queries and remailers were excluded from all further analysis). The first factor, General Uses included four items: brainstorming, making general suggestions, general announcements, and use of anonymity for fun. This factor accounted for 29% of the total variance explained, and the alpha reliability among the four items loading here was α = .80. The second factor is characterized mainly by Technology Use and includes four items: surfing the Web, calling

helplines and/or hotlines, using caller-ID blocking, and making donations. This factor accounted for 14% of the total variance, and the alpha reliability among the four items loading onto this factor was $\alpha = .76$. The four items loading on the third factor (going around one's supervisor, whistle-blowing, complaints and/or critiques of coworkers, and complaints and/or critiques of management) are all focused on Informal Evaluation. This factor accounts for 8% of the total variance, and the four items produce an alpha scale reliability of $\alpha = .76$. The fourth factor, Formal Evaluation, consists of the following three items: evaluation of training, performance evaluations of manager, and performance evaluations of coworkers. It accounts for 7% of the total variance explained, and the three items produce an acceptable alpha scale reliability of $\alpha = .73$. The final two factors have only a single item loading strongly on each of them but are of conceptual significance: Firing Someone and Organizational Assessment and/or Surveys (accounting for 6% and 5% of the total variance explained, respectively).

Creating mean appropriateness scores for each factor reveals several differences in the appropriateness of anonymous communication during different organizational situations. Based on those means, anonymity is viewed as generally appropriate for Organizational Assessment and/or Survey ($M = 3.88$) and Formal Evaluation ($M = 3.79$). Anonymous communication is only moderately appropriate for Informal Evaluations ($M = 3.20$) and Technology Use ($M = 3.36$). Finally, anonymous communication is viewed as moderately inappropriate for General Uses ($M = 2.79$) and Firing Someone ($M = 2.58$), with the last factor and/or item producing substantial variation in scores ($SD = 1.71$). Correlations suggest that most factors are positively correlated with one another (see Table 5), with r values ranging from .11 to .50.

APPROPRIATENESS AND KEY VARIABLES

The final two research questions of this second study ask if demographic differences and key organizational relationship variables are related to anonymity appropriateness. An ANOVA revealed no differences between men and women on any of the six

TABLE 5:   Correlations Among Six Anonymity Appropriateness Factors ($N = 97$)

Factor	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. General Use						
2. Technology Use	.20*					
3. Informal Evaluation	.11	.45**				
4. Formal Evaluation	.33**	.46**	.50**			
5. Firing	.24***	.29**	.32**	.32**		
6. Organizational Assessments	.35**	.27**	.30**	.32**	.13	

NOTE: *$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

anonymity appropriateness scores. The only differences based on organizational type were for the General Use factor, $F(6, 78) = 2.00$, $p < .10$. Pairwise comparisons reveal only one significant difference: respondents in engineering/construction/architecture/ energy view anonymous communication in general situations as significantly less appropriate than do those respondents from public (government and/or education) organizations. Similarly, the only difference based on job position was also for the General Use factor, $F(3, 92) = 6.46$, $p < .10$. Pairwise comparisons reveal low-level managers perceive anonymous communication in general situations as significantly less appropriate than do members in non-managerial, mid-management, and upper-management positions.

Respondent age was significantly correlated with anonymity appropriateness for informal evaluation, $r = -.20$, $p < .10$, and formal evaluation, $r = -.25$, $p < .10$. The older a respondent was, the less appropriate she or he viewed anonymous communication for either formal or informal evaluations. The only significant correlation between the relationship variables and the six appropriateness factors is between coworker relations and informal evaluation, $r = -.18$, $p < .10$. As the quality of one's relationships with coworkers improves, anonymity during informal evaluations is seen as less appropriate.

DISCUSSION

The largely descriptive research reported here examines anonymous communication in organizations—exploring anonymity use

and especially appropriateness as they relate to various demo-
graphic and key organizational variables. Open-ended and forced-
choice responses to a survey questionnaire from a diverse set of
organizational members in two different studies reveal several find-
ings related to these variables. Although the findings as a whole are
modest in size, several of them offer potentially valuable implica-
tions. This final section of the article discusses several key conclu-
sions, examines the implications of those findings, and suggests
directions for continued work in this area.

KEY CONCLUSIONS

Anonymity appropriateness. In general, the appropriateness of
anonymous communication in organizations varies widely—based
on the situation, underlying motivations, and relations with key
others in the workplace. The 14 categories of appropriate anony-
mous organizational communication generated from Study 1—
which included more than 120 specific suggestions from 97 organi-
zational members responding to this question—suggest to us that
anonymity is seen as appropriate in a variety of organizational situ-
ations. The breadth of the categories and fact that 9 of the 14 cate-
gories included responses from at least five different individuals
(each individual was asked to provide up to three situations), lead
us to believe that respondents were generally able to identify a siz-
able number of situations where anonymity is consistently accept-
able in a workplace setting. Study 2 clarifies this substantially,
revealing six general situations that differ in terms of the appropri-
ateness of anonymous communication. More specifically, organi-
zational surveys and/or assessments, formal evaluations, technol-
ogy use, and informal evaluations are all seen as more appropriate
than inappropriate, whereas general uses (suggestions and/or
announcements) and firing are seen as moderately inappropriate.
We view the identification of these situations and the six factors
that underlie them as an important way of describing types of anon-
ymous organizational communication. In several ways, the catego-
ries (factors) that emerged here are consistent with some of the situ-
ations Marx (1999) identified in terms of socially sanctioned
contexts for anonymity; yet categories (factors) such as general

suggestions and brainstorming, as well as organizational surveys and/or assessments, seem to go beyond this existing work.

Beyond simply identifying situations where anonymity is appropriate, the explanations provided in Study 1 suggest seven distinct rationales as to why anonymity is acceptable in certain situations. For example, anonymity allows communicators to avoid retribution, communicate about sensitive topics, and interact more openly. In some ways, these explanations act as motivations for why one might view it as acceptable to use anonymity. Indeed, several of the rationales identified in Study 1 are consistent with the motivations for anonymous communication noted by Marx (1999) and Anonymous (1998); however, we also see the rationales identified in the current study as usefully extending prior research.

Although some participants were able to identify multiple situations where anonymity is acceptable, anonymous communication was clearly not seen as appropriate by all respondents. The 13 respondents in Study 1 who claimed that anonymity is never appropriate in the organization are of substantial interest because of their relatively extreme position on this issue. Study 2 helps to clarify this somewhat. When specific situations possibly involving anonymous communication were presented to respondents for their evaluation, none of the respondents viewed all situations as inappropriate. This suggests that even those who report generally viewing anonymous organizational communication as inappropriate may find some specific situations where it is at least moderately appropriate. Such findings point to important differences in people's general orientation to anonymity and the need to incorporate such views into anonymity research.

There are at least two possible explanations for the range and intensity of views associated with the appropriateness of anonymous communication. First, the results of Study 2 provide evidence that those uses of anonymity formally sanctioned by the organization may be deemed as most appropriate. Ratings of the appropriateness of anonymity were highest for organizational assessments and formal evaluations, whereas more informal evaluations (e.g., going around one's supervisor) and general uses were seen as less appropriate. This seems consistent with the feedback literature suggesting the popularity of 360-degree feedback pro-

grams (Fairhurst, 2001) where anonymity is the norm (see Antonioni, 1994). We suspect assessments of appropriateness may depend heavily on what is currently permitted at one's workplace. Yet as organizations continue to integrate procedures and tools that foster anonymity, members may become more comfortable with anonymity, and perceptions of appropriateness may begin to extend to informal uses of anonymity as well.

A second explanation is that perceptions of the appropriateness of anonymity may depend on the quality of an individual's relationship with other organizational members. A repeated finding across Studies 1 and 2 is that when a member's relations with others are good, anonymity is seen as less appropriate; however, as those relations decline, there is greater perceived appropriateness for at least some forms of anonymity. In Study 1, for example, respondents who viewed anonymity as inappropriate across situations generally had better relations with a variety of others in the organization. Conversely, those with weaker coworker, supervisor, and top management relations viewed anonymity to be more appropriate in various organizational settings. In addition, in Study 2, the appropriateness of informal (not officially sanctioned) evaluations increased as relations with coworkers decreased. Although it is difficult to sort out issues of causality here, the evaluation of anonymity appropriateness does appear to depend, in part, on relations with others in the workplace. Such a finding seems very consistent with the work on leader-member exchange, or LMX (see Fairhurst, 2001, for review). Fairhurst (2001) noted that several studies have found important differences in how high-LMX (high-quality relations) and low-LMX (low-quality relations) relationships differ, especially with regard to upward influence. In general, that research shows that high-LMX relations are characterized by openness, personalness, and informal approaches; whereas low-LMX relations are more characterized by distortion, aggressiveness, and power games. Anonymity is not seen as appropriate or necessary when one has good relations because it does not facilitate open, personal, and informal approaches; however, anonymity is seen as better aligned with the more aggressive and political influence efforts that may characterize low-quality relationships. In addition, the extension of LMX research into coworker communication and

perceptions of differential treatment (see Sias, 1996; Sias & Jablin, 1995) suggests the quality of coworker relations may operate similarly with regard to anonymity appropriateness.

Anonymity use. Although the use of anonymous organizational communication appears to be fairly limited overall, some forms are clearly more utilized than others, and this usage depends, in part, on issues such as organizational type and relations with one's supervisor. As one might expect, anonymous communication is not normative in the workplace. Only 3 of the 12 forms of anonymous communication we asked about had been used by 30% or more of the respondents in the sample. Two of these—the often-maligned traditional suggestion box, and periodic written feedback (e.g., annual reviews)—represent traditional forms of anonymity that largely predate new communication technologies in organizations. The third form, caller-ID blocking (see Dutton, 1992), represents a more recent workplace innovation. This form of anonymity was related to work satisfaction—with less satisfied employees engaged in greater use of this technology. We suspect that individuals with jobs where caller-ID blocking is offered (or who must interact with others that have such features) may also be in positions where they are less satisfied with work generally, though it is again difficult to make causal claims here.

Other forms of anonymity, such as electronic whistle-blowing or use of electronic meeting systems, have been experienced by fewer people in the workplace. Yet even these least used forms of anonymous communication had been experienced by at least 9% of the organizational members we surveyed—which may be sizable given claims that only 1 of every 1,000 employees will phone an anonymous hotline in a given month (D. Jones, 2003) but is consistent with claims that organizations are actually encouraging more whistle-blowing as a means to fight fraud and identify potential scandals (Armour, 2002). Whereas the most used forms may be the most mundane, those used by the fewest members may represent some of the most important uses of anonymity. Thus, certain uses appear very situational and are likely limited to a few individuals who may have need for such anonymity in critical organizational moments.

Although there were generally few differences in use based on demographic and organizational variables, two exceptions deserve

mention. First, public sector organizational members were more likely to have used the three most utilized forms of anonymity than were their counterparts in most other organizational types. Protections of anonymity granted by the First Amendment may apply more clearly to government organizations, making them more likely to provide such tools. Relatedly, a survey in the United Kingdom revealed that public sector organizations were significantly more likely than private sector ones to have whistle-blowing policies or plans in place (Lewis, 2002). In addition, the greater portion of users here may reflect a greater need for anonymity in light of open records laws that would otherwise reveal one's identity publicly. Second, use of the four more rarely utilized forms of anonymity were linked to negative relations with one's supervisor. Based on the previously identified explanations for anonymous communication, we suspect that when an organizational member was not comfortable with confrontation, wanted to save face, or feared retaliation from a supervisor, he or she would use one of these anonymous forms; for those who had good relations with a supervisor, there was less need, and thus less usage, of these types of communication. Again, we see this as consistent with research on LMX (Fairhurst, 2001).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERS AND MANAGERS

The findings in these two studies suggest that there is an important place for at least some forms of anonymous communication in organizations. Even though most uses of anonymous communication in the workplace remain relatively rare, the lack of widespread use should not negate the importance of having such options available—which is partly why our research examined appropriateness perceptions in addition to usage behavior. These data support the contention that anonymous communication can be appropriate in a variety of situations. Indeed, anonymity is generally seen as appropriate when conducting organizational surveys and/or assessments, during formal evaluations, as part of various forms of informal evaluations, and even in the use of certain technologies. The reasons offered by participants to explain why anonymity is

appropriate provide further evidence of the utility of anonymous communication in organizations. For example, anonymity allowed participants to offer information without fear of retribution, to promote more open and honest feedback, and to raise sensitive issues. Thus, efforts should be made to supply anonymous channels for users in these situations. As one newspaper article put it, "hotlines are hot" (D. Jones, 2003, p. 03b)—and hotlines have been a major way to comply with Sarbanes-Oxley in a cost-effective way. Other work is currently being done to design systems that successfully reroute text-based messages in ways that preserve sender anonymity (see Guan, Fu, Bettani, & Zhao, 2004)—though these may well be seen as less appropriate in many organizational settings.

In addition, decisions about anonymous channels, and perhaps even those situations when anonymity is acceptable, should become a larger part of general organizational policies and guidelines related to communication. Clearly, the Sarbanes-Oxley legislation requiring organizations to provide employees with anonymous means for reporting wrongdoing demands they begin to grapple with such issues. In addition, our findings suggest that anonymity can be appropriate in a number of situations that go well beyond just reporting of company fraud. By providing mechanisms for anonymous communication, organizations may be able to enhance workplace communication. Lipinski (2002) suggested that workplace policies that reflect legal precedents "can help preserve a spirit of free speech, yet allow for the continued functioning of the organization" (p. 108). Our findings suggest that a necessary part of any such effort will involve educating members about when anonymous communication can and should be used—as well as convincing those who generally view anonymity as never appropriate that it may be acceptable in certain situations. Such training seems to rarely occur in organizations today (Lewis, 2002). If organizations value members' rights to anonymous communication and view anonymous input as an important form of typically more honest feedback, there are almost certainly more rewards than potential problems to be gained.

Furthermore, some of the findings here indicate that anonymity may indeed provide less enfranchised organizational members with important communication opportunities. We repeatedly found that those workers with weaker relationships with others listed

more situations as appropriate for anonymity and were more likely to have already used some forms of anonymous communication. These members with weaker relations may be ones who are more likely to rock the boat, play devil's advocate, and resist the status quo—all of which could be vital in helping address problems in the workplace (see Keyton, 1999). Anonymity can protect members from retaliation for their comments without silencing them, can provide extremely valuable feedback that improves managerial functions, and can point out wrongdoing that ultimately benefits the organization and other stakeholders. Organizations and their members clearly need channels that make anonymity possible and a communication climate that supports it during critical situations. Younger organizational members (e.g., newcomers), another potentially less powerful group, also saw anonymity as more appropriate for formal and informal evaluations than did their older colleagues. We even noted that private sector employees were somewhat less likely to have used several forms of anonymous communication and viewed general uses of anonymity as less appropriate when compared to their public sector counterparts. In general, the protections we related to free speech and anonymity do not extend into the private sector as clearly, and other public-private differences may create situations where private sector employees fear retaliation for voicing concerns—likely making these organizational members in even greater need of anonymous communication. In sum, although most members may not perceive a need for anonymous organizational communication, providing such channels helps ensure that the voices of potentially less powerful or lower-status groups are heard. These findings also suggest the need for more critical-cultural stances addressing power relations associated with anonymous organizational communication (see Rodriquez & Clair, 1999).

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several key limitations should serve to caution the reader in drawing conclusions from this research, even though the findings are fairly robust against such concerns. First, because all the data

came from responses to survey questionnaires, single-method bias may be a factor (although the open-ended and closed-ended responses help to minimize this). Second, the use measure in Study 1 was categorical and thus overly simplistic. Relatedly, the inability to sort out receiving anonymous communication from sending anonymous communication makes interpretation of use somewhat more difficult. Finally, even though the diversity of respondents is in many ways a strength, it is also limited in that some organizational types are not well represented, and no distinctions were made in Study 1 between respondents who might be in supervisory and/or management positions.

In addition to addressing each of the above limitations, several directions for future research in this area deserve brief mention as ways to build on this exploratory set of studies. First, future studies of anonymous organizational communication should examine the actual communication exchange, especially the message itself. Isolating situations where anonymity might occur or retrieving logs and/or records of anonymous exchanges could provide valuable data for organizational communication scholars interested in studying this issue. The six factors derived from the data in Study 2 provide a more comprehensive and "tested" list of appropriate situations for anonymous organizational communication than exists in other published works. Such a list provides important clues about organizational contexts in which to study anonymous messages. Armed with such a list, more detailed interviews of organizational members who send and/or receive these anonymous messages now makes sense.

Second, future efforts should seek to more closely link the six categories of anonymous communication that vary in appropriateness and the motivations and/or explanations that underlie them. For example, is any type of anonymous communication acceptable if it is done to avoid retaliation? Which types of anonymity are viewed as appropriate if the sender's underlying motivation is to avoid directly confronting another member? Is any type of anonymity appropriate if the underlying motivation is to discredit someone through false accusations? In addition, it would be interesting to determine how different channels used might relate to perceptions of appropriateness (e.g., is an anonymous memo for informal feedback viewed similar to an anonymous e-mail or an

anonymous hotline message?). Sorting out some of these specifics might provide organizations and their members with better data on how to provide adequate mechanisms for anonymity and how to best facilitate (and avoid) appropriate (and potentially inappropriate) anonymous communication.

Third, even though we think assessing usage behaviors and values-based perceptions of appropriateness are important, the effectiveness of various types of anonymity in achieving one's goal may be vital to examine as well. Considering the relative effectiveness of anonymous communication for the more disenfranchised organizational members is especially important. Also relevant here are judgments about credibility as they relate to anonymous messages—which will also shape reactions to and effectiveness of anonymity. Channel considerations and underlying motivations related to appropriateness also factor into likely effectiveness of such efforts.

Finally, the entire concept of anonymous organizational communication should be examined at multiple levels and further elaborated in subsequent work. We have used the term here to describe communication that organizational members in general might engage in anonymously. It would also be valuable to examine exchanges involving specific organizational positions (e.g., ombudspersons) where communication may often occur anonymously (or confidentially). Furthermore, the majority of the situations that emerged and that we asked about were focused on internal communication with other organizational members. Future research should conceptualize anonymous organizational communication as messages that unidentified others might send on behalf of the organization—internally and externally. This has some similarity to Eisenberg et al.'s (1985) idea of institutional linkages between organizations where the communicators are essentially anonymous. Although the blanket announcement category in Study 1 reflected this idea somewhat, much greater effort is needed to capture this aspect of anonymous organizational communication. In addition, anonymous communication from organizational spokespersons, anonymous and pseudonymous lobbying and/or marketing efforts, and anonymous communication about organizations on Web-based "suck sites," blogs, and other online forums may all represent genres of anonymous organizational communication worthy of further examination.

In closing, we believe that descriptive and highly exploratory research is relevant during the initial efforts to study a phenomenon. No comprehensive effort to date examines anonymous organizational communication as we have attempted in this work. Yet the various forces described in the introduction to this article—including a growing concern about ethics and mechanisms organizational members can use to report concerns internally and externally—demand that we better understand this issue. We hope that the thinking and research findings presented here will stimulate further exploration of what is likely an increasingly important area for organizational communication scholarship.

NOTES

1. Joinson (2001), for example, examined the role of physical anonymity and self-awareness on self-disclosure in computer-mediated dyads. He found that participants in anonymous computer-mediated dyads disclosed significantly more information about themselves than participants meeting face-to-face. Although the current study has a great deal of import for research on interpersonal uses of new communication technologies, important situational and contextual factors relevant to organizations (e.g., task type, organizational culture) are not considered.

2. As part of a class assignment, students in an upper-division undergraduate communication technology course at a large university assisted with the administration of the pen-and-paper questionnaire used for the current study. Each student was asked to deliver a questionnaire to six different organizational employees (temporary workers and employees of the student's university were not eligible to participate). To ensure that an appropriate organizational sample was being used, students were also asked not to complete the surveys themselves. Students were given class credit and some extra credit for locating qualified respondents and returning the completed surveys to the researchers in an envelope sealed by the participant. The cover page of the survey questionnaire explained the purpose of the study, which was to gain information about issues of privacy and anonymity in organizations. For later verification of the sample, participants were asked to indicate their name and phone number on the cover page. Respondents were informed that names were collected exclusively for survey verification and that one's identity would otherwise remain confidential. To help ensure the validity of the sample, the teaching assistant randomly selected one survey from each student. The teaching assistant contacted participants by telephone and asked whether they had completed the survey. The identity of all participants in the verification sample was corroborated in the telephone calls.

3. Participants in the larger research study were given the option to complete an online or paper version of the survey. However, the items addressing the appropriateness of anonymous communication used in the current study were only available in the online version of the questionnaire, and some items in the paper survey were not found in the online version—all of which was done to manage the overall length of the questionnaire. Of the 240 total questionnaires distributed, 193 (80%) were returned, and 98 participants (41% of the total possible sample, 51% of those returning a questionnaire in some form) chose to complete the online version. No statistical differences were found among those who completed the online and paper versions of the questionnaire for any of the key measures assessed on both forms.

4. At least one survey was selected from each student, and the participant was contacted to determine if he or she had completed the questionnaire. All participants who were contacted indicated completing the questionnaire, with one exception. As a result, that questionnaire was not included in the data analysis or among the total number of questionnaires returned.

5. Relations with top management was not assessed given the broader focus of the survey questionnaire on performance evaluations of coworkers and supervisors.

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