Ethics in public relations: gauging ethical decision-making patterns of public relations practitioners

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ETHICS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS:
GAUGING ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING PATTERNS
OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

A Thesis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This study employed the Defining Issues Test (DIT) and a quantitative version of the five-factor

TARES Test to gather data on the ethical decision-making patterns of public relations

practitioners. The former is an instrument based on Kohlberg's (1969) moral development

theory, the latter self-enforced, ethical consideration statements derived from the research of

Baker and Martinson (2001). Results show that levels of moral development in public relations

differ based on job segment, and that age, education, gender and rank significantly affect levels

of ethical consideration. The TARES test, it was discovered, is better suited for a three-factor

configuration based on Day's (2003) definition of moral knowledge.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

THE STATE OF THE PUBLIC RELATIONS INDUSTRY

Current economic trends favoring a globalization of business and mass media are creating quite a challenge for a field relatively young in comparison to other mass communication disciplines. Public relations, less than a century old, is expected to service this new, worldwide audience while simultaneously meeting the communication demands of the instantaneous information age (Fitzgerald & Spagnolia, 1999).

No event better symbolized these globalization trends than the financial boom of the late 1990s. Public relations became the weapon of choice for companies seeking to reap the benefits of the upward explosion of the NASDAQ and New York Stock Exchange markets. Information technology organizations across the world employed public relations practitioners in record numbers with a singular purpose in mind: to disseminate information about the viability of their products and services to anyone who would listen (Freeman, 2000).

What an audience it was! Technology-focused media emerged by the hundreds in both "offline" – standard, printed methods – as well in "online" – Internet-based – form to answer the call of this new flood of public relations messages. Advertising flourished as a supplemental means of messaging, as companies sought to distinguish their voice from the seemingly countless others competing for space within these new media outlets (e.g. *Red Herring*, *Business 2.0*, *Fast Company*, *Industry Standard,* etc.). Increased strategic communication efforts sprung forth to counter advertising by the competition. The second phase of public relations growth had arrived.

More public relations practitioners were hired, quickly followed by the creation of additional technology-focused media to capitalize on this second growth phase. Advertising expenditures grew in tandem, hoping to once again serve as market differentiators (Dumiak, 2000). As could be expected, a cyclical process emerged. As public relations budgets increased in the elusive search for market differentiation, so did the related growth of advertising, and likewise, the number of technology-focused media to service these entities.

Inevitably, the cycle ran its course. With the crash of the financial markets at the turn of the century, the pyramid of symmetry between public relations, advertising and niche media outlets crumbled with it. Public relations and advertising budgets were abruptly slashed as corporations shifted focus to simply surviving. Billions of dollars were lost in arguably nothing more than a mammoth, cyclical battle in strategic communication.

The public relations industry is on the mend, seeking to recover from the downsizing of its services post-market crash. Those who remain within the industry or in search of a place within it, however, exist under a microscope. They must answer questions concerning industry ethics and about conducting a communication battle that had a lot at stake…and lost (Penchansky, 2001).

Many cite public relations for possible ethics violations during the market boom, accusing the industry of knowingly communicating via marketing wizardry and stock-hype versus fact (Lovel, 2001). Recent high-profile accounting scandals and a slew of unprecedented bankruptcy filings further intensified the strength of these accusations.

LOOKING AHEAD

With the global economy's biggest growth periods still to come, public relations' most profitable days may likewise exist on the horizon. The ability to capitalize upon this growth may hinge on the public relations industry's ability to silence critics of its recent ethical activities. At this crucial stage in the evolution of public relations, achieving this silence offers a chance to sustain a near century's worth of garnered momentum in developing the field while simultaneously allowing for its necessary image rebuilding post market-bust.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

PUBLIC RELATIONS AS AN ETHICAL DISCIPLINE

To be successful, public relations practitioners are required to make intelligent, split-second decisions on situations laden with ethical dilemmas. This requirement is the same for practitioners in an agency (an employee of a public relations organization, servicing multiple corporate clients), corporate (an employee of a corporation, servicing them alone), solo practitioner/consultant (a "hired-gun" that services corporate clients on demand), or a government/public affairs (an employee of an institution, ultimately servicing the public) job setting. To further complicate matters, any decision made is expected to sustain an ongoing, delicate balance between serving the best interests of a client and that of overall society.

This balance defines the two accepted philosophies of the role of a public relations representative within society (Day, 2003, p. 393). The first philosophy classifies this representative, while paid, as a person simply advocating a principle that he/she already believes in. This is no different than an individual expressing an opinion on the grounds of First Amendment freedom of speech protections. The second philosophy sees the public relations representative as a hired conduit for a point of view that he/she may not personally condone. This role similarly operates under a First Amendment premise, but is instead concerned with the person/s *receiving* this opinion. In advocating a particular viewpoint into the marketplace of public opinion, a public relations representative offers the public a chance to hear the message of his/her client, even a controversial one.

Ideally, a perfect symmetry of service to both client and society is attained: the highest possible ethical standard of operation for public relations communication. Realistically, however,

a vast number of industry-related variables disrupt this symmetry. Matters related to finances, a frequent necessity for immediacy in action or response, personal or organizational goals at stake, an analysis of harm vs. good, etc., all can upset the balance.

Ethical dilemmas often result from dealing with these variables. The decision even to service a client presents a common ethical dilemma facing public relations agencies. Servicing a disreputable client can offer a valuable, albeit controversial, opinion into the marketplace of public opinion. This opinion also presents an equal possibility of causing more harm than good by providing the public with potentially harmful information.

In one of the highest profile instances of this dilemma, in October of 2000, Fleishman-Hillard, currently the world's largest public relations firm in terms of global billing (Council of Public Relations Firms, 2003), dismissed themselves from service to tire manufacturer Firestone/Bridgestone only eight months after securing the account. Firestone/Bridgestone had faced tremendous scrutiny over producing exploding tires on the Ford Explorer and was blamed for a number of deaths (Grodsky, 2000).

Fleishman-Hillard elected to arguably take a moral "high ground" of public good despite the financial gains associated with a high-paying client—a multi-million dollar shortfall. On the flipside, equally worth noting is that this decision was self-serving for Fleishman-Hillard, since dropping Firestone/Bridgestone protected the agency's corporate reputation.

Hill & Knowlton, the world's fourth largest public relations firm in total worldwide billing (Council of Public Relations Firms, 2003), found itself in a similar dilemma when lines of service to a client and the public good became blurred. In August 1990, a lobbyist group backed by the Kuwaiti government hired the firm to build support for a Persian Gulf War, a position simultaneously advocated by then U.S. President George Bush (Pratt, 1994). Muddying matters

at that time was Craig Fuller, who was Hill & Knowlton's President and Chief Operating Officer of Public Affairs. Fuller had previously served as Vice President Bush's chief of staff from 1985 to 1989. Was it ethical for Hill & Knowlton to have gathered public support for a client's viewpoint under a premise of backing Presidential policy? While it is likely that the Kuwaiti government and President Bush possessed different motives to support a Persian Gulf War, Fuller's employment history raised obvious conflict of interest questions.

The ability to consistently make decisions rooted in difficult ethical dilemmas is a characteristic that is an everyday reality of the public relations practitioner. It is also a characteristic that is yet to be fully researched.

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN ACADEMIA

While discussion to this point has focused on commercially-oriented public relations practitioners, it is important to make reference to an integral part of the field: university-based public relations practitioners. Public relations-focused academics, either through instruction or research, spend a great deal of time conversing with students, fellow scholars, the industry, and to the general public on industry ethics. Their scholarly writings often serve as a benchmark for the field's current views on the topic. Likewise, through their instruction, they shape the ethical views of their students: the public relations practitioners of the future.

THEORETICAL MODELS/BASES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

While various industry codes of ethics exist, there is no theoretical framework for explaining ethics strictly from a public relations perspective. There have, however, been several attempts to outline ethical expectations and related decision-making processes for the industry: three types of theoretical bases and models founded in ethical principles.

TYPE 1: MODELS OF DISCOURSE

The first model type stresses public relations' role in encouraging discourse. Within this type lies a popular theoretical base for public relations, Barney and Black's (1994) **attorney-adversary** model. Under this model, public relations practitioners perform a persuasive function similar to an attorney representing a client. The attorney-adversary model operates under an assumption that if competing messages and viewpoints are adequately represented, the truth will inevitably emerge. (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). Similarly, in the court of public opinion serviced by public relations practitioners, there is an expectation that the public will absorb all of the contrasting messages and viewpoints being disseminated. After considering all of this information, the public is expected to form an advised, intelligent opinion.

Along with this expectation is the model's leeway for a public relations practitioner to provide strategic, limited disclosure of information to best serve and/or protect his/her client's interests. Similar to the counterargument in legal settings, this practice is deemed acceptable behavior since alternative views are expected to arise naturally as a counterbalance to a particular perspective. If an opposing viewpoint doesn't emerge on its own, the burden falls upon the journalist or consumer advocate to provide for the public a counterargument that assures this balance.

The **two-way symmetrical model** first proposed by Grunig (1992) structures public relations as a forum for discussion where a variety of individuals, opinions and values come together, generally arriving at different conclusions. (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2002). This forum, similar to the discourse function of Barney and Black's attorney-adversary model (1994), adheres to certain ethical rules and standards with the goal of an ethical outcome. Public relations representatives, akin to opposing attorneys, operate with their client's best interests as their

primary motive. Under this model, they do so under a presupposition of producing this ethical end goal.

TYPE 2: MODELS OF SOCIETAL OBLIGATION

In contrast**,** the second model type sees the primary duty of public relations practitioners as serving society and community. Nelson (1990) perceives the persuasive function of public relations practitioners as "utilitarian" in nature. These practitioners serve public interest by providing points of accountability for the persuasive messages that contribute to the forming of public opinion. With this accountability present, the receiver of these messages can more easily select or reject a particular viewpoint: an essential element of First Amendment freedom of speech protections.

Similarly**,** the **social responsibility** model, originally formulated by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) as a normative pattern of press operations, also serves as a basis for concepts of civic journalism. This model instructs public relations practitioners to enact their campaigns while serving a broader public interest and communal good (Baker, 2002). Closely related is the **communitarianism** model (Leeper, 1996; Etzioni, 1993), which extends the social responsibility model to include additional duties of strengthening community and promoting communal values of fairness, democracy, and truth.

Sullivan's (1965) **partisan versus mutual values** model defines public relations as the intersection between these two values. This theoretical base, expanded in 1989 by Pearson, argues that while a public relations representative owes allegiance to his/her client, employer or organization, he/she must acknowledge all--even conflicting--viewpoints. A proper balance between obligation to employer and a "principle of mutuality" to contrasting opinions ensures a responsible strategic communication process (Pearson, 1989).

TYPE 3: MODELS OF THE PROFESSIONAL

Fitzpatrick and Gauthier's (2002) **professional responsibility** model extends the other theoretical models by freeing public relations representatives from assuming social and communitarian responsibilities in their activities. Fitzpatrick and Gauthier characterized these as unrealistic and unattainable expectations. They classified public relations practitioners not under the umbrella of communicators, but rather as serving in a "professional" role, with appropriate responsibilities derived from this alternate form of classification. The four criteria of this classification are: a) membership in a professional organization, b) specialized expertise, c) an orientation toward service, and d) autonomy in operation.

According to Fitzpatrick and Gauthier, professional classification does not necessarily imply complete autonomy from performing responsible advocacy. They outlined three foundations of advocacy-related requirements for the public relations practitioner as a professional: a) persuasive communication should completely avoid or best minimize harm, b) display respect for people and treat them with appropriate dignity, and c) communicate the "benefits and burdens" of an action or policy in as fair a manner as possible. Similarly, Baker (2002) used Koehn's (1994) classification of a professional to describe the public relations vocation**.** A profession, according to Koehn, loses its moral authority if it allows a practitioner to sacrifice the well being of one member of the community in servicing the needs of another. A professional relationship maintains ethics through self-regulation. Unbridled loyalty to a single client and/or viewpoint effectively removes other members of the professional community as potential clients.

Finally**,** Hutton (1999) proposed that the only model that truly describes public relations is one containing an underlying purpose of **relationship management** (toward a client). This

9

model, according to Hutton, is the only one capable of both defining the field while serving as a basis for its operation. Overall, the use of ethical self-standards as an operational framework for public relations is an approach gaining more widespread acceptance.

THE TARES TEST

Recently, the works of Sherry Baker and David Martinson have advanced the use of ethical frameworks in public relations and are gaining popular acceptance. Their TARES test (Baker & Martinson, 2001) outlined ethical expectations for the public relations practitioner to consider when enacting a persuasive communication campaign. The TARES test is composed of five interconnected factors of ethical consideration: Truthfulness of the message, Authenticity of the persuader, Respect for the persuadee, Equity of the appeal, and Social Responsibility for the common good.

Truthfulness states that public relations communication must result in an audience with enough information to make an informed choice on the issue being presented. Authenticity questions the motive of the communication message, requiring public relations practitioners to ask themselves if this message will benefit someone other than their client. Respect demands that communicators perceive their target audience as "human beings," and that messages are shaped and transmitted with appropriate respect. Equity calls for a responsibility by public relations practitioners to avoid communication that intentionally takes advantage of the vulnerabilities of a specific audience. Social responsibility, discussed above as a theoretical model and often cited within sister disciplines, is an expectation of service by mass media practitioners toward the public at large.

Adopting industry-wide ethical standards such as the TARES test would be a valuable step toward public relations achieving acceptance as a legitimate "profession." Unfortunately, many other barriers also stand in its way.

ETHICAL CODES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

Lacking formalized educational, certification and barrier-of-entry requirements, public relations continually faces a hurdle of acceptance as a bona-fide profession. Without these requirements in place, standardization of the field is seen as a near-impossible endeavor, as is the related establishment of mandatory operational procedures and ethical codes. An additional obstacle is the vocation's global presence and contrasting views worldwide on how to accurately define both "public relations" and appropriate ethical conduct (Kruckeberg, 1993).

Industry-related organizations have attempted to address these problems. The most widely known body of literature on this topic is the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)'s Code of Ethics. The code, first written in December 1950 by the industry's highest profile membership organization, has been continuously revised to match the ever-changing roles of the field's practitioners. This body of literature states a purpose of guiding public relations toward goals of "emphasizing serving the public interest; avoiding misrepresentations to clients, employers and others; and the continuing development of public relations practitioners" (Fitzpatrick, 2002a, p. 90).

These ethical codes, Huang (2001) suggested, are crucial for public relations to be granted status as bona-fide profession. Despite agreement with this statement by PRSA, its member public relations organizations and industry practitioners, the cold hard truth is that there are simply no means of formal enforcement for the PRSA Code of Ethics. Without punitive

measures, code enforcement falls upon the shoulders of individual practitioners who operate using ethical self-standards (Wright, 1993).

The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Code of Ethics, adopted in 1976 and modified in 1985, offers additional ethical guidelines for public relations and related strategic communication disciplines. While this code contains enforcement and sanction methods, they are non-disciplinary. Enforcement is intended only to serve informational and educational purposes (Briggs & Bernal, 1992).

Given the limitations of these codes, it is important to consider other methods to quantify and explain ethics among public relations practitioners. Moral development is such a method.

USING MORAL DEVELOPMENT TO EXPLAIN ETHICS

A widely accepted approach to measuring individual ethics across professions is within the concept of moral development. Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1965) first investigated this concept when observing play patterns of young boys engaged in the game of marbles. In these patterns Piaget discovered evidence of moral growth; a learned ability to reason rooted within individualized moral principles. These patterns became evident when Piaget discovered the boys' actions were performed not on the basis of external reward or possible sanction, but rather, universally, for individual benefit. Erikson (1964) extended Piaget's findings by studying moral growth across the entire life cycle. Lawrence Kohlberg, a Harvard psychologist, applied Piaget's work in researching the moral development of the university's undergraduates. Kohlberg's explanation of moral development is the most widely used definition of the concept.

Kohlberg (1969) discovered six stages of moral development among his sampled Harvard undergraduates. These stages were divided into three primary levels, consisting of two stages apiece. The first level, which Kohlberg labeled "preconventional," represents thought processes

specifically related to one's own welfare. A preconventional mind adheres to rules and obeys authority strictly because of punishment or reward. This punishment-reward dichotomy determines standards of what is ultimately perceived as either "right" or "wrong."

The second level, the "conventional," defines morality as conforming to the expectations of a given society. Unlike the preconventional level, rules and authority are accepted under a notion of "doing one's duty," in performing actions that benefit all of society. Maintenance of social order is considered the highest priority in this level.

"Postconventional," the third and highest level of Kohlberg's six stages, classifies universal, shared principles as what ultimately guides moral reasoning. Standards of morality are defined by acting in accordance with communal, societal standards. These standards are inherent by nature, based on personal conscience guided by thought and judgment.

Gilligan (1982) criticized Kohlberg's research as being biased against women, and argued that his findings did not allow for differing developmental patterns based on gender. Women, she stated, develop in an environment where more emphasis is placed on caring for others. In response to Gilligan's assertions, Kohlberg expanded his concepts of moral development. The postconventional stage was re-conceptualized to include an ethic of care.

In addition, Minnesota psychologist James Rest (1983, 1979) furthered Kohlberg's work in two significant areas. First, he applied the concept of ethical development to the professional arena. Furthermore, until that point, research on this topic had been strictly qualitative, with data obtained through comprehensive, personal interviews. Consequently, Rest's second major contribution was his development of a paper-and-pencil test that became the first quantitative means of testing Kohlberg and Gilligan's research.

Rest's "Defining Issues Test" presents six ethical dilemmas accompanied by twelve ranked statements. Respondents are instructed to answer these statements according to each one's perceived levels of importance in helping reach an ethical decision about the presented dilemma. The score obtained from these rankings, a P index, is considered a reflection of moral development.

To date, there has been no testing of the public relations industry via the Defining Issues Test (DIT). Journalists, however, have been surveyed twice (Westbrook, 1995; Coleman & Wilkins, 2002). This is worth noting since large numbers of the public relations community are, in fact, trained in and/or veterans of other mass communications-related fields (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2003).

Ryan and Martinson (1994) offered additional support for comparing the two industries on topics of ethics. In surveying public relations practitioners and journalists via ethics-based scenarios, a strong similarity emerged between the two disciplines in answers to questions associated with lying. Both groups perceived a "no comment" response to a request for elaboration on press releases as ethical behavior. Both said an evasive answer was not permissible.

The DIT studies on journalists surveyed 65 and 72 practitioners, respectively. What they uncovered was a moral development score for journalists higher than all but three other professions: seminarians/philosophers, physicians and medical students. These three groups shared a common bond of greater mean education levels than their journalistic counterparts, an important distinction since educational attainment had proven to be one of the soundest predictors of moral development (Rest, 1986). Professions scoring below journalists included

dental students, nurses, veterinary students, naval officers, orthopedic surgeons, prison inmates

and graduate/undergraduate college students. (See **Table 1**.)

TABLE 1: Mean P Scores for Various Professionals

Group Tested	Mean P Score on the DIT
Seminarians/Philosophers	65.1
Medical Students	50.2
Practicing Physicians	49.2
Journalists	48.4
Dental Students	47.6
Nurses	46.3
Graduate Students	44.9
Undergraduate College Students	43.2
Veterinary Students	42.2
Navy Enlisted Men	41.6
Orthopedic Surgeons	41
Adults in General	40
High School Students	31
Prison Inmates	23.7
Junior High Students	20

Data supplied by the Center for the Study of Ethical Development,
Minneapolis, MN.

Seeing journalists as astute moral reasoners is a view not necessarily shared by the

general populace. Voakes uncovered a public with "starkly different conceptions of journalistic

ethics" (Voakes, 1997, p. 23) than actual journalists. Likewise, public relations representatives

were "targeted perhaps more than any others for allegedly unethical conduct" (Seib, Fitzpatrick,

1995, p. 2).

Unlike journalism, there is no research pertaining to the public's perceptions of public

relations practitioner ethics and/or their ethical influences. Therefore, previous research based on

journalism, a significant sister vocation, is employed as a benchmark research comparison for

discussion on both industry ethics and the ethical decision-making patterns of practitioners.

ETHICS – INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL FACTORS

As mentioned, a notable disparity was uncovered between what the public and journalists identified as key influences behind journalistic ethical decision-making. This is a distinction worth mentioning since former journalists currently staff a large portion of the public relations vocation (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2003). Journalists perceived internal factors related to operational ethics -- laws and organizational policies -- as most significant in their ethical decision-making. The public highlighted external factors associated with situational ethics, such as competition from other media outlets and standard, journalistic norms, as primary influences on journalistic ethics.

Research on journalistic ethical reasoning consistently found support for the public's view (Valenti, 1998; Voakes, 1997; Wulfmeyer, 1990; Anderson, 1987). It discovered that external influences were most significant to journalistic ethical decision-making. Specifically, informal organizations journalists associate with including the newsroom environment, industry competition, accepted professional values and industry norms, and subjects and sources used by news, advertisers, and the audience (Breed, 1955; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996; Voakes, 1997; Singletary et al., 1990; White & Singletary, 1993; White & Pearce, 1991).

As a whole, quantitative research performed on journalism ethics is mainly descriptive, using statistical techniques to create categories into which journalistic ethical reasoning strategies can be grouped (Singletary et al., 1990; Black, Barney & Van Tubergen, 1979; Whitlow & Van Tubergen, 1978). Qualitative research on this subject is much more abundant, appearing as philosophical essays and detailed analyses of specific ethical situations.

To date, no quantitative research has been conducted to establish what factors public relations practitioners view as most important when making ethical decisions. The primary goal

of this current study is to determine the underlying factors that influence the ethical decision-making of these individuals.

PREDICTORS OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

In the various studies on journalistic ethical decision-making, certain variables were identified as helping predict this population's moral development. The four most significant were motivations, age, education and gender. Other variables, shown to be important predictors of moral development in other professions, are mentioned below in order to make comparisons between professions. These comparisons are essential as this is the first instance of public relations being tested via the DIT.

To begin, Singletary and others (Singletary, Caudill, Caudill & White 1990; White & Pearce 1991, White and Singletary 1993) developed, and then validated, an Ethical Motivation Scale in line with Kohlberg's six stages of moral development. Factors for this scale were classified as intrinsic or extrinsic depending on the role outside entities played in determining ethical behavior. White and Pearce (1991) uncovered that journalists who favored intrinsic motivations held more predictable attitudes toward ethical dilemmas than did those who preferred extrinsic guides.

Deci and Ryan (1991) found that an individual's reliance on intrinsic motivations could be augmented if feelings of autonomy were increased. Autonomy is an important part of Kohlberg's (1969) theory of moral development, serving as a key variable in the attainment of the postconventional level. McNeel (1994) discovered that choice, a construct related to autonomy, likewise functioned as an important factor in moral growth.

Next, the demographic variables of age, gender, religious preference and education need to be considered as important factors that influence ethical decision- making. According to Rest

(1986, 1993), age and education are the principal variables in determining moral development. Longitudinal DIT studies uncovered significant changes in scoring from high school age into adulthood (White, Bushnell & Regnemer, 1978; Rest, 1983), with a leveling off as formal education stops (Rest, 1976b).

Gender, while studied extensively with the DIT, has produced controversial results. A consistent criticism of Kohlberg's work is the aforementioned perceived inherent bias toward women (Gilligan, 1982). A comprehensive review of all DIT studies, however, found no difference between genders in more than 90% of those tested (Rest, 1979a). When differences did arise, educational opportunities, not gender, served as a better explanation for these differences (Rest, 1983). On the flipside, other studies did in fact uncover a difference in scoring by gender, with women consistently scoring higher than men (Thoma, 1986).

The variable of religion yielded a positive correlation with moral development, but only under certain circumstances. In numerous studies, a more fundamental or conservative religious belief correlated with lower moral development scores (Rest, 1979a, 1983, 1986; Lawrence, 1978; Parker, 1980). A variety of hypotheses have been offered to explain this variation. Some scholars believe that a higher ethical orientation is a result of critical and evaluative reasoning abilities, a concept that may stand in opposition to fundamental religious beliefs (Parker, 1990). Glock and Stark (1996) noted that orthodox Christian beliefs are highly correlated with social intolerance. Ellis (1986) discovered that religious fervor tends to lead to an extreme disregard for the rights of others.

GAUGING ETHICS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Questions of ethics in public relations inevitably arise as practitioners are expected to endure a delicate balance of simultaneously servicing both client and the collective good. Despite

this inevitably, to date there is not a single quantitative attempt to gauge ethical decision-making within this industry. Previous research on ethics in public relations focuses instead on defining ethical, operational guidelines for the field. These are the theoretical bases and models discussed above.

The use of theoretical bases and models as the preferred method of gauging public relations ethics is not surprising for a couple of reasons: a) the relative newness of the field (in comparison to other mass communication disciplines), b) its constant evolution, and c) due to this relative newness, most public relations practitioners are veterans of related, mass communication disciplines (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2003). Thus, gauging the attitudes of these individuals from sister disciplines provides data arguably transferable to public relations.

Despite a public relations environment staffed by veterans of sister professions, there is, in fact, a way to gauge ethics from a purely public relations standpoint: by researching individuals that are truly the ethical decision-makers within public relations. These are the field's leaders, practitioners with the most at stake when confronted with an ethical dilemma. They are individuals most apt to possess a management ranking or greater.

Research on industry ethics based solely on rank is common within other disciplines, notably in accounting and auditing (Ponemon, 1990; Rest, 1994). While auditing work is admittedly more quantifiable than public relations activities, they share commonalities in ethical expectations. Auditors are paid by a client for their services, yet must perform their duties in a non-biased fashion. When facing this role conflict, junior and senior- level CPAs tended to acknowledge adherence to rules of ethical conduct as their highest priority. Managers and partners, more concerned with profit and legal matters, viewed these latter items as primary concerns. Accompanying these findings is a related discovery that moral judgment levels in the

accounting and auditing field increased from staff to supervisory levels but sharply declined upon reaching the manager and partner ranks.

Closely related to rank, the variable of job setting is extremely relevant in explaining ethical decision-making processes for public relations practitioners. In agency, corporate and government/public affairs settings, the highest ranked figures often make the crucial decisions on public relations ethical dilemmas. Solo practitioners/consultants, unless working in tandem with another individual on a project, will make these decisions 100 percent of the time. Public relations-focused academics, although performing research and instruction on ethics, simply do not experience industry-related ethical dilemmas.

MOTIVES FOR RESEARCH

The primary goal of this study was to collect quantitative data on ethical decision-making for a previously untested population. It aimed to forge new ground by also comparing rank (manager vs. non-manager) and job setting (agency vs. corporate vs. government/public affairs vs. solo practitioner/consultant vs. academic) for this specific population.

A secondary goal was to quantitatively apply the five-category TARES test to its intended audience: public relations practitioners. Underlying patterns in responses to ethical consideration statements would be compared with the original five-factor configuration of the TARES test. The results of this comparison would determine if a possible grouping alternative was needed for these ethical consideration factors.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

RQ1a: What is the mean level of moral development among public relations practitioners?

RQ1b: What are the factors that best explain ethical consideration patterns of public relations practitioners?

RQ2a: Are variables identified as significantly correlated with moral development in other fields significant predictors for public relations?

RQ2b: What variables are significantly correlated with ethical consideration factors?

RQ3a: Are there significant associations in moral development between public relations practitioners based on rank or authority (manager vs. non-manager)?

RQ3b: Are there significant associations in ethical consideration factors among public relations practitioners based on rank or authority (manager vs. non-manager)?

RQ4a: Are there differences in moral development among public relations practitioners based on job setting (agency vs. corporate vs. solo practitioner/consultant vs. government/public affairs vs. academia)?

RQ4b: Are there differences in ethical consideration factors among public relations practitioners based on job setting (agency vs. corporate vs. solo practitioner/consultant vs. government/public affairs vs. academia)?

Given the lack of research in this area and the exploratory nature of this study, no specific hypotheses were made about the expected outcome of the research questions.

CHAPTER 3: MATERIALS AND METHODS

THE DEFINING ISSUES TEST

This study employed James Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT), originally created in 1979. The DIT, since its inception, has proven its worth on many occasions as a reliable measurement device of moral development across a variety of professions. Over 400 published studies use the Defining Issues Test (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). While it has been used to test journalists, to date, there has been no application of the DIT to public relations.

The DIT presents six ethical dilemmas accompanied by twelve statements. Four of the dilemmas in this study originate from the original DIT and are included in all versions of the test. The DIT allows for the inclusion of two additional dilemmas; in this instance they are public relations-specific.

While the test provides leeway to include these additional dilemmas, they are required to theoretically mirror the four "baseline" dilemmas in design. First, the added dilemmas should be true "dilemmas," in that there is no "right" or "wrong" course of action. Both of the public relations-specific dilemmas were pre-tested to satisfy this requirement. Second, the twelve individually ranked statements must reflect the moral development stages suggested by Kohlberg, with at least 3 or 4 of these statements, per dilemma, based on the "highest order" stages of 5 and six. These stages represent the following, from lowest to highest:

a) Stage 2—considerations focusing directly on potential advantages to the actor
   him/herself, and on the basic premise of fairness associated with exchange of favors,

b) Stage 3-considerations focusing on the good or evil intentions of those involved as well as the importance of maintaining positive relationships, friendships and approval within them,

c) Stage 4-considerations focusing on the maintenance of the existing legal system, roles, and formal organizational structure,

d) Stage 5A-considerations focusing on the organization of society via appeal to consensus-producing procedures (abiding by majority vote), insisting on "due process," as well as protecting minimal, basic rights,

e) Stage 5B/6-considerations focusing on the structure of social arrangements and relationships based on universally appealing concepts.

Respondents are instructed to rank the twelve statements according to each one's perceived level of importance in helping reach a decision about the presented dilemma. The statements were ranked on a 5-point scale of "Great," "Much," "Little," "Some" and "None."

The score obtained from these rankings, a *P*-index, is considered a reflection of moral development, specifically, the relative importance an individual assigns to decisions rooted in these principles. The levels serve as a manifestation of the postconventional: Kohlberg's highest stage of moral development.

To assure validity in ranking, the DIT includes a consistency check between rating and ranking to defend against random responses by the test's participants. There is an expectation that the four rating statements indicated as "most important" through "fourth most important" will be mirrored by statement rankings as having a "Great," "Much" or "Some" impact on the dilemma decision. If a pattern of inconsistency emerges between these two across multiple dilemmas, offending subjects are removed. Additionally, the test contains a number of

"meaningless" questions, intended to sound impressive in presentation but holding no actual purpose. If a respondent selects answers simply based on assumed complexity versus actual meaning, the individual questionnaire is discarded. Reliability for the DIT is high, with a Cronbach's alpha score in the upper .70s and low .80s. Test re-test reliability holds similar numbers.

THE TARES TEST

The dilemmas were followed by fourteen questions on ethical consideration, derived from the five level TARES (Truthfulness, Authenticity, Respect, Equity and Social Responsibility) test. There are three questions per level with the exception of Respect, which contains two. These questions, in the form of 7-point Likert scales from "Not at all important" to "Very important," measure the amount of ethical consideration a public relations practitioner places on these items when facing a difficult communication decision. (These questions comprise **Index 1**.)

INDEX 1: Ethical Consideration Questions Derived from the TARES Test

TRUTHFULNESS (of the message)

1. The accuracy of the content.

2. Whether the communicator's own honesty and integrity may be questioned as a result of this communication decision.

3. Whether the communicator would feel deceived if this communication was related to him/her in the same context.

AUTHENTICITY (of the persuader)

1. That the communicator would personally advocate the view he/she is presenting.

2. People receiving the information will benefit from it.

3. That the communicator would openly assume personal responsibility for the communication.

RESPECT (for the persuadee)

1. That the target audience is viewed by the communicator with respect.

2. Self-interest is being promoted at the expense of those being persuaded.

EQUITY (of the appeal)

1. Whether the target audience was unfairly selected due to their vulnerability to the content.

2. The context of the communication is fair.

3. The target audience can completely understand the information being presented to them.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (for the common good)

1. The view being advocated might cause harm to individuals or society.

2. That the content of the communication promoted the principles the communicator personally believes in.

3. Certain groups might be unfairly stereotyped by this communication.

Completing the study were questions pertaining to each individual's: a) choice or autonomy within his/her organizational culture, b) religiosity, c) political ideology and d) demographics. The first three items were measured via indices of interval-measure questions obtained from the General Social Survey. The General Social Survey, an annual personal interview survey of U.S. households, has been conducted by the National Opinion Research Center for over three decades. Demographic variables included: location, job title, years experience in public relations, vocation – if any – before public relations, size of organization, clients serviced, education, age, gender and race.

PROCEDURE

The target sample for this study was a convenience sample of public relations practitioners across the United States, with responses from 116 individuals. While this number may appear small, most studies containing the DIT employed a similarly, relatively small subject pool of 50-100 respondents.

The use of a convenience sample is commonplace in DIT studies. This form of subject acquisition was appropriate since the study adhered to three necessary conditions justifying its usage (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). First, that the material being studied—ethical development—is difficult to obtain. Second, with this being a pilot study conducted online, the nuances of online surveying combined with the limited resources available for data collection hindered the ability to generate a truly random sample. Third, while an important topic for the public relations sector, it remains under-researched. This is the first application of the DIT for the public relations industry.

Subjects were solicited either via personal, direct email solicitation, organization-wide solicitation, email listserv distribution or through "viral marketing" – word-of-mouth referrals – by already solicited individuals.

Direct email solicited participants consisted of public relations practitioners across the United States as well as faculty at academic institutions that specialize in public relations research and/or instruction. Approximately 100 individuals were contacted via this method.

Organizational solicitation was sent to members of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), the Black Public Relations Society of America (BPRSA), the Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and the New Orleans, Louisiana, chapters of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), and the Public Relations Association of Louisiana (PRAL).

Email listserv distribution was sent to members of the Communication Pros (CommPro's) network of Ryze.com. Ryze.com is an Internet-based business-networking site. CommPro's is composed of professionals in corporate communications, public relations, analyst relations, investor relations, marketing communications, employee communications or related disciplines. Additional email listserv distribution occurred via the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) public relations division, the Communication Theory and Research Network, as well as the International Association for Business and Society (IABS).

Response rate for this study was difficult to discern based on the inability to truly track email distribution through organizational solicitation and email listserv distribution. Membership lists for these two methods are not only updated by the minute as members subscribe and unsubscribe, they are also confidential. Additionally, many current email programs filter out "group" email such as these as "junk mail," eliminating the message before it ever has a chance to reach a target respondent's email inbox.

As mentioned, the study was placed online in hopes of acquiring more responses. This decision was made after consulting with a number of individuals in the public relations field, who all stated a strong preference for an online versus a print format for the study. The site was located at http://www.manship2.lsu.edu/jayweb.

Values were assigned for the six dilemmas. A decision to take action was coded a "1," "2" for undecided, and "3" for "can't decide." Responses left blank were coded as "can't decide." The twelve statements per dilemma indicating their importance in influencing the overall decision were coded as "5" for "Great," "4" for "Much," "3" for "Some," "2" for "Little," and "1" for "None."

At the conclusion of each dilemma, respondents were instructed to rank four of these twelve statements as "most important," "second most important," "third most important" and "fourth most important." Variables for these rankings correspond to the statement numbers selected to fill these four designations.

In order to test the validity of the statements written by the author to represent stages 5 and 6 of Kohlberg's Moral Development scale, bivariate correlations were performed. If all six dilemmas are consistently measuring the same theoretical constructs, significant correlations are expected between stage 5 and 6 questions from each dilemma and those from at least two other dilemmas. These correlations were produced by this study.

The level of moral development, or P-index, was calculated using the following method:

a) A review of the four statements per dilemma indicated as "most important," "second most important," "third most important" and "fourth most important."

b) If a Stage 5 or 6 statement was selected under one of these four designations, they were assigned the following values: most important=4, second most important=3, third most important=2, fourth most important=1. These values were summed together for each dilemma, for all six dilemmas for a range of 0 to 10.

c) The total summed score was divided by the number of dilemmas--in this instance, six. This quotient, multiplied by 10, is considered an individual's level of moral development or P-index.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

FINDINGS

        Being an Internet-based project, answers to questions within this study appeared in a digital format consisting of eight individual databases per subject. The databases were combined to create a single database file. In the interest of maintaining confidentiality in this format, respondents were identified across all eight databases only by IP address. Individual IP addresses were cross-compared to ensure that each respondent had sufficiently completed the study from start to finish. Incomplete surveys were removed from the subject pool. This initial step of data purging reduced the response rate from 175 to 131 individuals.

        As discussed earlier, the DIT includes a number of consistency checks for responses. Participants that failed these checks and/or did not complete sections sufficiently were removed. This second step of data purging reduced the sample from 131 to 116 respondents.

        Mean substitution was performed where appropriate. No more than three percent of the statement rankings accompanying individual dilemmas were mean substituted. Mean substitution for ethical consideration items (based on the TARES test) did not exceed five percent. Similarly, maximum mean substitution for the variables of age was seven percent, job independence questions five percent, location three percent, gender and race one percent each, political view two percent, and religiosity two percent. Time spent (seniority) in public relations required a mean substitution of 14.6 percent. Early technical difficulties associated with this particular variable prevented it from coding properly. While this error was quickly located and corrected, respondents affected by this technical glitch nevertheless required mean substitution.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Of the sample of 116, 64% were female, 36% male. Age ranged from 22 to 67, with a mean of 42 years old. Racial makeup of the 116 respondents was 91% white, 4% black, 2% mixed, with 3% identifying themselves as "other." Forty-eight percent possessed a graduate degree, 22% had taken some graduate courses, 28% obtained only a bachelor's degree, and 3% attended some college and/or attained a high school diploma.

In line with Department of Labor findings that ex-journalists are actively sought to staff public relations positions, 40% of the 116 sampled came to public relations with an employment background in journalism. Nineteen percent of the respondents worked in an agency setting, 36% for corporations, 6% operated as solo practitioners or consultants, 8% served in a government or public affairs environment, and 32% were from academia. Individuals were placed into these categories based on self-identified job title. Managers to non-managers was a near even split, 54% to 46%, respectively. "Manager" status was similarly determined by self-identified job title, with participants who identified themselves as manager, director, vice president, president, partner, etc., placed into the manager category. Solo practitioners, academics and titles of coordinator or lower-rank were all classified as "non-managers."

Participants tended to be more experienced, with 75% of respondents serving a minimum of six years in the field. (See **Table 2**.)

Table 2: Years Experience in Public Relations

Years Experience	Percentage of Respondents (Rounded)
Less than 1	9
1-5	16
6-10	31
10-15	14
15-20	9
20+	22

Twenty-three percent of the 116 originated from the Midwestern United States, 22% from the South, 22% from the Southeast, 13% from the Northwest, and 10% from both the Northeast and Southwestern United States.

In the category of religious beliefs, respondents tended to rank themselves as moderate to slightly religious. The majority of participants identified themselves as a 2 or 3 on a 7-point scale where 1=*extremely religious* and 7=*extremely non-religious*. This is an interesting dichotomy to journalists from a previous DIT study that tended to rank themselves as a slightly more moderate 4 or 5 on this 7-point scale (Coleman & Wilkins, 2002).

ADDITIONAL INDICES

Indices were created for the three questions pertaining to job independence and autonomy:

At your place of employment:

1. How independent does your job allow you to be?

2. How much say do you have over the tasks you work on?

3. How much are you allowed to take part in making decisions that affect your work?

These questions, obtained from the General Social Survey, have been oft tested and proven to be consistently reliable as an index. This trend was reinforced in this study with an alpha level of .89 for this index.

An additional index was created for the two questions reflecting political ideology:

1. Generally speaking do you think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent or Other?

2. Where would you place your place your political views on this scale?

The scale for question 1 ranged from *Strong Democrat=1* to *Strong Republican=7*; *Independent* was the median value at *4*. The scale for question 2 ranged from *Extremely Liberal=1* to *Extremely Conservative=7*; *Neutral* was the median value for this question with a value of 4. The alpha level for this index was .92.

TESTING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1a: What is the mean level of moral development among public relations practitioners?

On the Defining Issues Test, the score that constitutes moral development is the *P*-index, often referred to as the p score. The mean p score for the 116 public relations respondents was 45.41 (*SD=13.18*), with a score range of 8.33 to 73.33.

Individual analyses were conducted on the six dilemmas and the p scores obtained for each of them. The Heinz dilemma produced a mean of 4.86, the Doctor dilemma 5.91, Prisoner 4.35, and Newspaper 5.05. The public relations-specific Client and Cookies dilemmas yielded averages of 5.78 and 4.29. (See **Table 3**.)

Table 3: Mean P Scores for Individual Dilemmas

Dilemma	Mean P
Heinz	4.86
Prisoner	4.35
Doctor	5.91
Newspaper	5.05
Client	5.78
Cookies	4.29

RQ1b: What are the factors that best explain ethical consideration patterns of public relations practitioners?

A reliability analysis was conducted on the fourteen ethical consideration statements originating from the 5-part TARES test. Analysis focused on whether questions grouped together to measure individual constructs of Truthfulness (3 questions), Authenticity (3 questions),

Respect (2 questions), Equity (3 questions) and Social Responsibility (3 questions), in fact, did so.

Individual reliability analyses on these five groups resulted in alpha levels between .53 and .60, respectively. With all five alpha levels falling below .70, the benchmark used for determining the reliability of a factor, a factor analysis was conducted to locate a possible grouping alternative to the five-component TARES configuration. After discovering significant multicollinearity at the .01 and .05 levels for nearly all of these questions, the decision was made to use a varimax rotation to ensure the independence of the obtained factors.

Three factors were extracted consisting of 8, 3 and 3 items, respectively. These factors identified as "Credibility," "Integrity" and "Civility" together encompassed what Day (2003, pp. 11-12) defined as "moral knowledge." Moral knowledge, according to Day, is the mental capacity to discriminate between good and bad behavior and to possess the "moral will" to apply this knowledge in solving actual, ethical dilemmas. (See **Table 4** for factor loadings.)

Factor 1, "Civility," contained items indicative of this "first principle" of morality (Day, 2003, pp. 11-12). This factor represents an attitude of self-sacrifice by the communicator in favor of overall respect for others. The definition of this factor mirrors that of prosocial behavior, specifically behavior powered by intrinsic, prosocial motives for action. This form of prosocial behavior produces a response or action guided by a primary focus on the needs of others and for collective society (Ryan & Connell, 1989).

The second factor, "Integrity," was composed of statements signifying a communicator's willingness to take responsibility for the consequences of his/her actions and to live with the results of this behavior. A communicator that values matters of Integrity practices what he/she preaches, trying to make a difference in society through their actions (Day, 2003, p. 11).

"Credibility" details a communicator's ability to be believable and worthy of trust. It is a communicator's transition from simply dealing with others to his/her membership in the moral community at large. Reliability analyses for these factors yielded alpha levels of .82, .77 and .66, respectively.

TABLE 4: Factor Loadings of Ethical Consideration Statements

ITEMS	*FACTOR LOADING*		
Whether the communicator would feel deceived if this communication was related to him/her in the same context.	.70		
The view being advocated might cause harm to individuals or society.	.69		
That the target audience is viewed by the communicator with respect.	.63		
People receiving the information will benefit from it.	.61		
Certain groups might be unfairly stereotyped by this communication.	.58		
The target audience can completely understand the information being presented to them.	.58		
Whether the target audience was unfairly selected due to their vulnerability to the content.	.57		
Self-interest is being promoted at the expense of those being persuaded.	.48		
That the content of the communication promoted the principles the communicator personally believes in.		.86	
That the communicator would personally advocate the view he/she is presenting.		.81	
That the communicator would openly assume personal responsibility for the communication.		.70	
The accuracy of the content.			.83
The context of the communication is fair.			.72
Whether the communicator's own honesty and integrity may be questioned as a result of this communication decision.			.54

RQ2a: Are variables identified as important in predicting moral development in other fields significant predictors for public relations?

Correlations were performed between overall p scores and the variables of age, gender, education, job independence and autonomy (Autonomy), political ideology (Politics) and religiosity. No significance was found between any of these variables and moral development levels.

RQ2b: What variables are significantly correlated with ethical consideration factors?

Factor 1:Civility, produced a significant and positive linear association between a person's educational levels and this factor's theme of self-sacrifice in favor of overall society. This factor also yielded a negative linear relationship with political ideology, denoting that participants leaning toward a Democratic political view and more liberal by nature tended to place significantly more weight on self-sacrifice in favor of overall society when faced with a difficult communication decision. Lastly, this factor correlated significantly and positively with age. Older respondents considered these concepts as more critical than their younger peers when confronted by a difficult communication decision. (See **Table 5** for factor/variable correlations.)

Factor 2:Integrity, was negatively correlated with gender, with women significantly more concerned than men on matters of integrity when encountering difficult communication decisions. Similar to Factor 1:Civility, this second factor produced a significant and positive linear association with levels of education.

Akin to Factor 1:Civility, Factor 3:Credibility, a communicator's ability to be believable and worthy of trust, likewise correlated significantly and positively with age.

TABLE 5: Correlations Among Variables and Factors

	Age	Gender	Education	Autonomy	Politics	Religiosity
CIVILITY	.305**	-.102	.254**	.151	-.253**	.083
INTEGRITY	.079	-.219**	.343**	.159	-.087	.038
CREDIBILITY	.331**	-.071	.065	.006	.105	.064

**p<.01 (2-tailed)

RQ3a: Are there significant associations in moral development among public relations practitioners based on rank or authority (manager vs. non-manager)?

No significance was found between management status and individual moral development levels.

RQ3b: Are there significant associations in ethical consideration levels among public relations practitioners based on rank or authority (manager vs. non-manager)?

Factor 2:Integrity, correlated significantly and negatively with p scores, indicating that non-managers were more concerned than their supervisors with having to assume responsibility to society for the consequences of difficult communication decisions. (See **Table 6** for correlation results.)

TABLE 6: Correlations Among Factors and Rank/Authority

	Rank/Authority Managers=1
CIVILITY	-.038
INTEGRITY	-.263**
CREDIBILITY	.035

**p<.01 (2-tailed)

RQ4a: Are there differences in moral development among public relations practitioners based on job setting (agency vs. corporate vs. solo practitioner/consultant vs. government/public affairs vs. academia)?

Mean p scores for individual job setting groups were 39.5 (s.d.=3.05) for agency practitioners, 39.8 (s.d.=2.78) for corporate practitioners, 52.2 (s.d.=4.98) for solo

practitioners/consultants, 47.7 (s.d.=4.31) for government/public affairs practitioners, and 49.3

(s.d.=2.80) for individuals in academia. (See **Table 7**.)

Table 7: Mean P Scores for Individual Job Settings

Dilemma	Mean P
Agency *n=20*	39.5
Corporate *n=39*	39.8
Solo/Consultant *n=6*	52.2
Govt./Public Affairs *n=9*	47.7
Education *n=34*	49.3

Moral development levels for agency and corporate-based practitioners were discovered

to be nearly identical. Unlike the other three public relations job settings, many of the tasks these

two particular groups are faced with on a daily basis are nearly identical in nature. While agency-

based practitioners may be serving multiple clients versus their corporate counterparts who

answer to a lone employer, job responsibilities between these groups tend to mirror each other

closely.

These two groups were combined to create a new job setting variable. Correlating the

original job setting variable (of separate groups for these two environments) with the new,

grouped entity yielded a powerful .972 correlation, significant at the p<.01 level. A Levene's

Test of heterogeneity of variance was .430, indicating normal variability between groups using

this new variable.

A follow-up ANOVA was conducted accompanied by a Tukey HSD procedure to

determine which of these job-setting groups were significantly different from one another based

on p scores. (See **Table 8**.) Significant differences in moral development levels between agency/corporate and academic practitioners were found**.** (See **Table 9**.)

TABLE 8: ANOVA of Job Setting and P Score   *n=68*

Source	Type III SS	MS	df	F
Job Setting	1694.693	564.99	13	3.86*
Error	9365.111	146.33	64	
Total	145183.333		68	

*p<.05 (2-tailed)

TABLE 9: Tukey HSD between Job Setting and Moral Development Levels
Values indicate significance levels

	Solo	Govt./Public Aff.	Education
Agency/Corporate	.098	.334	.034*

*p<.05 (2-tailed)

RQ4b: Are there differences in ethical consideration factors among public relations practitioners based on job setting (agency vs. corporate vs. solo practitioner/consultant vs. government/public affairs vs. academia)?

There was no difference in ethical consideration factors based on a participant's job setting.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

DISCUSSION

Overall, the most valuable findings of this study were somewhat unexpected indicating the importance of quantitative research on moral development in the profession of public relations. To explain, many of the demographic variables theorized to affect moral development instead produced significant associations with ethical consideration factors. While these factors weren't directly concerned with matters of moral development, their content tended to mirror principles similar to Kohlberg's theories.

All three factors were compiled from concepts akin to those expressed in Kohlberg's definition of postconventional reasoning. Factor 1:Civility represented a theme of self-sacrifice and of prosocial behavior. Factor 2:Integrity was most concerned with a communicator assuming a responsibility to society for his/her actions. Factor 3:Credibility stressed membership in the moral community at large.

Statistical support for this idea of a relationship between ethical consideration and moral development was found in numerous places within this study. One of these instances was the significant and positive linear association between Factor 1:Civility and a respondent's educational attainment. As discussed above, this factor's principles are not far removed from the stage 5 and 6 levels of the Defining Issues Test that place preference on societal versus individual gains. The additional significant and positive relationship between Civility and age could simply have been the result of older individuals merely possessing higher levels of education.

Further support for a connection between moral development and ethical consideration levels existed in gender's relationship with Factor 2:Integrity, composed of statements that highlight a communicator's transition from simply dealing with others to his/her membership in the larger community. Women in this study scored significantly higher than men on this factor. This same linkage is oft debated within DIT circles, however, in the context of gender's relationship with p scores.

While some have argued that gender plays no role in explaining differences in p scores (Rest, 1983), other studies did in fact uncover a relationship with gender, with women consistently scoring higher in moral development than men (Thoma, 1986). Factor 2:Integrity, focused on making a difference in society, perhaps resonated more clearly with women, who according to Gilligan (1982), are developmentally conditioned to be more concerned than men with the needs of others.

With women comprising a vast majority of the public relations vocation – 64 percent of this sample were women – the role of gender in ethical consideration should not be understated. As more men begin to find a place within public relations, future studies may want to analyze potential shifts in ethical decision-making patterns.

Rank/authority, a critical element in determining who makes the ethical decisions in public relations, is another variable often linked to p scores that in this study produced a significant association with ethical consideration factors. In this sample, non-managers placed significantly more importance on Integrity when facing a tough communication decision than did their supervisor counterparts. This discovery is in line with research on auditors tested via the DIT, where moral judgment levels increased from staff to supervisory levels but sharply declined upon reaching the manager and partner ranks (Ponemon, 1990; Rest, 1994). Management level

practitioners, much like those of the same status in auditing, are likely more concerned with profit and operational affairs when confronting a conflict rooted in ethics.

Elm and Nichols (1993) uncovered that this negative correlation between moral development and management status is independent of both: a) the ethical climate of an organization, and b) an individual's propensity to act in accordance with internal or external cues on an organization's perceived ethical norms. These findings are extremely relevant in interpreting the results from this study, as five different job settings containing unique work environments and roles are all being researched under a single umbrella of "public relations."

Agency and corporate practitioners, individuals that comprise the majority of the public relations umbrella – 54% in this sample -- are two job settings that at first glance appear very dissimilar based on the type of client serviced. The two groups, however, approached ethical decisions in a nearly identical fashion. Perhaps most important is not whom you service that affects these decisions, rather how you service them. The tasks the two groups perform are often nearly indistinguishable.

The discrepancy in scoring between the combined group of agency/corporate participants and their academic peers followed suit with prior DIT studies, where increased educational levels directly correlated with greater p scores. As all members of the academic group attained at least a graduate degree, this distinction likely led to higher p scores and a significant difference in scoring with agency/corporate practitioners who, on average, possessed a bachelor's degree alone.

Public relations-focused academics, however, do not face on a daily basis the difficult communication decisions that confront the other four public relations job settings. Without the burdens of everyday accountability in solving ethical dilemmas, academic-based practitioners are

41

less tainted with "bottom-line" realities of commercial public relations. This discrepancy might have contributed toward a greater emphasis on societal needs, resulting in higher ethical consideration levels that reward this view.

This discovery of a significant difference between academic and agency/corporate practitioners was both fascinating and potentially problematic. As it is academics that train the public relations practitioners of the future, maintaining an open exchange of ideas and philosophies between scholars and the rest of the public relations industry is a necessity. Is it imperative that a rift does not emerge in defining ethics within public relations based solely on job setting.

The hypothesized relationship between journalism and public relations proved to be an accurate one. The significant association between Civility and a political ideology of a more liberal and Democratic Party tone is perhaps a by-product of employment background. Forty percent of the participants were former journalists. Journalists, by nature, tend to be staunch advocates of First Amendment rights with corresponding political views of a more liberal tone. With nearly half of the sampled public relations practitioners identifying themselves as former journalists, the relationship between civility and political ideology makes sense. Liberal political views have also proven to be associated with a greater preference toward postconventional reasoning, resulting in higher p scores for individuals with this political stance (Kohlberg, 1981; Rest, 1986).

Perhaps the dichotomy between ethical consideration factors versus p scores was simply due to the style of questioning. While the DIT measured moral development via dilemmas, the ethical consideration statements *directly* asked public relations practitioners about their industry and to respond to issues they are faced with on a daily basis. This latter approach appeared to

resonate more clearly with participants, whom in their feedback blatantly questioned the utility of answering projective questions on dilemmas that they perceived as having little actual connection to their jobs.

Furthermore, while the DIT has proven quite useful in gauging professions containing standardized ethical codes, it faced a unique challenge in being applied to a public relations industry with none in place. In contrast, the TARES test was designed with a purpose of ethical self-regulation. Thus, it is logical that these ethical consideration factors would better resonate with a field practicing self-standards versus moral development dilemmas usually reserved for measuring professions with accepted, industry-wide regulations.

Regardless of the method employed in questioning public relations practitioners about their decision-making processes, the end result was a finding that matters of ethics are, in fact, a part of their everyday operations. This study demonstrated quantitatively that despite a lack of formal codes or vocation-wide standards, public relations practitioners are not amoral sheep that blindly service their clients with reckless ethical abandon.

In spite of a public that sees a field laden with unethical conduct (Seib, Fitzpatrick, 1995, p. 2), a duality of service creed is alive and well in public relations. The TARES test of ethical expectations for public relations practitioners suggests adherence to notions of a communal good when faced with difficult communication decisions. Through this study, the three factors comprising moral knowledge exhibited empirically that these expectations are not only present but can also be gauged.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Similar to its media counterparts, the public relations industry services a world of instantaneous, information demands. Thus, the unanimous preference by participants surveyed early in the study for an online versus print format came as no surprise.

While placing the study online allowed for a cost-effective and widespread reach to potential respondents – the positives of this medium – it also had it drawbacks. Response rates were impossible to discern based on the limitations of email. An additional limitation of the medium lies in what can be construed as "normal" Internet media consumption patterns. This need for both a great deal of cognitive attention and time are demands not often a part of everyday Internet browsing. These demands were the most likely culprits in the "drop-off" rate of respondents that started the study but would not finish it.

The results of this study should be viewed with caution before considering them as a benchmark for the public relations industry as a whole as well as to use this score in comparison with other DIT results. First, the stages identified by Kohlberg as most important may not be viewed as such by all who complete the test. Similarly, his postconventional stage is not necessarily a perfect definition of communitarian principles. These are important distinctions, since answers to questions based on these stages determine a person's p score. Second, while this study adhered to rules established by the DIT that allow for two additional dilemmas, it did not, however, contain enough accompanying Stage 5 or 6 statements for its results to be considered completely comparable. The PR-specific dilemmas contained only 3 and 2 of these higher-level statements, a design issue that likely skewed the overall P score downward. To be considered fully comparable, these last two dilemmas must have four Stage 5 or 6 statements apiece.

Additionally, as with any self-reported study, there is no way to perfectly gauge the concept/s being analyzed. Despite a discovery of significant associations and correlations, this study does not come with a guarantee that a participant's response on ethical dilemmas and statements is indicative of how they react in their actual job. Also, being an exploratory study, participants were from a convenience not a probability sample. Therefore, the variability of the statistics in this study cannot truly be estimated.

CONCLUSIONS

Understanding the ethical decision-making patterns of public relations practitioners proved itself to be anything but a cut-and-dry endeavor. This is somewhat expected for a relatively new field composed of five unique job environments, each with distinct staffing and operational realities. Public relations practitioners simply do not exist in a vacuum where discrepancies in role and obligation have no effect on ethical and moral reasoning.

With public relations' biggest days of growth and maturation arguably still to come, future research is essential to better understand this field. This initial look produced a plethora of information, helping explain differences in public relations practitioners' moral development based on job setting and on ethical consideration factors due to key variables of age, education, gender, rank and political ideology.

Rather than limiting discussion to negative, lump statements from its critics, the field's practitioners can now better understand the variables that affect their morals and ethics. They can point to differences in political ideology as having a significant impact on decision-making patterns rooted in concepts of civility. Managers can become more cognizant of sacrificing personal credibility for professional interests.

Furthermore, this study took equally important steps by acquiring its information online. While it definitely has its weaknesses, this medium proved itself to be a viable method for data collection on this topic. It is, however, important to note that despite a voiced preference for this format, more than 60 percent of these same practitioners failed to complete the study once they started it. How to best gather data on this field remains a question.

Research possibilities on this topic are abundant. A logical next step would be a focused, individual DIT study on a particular public relations job setting. Tailoring the instrument to be consistent with DIT studies on other industries would yield the mean p score that public relations is lacking. It will be interesting to track the field's moral development as it shifts from an industry staffed by former journalists to public relations-trained practitioners.

The TARES test, never before applied to a quantitative study, proved its worth as factors comprising moral knowledge. The ability of ethical consideration statements to replicate findings hypothesized to associate with p scores suggests alternative means to gauge ethics in public relations (and potentially other mass communication professions).

At a minimum, what this study proposed is to open up the Pandora's Box of questioning public relations practitioners about ethics and moral development at a time when they are under extreme scrutiny on these very topics. The willingness by this community to address these issues and outwardly encourage this study was both surprising and refreshing. Most of the feedback from participants was not defensive. Rather, they voiced support for the study, the desire to be informed of the results, and a congratulatory message for what some perceived as a meaningful look at their industry. Practitioners from Canada, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Australia and New Zealand similarly expressed encouragement for addressing this topic.

This appears to be an industry ready to face the music in answering questions from its critics, to learn from its past, understand its present, and to prepare for its future. Let the research begin.

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APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS DILEMMAS

CLIENT DILEMMA

A small Latin American country is trying to gain popular support across the United States for its new democratic government and policies. Believing this support will help in gaining entry into the U.S. marketplace and the much-needed revenue to help build its infrastructure, the country turns to public relations for help.

The country is also under scrutiny for accusations of human rights violations and has been reprimanded in the past for similar actions.

Espen-Rogers Communications, a large global public relations firm based in the United States, is approached by this Latin American country, asking to be taken on as a client. Should the firm agree to service this client?

1.Other public relations firms are already servicing these kinds of clients; if Espen-Rogers doesn't accept this account someone else certainly will.

2. Servicing this client will help build Espen-Rogers' reputation as a global leader.

3. In refusing to service this client, Espen-Rogers is protecting human rights.

4. How people in the U.S. will feel when they discover Espen-Rogers is servicing this client.

5. It is Espen Rogers' duty to society to accept this client and to bring an important voice to the marketplace of public opinion.

6. This would be a big-paying client; Espen-Rogers really needs the money to help pay its employees.

7. Whether Espen-Rogers should be influenced by external factors when considering taking on a client.

8. In accepting this account, Espen-Rogers will be allowing more human rights violations to occur.

9. If no one finds out that this country is using public relations to help its image,   no harm has been done.

10. Refusing this client's account raises the credibility of all public relations firms.

11. Everybody already knows that public relations firms are doing this sort of thing all the time.

12. Accepting this kind of client may deter other clients from approaching Espen- Rogers for future business.

"COOKIES" DILEMMA

Kelly Smith, Public Relations Manager at a leading car company, is about to launch a new marketing campaign. As part of the campaign, she has been asked by her supervisor to consider using "cookies" -- files that secretly track a person's Internet browsing habits. These cookies contain very detailed, personal information about these individuals, knowledge that would then be used to market the car to them by e-mail .

Using cookies in marketing campaigns is both legal and a common practice. Consumers groups, however, have been strongly outspoken against marketers using cookies, accusing them of intentionally invading a person's privacy just to sell products. Bad publicity has resulted.

Knowing that some of the competition is already using cookies in their marketing campaigns, should Kelly follow suit? Or, afraid of possible repercussions to both her company's image and personal job security, kill the campaign it before it starts?

1. The competition is already using this method; if Kelly doesn't do the same, her company will suffer.
 2. Using this marketing method will increase Kelly's company's sales.
 3. Kelly's customers will feel violated if they discover their Internet browsing has been tracked.
 4. If Kelly doesn't run a successful product launch she may lose her job.
 5. Kelly has a responsibility to best serve her employer, and using this method is a part of this responsibility.
 6. It's important to protect a person's privacy, despite what others are doing.
 7. Using cookies to market products gives customers an easier way to buy what they probably already want.
 8. In being outspoken against using the method, Kelly is serving the interests of overall society.
 9. Consumers will become angry, making Kelly's company very upset she used this marketing method.
10. Sales will suffer if consumers find out they've been tracked.
11. Marketing products using cookies is just another way of selling products.
12. If customers don't find out, no harm has been done.

VITA

Paul Stuart Lieber is currently enrolled as a doctoral student at Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication, with a primary research focus on both public relations and computer mediated communication. He is a recognized specialist in communicating advanced information technology to and through the media, having served in strategic communications positions in a variety of vertical industries across the United States. He has held agency, corporate and consulting roles associated with successfully re-launching three corporate entities, spearheading the communications, public relations, marketing and investor relations processes associated with these launches.