



6-2011

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WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Kramer, Ronald, "Reflections on the 25th Anniversary of the WMU Center for the Study of Ethics in Society" (2011). *Center for the Study of Ethics in Society Papers*. Paper 90.

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Reflections on the 25th Anniversary of the WMU Center for the Study of Ethics in Society

Ronald Kramer, Executive Board

I have been a member of the Executive Board of the WMU Center for the Study of Ethics from its inception. As a sociological criminologist who specializes in the study of organizational (corporate and government) crimes, it seemed a natural fit for me. Over the years, I have benefited greatly from the interdisciplinary collaboration that the Center fosters so well. One such collaboration had a significant impact on my work as a criminologist.

In the early 1980s I was working on an integrated theoretical model to explain organizational crimes such as the Ford Pinto case. I presented the model at an Ethics Center presentation in early 1986. After the presentation, fellow board member Jim Jakska approached me and told me that he thought my model would apply well to the recent explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*. I didn't think any more about it at the time, but Jim persisted with his suggestion. Then, when I read the report of the Presidential Commission on the *Challenger* explosion, I realized that Jim was really on to something. Thanks to Jim, I started doing research on the *Challenger* case and eventually he and I collaborated on a paper titled "The Space Shuttle Disaster: Ethical Issues in Organizational Decision-Making." We first presented the paper in October 1986 at the Fall Conference of the Michigan Association of Speech Communication in Ann Arbor. The paper was selected as a showcase program presentation for the April 1987 joint meeting of the Central States Speech Association and the Southern Speech Communication Association in St. Louis, Missouri. A revised

version of that paper, with Mike Pritchard now on board as a co-author, was eventually published as "Ethics in Organizations: The *Challenger* Explosion" in Jaksa and Pritchard's *Communication Ethics: Methods of Analysis* (Wadsworth, 1994) and reprinted in their *Responsible Communication: Ethical Issues in Business, Industry, and the Professions* (Hampton Press, 1996).

I continued to research the *Challenger* case and again, the Center provided an important assist. Roger Boisjoly, the whistle-blowing engineer from Morton Thiokol came to WMU to give an Ethics Center lecture on the *Challenger* and engineering ethics. While he was on campus, I was able to sit down with him and conduct a lengthy interview. The *Challenger* case study eventually led me to develop the concept of *state-corporate crime* (corporations and states acting together to produce a harm) since this incident involved an interaction between a business corporation (Morton Thiokol) and a government agency (NASA). I presented a paper on the *Challenger* as state-corporate crime in 1990 at a large conference at Indiana University celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of criminologist Edwin Sutherland's creation of the concept of white-collar crime. I was fortunate to have this paper selected for publication in a book that grew out of the conference (*White Collar Crime Reconsidered*, edited by Schlegel and Weisburd in 1992). This publication also drew a lot of attention and my work on the *Challenger* explosion has been discussed in a number of introductory criminology and white-collar crime textbooks.

Along with criminologist Ray Michalowski and a number of my graduate students, I continued to develop the concept of state-corporate crime. Dave Kauzlarich and I analyzed the radiation poisoning that occurred near U.S. nuclear weapons production facilities as a form of state-corporate crime (published in the *Journal of Human Justice* in 1993). The concept of state-corporate crime caught on within the field of organizational crime, generated a lot of discussion, and spurred the production of a substantial body of criminological research. Many of these case studies explicitly used the integrated theoretical model that I

had developed earlier and refined with Ray Michalowski. Eventually, Ray and I gathered much of this research together in the book *State-Corporate Crime: Wrongdoing at the Intersection of Business and Government* (published by Rutgers University Press in 2006). The topic of state-corporate crime is now widely recognized within criminology. It is presented in many introductory criminology textbooks and discussed in most books on white-collar crime. It has also been featured in a number of handbooks and encyclopedias in the field of criminology. The development of the concept and theory of state-corporate crime has been my most important contribution to the field of criminology to date, and it all started with my presentation to the Ethics Center, Jim Jaksas's persistence in suggesting that I apply my model to the *Challenger* case, and the collaborative work Jim and Mike and I engaged in under the auspices of the Center.