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## A Review by Chatham Carpenter of Moral Courage, by Rushworth Kidder

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# UNIVERSITAS

**Rushworth Kidder, *Moral Courage*. HarperCollins: New York, 2005**

Reviewed by April Chatham-Carpenter

## **“Moral Courage for a University Ethics Capstone Class?”**

“Should I select a pragmatic, application-based text, to supplement the more traditional theoretical text, for the university capstone class I’m teaching for the first time this Fall? I want something that would be practical and make the students think about their own behavioral choices in situations involving ethics. But I also want something that will challenge them to think critically about a variety of ethical situations.” This was one of the dilemmas I faced when I was investigating what text to use as a supplementary text my first time through teaching the Ethics in Communication course as a university capstone elective. Could I pull from the more popular literature on ethics for such a text? If so, what text would I choose?

In considering such questions, I came across the Institute for Global Ethics’ website ([www.globalethics.org](http://www.globalethics.org)) and read a “white paper” entitled “Moral Courage” (Kidder & Bracy, 2001). This essay questioned the value of teaching ethics – the philosophies behind them, the consequences of ethical and unethical behavior, etc. – without also equipping students with the decision-making skills to be able to choose the best course of action in not only “right vs. wrong” situations, but also in “right vs. right” situations. The Institute’s website had a link to a book also entitled *Moral Courage* by Rushworth M. Kidder (2005; author of *How Good People Make Tough Choices*). I ordered the book, and liked it so much that I chose it as the supplementary text for my upcoming Ethics in Communication capstone course.

I never know, when I choose a new textbook for a class, whether I or the students will ultimately find the book useful and actually like it, and both texts I chose for the class were new to me, so it was with some fear and trepidation that I began this semester.

After defining moral courage and justifying the use of it across settings, Kidder addresses the often thorny issue of whether humanity, at large, has a “common moral framework” (p. 42), with shared values across cultures. I wondered how he could make this claim and whether he would rely just on anecdotal evidence to support this (which could easily be shot down by critics). I did not want students to believe something like this might be “true” if there was not empirical evidence to support it. But I was relieved to see that he based this claim from research that included (a) face-to-face interviews with people from sixteen countries, (b) facilitated discourse in Ethical Fitness seminars across at least twenty-seven countries, (c) survey research conducted between 1996-2001 with the Gallup Organization and the Institute for Global Ethics in eight separate studies, and (d) textual analyses of corporate codes of ethics. And although the research he cites indicates there are five common values across cultures and settings (honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility, and compassion), Kidder acknowledges that cultures place different priorities and moral boundaries on these values and therefore calls for more research on how these values are put into practice in different cultures. “Wow,” I thought, “my students have a very readable example of research triangulation in this chapter of Kidder’s text. Plus, they can see how a person can make limited conclusions from such research, while calling for more research. Maybe I did make a good choice with this text.”

The remainder of the book is built around Kidder's seven-step model, or "moral courage" checklist. The first five steps pertain primarily to the decision making about whether to exercise moral courage in any given situation, the sixth step talks in general about avoiding the pitfalls to moral courage (and what moral courage isn't), and the last step provides practical advice on how to develop moral courage. The steps are as follows: (1) assess the situation, (2) scan for values, (3) stand for conscience, (4) contemplate the dangers, (5) endure the hardship, (6) avoid the pitfalls, and (7) develop moral courage. Kidder's description of "moral courage," or "the courage to do the right thing" (p. 24), is not presented as an easy option or one that every person should choose regardless of the consequences. He recognizes that we often face situations where our values conflict within us (for example, making a "choice between what's right for the world and what's right for your family," p. 23). My students recently had to use this checklist to evaluate the behavior of another person in an interpersonal ethics situation and seemed to have no problem applying the model.

I wondered how Kidder's approach would relate to the more traditional moral philosophies covered in most Ethics texts. I was pleasantly surprised to see that Kidder does a good job, using lay terminology, tying several of the major moral philosophies into his model. For example, deontology (which Kidder labels as "the rule-based principle"), often tied by scholars to Kantian's "moral imperative," is connected with step three of his moral courage model ("stand for conscience"). Teleology, or ends-based ethical systems (which Kidder labels as "the ends-based principle") is connected with step five of his model ("contemplate the dangers"), while relational ethical systems (labeled by Kidder "the care-based principle") is seen throughout the text in coverage of such things as choosing between two conflicting values ("right" vs. "right").

One of my concerns in selecting a textbook for a university capstone course was that it was thoroughly interdisciplinary. What a great discovery that throughout his book, Kidder employs examples from business, politics (both domestic and international), sports, media, and science. In every chapter, there are at least two detailed examples provided, from two different contexts. Some of the examples would be recognizable for students based on their knowledge of history, but many are examples they most likely would never have heard about without reading this text. These everyday examples make it easy for students to see the application of his model across a variety of settings. "Perhaps the Kidder text will help my students realize that ethics (and moral courage, in particular) is truly interdisciplinary," I think. The examples in the text are what the students have commented on the most, in terms of what they like about Kidder's book. When I recently asked them to provide feedback on this text for our class, their responses were primarily positive, with almost all of the students who responded mentioning that one of the biggest strengths of the book is its examples. One student noted:

As a student who usually finds herself not enjoying class readings, I am particularly fond of the Kidder Text. I feel it provides easy to follow explanations for the concepts that are defined within the reading. I also feel the examples provided in the book, do an excellent job of making the reading seem 'down-to-earth' and interesting. I would recommend this text to future ethics courses because it makes reading enjoyable and worthwhile.

Another student agreed, stating:

I have found this book to be a welcome change from my business class textbooks. The examples provided throughout the text give the student a personal connection with whom the stories are written about and make the concepts being taught livelier and easier to understand. I would recommend this book to future ethics students and would hope they would enjoy it as much as I have.

Some of the students, however, saw the text as “repetitive,” “predictable,” and/or “redundant” and perhaps a “little young for a college setting.” For example, one student said:

I find the book to be a good reference guide as to the difficult ethical decisions that one will have to make and how to overcome those obstacles. I do think, however, that the text is a little “young” for a college setting, which is why I think it is good to reference it, but not use it solely. If someone doesn’t have a decent understanding of morals and ethics and isn’t able to apply basic “moral courage” practices by this age, I don’t see how this could help that much. I think that this book kind of makes you think a little more in depth about your personal morals, but as I stated before, I feel like it is more of a reference, although I do enjoy hearing different people’s stories and opinions.

In conclusion, I like the Kidder book and am glad I chose it as a supplementary text for my Ethics in Communication course. Its claims about values are based on research and yet it is easy for students to read; it has numerous real-life stories in it across a variety of contexts; it challenges students to think about when and why they may choose a difficult course of action in a personal or professional setting, and I truly believe my students are actually more likely to make difficult decisions if they follow the critical thinking model presented by Kidder in this book. What more could I ask from a supplementary text for a class I’m teaching for the first time as a university capstone elective?

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## REFERENCES

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