Ethics Optional? How Ethics are Understood, Defined, and Enacted in the Practice of Public Relations

Prudence A. Kaufman
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Ethics Optional? How Ethics are Understood, Defined, and Enacted in the Practice of Public Relations.

By

Prudence A. Kaufman

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Arts

May 2011

College: College of the Arts

Department: Communication Studies

Certified by:

Geoffrey W. Newman, Ph.D.
Dean of the College of the Arts

Date 5/6/11

Thesis Committee:

Todd Kelshaw, Ph.D.
Christine A. Lemesianou, Ph.D.
Harry W. Raines, Ph.D.

Department Chair

Harry W. Raines, Ph.D.
ABSTRACT

This present historical moment is characterized, to a large extent, by ethical transgressions that pervade many institutions and sectors of society, including politics, industry, religion, entertainment, and media, among others - all of which are related to the functions of public relations. Public relations itself, though taught in the degree programs of numerous colleges and universities, suffers from a reputation such that the words PR ethics are considered an oxymoron or simply unfeasible by many. This study addressed several key issues central to this subject: Concepts of ethics regarding public relations; the role of education in influencing concepts of ethics; the application of ethics to public relations practice, including heuristic models of decision-making; and the primary ethical challenges of public relations practice today. This qualitative study was based in the naturalistic paradigm of research, and in philosophical ethics theory. The methods employed were the interview (triangulated among focus group interviews, E-interviews, and elite personal interviews), and the Rokeach Values Survey. Participants represented three populations – PR students, PR educators, and professional PR practitioners. There were several key findings from the student data: Student participants considered spin and related alteration of truth to be inherent and inevitable in public relations practice; They anticipated that their future careers in public relations would require them to live by two distinctly separate moral identities – self-determined personal ethics, and work ethics as determined by employers, clients, or the industry; and, They were unfamiliar with ethics philosophy, moral reasoning, or heuristic models of decision-making. Findings also showed variance among educators in the ethics content and pedagogy of public relations courses, and similarity about ethical perceptions among the professional public relations
practitioners. The findings provided implications for future research which could further extend the objectives of this study.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am happy to express my appreciation to those who have been most directly influential in this work: Dr. Todd Kelshaw, my thesis sponsor, for his astute direction, editorial expertise, and clarity; Dr. Harry Haines, for his generosity of time amidst other priorities as Department Chair, and for his encouragement of my academic interest in ethics; and Dr. Christine Lemesianou, for her methodological expertise, and for the inspiration of her excellent pedagogy. I am indebted, also, to my husband Michael, whose patience with this study surpassed mine, whose comic relief was appreciated, and whose love and partnership make everything possible and worthwhile. Finally, my deepest gratitude to Sri Sathya Sai, Chancellor of Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Bangalore, whose teachings provided the inspiration and motivation for this study, “The end of education is character” (Sai, 2009, p. 171).
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Ethics</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Philosophical Approaches to Ethics</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtue Ethics</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deonotology</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teleology</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Philosophical Approaches to Ethics</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taoism</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confucianism</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Background</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying Values</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Instrument: Rokeach Values Survey</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Instrument: Focus Group Interview</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Instrument: E-interview</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Instrument: Telephone Interview</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application to the Institutional Review Board</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 4: SUMMARY OF DATA**

| Rokeach Values Surveys: PR Students | 52 |
| Terminal Values | 52 |
| Gender Differences | 53 |
| Age Differences | 53 |
| Grade Level Differences | 54 |
| Instrumental Values | 54 |
| Age Differences | 56 |
| Grade Level Differences | 56 |
| Focus Group Interviews: PR Students | 56 |
| Career Interests | 58 |
| Students’ Personal Concepts of Ethics | 58 |
| Origins of Concepts of Ethics | 59 |
| Values Related to Concepts of Ethics | 59 |
| Influence of Education on Students’ Concepts of Ethics | 59 |
| Hypothetical Philosophical Approach to an Ethical Dilemma | 64 |
| Additional Comments | 65 |
| E-Interviews: PR Educators | 67 |
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

RQ1: Defining and Valuing Ethics

Scholars

Rokeach Values Survey

Focus Group Interviews

Educators

Practitioners

RQ2: Learning About PR-Relevant Ethics

Scholars
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3: Applying Ethics to PR</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholars</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Future Research</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Protocol: Rokeach Values Survey</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Protocol: Focus Group Interview</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Protocol: E-interview</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Protocol: Telephone Interview</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: N.I.H. Certification</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Recruitment Material: Focus Group Interview</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G: Recruitment Material: E-interview</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H: Recruitment Material: Telephone Interview</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I: Consent Form: Focus Group Interview</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix J: Consent Form: E-interview</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix K: Consent Form: Telephone Interview</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix L: Data: Focus Group Interviews</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix M: Data: E-interviews</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
<td>Terminal values ranked by students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.2</td>
<td>Instrumental values ranked by students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.3</td>
<td>Students’ career interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.4</td>
<td>Students’ concepts of ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.5</td>
<td>Origins of students’ concepts of ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.6</td>
<td>Values related to students’ concepts of ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.7</td>
<td>Influence of education on students’ concepts of ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.8</td>
<td>Students’ hypothetical philosophical approached to ethical dilemma example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.9</td>
<td>Post-secondary educational institutions represented in E-interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.10</td>
<td>Courses taught by PR educator-participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

This historical moment appears to be characterized by a proliferation of greed and self-interest so deep and widespread that virtually all of our society’s institutions are tainted, if not corrupted, by it. A single daily edition of The Wall Street Journal (March 11, 2011) reported six high-profile cases: An alliance of eight New York state politicians charged with bribery; Congressional hearings of the Security and Exchange Commission’s involvement with the Bernard Madoff case; Ohio State University football coach Jim Tressel’s public disgrace for ethical transgressions of professional regulations regarding truth and disclosure; Charges of National Public Radio’s covert attempt to receive an anonymous $5 million donation (potentially tax-free) from a fictitious Muslim organization; The criminal trial of the Galleon Group for insider trading designed to boost the shares of Advanced Micro Devices, Inc.; and, A sex-bias lawsuit of potentially epic proportions again Wal-Mart. One need not be a scholar, nor be particularly well-read, to be aware of transgressions against human dignity that abound in the news every day—government response to Hurricane Katrina, the Enron scandal, Bernard Madoff’s ponzi scheme, Michael Jackson’s demise at the hands of dubious physicians, Toyota’s negligence of mechanical flaws, the International Olympic Committee’s ethical breeches, inflammatory media-driven political discourse, British Petroleum’s not my fault posture over an oil spill of devastating scope, children and teens bullying their peers to the point of suicide, ad infinitum.

Indeed, stories of greed, corruption, deceit, and irresponsibility both big and small are so frequently the fodder of overexposing media coverage that we become desensitized to their presence and effects. Although it might be faulty logic to presume there is a
widespread lack of ethics in society simply because we hear about such events in the
news, the opposite argument might corroborate that logic: if such events weren’t
sensational enough to provide good content for news, they would not receive the
coverage or extent of coverage that they do.

Gallup’s 2005 poll documented that the majority of American surveyed are
dissatisfied with the moral and ethical climate of the country (Lyons, 2005). Edelman
Public Relations’ (2011) global Trust Barometer of business, government, NGOs, and
media indicated that the USA’s composite rating dropped to the third lowest position
worldwide in 2010, and that the USA is the only country to see a drop in all four sectors.
The survey also indicated that only 27% of US participants reported trust in media to do
what is right, representing an 11% decline in trust since 2010 (edelman.com, 2011).

Although ethical transgressions against fellow humans are certainly not new
phenomena, they do, at this time in history, present a higher magnitude of scope and
effect than ever before. Facilitated by technology-enabled expediency, the consequences
of an individual or a corporation’s communication and actions can be multiplied and far-
reaching, if not global. The stakes and the consequences of our actions have never been
higher than they are in a global village of economic interdependence and environmental
fragility. It is, perhaps, an ethical fork in the road of human destiny with vastly different
futures on each side.

Rationale

Concurrently, there is an ironic scarcity of meaningful public discourse about the
role of ethics in our society. Lone voices may cry in the public wilderness about the need
for ethics from time to time, as former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi did recently during her commencement address at Cornell University:

When we see the environmental, economic, and cultural impact of the tragedy on the Gulf Coast, we know that we need a new energy policy. A new energy policy is a moral issue ... this planet is God’s creation; we have a moral obligation to care for it and pass it on to our future generations in a responsible way. (Pelosi, 2010).

Deeper conversation, however, about the qualities and attributes that would take the place of absent or questionable ethics is largely absent. We may bemoan the lack of ethics in our society, but we fail to engage in the type of deliberate introspection and intentional inquiry required to define those ethics that would ideally shape our social reality in the 21st century, and that might be necessary to ensure our survival on a delicate planet.

There is also a limited amount of existing academic research on the topic of ethics education related to public relations practice, despite the symbiotic relationship between the two, the role that public relations plays in the aforementioned examples and in other situations. The purpose of this thesis is to partially address that void by exploring ethics within the scope of public relations education and practice.

My goal is to acquire insight and understanding into the role of ethics in society. In particular, my objective is to study how ethics are learned in post-secondary education, how ethics are subsequently defined by professional public relations practitioners, and how ethics are then professionally enacted within the realm of public relations practice. By focusing attention on the ethics of public relations as a specific context within the communication discipline, and by exploring it from the perspectives of students,
instructors, and professional practitioners, I sought to gain insight into this multidimensional topic. My hope is that the information gained in this study will be of value to the academic community and to public relations practice, and that it will illuminate what their respective roles in constructing the paradigm of public relations practice and mutually constitutive relationship.

Qualifications

The qualifications that I brought to this research included my professional experience working in public relations, advertising, and media; my recent roles at Montclair State University as student and instructor; and my desire to pursue an academic study that is both personally meaningful as well as potentially contributive to the academic and professional understanding of public relations ethics.

Summary of Study

Three fundamental questions frame this research. How do scholars and practitioners define and value ethics? (RQ1). How do public relations professionals define ethics for themselves, personally and professionally? How was that definition shaped? What constitutes and defines the ethical credo that a public relations degree recipient carries forward into the practice of public relations?

How do scholars and practitioners learn about public relations-relevant ethics? (RQ1). Does the content and pedagogy of public relations courses shape students’ moral development relative to their intended profession? As intellect, personality, and character develop throughout a person’s growth years, so does the capacity for moral reasoning. Such reasoning may be shaped formally or informally by cultural influences related to family, education, religious training, etc. By the traditional age of entry into college,
most students have developed a sense of self-identity and worldview that includes their moral or ethical orientation. Most have not yet, however, fully formed or solidified their sense of moral self relative to their future professions or roles in society. The social and academic experience of college informs and influences that further development (Christians & Lambeth, 1996). I explored how the academic experience of college influences the development of moral reasoning in public relations students.

*How do scholars and practitioners apply public relations-relevant ethics? (RQ3).*

On what basis do public relations professionals make decisions - personal credo, professional code of ethics, legality, or other? What types of situations pose ethical dilemmas to public relations practitioners? What methods – heuristic or otherwise – are used to reach ethical determinations?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The questions I sought to answer in this study presupposed fundamental knowledge in two distinct subject areas: ethics and public relations. I first addressed the realm of ethics in order to provide definition, historical background and relevance to my subsequent exploration of public relations practice.

Defining Ethics

“Ethics deals with things to be sought and things to be avoided, with ways of life and with the telos (“telos” [from the Greek] is the chief good, the aim, or the end of life)” (Bok, 1999, p. xxxi). Ethics is an area of study that concerns itself with how people should ideally live and interact with each other, individually and collectively. Webster defined the word *ethic* as “the discipline dealing with what is good and bad, and with moral duty and obligation” (Merriam, 2007, p. 429). This definition also includes the concepts of moral principles and values, and a corresponding theory or system of organization. In this brief exposition of ethics, Webster captured its multiple nuances and the different ways that ethics is understood. Further, Webster defined the word *moral* with more than twice the verbiage used to define *ethic*, and alludes to ethics as a philosophy that teaches a concept of right behavior. In contrast to the definition of ethic, the definition of moral emphasizes the element of the specific rightness or wrongness of an act that can be ascertained by conscience or judgment. Ancillary concepts included in the definition of moral are virtuous, righteous, and character. Webster also provided a succinct definition of the term *moral philosophy* in one word: “ethics” (Merriam, 2007). Beck (1963) defined ethics as “a practical philosophy which deals with the intrinsic goodness found in some but not in all actions, dispositions, and maxims” (p. xiii).
This brief passage on the definition of ethics reflects its inherent complexity and some of the many subtleties of understanding that multiple perspectives bring to bear upon the subject. For the purpose of this study, I refer to ethics as a system of thought and action about what is good and bad in human life, at both the physical level—at which we apply and experience values—and at the conceptual, metaphysical level. Although ethics can be addressed within psychological, anthropological, sociological, or scientific contexts, for the purpose of this study I focused on the philosophical approach to ethics. Many of the issues that pertain to human existence—and specifically to public relations practice—are conceptual or philosophical in nature, dealing with our essential humanness, quality of life experience, or purpose (Baggini & Fosl, 2007).

**Western philosophical approaches to ethics.**

The field of ethics philosophy spans centuries of human history, and is vast, complex, and diverse. Polk (1999) identified up to twenty different schools of philosophical thought and numerous normative moral theories. Normative theories are systems of thought that promote an ideal of how humans should act (Griffin, 2006). In ethics philosophy, normative theorists also seek to define the notion of the good—for individuals and for society collectively. Many philosophers throughout Western history have conceptualized ethics from a variety of normative perspectives that are generally organized into different methods of classification: nonconsequentialist and consequentialist ethics philosophies; virtue, deontological, and teleological ethics philosophies; or teleological and deontological (Bowen, 2000; Broadie, 2002). Although the definitions of these terms are open to philosophical debate, nonconsequentialist ethics is broadly understood to encompass systems of thought based on the premise that
concepts of morality, virtue, character, or the good determine behavior. Within this realm, some ethics are further sub-classified as deontological, a term derived from the Greek word *deon*, meaning duty or obligation. These focus on the concept of that which is *right* rather than on that which is *good* (Neher & Sandin, 2007). In contrast, consequentialist ethics philosophies concern themselves with results, outcomes, and consequences as determinants of what is to be considered the moral action that one ought to perform (Bowen, 2000). Within this realm, systems of thought are regarded as teleological, a term derived from the Greek word *telos* meaning the aim or end.

**Virtue ethics.**

Virtue ethics is considered the oldest system of thought in Western ethics, dating to the ancient Greek philosophical traditions of Plato and Aristotle (Baggini & Fosl, 2007). Virtue ethics focuses on a way of being as opposed to doing, and considers the character of an individual as the determinant of morality—i.e., the notion that if one’s character comprises virtuous dispositions, morality in action will naturally ensue and reflect the *good*, that which is intrinsically moral and of enduring value. Virtues, in this context, were a reflection of the values of Greek society (Himmelfarb, 1994). Aristotle purported that the development of good character traits such as trustworthiness and kindness could nullify vices such as greed or avarice, and that the possession of a virtuous character deemed a person to be good (Hursthouse, 2007). According to Aristotle (Himmelfarb, 1994), character development through the cultivation of cardinal virtues (wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage) advances the idealized Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, a term that has been translated to mean happiness, well-being, flourishing, or good-spiritedness (Baggini & Fosl, 2007). According to Aristotle, eudaimonia is the
essence of a well-lived human life and is the inherent essential nature of human beings. Eudaimonia can be achieved through character development and the cultivation of the cardinal virtues under the broad categorical headings of wisdom and prudence (virtues of the intellect), courage (virtue of the spirit), temperance (virtue of emotion), and justice (virtue of harmonizing the previous virtues, and virtue of civil order) (Himmelfarb, 1994; Darwall, 2002). Associated with these are secondary virtues, including “magnanimity, munificence, liberality, and gentleness” (Himmelfarb, 1994). Thus, virtues are the absolute and immutable standard of moral behavior, identified by Aristotle as the golden mean, the point of ideal balance between the extremes of excessive virtue or excessive vice.

Virtue ethics reached its zenith of prominence during the middle ages through the influence of Christian thinkers, i.e., Augustine and Aquinas, who displaced the classical virtues of Aristotle by assigning centrality to the Christian virtues of faith, hope, charity, and the golden rule: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12, New American Bible, 1991). Secular philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries further subverted both the classical and Christian virtues, although all upheld the importance of virtues for the good life of individuals and the welfare of society, emphasizing “the intimate relation between the character of the people and the health of the polity” (Himmelfarb, 1994).

Deontology.

Deontological derives from the Greek word deon and connotes the idea of obligatory duty (Neher & Sandin, 2007). In contrast to the notion of virtue ethics, the focus of deontological ethics is on the individual and collective right rather than on the
individual or collective good. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant was “the primary proponent in history of what is called deontological ethics” (DeGeorge, 1986). Kant revolutionized Western thinking with a new interpretation of morality and is considered to be the most influential philosopher of the modern period (which spans the 1500s through the 1700s) (Guyer, 1992; Polk, 1999). Kant advanced deontology through several concepts: moral worth, the law of autonomy, duty, good will, and the notion of imperatives (Bowen, 2000).

“The moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it,” but rather is intrinsic to the act as either right or wrong (Kant, 1785, in Paton, 1948). The doer’s intention in performing an act determines the rightness or wrongness of the act. Therefore, according to Kant, the highest value is an individual’s good will. Sullivan (1994) notes that Kant’s law of autonomy describes a moral agent as being someone with the capacity to act in an independent and self-directed way, based on his or her own rationale. This law of autonomy, described by Kant as a moral absolute, means that one’s freedom and choice to act morally reflect one’s will, in accordance with the reason that originates in universal law (Bowen, 2000). Duty, stemming from the principles and maxims that define moral law, can be ascertained through autonomous reason. Also intrinsic to Kantian ethics is the premise of a categorical imperative, a universally applied maxim: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant, 1785). Thus, lying, if it is wrong, is wrong categorically—i.e., universally in all places, at all times, and under all circumstances. In Kantian deontology, there is a categorical imperative to do that which is dictated to be
morally right by either divine command or reason inherent to human nature, both of which are unalterable due to the natural laws of reason and logic (Neher & Sandin, 2007).

**Teleology.**

Derived from the Greek word *telos*, denoting the end or purpose, teleological systems of ethics thought concern themselves necessarily with outcomes or consequences as the determinants of what constitutes moral behavior, distinct from virtue ethics’ consideration of the character of the doer, or deontological ethics’ concern for the fulfillment of duty (newworldencyclopedia.org, 2010). As such, teleology can be viewed as output-based theory, in contrast to deontology, which is input-based theory (Neher & Sandin, 2007). Teleological, or consequentialist, ethics philosophies seek to determine if the end justifies the means (Neher & Sandin, 2007). “Consequentialist theories vary according to how one understands what makes consequences good or bad” (Baggini & Fosl, 2007, p.57). Further, actions can potentially have multiple consequences, some of which are not intended (Baggini & Fosl, 2007). Actual consequences sometimes don’t match expected consequences; consequences can be indirect or secondary, immediate or deferred, and some consequences can be unknowable (Baggini & Fosl, 2007). These factors contribute to the complexity and limitations of teleological ethics philosophy.

One system of thought that is prominent within the teleological framework is utilitarianism. Initially attributed to English social reformer Jeremy Bentham, the original version of utilitarian theory sought to quantify the benefits versus the costs of actions in assessing their moral rightness, with the greatest benefit being identified as happiness (MacIntyre, 1998). Bentham equated his concept of utility with happiness, asserting the moral objective of maximizing happiness in the world. Neher & Sandin
describe that Bentham devised a complicated and inflexible scientific method based on “duration, intensity, certainty, remoteness or nearness in time and place” and other factors to calculate the consequent utility, or level of pleasure or happiness, of an action to the greatest amount of people.

Subsequently, in the early 1800s John Stuart Mill modified Bentham’s theory in two significant aspects: Mill introduced a more flexible qualitative appraisal of pleasure or happiness into the theory; and he identified a hierarchy of distinct types of pleasure or happiness, ranking the faculties of the mind and spirit as higher pleasures compared with the pleasures associated with the purely physical (Neher & Sandin, 2007). Further permutations of utilitarian theory throughout history include: hedonic utilitarianism, which considers actions right to the extent that they promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people and wrong to the extent that they diminish happiness; welfare utilitarianism, which considers actions right to the extent that they promote the welfare of the largest number of people and conversely wrong to the extent that they diminish that welfare or well-being; and preference utilitarianism, which holds that actions are right to the extent that they permit the greatest number of people to live as they please even if doing so does not result in happiness, and wrong to the extent that that freedom of preference is inhibited (Baggini & Fosl, 2007, p. 57).

**Eastern philosophical approaches to ethics.**

Although Western philosophy traditions have provided the basis for much of our legal system and social structure, recent technology advances have brought us into contact with the cultures and philosophies of Eastern countries. Although Eastern concepts of ethics predate the development of the Greek philosophy school of thought,
Aristotle’s theories are thought to have been influenced in some measure by the concepts of the East that preceded him by several thousand years, - in particular, Taoism and Confucianism from China, and Hinduism and Buddhism from India (Baggini & Fosl, 2007). These Eastern traditions center upon the concepts of balance in duality, the order of the cosmos, and the human being’s place within that order (Fisher, 2005).

**Taoism.**

The ancient Chinese tradition of Taoism “is actually a label invented by scholars and awkwardly stretched to cover a philosophical or “literati” tradition, a multitude of longevity techniques, and an assortment of religious sects whose relationship to the literati tradition is complex, but which probably developed at least in part from the early philosophical texts and practices” (Fisher, 2005, p. 180). Taoism *(tao is translated to mean “the way”)* holds that the universe arises from an interplay of energies characterized as yin and yang, which represent the inherent duality of existence that manifests in every person, object, and action (Fisher, 2005). Although full of paradoxes both practical and mystical, Taoism maintains that the middle way — that of balance or harmony between the opposites — is the way to an ideal life, and that human destiny is determined by virtuous deeds. The central principle of *wu-wei* (translated to mean not-doing, or non-force) dictates that no action be taken that is contrary to the natural flow of the universe (Wong, 1997). “For Chinese, the transcendental world, the world of the spirit, interpenetrates with the everyday world though it is not considered identical to it. If we use the Tao to represent the transcendental world and the Confucian ideal of human relationships to represent the human world, we can see how they interface. The Tao creates the character of these human relations . . . mundane human relationships are,
from the very beginning, endowed with a transcendental nature” (Yingshi, in Fisher, 2005, p. 192).

The primary sage of Taoism, Laozi, is credited with authoring the work *Daodejing* (“The Way and Virtue,” or “Tao Te Ching”), which purports that any person who develops extreme qualities that disturb “the natural harmony of the world will reap corresponding consequences, which will inevitably right the balance of nature” (Fieser & Powers, 1998, p. 205). Contemporary scholars commonly distinguish two main streams of Daoist thought: the system of philosophers of the fourth and third centuries B.C.E. is termed “philosophical Daoism,” and the later tradition that was concerned with techniques leading to immortality is termed “religious Daoism” (Fieser & Powers, 1998).

**Confucianism.**

Confucianism, a different strand of Chinese thought, developed around the sixth century B.C.E. as a school of thought that emphasized the cultivation of moral virtues as well as the interaction between human rulers and the mandates of the heavenly realm (Fisher, 2005). Based on the philosophical teachings of the political leader Kong fuzi, Confucianism emphasizes the ways of developing and maintaining a just and orderly society. During a period of political turmoil, Confucius stressed a return to ancient cultural practices and rituals, and to standards of virtue as a means to quell the chaos of his time. Among the virtues espoused is *jen*, a term whose translation includes the concepts of innate goodness, perfect virtue, humaneness and benevolence (Fisher, 2005, p. 194). In *The Analects*, Confucius described the rare person utterly devoted to the virtue of *jen* as “one who is not motivated by personal profit but by what is moral, is concerned with self-improvement rather than public recognition, is ever mindful of parents, speaks
cautiously but acts quickly, and regards human nature as basically good” (Fisher, 2005, p. 194). The virtue-based philosophy of Confucius stresses the idea that relationship between self and other is paramount, and codifies the details of how specific relationships should be enacted. For instance, e.g., kindness is the preeminent virtue for fathers to exemplify, filial piety for sons, gentility for older brothers, righteous behavior for husbands, obedience for wives, humane consideration for older friends, deference for younger friends, benevolence for rulers, and loyalty for subjects (Fisher, 2005).

Hinduism.

The world’s oldest philosophical system is considered to be Hinduism, whose origin on the Indian sub-continent among the people of the Indus valley is thought to date to 8000 B.C.E., and whose recorded concepts are generally believed to date to 1500 B.C.B. (Fisher, 2005). It is alternately referred to in contemporary times as Sanatana Dharma (Sanatana is translated to mean eternal, and, in this use, dharma is translated to mean religion.) (Fisher, 2005). It is important to note, however, that dharma, a concept central to Hinduism, includes duty, righteousness, natural law, social welfare, and ethics (Fisher, 2005). Dharma, then, is a “holistic approach to social coherence and the good of all, corresponding to order in the cosmos” that is believed to be ageless and eternal (Fisher, 2005, p. 69). Dharma, then, refers to the overarching concept of right-action, which is a reflection of natural law. “One’s duty in life is one’s dharma” (Hawley, 2001). Central also is the concept of reincarnation, based on the belief that a human being is an eternal soul whose life exists on a continuum, occupying different physical bodies throughout numerous lifetimes until such time as spiritual enlightenment occurs, enabling one to exit the cycle of birth-death-rebirth and merge with Brahman, the absolute reality.
Concomitant with the belief in reincarnation is the concept of *karma*, an inviolable law of nature, meaning both action and the consequences of action (Hawley, 2001). As espoused in *The Bhagavad Gita*, a text believed to be divinely authored and one of the most valuable of Hindu texts, *karma* is constantly created by every thought, word, and deed. Hinduism seeks to explain suffering in life through *karma*, and to point to the creation of an orderly life through the ethics of dharma. As such, Hinduism is a strong moral philosophy stressing duty and virtue, within a framework of individual freedom and self-determination.

Based on the life and teachings of 5th century B.C.E. Gautama Buddha, a historical figure from India's Nepal region who sought to understand the true nature of suffering in life, Buddhism also incorporates the pre-existing Hindu concepts of *dharma* and *karma*. Although more religious than philosophical in nature, Buddhism espouses precepts of living designed to liberate human beings from the experience of suffering and lead them to *nirvana*, the final state of liberation from the wheel of birth-death-rebirth. This wheel is kept in perpetual motion by the evils of greed, hate, and delusion. The eightfold path of liberation emphasizes the concept of that which is right or correct: right understanding, right motives, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation (Fisher, 2005). In particular, the principle of right action exhorts adherents to Buddhist thought to avoid destroying life, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxicants. According to Buddha, "evil deeds are those done from motives of partiality, enmity, stupidity, and fear" (Saddhatissa, 1971).
Values.

In more recent history, the concept of values in western society has become associated with ethics. Values, both individual and societal, give rise to ethical interpretation.

Historical background.

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is considered to be the first to degrade virtues into values, a term connoting the moral beliefs and attitudes of a society (Himmelfarb, 1994). Contrasted with the classical and Christian-Judaic concepts of virtue, Nietzsche’s nihilistic stance asserted the destruction of an absolute morality that held fixed assumptions about good and evil, right and wrong, and truth. Values, rather than virtues, then reflected the view that moral ideas are relative and subjective, mere customs and conventions, purely instrumental and utilitarian, and are specific to individuals, classes, races, sexes, and societies (Himmelfarb, 1994). The conceptual displacement of virtues by values became the predominant school of thought from the time of the 1800s. It remains so today, with a generalized understanding that values do not have to be virtues, and can, in fact, be “beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings, habits, conventions, preferences, prejudices” or idiosyncrasies that individuals or groups happen to value at any time (Himmelfarb, 1994). Thus, our present values-based ethics espouses “moral equality and neutrality” and is “impartial and nonjudgmental” (Himmelfarb, 1994). Although more egalitarian than virtue ethics in allowing for individual self-determination in creating a subjective reality, value ethics contributes to the inherent difficulty of achieving and sustaining a consensus of moral standards within or among a society or societies, due to its unrestricted honoring of the diversity of ethical perspectives. Mackie (1977) asserted
the subjectivity of values and the idea that there can be no objective values as they are not part of the fabric of the world. Bok (1995) identifies a category of basic values that appear to be common to all societies, including those of duty, reciprocal care, admonitions against deceit and harm, and codes of justice.

**Identifying values.**

Social psychologist Milton Rokeach (1973) asserted that values are not fixed, and that they may fluctuate over time in response to situations, circumstances, and behavior. Values are inherent to a set of inner guiding principles that are often contradictory. Rokeach (1973) identified two categories of values: *terminal* values, referring to end states of existence or ultimate ideals of life — e.g., freedom, salvation, and a comfortable life — and *instrumental* values, referring to desirable modes of behavior that promote the attainment of terminal values — e.g., politeness, sympathy, and ambition. Rokeach further devised a method of operationalizing the concepts of terminal and instrumental values, the Rokeach Values Survey, which has been used to investigate political ideology, assess personality, process and outcomes of psychology, and moral reasoning (Debats & Bartelds). Feather (1991) distinguished further categories within the terminal category (mature accomplishment, security/salvation, positive affiliation, comfort/stimulation, and universal pro-social), and within the instrumental category (self-directed competence, restrictive conformity, and pro-social concern). Nagel (1980) distinguished agent-relative and agent-neutral values. According to Nagel (1980), hypothetical agent-neutral values are things that are good or bad in themselves, with intrinsic reason for anyone to want or not want them, and are, therefore, independent of the agent/doer. Agent-relative values are defined as having specific benefits relevant to the agent/doer or those on
whose behalf s/he acts (Nagel, 1980). Schwartz (1992) posited that each person possesses a values complex, which is an organized and hierarchical set of what s/he holds important and the relationship, compatibility, or conflict that exists among such values.

**Truth.**

Webster stated that honesty implies “a refusal to lie, steal, or deceive in any way” as well as “fairness and straightforwardness of conduct” (Merriam, 2007). Honesty, then, implies a relationship that one takes to truth, in both concept and in action. Truth is defined as “the state of being the case . . . the body of true statements and proposition . . . and a transcendent fundamental or spiritual reality” (Merriam, 2007). Honesty, in one form or another, is a form of both virtue and value that is common to numerous philosophies of ethics. Webster further defined truthful as “telling or disposed to tell the truth” and honest as “truthful” (Merriam, 2007). Aristotle described truthfulness as a virtue of character and as the mean between the excess of boastfulness and pride and the deficiency of self-deprecation.

Deontological ethics values truth, as evidenced by Kant’s assertion that truthfulness is not only a moral imperative but a categorical one and, therefore, an absolutely universal duty (e.g., Kant’s position that it would be a crime to lie to a murderer who is inquiring about the whereabouts of his victim) (Beck, 1949). French philosopher Constant (1797), while recognizing that telling the truth is a duty, refutes Kant’s position on the universality of truthfulness by claiming that it is a duty only insofar as the recipient of truthfulness has a moral right to the truth. “The concept of duty is inseparable from the concept of right. A duty is that which in one being corresponds to
the rights of another ... But no one has a right to a truth that injures others" (Constant, in Beck, 1949).

From a teleological perspective, truth is not upheld as a moral virtue or obligation. Rather, truth is considered as simply an instrumental value or utility that might or might not facilitate certain consequences, e.g., the most good for the greatest amount of people, or any other outcomes based on the agent’s self-oriented or other-oriented motivations (Rachels, 2007). According to the utilitarian doctrine, only happiness is desirable as an end in itself, while all other things are means to that end” (Mill, 1861).

Along with the philosophical ethics traditions based largely in reason, Christian theology has contributed concepts of truth that have become deeply ingrained in Western culture (Sullivan, 2001). Dating to both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible are the ideas that truth is an attribute associated with nature of the supreme deity and that truthfulness is a divine command inherent in our relationship with that deity as our creator (Sullivan, 2001). When God spoke to Moses in the Old Testament’s account, the divine revelation was explicit: “You shall not lie or speak falsely to one another ... You shall not defraud .... You shall not act dishonestly ... You shall not go about spreading slander” (Leviticus 19: 11-17, New American Bible, 1992). Solomon later elucidated seven vices that God hates, among them “a lying tongue” and “the false witness who utters lies” (Proverbs 6: 16-10, New American Bible, 1992). After the life of Jesus, the synoptic gospels under the authorship of John present the concept of the devil (Satan or Lucifer) as a liar, the father of lies, the archenemy of God. (New American Bible 1992).

Non-Western concepts of truth differ from Western philosophical and theological concepts. Taoism teaches that truth is the continually flowing natural order of
the universe (Wong, 1997). When we live in concert with the natural law of balance and harmony, we access the inherent inner truth of our nature. Thus, truth is considered not within the context of a dichotomy of right and wrong but within the concept of the wholeness, harmony, and balance of life (Wong, 1997). The teachings of Confucius extol virtue, ethics, devotion of the soul, and truthfulness. In particular, Confucius states both a consequentialist perspective (e.g., that if one is sincere, one will gain the trust of people) and a virtue perspective (e.g., that to be strictly sincere is a characteristic of superior character) (Wong, 1997). Hinduism holds truth in both absolute and particular contexts. In the absolute, truth (sathya, from the Sanskrit) signifies the transcendent that is beyond the reach of time and space, is unchangeable, and is the supreme consciousness and universal love (Gita, Balaji, and Mrunalini, 2000). In the particular, the expression of truthfulness takes on a teleological aspect in light of the concepts of dharma (right action) and karma (natural consequences). Thus, while it might be philosophically dharmic (right) to be honest, that moral imperative is subsumed in the doctrine of karma, which provides the perfectly matched reaction to every action, good or bad (Hawley, 2001). Buddha’s teaching of the Four Noble Truths represent his search for the ultimate truth about life and the nature of suffering. According to Buddha, one who deludes himself regarding any of these universal truth experiences suffering. Any suffering in life, then, is the self-imposed natural consequence of failing to recognize the absolute truth of these principles.

Deception.

According to Merriam-Webster (2007), deception is an act that deceives, tricks, or causes one to believe an untruth. Although philosophical and theological systems of
thought have infused Western culture with ideals of ethical behavior (such as truth-telling), deceit continues to feature prominently in the landscape of human interaction. Deception, in a myriad of forms including lying, concealment, cheating, and fraud, is ubiquitous in human relationships.

Smith (2004) asserted that deceit is “the Cinderella of human nature; essential to our human nature but disowned by its perpetrators at every turn. It is normal, natural, and pervasive” and not necessarily a moral failure or pathological condition (p. 2). Smith notes that evolutionary biology has discovered numerous forms of deception throughout the natural kingdom. Simple, subtle, and complex survival strategies exist among organisms to outsmart invaders. Of human beings, Smith (2004) credits the appearance of *Homo Sapiens* and their development of speech with the beginnings of self-deception and, subsequently, interpersonal deception. According to Smith (2004), the capacity for self-deception—the ability to obscure the truth about ourselves from our own awareness—is a necessary prerequisite to one’s ability to deceive others. Contrary to common belief that such internal compartmentalizing might represent mental or emotional imbalance, Smith (2004) asserts that self-deception is important for psychological equilibrium, and that the development of certain mental capacities such as deceit were part of the evolutionary process of natural selection that allowed for the proliferation of our genes and the rise of human population. Smith (2004) points out that evolutionary biology offers an understanding of the physiological defense mechanisms of both simple and complex organisms (from virus to primate) that protect against harm or invasion of others that would threaten the organisms’ survival. Campbell (2001) notes, “The phrase ‘Machiavellian intelligence’ has been used in science to describe the
deceptive tactics of animals in the wild and in captivity,” derived from the philosophy of Niccolo Machiavelli and implying the ability to be cunningly and opportunistically cutthroat to advance their own interests.

Sullivan (2001) addressed deception in the form of lying, and, in particular, the motivation to lie. Merriam-Webster (2007) defined lying as the deliberate telling of an untruth with the intention to deceive. Smith (2004) identified two categories of lies reflecting different, but related, motivational intentions: first, lies intended “to keep the truth from being known,” and second, lies intended “to make someone believe a falsehood when the belief benefits the liar” (p. 57). In both cases, underlying the intention to lie is either a fear or a desire: the fear of losing something such as money, love, freedom, reputation, a job, comfort, or privacy; or the desire to acquire something such as money, love, freedom, control, or material goods.

Benevolent or malevolent intentions aside, Campbell (2001) explained that lying is stressful to humans regardless of motives. Medical scientist Lewis Thomas (1983) stated that the polygraph test shows that “a human being cannot tell a lie, even a small one, without setting off a kind of smoke alarm somewhere in a dark lobule of the brain, resulting in the sudden discharge of nerve impulses, or the sudden outpouring of neurohormones, or both,” (p. 127). According to Campbell (2001) this raises a question of “whether truth is a basic instinct among living things” (p. 23), and if we are, paradoxically, hardwired for both truth telling and deceit.

Bok (1999) differentiated the concept of what constitutes a lie: “For there to be a lie, the person must not only be making a statement intended to deceive listeners but must also believe that the statement is itself false” (p. xxv). Bok acknowledges that although
motives in lying may be benevolent in nature, e.g., on behalf of another’s welfare, benevolent motives often mix with less altruistic ones in a mix that can become an ethical grey area that can challenge the interpretation of both motives and outcomes. Bok (1999) further addresses the coercive effect of lying upon individuals and society. The obfuscation of fact that occurs in lying makes us vulnerable to coercion. The act of lying affects the balance of power in a relationship, adding power to the liar and diminishing power in the deceived, altering his/her ability and freedom to choose. Thus, according to Bok (1999), a society “whose members were unable to distinguish truthful messages from deceptive ones” would be vulnerable to collapse (p. 19).

Defining Public Relations

Initially, in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what is now termed public relations was the province of press agents, publicists and promoters who worked – legitimately or not – to position their clients or employers in the most favorable light (Kaufman, 2010). Goldman (1948, in Grunig 1992) described these distinct periods respectively and characteristically as “public be fooled” and “public be informed” (p. 286).

Models of public relations.

Since then, this field of endeavor has struggled to define itself more formally as a profession. Grunig and Hunt (1984, p.6) defined public relations as the “management of communication between an organization and its publics,” both internal and external. The management of communication in this sense implies the strategy, execution, and evaluation of communication behaviors relative to specific objectives.
Grunig (1992) defined the term *model* as “a set of values and a pattern of behavior that characterize the approach taken... by public relations practitioners... to specific public relations programs or campaigns” (p. 286). *Model*, then, refers to the patterns of behavior that characterize public relations practices. Grunig & Hunt (1984) described four models of public relations: the press agentry/publicity model, the public information model, the two-way assymetrical model, and the two-way symmetrical model. The press agentry/publicity model refers to the earliest recognized period of public relations-like activity in the mid-nineteenth century, as characterized by practitioner P.T. Barnum’s circus promotions (Grunig, 1992). Journalist Ivy Lee is credited with instigating the transition to the public information model by writing in an informational way about business and banking practices to help those businesses explain and position themselves favorably. Grunig (1992) acknowledged that Edward L. Bernays’ behavioral and psychological theories of persuasion, propaganda, and manipulation of consent were instrumental in shifting public relations further into a two-way assymetrical model, characterized by the quality of audience manipulation. Grunig & Hunt (1984) identified the further evolution of public relations into a two-way symmetrical model, characterized by truth-telling, the mutual interpretation of client and publics, and the management of multiple viewpoints. Grunig (1984) identified direction and purpose as the determining variables in the models. Direction implies whether communication is one-way, as in the dissemination of information, or two-way, as in the exchange of information; purpose implies whether communication is imbalanced, in the case of assymetrical communication that seeks to change only the audience, or balanced, in the case of symmetrical communication that seeks to equalize the relationship between an
organization and its publics. According to Grunig (1984), the press agentry/publicity model is one-way asymmetrical, and the public information model is one-way symmetrical. Grunig (1992) posits the two-way symmetrical model as a normative model of how public relations should ideally be practiced in order to be both effective and ethical.

An evolution of ethical thought regarding public relations can be traced through the developmental pattern that these four models represent. The earliest model, press agentry/publicity, depicted an amoral perspective on the role of public relations practice (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This early stage in the emergence of public relations as a practice focused on communication as a manipulative persuasive tactic for the sole purpose of producing desired results and objectives, without ethical consideration for the audience. The press agentry/publicity model was devoid of virtue, duty, or consequentialist consideration. The public information model showed the emergence of consideration for the audience’s perspective in designing persuasive messages, and represented a shift toward consequentialist thought. That perspective, however, was still skewed toward manipulative accomplishment of self-interest rather than toward a greater common good. Bernays’ later theories of persuasion, propaganda, and manipulation of consent, as noted by Grunig (1992), further extended consequentialist thinking into a two-way asymmetrical model of public relations that included audience feedback and research in the process of crafting persuasive messages. Although communication began to flow between PR practitioners and audiences, it was only reciprocal to the extent that it facilitated greater manipulation of persuasive messages, and therefore did not depict an ethical advancement in PR theory. Grunig (1992) introduced a normative two-way
symmetrical model of public relations that sought to establish communication reciprocity between PR practitioners and audiences (including the notion of publics and stakeholders) with the goal of equalizing the power differential in those relationships. Grunig (1992) posited his model of two-way symmetrical communication as a means to both excellence and ethics in public relations, incorporating concepts of virtue (principles), duty (obligation), and consequence (outcomes). Grunig’s (1992) theory represents an ethical paradigm shift in the development of public relations that the industry needs to adapt in order to shed its dubious reputation based on previous models, and to advance its status as a profession.

Theories of public relations.

In addition to philosophical ethics as the theoretical basis for this study, the examined literature revealed a number of other theoretical frameworks, several of which are included here. Heath (in Hansen-Horn & Neff, 2008) asserted a theory of public relations as power resource management. According to Heath (2008), companies, nonprofits, and government agencies seek to gain and exert power to accomplish their missions, and to use power to control their destinies (p. 2). Heath (in Hansen-Horn & Neff, 2008) stated that ethics is important in this theory because “power is contestable and the ethics of how power should be exerted is in constant flux” (p. 3). Kreps (in Hansen-Horn & Neff, 2008) interpreted a theory of public relations as a process of organizational sense-making. Utilizing a Weickian approach, Kreps (in Hansen-Horn & Neff, 2008) noted that public relations professionals gather information from a variety of sources in order to identify issues and generate appropriate responses. Central to Kreps’ theory is reducing equivocality (i.e. “ambiguity, complexity, and obscurity”) in the sense-
making process of public relations (Kreps, in Hansen-Horn & Neff, 2008, p. 23). Not
dissimilarly, Pearce (2007) describes a theory of speech acts as the process of creating
mutual meaning through communication. According to Pearce, speech acts contain the
elements of self, relationship, episode and culture, with the net result that meaning is
created and coordinated between the actors in speech acts, thus constructing social
reality. Public relations then, as a system of communication management between an
organization and its publics, reflects this function of meaning-making through speech
acts. Heath (2001) described a rhetorical view of public relations that highlights the
strategic options of language and communication in collaborative meaning making.
According to Heath (2001) rhetorical theory is useful in situations where informational
and persuasive messages are employed to motivate people toward a preferred choice.

**Public Relations Education**

The field of public relations has grown rapidly over the past twenty-five years.
Post-secondary education now serves a different role in preparing students for the field
than it did in the past – largely due to increased specialization and a division of labor in a
more broadly defined field that is influenced by technology innovations, the proliferation
of new media and re-conceptualization of former media constructs, and globalization
(DiStaso, Stacks, and Botan, 1999). Miller and Kernisky (1999) identified three models
of undergraduate public relations programs: the macro-approach of a programmatic
model, wherein outcomes, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are integrated across
cognitive, behavioral, and professional domains, and in which ethical theory is designated
as a cognitive outcome; the two model micro-approach, which either builds upon the
macro-approach by adding five core courses oriented around practice, theory, research,
and values and culture, or an alternative version which offers a single introductory course covering principles, practice, research, and ethics.

Coombs and Rybacki (1999) noted that pedagogy is weak within public relations education, as "educators have focused most of their attention on outcomes (skills and knowledge students need for the practice) and curriculum (packaging of those desired outcomes into courses)" (p. 56). These weaknesses reflect a restriction or underutilization of new media and technology in the classroom, and, in particular the Internet (Coombs and Rybacki, 1999). One area of pedagogical strength identified is the tradition of interactive learning, whereby students engage and participate collaboratively with each other and with their instructors (Coombs and Rybacki, 1999).

Van Leuven (1999) noted that "the number of students majoring in public relations has grown much faster over the past decade than has the number of full-time faculty trained in the study and practice of public relations" (p. 77). In particular, Van Leuven observed the necessity for newly defined core competencies for students: ethics in public relations, visual and interactive communication, public relations management, and public relations campaigns (1999). Van Leuven (1999) elaborated that ethical competency outcomes include the ability to understand and navigate within frameworks of ethical reasoning on professional issues.

Culbertson and Jeffers (1992) asserted that public relations instruction should also include contextual analysis. According to Culbertson and Jeffers (1992), an essential competency is sensitivity to the social, political, and economic contexts within which entities or organizations operate and within which public relations communication takes place. The social context includes the cultural beliefs of a community or organization, the
political context includes the relationships among publics and the role of power in those relationships (not exclusive to government), and the economic context includes the resources and costs for client organizations and publics (Culbertson and Jeffers, 1992).

According to Toth (1999), a National Communication Association (NCA) taskforce on public relations curricula recommended that educations give more attention to the study of ethics in public relations, as well as to multiculturalism, technology, and global issues. The NCA taskforce further provided educational models of public relations based curriculum, and advocated that ethics be taught in individual courses as well as across the curriculum. The taskforce advocated that ethics and professional values be taught as part of the knowledge and theory base (Toth, 1999).

DiStaso, Stacks, and Botan (2009) described a further study of public relations education conducted by the NCA in 2006. The survey of 312 public relations educators and executives revealed that public relations educational programs “will feel some pressure to increase offerings in at least three critical areas: research, ethics, and new information technology. All three will be of increasing importance, particularly ethics training as public relations practitioners and managers continue to fill more and more important strategic roles” (Di Staso, et.al., 2009, p. 266). The implications for this research indicate that ethics is one of the most critical curriculum areas in public relations education, including issues of public relations law, social responsibility, credibility and transparency (Di Staso, et.al., 2009).

**Ethics instruction within public relations education.**

Piaget’s (1965) educational theory stated “that individuals progress (or not) along a moral reasoning continuum as they grow and mature” (Cabot, 2005). According to
Piaget (1965), there are three stages of moral development: Preconventional or self-focused, during which punishment and obedience, and the choice of actions that meet the individual's own narcissistic needs are the primary motivations; Conventional, during which individuals acquire an interpersonal orientation within which concepts of right and wrong are tied to formal rules and structures; and Postconventional, when individuals move into a social contract orientation wherein moral right is based on social principles, and when universally ethical principles may be adopted. "Those in the beginning stages demonstrate relatively unsophisticated moral reasoning, while those in the latter stages show complex moral reasoning. Along this progression ... individuals become less self-focused and more cognizant of universal principles of morality" (Cabot, 2005). Rest (1979) posited that the experience of a traditional college education during the ages of eighteen to twenty-three is most influential in the development of moral reasoning, largely due to the intellectual stimulation, and the diversity and richness of life and social experience that it affords the student.

Christians & Lambeth (1996) note, "as late as the turn of the 20th century, university presidents taught a moral philosophy course to seniors. They were exhorted to live responsibly and apply their learning to the civic good" (p. 242). Sloan (1980) posited that higher education was overwhelmed at that time by scientific naturalism, which forced a split between facts and values that resulted in the isolation of ethics within philosophy departments (where it has been taught as meta-ethics in academic but not normative terms). Erzikova (2010) conducted a survey with 249 university public relations teachers to determine their perceptions regarding the teaching of ethics within public relations curricula relative to pedagogy, assessment, and course goals. Erzikova's
recent (2010) study indicated that the majority of “participants recognized ethics education as an essential part of the preparation of future PR professionals” and “valued ethics education because they believed in a close tie between general morality and professional ethics” (p. 318).

Canary’s (2007) study of instructional methods and moral reasoning in communication courses indicated that “when instructors simply talk about ethics, regardless of how often, students do not seem to register such lectures as addressing ethical issues” and that “talking about ethics in a lecture format does not seem to impact student abilities to reason about moral dilemmas” (p. 204). Canary (2007) noted that students respond more positively “when lectures are accompanied with more interactive and engaging methods such as class discussion and case studies” (p. 204), indicating that “students increase their abilities to morally reason by engaging in case studies about situations [to] which they can relate” (p. 204).

According to Hutchison (2002), although most PR practitioners and educators agree that ethics is a critical component of public relations education, there is disagreement about where in the curriculum it should occur. Hutchison (2002) cites the 1999 National Communication Association report that states, “undergraduates need to possess both knowledge of ethical issues and skills for making ethical decisions” (p. 302). Hutchison (2002) noted that previous thinking on the subject held that a “saturate-the-curriculum” strategy seems most logical as it emulates the situational reality of PR practice. Hutchison (2002) further noted that although “the complexity of modern ethical dilemmas would seem to require a specific [ethics] course in the curriculum” (p. 302), programs that integrate ethics across the curriculum are common – due, most likely, to
the logistical teaching limitations that exist in many schools, where a single faculty member often teaches public relations courses, advises students, and moderates the Public Relations Student Society (PRSA) chapter. Such conditions or constraints often are not conducive to the feasibility of teaching a separate course on public relations ethics. Hutchison (2002) suggested that public relations students engaged in internships should be required to keep journals of ethical issues they encounter throughout their internship experience, and to write semester-end analytical reports. Van Leuven (1999) suggested that

...teaching the ethics competency involves multiple pedagogies including Socratic dialogue, lectures and guest presentations, journal keeping and reports based on trade publication and professional newsletter articles...written examinations, written case studies, individual and panel presentations, term papers, group and individual projects (p. 77-85).

McInerny (1998) cited “the need for a true philosophical basis for public relations” with “more in-depth study of the theoretical underpinnings of the practice” (p. 46). According to McInerny (1998):

An ethic for communication is intended to determine whether a particular speech act is ethical or not. An ethic derived from communication focuses on the process of communication itself. An ethic of communication uses a specific definition of communication as a basis for developing normative standards for public and private discourse. (p. 45)

McInerny (1998) also cited Pearson’s (1989) analysis of Sullivan’s theory of three value systems inherent in the work of PR practitioners: Technical values, which are amoral
values that focus on the craft and execution of technique; Partisan values, which are involving a practitioner’s commitment and loyalty to a client or organization; and Mutual values, the highest level, which recognizes the rights of others and obligations to publics. According to McInerny (1998), the aforementioned interpretation of ethics from the rhetorical tradition is similar to Sullivan’s theory of public relations ethics, and constitutes an approach that should be taught within public relations curricula.

Kienzler (2001) noted that critical thinking skills are vital to ethical thought and behavior, including “identifying and questioning [social cultural, political, and moral] assumptions, seeking a multiplicity of voices and alternatives on a subject, making connections, and fostering active involvement” (p. 319). According to Kienzler (2001), “a whole-class service learning project is the richest way to incorporate critical thinking and ethics into the professional classroom” (p. 336), and the biggest advantage of the critical thinking environment is that its ethics permeate the entire course, not just a discrete unit on ethics” (p. 336).

Gale & Bunton’s (2005) research showed that, derived from a 2003 survey of 242 advertising and public relations degree recipients, a significant difference exists “between the views of the alumni who completed an ethics course and those who had not with respect to whether business and personal ethics are the same” (p. 281); and that “those who had not completed an ethics course were more apt to separate personal ethics and business ethics than those who had completed an ethics course” (p. 281). This suggests a link between personal ethical values and ethical leadership in business organizations. The alumni studied by Gale & Bunton (2005) showed a link between their personal and professional ethical values, suggesting a “stronger likelihood that they had used ethical
reasoning skills to solve ethical dilemmas and discussed unethical practices with professional colleagues” (p. 281).

**Heuristic models of ethical decision making.**

Although Grunig and Hunt (1984) noted that many, if not most, public relations practitioners “prefer to fly by the seat of their pants and use intuition rather than intellectual procedures to solve public relations problems” (p. 77), scholars have advanced various methods of operationalizing ethical decision-making relative to public relations practice. Tilley (2005) asserted that “no one ethics tools or approach can predict or resolve every potential ethical dilemma” (p. 307) encountered in planning, creating, or executing PR messages and campaigns. Among the options explored, Baker & Martinson (2001) noted that “ethical persuasion must rest on or serve a deeper, morally based final (or relative last) end … public relations practitioners will play an increasingly dysfunctional role in the communication process if means continue to be confused with ends in professional persuasive communications. Means and ends will continue to be confused unless advertisers and public relations practitioners reach some level of agreement about the moral end toward which their efforts should be directed” (p. 148).

**The TARES Test.**

To address the problem of defining the moral end, Baker & Martinson (2001) proposed a five-part test to provide practitioners with principles to establish ethical boundaries and guide action toward a moral consequence. “The TARES Test consists of five principles: Truthfulness (of the message), Authenticity (of the persuader), Respect (for the persuadee), Equity (of the persuasive appeal), and Social Responsibility (for the common good)” (Baker & Martinson, 2001, p. 148). Within the context of The TARES
Test, truthfulness requires that a message be both true and truthful in a broad sense, including the persuader's intention not to deceive and to provide meaningful and truthful information to benefit others. Authenticity connotes sincerity, genuineness, personal integrity, appropriate loyalty, and moral independence. Respect includes a regard for human dignity, rights, well-being, and interests beyond those of self-interest or client-serving purposes. The equity principles of The TARES Test addresses the issue of fairness and parity in both the content and execution of a persuasive message, as well as the balance of power among parties involved and effected. Finally, social responsibility encompasses a practitioners need to be aware, concerned, sensitive to, and responsible for the wider public interest or common good (Baker & Martinson, 2001). The TARES Test consists of a checklist protocol of interrelated questions for each of the five principles that practitioners can apply to their decision-making processes in PR practice. According to Baker & Martinson (2001), The TARES Test also provides a set of prima facie duties for the practice of professional persuasion. The TARES Test privileges primarily virtue and deontological ethics perspectives.

**The Ethics Pyramid.**

Macnamara's (2002) The Ethics Pyramid provides a step-by-step model of decision-making that allows practitioners "to measure, clarify, communicate, and manage an ethical compliance strategy at micro- and macrolevels" (Tilley, 2005, p. 306). The protocol uses a three-stage pyramid model with ethical intent providing the base of the pyramid, ethical means providing the mid-section of the pyramid, and ethical ends providing the cap of the pyramid. These stages can be customized to correspond to the stages of a PR campaign: ethical intent corresponds to the first stage of planning and
research, ethical means corresponds to the second stage of communicating, and ethical ends corresponds to the final stage of evaluating (Tilley, 2005). As such, The Ethics Pyramid provides a means to proactively integrate ethical inquiry ongoingly throughout the PR process, allowing for continual reassessment and course correction. The Ethics Pyramid’s emphasis on intention favors a deontological approach initially, followed by teleological considerations.

The MERIT System.

Plaisance (2009) posited a model of ethical reasoning that, although not intended to uncover a definitive ethical course of action in any given situation, does provide a method to direct attention to “the values involved in an issue, the philosophical principles that can help guide good decision making, the interests of various stakeholders, and the moral duties and considerations that should be part of any credible ethical deliberation” (p. 35). The Multidimensional Ethical Reasoning and Inquiry Task Sheet (MERITS) is a four-stage protocol for inquiry, arranged around the following content: Stage one – conflicting values (“Identify and explain the key values in conflict in a dilemma. Examine the importance of each and articulate the conflict”) (Plaisance, 2009, p. 36); Stage two – normative framework (“Consider which philosophical approach is most applicable and articulate how it should guide ethical thinking in this case”, e.g., Kant, Aristotle) (Plaisance, 2009, p. 26); Stage three – stakeholder interests (Identify all potential parties that would be affected by your decision or have a legitimate interest in the outcome”) (Plaisance, 2009, p. 36); and Stage four – duties and effects (“Consider how all your options reflect the moral duties you may have and how they may advance your effectiveness as a moral agent”) (Plaisance, 2009, p.36). Although designed to
apply to media ethics, the MERITS model is relevant to ethical dilemmas in public relations practice. Although the MERITS model allows for a multiplicity of ethical perspectives to be utilized, the model itself is grounded in deontology.

**Bowen’s Practical Model of Ethical Issues Management.**

Bowen (2000) asserted that “issues managers need a consistent and reliable guide to ethical decision-making” (p. 431) and provided the Ethical Issues Management Practical Model as a deontology-based matrix for structuring a moral inquiry. Bowen’s (2000) model begins with autonomy questions, “Am I acting from the basis of reason alone?” and “Can I rule out political and monetary influences, as well as self-interest?” (p. 433), in order to determine if a practitioner can proceed with the decision-making process, or if the decision should be deferred to another practitioner. Bowen’s (2000) protocol proceeds to address an “ethical consideration triangle” (p. 434) that hold the components of self, publics, society, stakeholders, and organization within the body of the triangle, and the elements of duty (“Am I doing the right thing?”) (p. 434), intention (“Am I proceeding with a morally good will?”) (p. 434), and dignity and respect (“Are dignity and respect maintained?”) (p. 434) on the exterior at the three points of the triangle. The next stage of Bowen’s (2000) practical model suggests that communication with the persons listed within the triangle be considered through Grunig’s theory of two-way symmetrical communication to arrive at the result of an ethical decision.

**The Potter Box.**

Potter’s (1965) model of ethical decision-making, *The Potter Box*, is derived from a theological framework and provides a four-step process designed to inquire into the elements of facts, values, principles, and loyalties in any given situation. Although it
may be most logical to begin using The Potter Box by first defining the facts involved, the procedure of moving through the four domains is not necessarily sequential. Rather, the domains are interrelated, but the sequence of examination is not linear. In particular, the domain of values may include logical, sociocultural, moral, professional, or aesthetic preferences that may be relevant to a variety of stakeholders; and the domain of principles may utilize different philosophical orientations, e.g., Kant's categorical imperative, Aristotle's golden mean, or the Judeo-Christian golden-rule (Deats, 1972). The fluid nature of The Potter Box allows for differing interpretative conclusions of a given situation to be reached by using various ethical theories by different people, or by the same person at different times.

**PRSA Decision Making Matrix.**

The PRSA recognized that educators teach various approaches to ethical decision making, and offered a semi-structured reproducible process for analyzing ethical dilemmas in public relations practice (prsa.org, 2011). The process comprises six steps: (1) Defining the issue; (2) Identifying internal and external influencing factors; (3) Identifying key values; (4) Identifying the parties to be affected and the practitioner's obligations to each; (5) Selecting ethical principles to guide the decision making process; and, (6) Making and justifying a decision. The PRSA also provides an accompanying matrix of ethical dilemmas that depicts the principles of the PRSA Code of Ethics (advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, fairness, free flow of information, competition, disclosure of information, safeguarding confidences, conflicts of interest, and enhancing the profession) as applied to specific issues and situations. Although
virtue, duty, and consequences are represented in the PRSA decision-making matrix, the model relies primarily on deontology and teleology for its theoretical grounding.

**Ethical Standards of Public Relations Practice**

Pfeiffer and Forsberg (2005) described professions as having five central distinguishing characteristics: practitioners possess a formal body of knowledge that is identified by an elected group, practitioners possess specialized training and a certification of mastery by the association, practitioners’ actions are governed by the organization’s code of ethics, the primary goal of the practitioners is to promote the well-being of clients and society, and practitioners make decisions to uphold the standards of their professions above personal interest or enrichment.

Professional membership organizations govern the activities of lawyers, physicians, teachers, clergy, public accountants, journalists, psychologists, and others through the provision of ethical behavioral codes. Such codes generally adhere to the principles of doing no harm, upholding honesty, protecting confidentiality, adhering to lawfulness, and autonomy. Violations by members are often brought before peer review boards, and may lead to disciplinary actions including fines, censure, or the loss of licenses, thus enforcing the codes as if they are fully legitimimized laws (Pfeiffer and Forsberg, 2005). Rawls (1955) as summarized in Gorovitz (1971) assured that “the state of affairs where a wrongdoer suffers punishment is morally better than the state of affairs where he does not; and it is better irrespective of any of the consequences of punishing him” (p. 176).
Public relations codes and regulations.

Although public relations lacks the aforementioned distinctions of a profession, the practice has attempted to self-modulate through the establishment of a voluntary membership organization involving a pledge to uphold a code of ethics. Since its inception in 1950, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has authored more than seven iterations of a “Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations (Fitzpatrick, 2002). The preamble to the current document states that the code addresses professional values, principles of conduct, and commitment and compliance; and provides the disclaimers that “emphasis on enforcement of the Code has been eliminated” and “ethical practice is the most important obligation of a PRSA member” (prsa.org, 2009). The Code espouses values of advocacy, honesty, and expertise; and addresses the issues of disclosure, confidence, conflicts of interest, free flow of information, and competition through guidelines for behavior and examples of improper conduct.

The International Association of Business Communicators (“IABC”), founded in 1970, encompasses a broader spectrum of communication professionals, of which public relations consulting firms comprise 16% or approximately 2,100 memberships (iabc.com, 2010). The IABC Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators emphasizes the principles that professional communication should be legal, ethical, and in good taste, and elaborates on those principles through a series of twelve articles that exhort concern for the public interest, sensitivity to cultural values and beliefs, and a commitment to honesty and truth-telling, most notably to the self first (iabc.com, 2010). The IABC publishes an international magazine, Communication World, which features articles on
ethics issues relevant to the global community. As well, the IABC devotes sessions to ethics at its annual conference.

**Distinguishing legal and ethical perspectives.**

Shaw (2008) asserted that morality should be distinguished from rules of etiquette, law, and from professional codes of ethics. Shaw (2008) further pointed out that law, the codification of society's customs, ideals, norms and values, cannot cover all possible human conduct, is insufficient and too blunt an instrument to establish moral standards. Although the law does prohibit "egregious affronts to society's moral standards," "breaches of moral conduct can slip through the cracks" (Shaw, 2008, p. 13). Thus, an action that is illegal might be morally correct, and an action that is legal might be deemed ethically incorrect. Shaw (2008) maintained that professional codes of ethics lay in the middle ground between etiquette and law, and help to clarify that grey area.

Various public relations activities may involve issues governed by law, e.g., intellectual property copyrights, trademarks, the duty to warn/failure to disclose, unfair competition, misrepresentation, confidentiality, freedom of speech, hold-harmless indemnification, no-compete clauses, consent agreements, or off-the-record remarks (Hopkins, 2007). Public relations activities might also involve less clear-cut ethical dilemmas, e.g., conflicting loyalties to client and employer, or competing interests between self and public interest. In situations such as these, the average practitioner, lacking formal training in ethical analysis and skill in operationalizing decision-making, might use his/her own subjective ethical perspective to influence outcomes (Kaufman, 2009).
Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter presents the theoretical orientation of this study, the methods of collecting data, and the justification of those methods. Descriptions of each method are provided.

Theoretical Orientation of Study

The qualitative nature of this study, which sought to understand rather than to quantify phenomena, lent itself to a naturalistic research paradigm. Frey, Botan & Kreps (2000) described the research culture of the social sciences to include positivist and naturalistic paradigms, each representing a different worldview. Positivism addresses the more objective, quantifiable elements of human behavior using the scientific method to establish cause-and-effect relationships between variables. It is primarily a deductive orientation toward research that seeks to explain, predict, and control in a context that is formal, impersonal, and unbiased. In contrast, the naturalistic research paradigm seeks methodology to probe “the socially constructed and situated nature of human behavior,” with the goal of understanding and social change (p. 18). According to Cresswell (1994, as cited in Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000), it allows for bias in interpretation, an important aspect of which is the researcher’s values. In this study, my own interest, bias, and values determined what I believed was important enough to investigate. Although my values and bias were accommodated in the naturalistic orientation, they were also taken into account to ensure trustworthiness in the interpretation of data. Hence, the relationship between investigator and analysis of data in this study was an interdependent synergistic one, as opposed to the objective independent relationship that a positivist approach would have dictated.
Methods of Collecting Data

Keyton (2006) described triangulation as the process of providing multiple perspectives of investigation within one study. The term is used in mathematics, engineering, and nautical navigation to indicate a means of identifying a true point through the use of two other fixed points that are measurably apart (Merriam, 2007). Triangulation then, refers to an attempt to arrive at a true point, in this case, as valid and accurate an interpretation of qualitative data as possible. Four methods of triangulation are commonly recognized: methodological triangulation, which utilizes multiple methods; data triangulation, which includes a variety of data sources; researcher triangulation, which utilizes several researchers; and theoretical triangulation, which employs various theories for the interpretation of data. This study utilized methodological and data triangulation in conducting research, utilizing qualitative survey, interview and focus group methods, with participants who are students, educators, and public relations professionals.

Justification of Methods

The methodology for this study consisted of a survey, interviews, and focus groups, each chosen for specific reasons and purposes. Surveys are traditionally considered to be appropriate methods of investigating the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of respondents because they can question large sample sizes and yield substantial amounts of data (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p. 198). Survey instruments can be designed to be executed verbally (face to face or telephone), by writing (in person or by mail), or electronically (Email or web-based interactive design). They are considered to be self-reporting instruments, which poses two different considerations: (a) They can be
executed by respondents with minimal involvement of time or effort from the researcher, as in the case of written or electronic surveys; and (b) written or electronic surveys are self-reporting instruments, so they may have a lower rate of compliance than researcher administered surveys as well as less accuracy and reliability in the information reported (as a result of the subjective nature of self-reflection) (Frey, et.al).

**Surveys.**

In order for a survey to be a reliable instrument that yields valid data, it must incorporate two key elements that both concern the quality of specificity. First, a survey must be specific in addressing a single topic. By focusing narrowly upon one topic, or aspect of an issue, responses can be more closely related to the research questions being addressed by the survey. Second, the questions of the survey must be highly precise in their language and composition, and ask specifically for the required topical content. Such specificity is critical to eliminate the possibility of multiple interpretations about the meaning of a question that would inaccurately skew the interpretation and render the data invalid (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000).

The questions of a survey may follow a protocol designed to elicit responses about experience and behavior, opinion and value, feelings, knowledge about the topic, sensory experience (e.g., what the respondent saw, heard, touched, tasted or smelled during the survey), as well as background and demographic information (Patton, 1980). Alternatively, a survey instrument might follow a protocol designed to include reportorial, devil's advocate, hypothetical, posing the ideal, and propositional questions (Schatzman & Straus, 1973, cited in Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p. 211). This type of scheme probes more deeply into the respondents' thought process, beliefs, values, and
desires than does the former scheme, which probes for more straightforward but not necessarily deep information.

Surveys are often used in a variety of different applications for the purpose of understanding public opinion such as market, political, and evaluation research. Market researchers strive to ascertain consumers’ preferences, buying, and usage habits both before and after launching products. Political research often takes the form of forecast polling to predetermine voters’ choices of candidates or positions on issues up for vote. Exit polls, conducted with people immediately after they perform the voting process, are often used in news coverage to predict – correctly or incorrectly – the potential outcome of a vote. The use of exit polls in news coverage raises ethical concerns about the possibility of intentionally or unintentionally misleading the audience about the outcome of an election that is still in process due to premature interpretation and reporting of the data. Evaluation research in the form of a survey is often conducted to determine the effectiveness of programs or products. Montclair State University utilizes a web-based survey of students to assess the efficacy and outcomes of its Fundamentals of Speech course.

This study utilized the Rokeach Values Survey, which was conducted with students currently enrolled in public relations courses at a large east-coast university as participants. The Rokeach Values Survey was created during the late 1960s and early 1970s by noted social psychologist Milton Rokeach as a means of classifying terminal and instrumental values (Rokeach, 1973). Terminal values are those enduring values that are considered by an individual to be desirable in and of themselves, such as world peace, wisdom, or happiness. Instrumental values are those values that are preferable methods
of achieving terminal values such as courage, honesty, or responsibility. Rokeach hypothesized that by understanding what an individual values, one may make predictions about many of his/her attitudes and behaviors, including choice of work, religion, or political affiliation. The Rokeach Values Survey poses a list of eighteen terminal and eighteen instrumental values, and asks the respondent to simply rank each list of values in their order of importance to the respondent.

Implementing the Rokeach Values Survey with public relations students at the beginning of focus group sessions served as an entrée into questions and discussion about the values, beliefs and attitudes that the students hold about public relations. By first having the students reflect and clarify for themselves how they perceived the values individually, the ensuing discussion about RQ1 (How do scholars and practitioners define and value ethics?), and RQ2 (How do scholars and practitioners learn about public relations-relevant ethics?) was more specifically focused and framed within that context of reference.

**Focus Groups.**

The next research method used for this study was the focus group interview. This method provides a structure for interactive group interviews facilitated by the researcher or a researcher’s designee. Focus groups are usually composed of five to seven participants, to allow for maximum discussion and interaction. A facilitator introduces topics and questions designed to engage thinking and elicit a rich and vibrant exchange of responses, information, and perspectives among the participants (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000). Focus groups require skillful facilitating that includes the ability to maintain and portray neutrality, to answer responses reflectively or with further questions, sensitive
listening, and to recognize verbal and nonverbal cues, nuances in meaning, timing, and openings for new directions in the conversation. The focus group protocol is essentially a flexible semi-structured interview format that allows for the emergence of unplanned questions and directions during its execution (p. 221).

Focus groups are often used in market, political, and evaluation research for the same applications previously described for survey instruments. Particular distinctions of the focus group are the ability to interview multiple subjects at once while obtaining richer more nuanced data. The criteria for an effective focus group interview protocol (or interview schedule) include the planning of questions to incorporate an engaging opening, substantive middle, and conclusive ending. Questions must be appropriately paced for the amount of time allotted and the participants' energy and attention spans, and they must be appropriately worded to elicit specific responses. A combination of short and longer questions, as well as a combination of open and closed-ended questions, is also required to constitute an effective protocol.

The primary purpose of the focus groups was to understand what undergraduate students of public relations value most, how they relate those values to ethics, and what role education plays in shaping their values and ethics. A secondary purpose of the focus groups was to understand how public relations students define and anticipate ethics relative to their own future work in public relations.

*Interviews.*

Finally, the personal interview method was used in this study to investigate how educators participate in shaping the ethics credos of public relations students and, subsequently, public relations practitioners; and to investigate how public relations
practitioners define and enact ethics in their practices. Interviews are commonly used in communication research and in organizational consulting, as they can be effective tools to measure and assess the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of others (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000). As in the focus group, interviews can yield a depth of understanding that is rich in detail and nuance of understanding. Unlike focus groups, interviews are usually conducted on an individual rather than group basis. The criteria for a successful interview likewise include carefully worded open-ended and closed-ended questions focused on one topic or aspect of an issue, and that follow a purposeful flow from engaging opening, substantive middle, and conclusive ending. For this project, I conducted individual telephone interviews with professional practitioners of public relations, using a protocol designed to probe RQ1 (How do scholars and practitioners define and value ethics?) and RQ3 (How do scholars and practitioners apply public relations-relevant ethics?). Conducting the interviews by telephone was more feasible than conducting them in person due to my own limited available time and to the busy and fluctuating schedules of the practitioners who participated. Also, the geographic distances between participants would have added more time and expense to executing this method. This was a benefit to using a telephone-interview format, while a disadvantage was the absence of visual and nonverbal cues. Without seeing the respondents’ facial expressions and body language, I was not be able to interpret or attribute congruence or incongruence based on those elements of communication. However, the nature of the telephone interview allowed for greater focus on the content of questions and answers by the participants and me, and I was able to respond to answers with prompts for further information and detail.
Lastly, the interview method was tailored into an Email format and was conducted with college and university public relations educators. By placing the interview protocol into an Email, I was able to extend my research to more educational institutions than could otherwise be interviewed. As with the interview protocol for public relations practitioners, asking many busy instructors to participate in an E-interview was more pragmatic than conducting face-to-face or telephone interviews, and likely produced a higher compliance rate. Knowledge that the E-interview can be completed at a time, and place that are convenient to participants (as well as in manageable increments) may be an incentive to participate. Other benefits of the E-interview format were that a physical transcript of each interview was produced in the execution of the interview, facilitating documentation and record-keeping, and, because of the interactive nature of Email, I had the option to reply to those responses for which I needed more information, clarification, or another angle of understanding. As with the telephone interview format, a disadvantage was that I did not have the benefit of visual and nonverbal elements that could have added richness to the data. However, this disadvantage to me as the researcher might have proved an advantage to the participants and a benefit to the data. Without my physical presence to provide a visual reference, and without my voice (tone, inflection, volume), the respondents were less likely to be influenced by external cues, and might have self-reflected in a more candid manner. The protocol for the E-interview addressed RQ2 (How do scholars and practitioners learn about ethics public relations-relevant ethics?) and RQ1 (How do scholars and practitioners define and value ethics?) from the perspective of those who are currently teaching undergraduate and graduate public relations courses.
Description of Instrument: Rokeach Value Survey

The sample for this survey was composed of undergraduate students of public relations who are currently enrolled at large east-coast university. See Appendix A for the protocol of this instrument.

Description of Instrument: Focus Group Interview Protocol

The sample of participants for focus groups consisted of the same undergraduate students of public relations who are currently enrolled at large east-coast university. See Appendix B for the protocol of this instrument.

Description of Instrument: E-interview Protocol

The sample for this instrument comprised eight college and university instructors of public relations and communication ethics courses. See Appendix C for the protocol of this instrument.

Description of Instrument: Telephone Interview Protocol

The sample of participants for the telephone interview comprised three professional practitioners of public relations who work in public relations agencies or firms situated in proximity to the New York metropolitan market. See Appendix D for the protocol of this instrument.

Application to the Institutional Review Board

The following material was submitted to the Institutional Review Board for approval of this study: Certificate of completion for the National Institutes of Health online course, “Participants Protection Education for Research Teams” (Appendix E), method protocols (Appendices A, B, C, and D), recruitment Material (Appendices F, G, and H), consent forms (Appendices I, J, and K), and key references.
Chapter 4: Summary of Data

In chapter three I discussed the theoretical orientation of this study, the methods of data collection, their rationale, descriptions of their procedures, and their respective protocols. This chapter provides a summary of the data collected from the four instruments that were executed among three populations: the Rokeach Values Survey and focus group interviews with public relations students as participants, E-interviews with public relations educators as participants, and telephone interviews with professional public relations practitioners as participants.

**Rokeach Values Survey: PR Students**

My sample for the Rokeach Values Survey (Appendix A) was composed of seventeen students currently enrolled in undergraduate public relations courses at a large east-coast university: One freshman (male), four sophomores (two males and two females), six juniors (two males and four females), and six seniors (female).

The survey was conducted on November 10, and November 17, 2010. Participants were asked to rank two lists of concepts – *terminal values* and *instrumental values* – in descending order of personal importance, starting with the value of most importance in the #1 position, and ending with the value of least importance in the #18 position.

**Terminal values.**

First, I will identify the overall highest and lowest ranked terminal values (Table 4.1). *Health* was ranked #1 overall (highest or most important position) by six participants, without regard to age, gender, or grade level. Although not a majority, *Health* received the most agreement as the most important terminal value.
A World of Beauty was ranked #18 overall (lowest or least important position) by eight participants. Although not a majority, A World of Beauty received the most agreement as the least important terminal value.

**Gender differences.**

Although gender, age, and grade level differences were unremarkable and insignificant in this study, these data are included as they might be potentially beneficial to implications for future research. Among five male participants, no single value received more than one highest ranking. Freedom, Health, Self-Respect, An Exciting Life, and Salvation were each ranked most important by one male participant.

A World of Beauty received consensus as the least important value from a majority (three) of male participants.

Among twelve female participants, Health was ranked most important by five females. Although not a majority, Health received the most consensus as most important among females.

Among twelve female participants, A World of Beauty was ranked least important by five female participants. Although not a majority, A World of Beauty received the most agreement as least important among females.

**Age differences.**

The largest single age group among participants was eight twenty-one year old students.

Six of eight twenty-one year old students ranked Health as most important. No other participants in any age group ranked Health as most important.
Five of eight twenty-one year old students ranked *A World of Beauty* as least important. Noteworthy is the fact that among all (three) twenty year old students, *Freedom* was ranked as the most important value by two participants, and as the second-most important value by one participant.

**Grade level differences.**

Three of six senior participants ranked *Health* as most important.

Four of six junior participants ranked *Health* or *Freedom* as most important (two each).

Three of six senior participants ranked *A World of Beauty* as least important.

Four of six junior participants ranked *A World of Beauty* or *Salvation* as least important (two each). Of the remaining two junior participants, one ranked *Salvation* as most important.

Two of four sophomore participants and one freshman participants ranked *A World of Beauty* as least important.

**Instrumental values.**

First, I will identify the overall highest and lowest ranked instrumental values (Table 4.2). *Honest* was ranked the most important value by five of seventeen total participants, without regard to age, gender, or grade level differences. *Loving* was ranked the most important value by four of seventeen total participants, without regard to age, gender, or grade level differences. *Loyal*, was ranked most important by two participants.

*Clean* was ranked the least important value by five of seventeen total participants, without regard to age, gender, or grade level differences. *Logical* was ranked the least important value by four, *Obedient*, and *Imaginative* were each ranked least important by
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1</th>
<th>Terminal values ranked by students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A comfortable life (a prosperous life)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality (brotherhood and equal opportunity for all)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An exciting life (a stimulating, active life)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family security (taking care of loved ones)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom (independence and free choice)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health (physical and mental well-being)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner harmony (freedom from inner conflict)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature love (sexual and spiritual intimacy)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National security (protection from attack)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasure (an enjoyable, leisurely life)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation (saved, eternal life)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-respect (self-esteem)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense of accomplishment (a lasting contribution)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social recognition (respect and admiration)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True friendship (close companionship)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom (a mature understanding of life)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A world at peace (a world free of war and conflict)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A world of beauty (beauty of nature and the arts)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coding of participants' identities:
Top Row:
Grade level (Fr = Freshman)

Second Row:
First letter indicates gender (F = female, M = male)
Number indicates age in years
Numbers with decimal points indicate multiples of the same grade, gender and age
two participants each.

**Age differences.**

Four of eight twenty-one year old students ranked *Honest* as most important. Two of eight twenty-one year old students ranked *Loving* as most important.

Three of eight twenty-one year old students ranked *Clean* as least important, and three twenty-one year old students ranked *Logical* as least important.

Among three nineteen year old students, two ranked *Clean* as least important, and one ranked *Clean* as the second-least important value.

**Gender differences.**

Among five male students, *Imaginative* was ranked least important by two participants.

Four of twelve females ranked *Honest* as the most important, four ranked *Loving* as the most important value, and two ranked *Loyal* as most important.

Four of twelve females ranked *Clean* or *Logical* as the least important value (four each).

**Grade level differences.**

Among six seniors, three participants ranked *Honest* as most important, and two participants ranked *Loving* as most important.

Four of six seniors ranked *Logical* as the least important value.

Three of five sophomores ranked *Clean* as the least important value.

**Focus Group Interviews: PR Students**

My sample for the focus group interviews was comprised of the same seventeen students who participated in the Rokeach Values Survey.
Table 4.2
Instrumental values ranked by students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fr.</th>
<th>Sophomores</th>
<th>Juniors</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious (hard-working and aspiring)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad-minded (open-minded)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capable (competent; effective)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean (neat and tidy)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courageous (standing up to your beliefs)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiving (willing to pardon others)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful (working for the welfare of others)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest (sincere and truthful)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative (daring and creative)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent (self-reliant; self-sufficient)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual (intelligent and reflective)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical (consistent; rational)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loving (affectionate and tender)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyal (faithful to friends or the group)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obedient (dutiful; respectful)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polite (courteous and well-mannered)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible (dependable and reliable)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-controlled (restrained; self-disciplined)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coding of participants' identities:

**Top Row:**
Grade level (Fr = Freshman)

**Second Row:**
First letter indicates gender (F = female, M = male)
Number indicates age in years
Numbers with decimal points indicate multiples of the same grade, gender and age
University who had previously completed the Rokeach Values Survey: one freshman (male), four sophomores (two males and two females), six juniors (two males and four females), and six seniors (female). The focus group interviews were conducted on November 10, and November 17, 2010 (Appendix B; Appendix I).

**Career interests.**

Although student participants reported a variety of career interests (Table 4.3), the clustered area of entertainment/celebrity/fashion/beauty was of interest to the most students – seven. Eight students reported only one specific area of career interest, and nine students reported uncertainty about multiple areas of interest.

Table 4.3

*Students’ Career Interests*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Areas of career interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 sophomores, 1 junior, 3 seniors</td>
<td>Entertainment/celebrity/fashion/beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore, 2 juniors</td>
<td>Health/pharmaceutical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore, 1 junior, 3 seniors</td>
<td>PR representative – agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 seniors</td>
<td>Event planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman</td>
<td>Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore, 1 senior</td>
<td>Sports industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore</td>
<td>Corporate PR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 junior</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 junior</td>
<td>Publishing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Students’ personal concepts of ethics.**

Students reported a variety of conceptual understanding of the term *ethics* (Table 4.4), including the clustered concepts of *right/wrong/good/evil, society’s*
standards/guidelines, and punishment/consequences, as well as morality, correctness, and honesty.

Right/wrong/good/evil was the most often cited concept of ethics (twelve references). Morality was the second most cited concept of ethics (nine references).

Table 4.4

Students' concepts of ethics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Concepts of ethics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 sophomores, 5 juniors, 3 seniors</td>
<td>Right/wrong/good/evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman, 3 sophomores, 2 juniors</td>
<td>Society's standards/guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore</td>
<td>Punishment/consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman</td>
<td>Correctness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman</td>
<td>Honesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman, 3 sophomores, 3 juniors, 2 seniors</td>
<td>Morality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Origins of students' personal concepts of ethics.

Students reported a variety of sources from which their concepts of ethics originated (Table 4.5), including the clustered concepts of parents/family, and school/teachers, as well as religion, social relationships, and demographics.

Parents/family was the most often cited source as the origin of ethical understanding (thirteen references), and school/teachers was the second most cited source as the origin of ethical understanding (six references).

Values related to students' ethical concepts.

Students reported that a variety of values were related to their ethical concepts. Among them, Honesty was cited most frequently (eleven times) (Table 4.6).
Table 4.5

*Origins of students' concepts of ethics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Original sources of ethical concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman, 3 sophomores, 6 juniors, 3 seniors</td>
<td>Parents/family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 sophomores, 4 seniors</td>
<td>School/teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 junior, 3 seniors</td>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 sophomores, 1 junior</td>
<td>Social Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore, 1 junior</td>
<td>Demographic influence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6

*Values related to students' concepts of ethics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Terminal values related to ethics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 sophomores</td>
<td>A comfortable life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore</td>
<td>Family security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman, 1 junior</td>
<td>Salvation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman, 1 sophomore, 2 juniors</td>
<td>Self-respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 senior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Instrumental values cited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 junior</td>
<td>Broad-minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman, 1 sophomore</td>
<td>Courageous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore, 1 junior</td>
<td>Helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman, 2 sophomores, 2 juniors, 6 seniors</td>
<td>Honest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 sophomores</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 senior</td>
<td>Loving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore, 2 juniors</td>
<td>Loyal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 juniors</td>
<td>Responsible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Influence of education on students’ concepts of ethics.

When asked about the influence of education upon their concepts of ethics, students’ replies were varied and, sometimes, contradictory (Table 4.7).

Table 4.7

*How education has influenced students’ concepts of ethics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Educational influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 sophomores, 1 junior</td>
<td>Morals taught in elementary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sophomore, 1 junior</td>
<td>High school social environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman</td>
<td>Religious values of parochial high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 sophomores, 3 juniors</td>
<td>University social environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 juniors, 4 seniors</td>
<td>University courses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked if their college education had changed their concepts of ethics by either adding some new concepts or by eliminating previously held concepts, four seniors reported that their college education had not changed their concepts of ethics in any way.

However, when asked if their college education had given them new or different concepts about ethics, two juniors and one senior replied “yes.”

When asked which courses have addressed ethics, students cited the following course titles: *Introduction to Public Relations*, *Principles of Public Relations*, *Communication Research*, *PR Writing*, and *PR Cases*. Participant Jr5 replied:

“We haven’t gone over ethics so far.”
*PR Cases* was cited as the course which provided the most coverage of ethics through case analysis by three sophomores, three juniors and four seniors.

When asked what their public relations courses have taught them about ethics, some students replied:

So1: “In *Principles of PR*, lying is unethical. I can’t remember anything else.”

So2: “In that same class...ethics was just brushed upon but not focused on...not majorly addressed...honesty and lying were touched upon [in a way, just don’t want to get caught] but no other values or ethics were mentioned.”

So4: “I can honestly say that I haven’t learned much. When we talked about lying, I figured it meant to the audience...I really don’t know. It wasn’t clear.”

Jr6: “It’s just like another chapter that they go over. It’s not predominant. We went over it briefly, but it did not stand out.”

Sr2: “It’s been that when we were dealing with something in class, the teacher would say ‘that has to do with ethics, we’ll cover that later on. Like it’s an issue of ethics and we don’t go into it.”

Sr3: “Ethics wasn’t brought to light until this *PR Cases* course. My other courses never really focused on that.”

When speaking further about how ethics has been addressed in their public relations courses, some students elaborated:

So1: “My professor lays down everything blatantly and tells us PR is a very manipulative industry. I feel that ethics and PR is an oxymoron. I’ve learned that you should be honest... but, in reality, I know that it’s not as ethical as it should be.”

So2: “[A couple of] PR classes have taught me that ethics is something you *should* have, but is not *necessary* to have. It’s not what you *have* so much as what you *portray* that you have... your client is paying you to think and present their material/news in a certain way. Even if you disagree with it, you have to display it with *their* ethics, not your own.”

So3: “You’re going to have to have a certain level of respect to clients...but at the same rate it’s a dirty game... It’s not easy, no matter how much
ethics you have. You have to take away some just to get where you want...You have to represent [clients] in a way they want to be represented. You can't put your own values into [that].”

Jr1: “In PR Writing it was basically what not to do...because of consequences like defamation and possible law suits.”

Sr1: “In my PR courses we haven’t learned specifically about ethics.”

When asked what they think the main ethical challenges are for PR practitioners, some students responded:

Fr1: “Honesty ... if they’re covering a story of a political race, ethically they would have to report an unbiased standpoint that they might not agree with. You still must present it in a totally neutral format with clarity, dignity, because it’s your work and your name on the line.”

So1: “Differentiating your own ethics from your work.”

So2: “Maybe your client is telling you to lie for them, or you know that the organization...is doing something wrong, but you don’t say it, because they say ‘if you do, we’re going to fire you’...that’s a big problem they face. It just has to do with if you can’t bring your own ethics in, but, on the other hand, you don’t want to do something that you think is so terribly wrong.”

So4: “Spin...is basically adding icing to the cake. I think obviously spin isn’t ethical, but, to an extent, a lot of people add a little something to what they say to make it a little more exciting...that’s a big problem in PR because spin has a lot to do with everything.”

Jr1: “Not to think you’re going to always adhere to these rules...things going on in your personal life that can sometimes conflict with the fact that you need to adhere to those standards...[Conflict or discrepancy] between the fact that you might need to make money and you might be in an unethical situation.”

Jr2: “You have to put aside your ethics just to do what the job wants you to do, to keep your job. Also, honesty is a big challenge they have to face.”

Sr5: “Doing PR for something that you don’t believe in...don’t think is ethically correct...or have to promote.”
Sr6: "A major challenge is reaching the public...different publics or different people and deliver the same message to them. That can be hard."

Sr4: "A challenge for a PR agent is to decide which information is necessary or unnecessary to give to the public in order to succeed in a campaign, [what to reveal or not reveal], what can help or what can hurt you. You want to give out good information, not about the flaws."

**Hypothetical philosophical approach to an ethical dilemma.**

Students were given an example of an actual PR case (Appendix I), and asked to select one of three philosophical perspectives that should, ideally, be the primary consideration of a hypothetical PR practitioner in such a case (Table 4.8). A majority of students (twelve) replied that *consequences* should be the primary consideration of a PR practitioner.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>What should be the primary consideration of a PR practitioner in the sample case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 freshman, 1 sophomore, 1 senior</td>
<td>Duty (to client, firm, profession)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 seniors</td>
<td>Virtue (principles, values of practitioner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 sophomores, 5 juniors, 3 seniors</td>
<td>Consequences (end results, outcomes to self or others)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked if they were aware of any specific methods that could be utilized to make ethical decisions in PR practice, no students could cite any specific heuristic decision-making procedures. Several students commented:
Fr1: “Can’t say off the top of my head. No, just diligent work, keeping the honesty and dignity of the public in mind, going with the virtues you mentioned.”

So1: “Not yet. Things like that will come down the road. When you take the higher level courses, you probably learn that, but not right now.”

So2: “I hope we’re going to learn more about it. It seems strange that we just touched upon it – ethics...I just want to learn more about it.”

Jr5: “In a job, they might give you a rulebook. Some people might say ‘the Bible,’ because they might see that as a life guide. Or people would just use what’s in their head, what they’ve known from their past, what they grew up with, and what they personally think would be the best ethics guide.”

Jr6: “In PR Cases, the teacher told us that we have to analyze the situation and the different publics – internal and external. Basically analyze the situation and different publics.”

Sr1: “First, analyze the situation and do your research...Then, obviously, form a meeting and discuss it with your employees and management to see what their opinions are.”

Sr3: “There is no step by step way of deciding whether something is ethical. Who’s to say if something is ethically correct? That’s why I always go back to my own personal beliefs – virtues. At the end of the day, I have to make that choice, not anyone else. There are not any right or wrong ways to go about determining what’s ethically or morally correct. There is no learned, preset model. I am not aware of any. I don’t think each individual has a step by step procedure for deciding what’s ethical or not. A method you could use is making a pros and cons list, writing down, weighting what is good and bad...If there are more cons, reconsider what your plan is, so that there are more pros.”

Sr4: “A method I would use is weigh the consequences my decision would have on me, or the organization around me, or who I’m making the decision for.”

**Additional comments.**

Finally, when asked if they would like to add any comments about the topic of PR ethics, several students replied:
Frl: “I’d like to look into taking a course on this. It’s very interesting, intriguing.”

Sr1: “Maybe there can be a course on it. I think it should be brought up in every class... instead of the teachers saying ‘we’ll talk about it at the end’ actually have a discussion... a presentation and a lecture on ethics.”

Sr3: “It’s interesting that ethics is so downplayed.”

Sr1: “Debate would be interesting about different ethical topics. And then you could learn about the different models, and ways you could make a decision on what’s right or wrong when you’re working for an organization.”

Jr5: “It’s easy for people in college to lose their ethics along the way, especially going out to the real world.”

Jr6: “You should ask people if they’re interested in taking a PR Ethics course. I don’t think we have a PR Ethics course. That would be very helpful, an ethics course for PR. You should ask students what kinds of things they would like to learn about and help design the course.”

Jr5: “It would be really helpful if you’re going into the PR field, because that’s what you’re going to be dealing with. You should know about ethics... It would be good to examine that.”

When asked what they thought about creating their own personal codes of ethics, some students replied:

Jr6: “That’s a good idea, in the class. That is an excellent idea. I know how far I would go for a client.”

Jr5: “I would be interested to see what other people write down. Like, what are the top five things you can’t do, what are the main things you cannot compromise on. Compare those with other classmates. Don’t put names on them, but put them all up on the wall so everyone could read what the class wrote about their personal ethics.”

Jr6: “There are plenty of unethical people in the college, so that would be a really interesting exercise to see. It would be huge.”
E-interviews: PR Educators

Institutional and program descriptions.

Eighty-four college and university public relations educators throughout the USA were solicited via Email letter (Appendix G). Eight educators subsequently participated in E-interviews (interviews via Email) that I conducted during January and February, 2011. Seven participants teach in four-year state colleges or universities, and one participant teaches in a four-year private college (Table 4.9). Seven participants hold doctorate degrees, one of whom also holds the A.P.R. accreditation, and one participant holds a masters degree. Participants reported teaching or having taught a variety of undergraduate and graduate public relations courses (Table 4.10).

Table 4.9

Post-secondary educational institutions represented in E-interview data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State institutions</th>
<th>Private institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California Polytechnic State University</td>
<td>Iona College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montclair State University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Paterson University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Alabama</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of North Carolina</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.10

Courses taught by PR educator-participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Undergraduate Courses</th>
<th>Graduate Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

PR course goals and learning objectives.

When asked to describe the goals or learning objectives of their public relations courses, several participants provided the following responses that mention ethics specifically:

ED1: “The Principles of PR course is an intro course...there is a small ethics component.”

ED2: “For PR Writing: ‘to understand the relationship between ethics and professionalism.’ For PR Management: ‘to understand ethical decision-making processes and professional codes of ethics to resolve ethical dilemmas in practice.’”

ED4: “Learning objectives for PR Management and Problems include: ‘to continue development of a sense of professionalism with ethicality in the practice of public relations.’”

ED7: Courses are “…philosophical, theoretical and strategic, rather than tactical and technical. Students will be asked to consider ethical questions of over-riding global significance…predicated on the meta-question ‘How is society possible?’ Students explore, consider, and attempt to resolve such questions of ethics in communication. Ethics must be a paramount concern to communication scholars and practitioners who increasingly will be called upon, not only to be ethical in the powerful role they have in society, but to help address a range of ethical issues of far more breadth...
than what is sometimes narrowly perceived to be within the realm of communication as an area of scholarly inquiry and practice. Unprecedented ethical questions will arise, particularly as communication scholars and practitioners attempt to clarify their own ethical values and to reconcile these values in the global arena, and it behooves the communication scholar and practitioner to thoroughly understand the ethical ramifications of this awesome role and responsibility – requiring both expert knowledge and skills of considerable depth and breadth."

When asked to identify ethics-related course outcomes that they consider important for their students to achieve, several participants replied as follows:

ED1: "For Media Law and Ethics students should be able to: think critically about existing American media law and ethics including alternatives...develop one's own system of ethics as applied to mass communication, [and] discuss the convergence and conflict between ethics and law."

ED3: "Understanding the importance of ethics in public relations and know the PRSA Code of Ethics. Many PR professionals encounter situations for ethical decisions but often don't know how to determine what's right and wrong."

ED6: "I'd like my students to be familiar with the role of public relations to advise or counsel their clients or organizations to be ethical. In addition to managing communication...public relations officers should help the organization to be accountable for its behavior and decisions."

ED7: "Provide students with a theoretical foundation in their consideration of the ethics of communication in a technological, global, and multicultural environment. Familiarize students with the literature of communication ethics and with the communication scholars who provide perspectives on these ethics...Encourage students to identify and examine global societal problems to which communication and its ethics are relevant and must be addressed."

ED8: "Ethics are often given lip-service. Ethics should permeate all objectives, and PR is as good a discipline as any in which to hammer this idea home. However, we are often some of the worst offenders."
Critical thinking strategies taught.

When asked to describe the critical thinking strategies for ethical decision-making that they teach, several participants replied:

ED2: “I use the PRSA ethical decision-making matrix.”

ED6: “We discuss teleological and deontological approaches for ethical decision-making. Students have learned and examined the impact of these two different approaches. Particularly, students reflect upon whether a consequence/outcome-oriented approach justifies actions or whether the nature of actions and intention could adequately gauge the ethics of organizational decisions.”

ED8: “Not many. We are strategic thinkers. I think ethics are strategically sound, even if one is less than convinced of their moral imperatives.”

Philosophical approaches.

Participants were asked to consider the following philosophical approaches to ethical decision-making, and to select the approach that they consider most relevant to PR practice today: Duty (how a practitioner understands and enacts his/her professional obligations to a client, employer, or profession); Virtue (the principles, values or ideals that a practitioners values most); or Consequences (the end results or effects of an action that could be foreseen from a course of action). Five participants replied that all approaches are relevant or important. Three participants replied differently:

ED2: “Duty is particularly relevant, but I think practitioners need to be aware of and consider each approach.”

ED3: “Approach based on consequences. Many textbooks discuss the standards but there is a lack of discussion on consequences. I think it is important to discuss the outcomes of unethical actions.”

ED8: “Now this is getting interesting! Consequences is the most pragmatic and widely useful. One can try duty, although it’s highly dependent upon context. Good luck with virtue.”
Main challenges of PR practice.

When asked what they consider the main ethical challenges of public relations to be, several participants responded:

ED1: “I could write a book about this. Probably honesty in representing clients and the public’s perception of the field as unethical.”

ED2: “Being open and honest is the hardest thing today. PR practitioners don’t want to stand up to their clients and say ‘no.’ We need to consistently do the right thing, but we tend to want to rely on our clients to decide what the right thing is.”

ED3: “1. How to demonstrate the influence the public relations function can exert on organizational decision-making; 2. How to develop the role of being ethical advisor or counselor as an integral part of public relations practice; 3. How to establish the public relations function as an ethical counselor among top management or dominant coalition; and 4. How to develop systematic curriculum plans about the topic of ethics in public relations.”

ED7: “Having a discrete professional community with publicly declared professional values and ethics; distinguishing this professional community from inexpensive and pervasive social media communication.”

ED8: “We sell our hard-earned communication gifts to the highest bidder. I try to challenge students to align their personal scruples (or lack thereof, I guess) with an organizational context they can authentically back and support. That can be a win-win situation.”

Telephone Interviews: Professional PR Practitioners

Three professional public relations practitioners working in the agency side of the industry participated in telephone interviews I conducted during January and February, 2011 (Appendix K). Each participant represents a unique perspective on public relations, by virtue of their occupational positions: PR1 has approximately six and a half years experience, is employed as a Senior Account Supervisor by a large global public relations agency headquartered in New York City, and holds a B.A. in public communication; PR2
has approximately thirty years experience, is an independent PR consultant in the New York metropolitan area, and holds a B.A. in English, a Master's degree, and an APR accreditation, and PR3 has approximately thirty-five years experience, is the owner/president of a boutique PR agency in the New York metropolitan area, former president of the PRSA New York, holds a B.A. in sociology, an APR accreditation, and is currently completing a Master's degree in public relations.

**Concepts of ethics.**

The interview questions focused on the areas of ethical concepts, PR practice, and the role of education in both. When asked to describe their personal concepts of ethics, participants replied:

PR1: “Doing what’s right. Making decision that are in the best interests of all parties involved. Operating with a degree of transparency.”

PR2: “Honesty, being truthful, doing the right thing. It’s a sense of right and wrong. Obviously, there’s your personal ethic. Then the corporation has its own ethic. I guess the society at large has another ethic. So it’s just a question of marrying up your ethic with the corporation that has a similar ethic.”

PR3: “There are the traditional ethical things – we don’t steal, we don’t rob, we don’t do criminal things. But there’s other ethical things that come into play. There is a lack of civility between people today, the backstabbing that goes on, or some of the things I’ve seen agencies do, like they might suddenly try to take business away from another agency. As a society – a big part of this – we have come to a point when a lot of people aren’t even thinking about whether it’s ethical or not. They’re just doing... We’ve gotten to be not tuned to people’s feelings, thinking it’s something minor but it hurts someone’s career, hurts somebody’s business. Some of the old really unethical things from the good ole boys’ days might be gone, but in a lot of ways, they’ve been replaced by other things.”

**Philosophical consideration.**

Participants were asked to identify the consideration that would be of highest concern to them when facing ethical decisions in their practices: Duty (how they
understand their professional obligations to their clients, employer, or profession); Virtue (the principles or ideals they personally value most); or Consequences (the end results or effects – upon self, or others - that they could foresee from a course of action).

**PR1:** “Virtue... I was working on one of the earliest social media campaigns ever, before Facebook even existed. The client created an anti-drug campaign. I was moderating a message board for parents that provided advice on how to handle your children and their encounters with drugs. Part of my job was to read submissions and censor them, and rewrite them to align with the client’s own messaging and post them. I was so morally opposed to it that I said ‘I refuse to do this and if you want me to keep doing it, I’m out.’ I felt so strongly that this was nothing more than propaganda, and it was immoral, and I was willing to leave my job to stop doing it.”

**PR2:** “Virtue first, then consequences upon me personally. Ultimately, you have to live with yourself. You can always go out and get a new client, you can get a new job, but it’s ultimately whether you can live with yourself. That’s always been it for me. I’ve left companies, quit clients, when I knew it was going to hurt me financially, but I knew there was simply no way I could do anything for them.”

**PR3:** “I hate to say consequences, but in a way I think consequences covers the other two, because your actions create harm to yourself and to other people. That’s the biggest thing you want to be careful of – that you don’t hurt somebody. Supposing through a press release...you’re putting [healthcare] information out there and somebody tries something and gets hurt. Forget how you even feel about your virtue...this is a terrible thing. People are being hurt by this...you’ve got to take that into account. Not because I’m afraid I’m going to get into trouble...I’d be more concerned with people being hurt, having a consequence, the trickle-down effect. Look at the story of the Passaic Valley Sewer Commission. Every year I get an RFP [request for proposal] from them for PR services. I’m glad I never responded to that because I would have never gotten it, because...they’re giving all of their family and friends jobs and they’re milking money from the public. It’s unethical and it’s unprofessional, but look at how many people are going to be hurt...consequences would have to be the most important thing.”

**Influential factors in ethical decision making.**

Interviewees were asked which consideration most influences their choices of
actions: a personal credo, a professional code of ethics or standards of practice, or the determination of legality.

PR1: “One [personal credo] and two [professional code of ethics] – a combination of those.”

PR2: “It’s always the personal credo, the personal has to come first...if you use that as your standard, everything else sort of falls into place. If you have a well-balanced sense of ethics, it’s probably not going to be illegal, and it’s probably going to parallel with what the client’s ethic is. What fits me best personally, always.”

PR3: “My first concern would always be for something legal. That would be the stop-gap. If it’s legal, but it’s unethical, then the personal credo would be my secondary choice.”

Main ethical challenges of PR practice.

Participants were asked to identify, from their own perspectives, the main ethical challenges in public relations today, and replied:

PR1: “The agency dynamic is important because there are various business interests that need to be considered when you’re working for an organization...their interests and your own company’s interests...that’s where the line gets blurry from an ethical perspective, when folks are looking for opportunities to meet their own business’s revenue needs or their billability targets, sometimes that conflicts with what the client needs. That’s certainly an industry issue. From an actual jack-of-the-trade perspective, I think it’s just an honesty and transparency issue where sometimes things are often misrepresented. For instance, a lot of quotes you might see from a CEO in a newspaper are not written by that CEO. They’re written by a PR guy.”

PR2: “It’s always been the lure of money...there are business people who feel they can buy off somebody’s honesty...people have been caught doing something illegal, and who try to hire a PR person, and they feel if they give them a large enough retainer, they can buy off their honesty. That’s always the temptation. You look at a retainer, and that’s a lot of money. How solid is your ethical foundation? That’s the big ethical challenge. There were big PR firms who did work for the tobacco companies even after the Surgeon General’s report came out.”
PR3: “Let’s face it – in this business, anybody in the world can go hang their shingle out. That has been a source of debate in the PRSA. Licensing requires regulation and a whole lot of other stuff that comes with that...PRSA has done a great job of advocating for the job of PR. I’m not sure they’ve done a great job of advocating – once you have a job, once you have an agency – how that’s supposed to work...[for example] companies hire agencies...but they don’t really know what to expect from a PR firm. So they hire someone who is, maybe, more of a tactician, who knows nothing about strategy, nothing about branding, ethics...they sell them this great bill of goods and all it is is a great bunch of spin-doctor talk...that’s unethical...Now they’re looking at other [agencies] and other practitioners with trepidation, there a lack of trust. That is still a challenge to the industry. We still have this dark shadow hanging over us...we’re not taken seriously because of the actions of some other people”

Anecdotes of ethical dilemmas.

Participants were asked to describe anecdotes of real-life ethical dilemmas with which they are familiar:

PR1: “When I was working at Fleishman Hillard, they were sued - it was quite public – for billing an inappropriate amount of hours to a large municipality which was one of their clients at the time. There was a lot talked about how folks were encouraged to bill more hours than they were actually working to meet targets of revenue. A couple of my colleagues ended up in prison at that time. The fingers were pointing at the people who were essentially torched for the crime – the senior people. It was never the troops...I assume that some of those folks’ compensation was based on revenue generation. And this was a multi-million dollar client, and I presume that if they fell short of their revenue targets, they weren’t going to get the bonus they wanted...I was not involved in that situation.

PR2: “__’s car dealership had been caught turning back odometers on used cars...the ad agency called me in to see if I would do public relations for the client...the first question I asked him was “Did you do this?” He hemmed and hawed, but ultimately he came out and sort of implied his approval to those who wanted to do that. So ultimately, he was culpable. I asked him if he was willing to come forward and admit it. He said, “No, your job is to cover it up.” I walked out. But they were ready to pay me $4,000 a month to turn a sow’s ear into a silk purse, so to speak...I wasn’t going to jeopardize my standing...it would destroy my career if I took on this client and it was found out that he had been doing it...the potential to the agency was that they would lost a big client, which they ultimately lost anyway...someone who operate like that probably operates like that all the
time. It wasn’t just an isolated instance where he was looking to cover up or do something a little deceitful. I’m sure there were indicators all along.”

PR3: “I’ve heard through other colleagues that they’ve been asked to enhance something...how far do you go when you are putting together a communications document about a product, about how good it is, how do you stretch it? That has gone on, where firms have blown up something, professing the product is better than it really is...To some people, it’s just a little smudging the lines. If you’re lying, you’re lying.”

**Heuristics for ethical decision making.**

When asked if they utilize any specific procedures for evaluating and making ethical decisions in their practice, participants replied:

PR1: “I don’t know if there’s necessarily a formal process...We have a pretty thick handbook, but I haven’t read it in enough detail to answer.”

PR2: “I always let the client know up from that I would never lie for them and I’ll be completely honest. So they know right away that that’s what the expectation is. If you tell a client up front right away that these are the things I will not do for you – I will not lie, you need to be completely transparent with the public...if you’re not, that’s not the way I do PR and we’re not a good match. You lay the groundwork right up front and do away with a lot of confusion down the road.”

PR3: “I don’t...Some agencies have a niche, a specialty. So when they take on clients, the clients know. But when you have an opportunity to take on a client who’s a competitor of another of your current clients, you can’t do that. There’s no rule that says you can’t, and I suppose that if all the parties talked and you all agreed, then it would ok. But how do you start to separate some of those things? You get a media offering and either one of your clients could be the one who’s covered. How to start making decisions like that? It’s still a grey area. PRSA has tried to get somebody in each chapter to be in charge of ethics, but I’m not sure what they’re really doing. In organizations, the people in them haven’t thought about it. Maybe if somebody creates an awareness for them, it would be like wow. Ethics doesn’t get a lot of formal thought.”
Influence of college education.

All three participants reported that their concepts of ethics were fairly well-formed by the time they entered college, that they did not change as a result of their education, and that they do not draw upon anything they learned from their educations regarding ethics. When asked to describe how education influenced their concepts of ethics, the participants responded:

PR1: “It didn’t. There were business ethics classes that were required, but I found it to be fairly obvious.”

PR2: “Not at all. Various universities teach ethics, and that may be of some help to certain people...In my case...I think I developed my own ethic. Some people have their own discoveries when it comes to ethics.”

PR3: “In formal education we never had any ethics. The only ethics training I’ve had was for the APR exam. For me, it’s just part of who I am...it’s more inherent...it’s really more me, and not education that did that.”

Suggestions for PR education.

When asked how they think colleges should prepare students for the ethical dimension of public relations practice, interviewees responded:

PR1: “They should offer real-life examples and case studies that allow students to actually really understand what they might be faced with when they’re thrown into the real world, rather than reading from a textbook what’s right and wrong. I think there should be anecdotes and specific examples shared. Some of the examples that you and I have talked about are good examples of things that I would have liked to hear about in school, but I never did.”

“I’d be interested to know if you find any discrepancies between the professor crowd and the professional world...I was surprised to find when I graduated that the professors didn’t really have a grasp of what the industry was really like. I’d like to know what you find...it would be very interesting to me.”
PR2: “I think it’s good to have a course where ethics is reviewed, but I think it has to come much younger. Students have to learn what’s right and wrong. A few years ago I taught a course in PR… I asked the question ‘if a student was walking out of the classroom and they dropped some money on the floor, what would you do? Pick it up and give it to the person? Pick it up and put it in your own pocket? Most of the class said they’d pick it up and put it in their own pocket. I was stunned by that. They said that the person shouldn’t have dropped it. That highlighted to me the fact that a lot of young students just don’t understand their role in a free society. It always starts out where we’re all our own little government. We govern ourselves. I think that’s where it starts. Once they get to the college level, there’s only so much we can do, because ethics is such a personal thing… They have to teach it, first of all.”

PR3: “They should have more courses on ethics, or a seminar on ethics... Kids... are probably going into jobs where they might know that something doesn’t feel right, but if the boss says it’s ok, it’s ok.... There should be some ethics training within their educational process. I’m not sure how many schools have a communication law course... that would also play into it, not just because of the ethics, but understanding where you can get into trouble. You mentioned personal credo as opposed to what’s legal... If Madonna is sunbathing on her deck... and a photographer takes a photo of her from a helicopter, is this legal or not legal? The answer to those photography questions is that if you’re in a public place where others can see you, then all bets are off... Even if you’re taking photos at an event, you almost don’t even need the photographic release signed off, because that’s the way the law works. But if it’s a picture of somebody in an unflattering position, you know it may be legal to take that photo and use it, but is it really the right thing to do? Is it ethical? There are situation like that where younger people might come out of school and just say ‘it’s legal’ or ‘the boss says it’s ok.’ Even the legal and ethical can parallel, being part of the educational process.”

“...the case with Armstrong Williams. When I’ve gone in to speak to classes, you would not believe the debate between students in the classroom about whether that was ethical or that was totally acceptable! [The students were] 50:50. The whole pay-for-play thing. There’s a lot of that murkiness...there should be more ethics taught in college. It really should be.”
Chapter 5: Analysis of Findings

The previous chapter summarized data from the four instruments that were executed for this study. In this chapter, I discuss the findings relative to each of the research questions that constituted the framework for this study: RQ1: How do public relations scholars and practitioners define and value ethics?; RQ2: How do public relations schools and practitioners learn about PR relevant ethics?; and RQ3: How do scholars and practitioners apply PR relevant ethics?

RQ1: How Do Scholars and Practitioners Define and Value Ethics?

A key issue of this research was seeking to understand how ethics are conceptualized and understood by students, educators, and practitioners of public relations.

Scholars.

The term scholars is intended to include students and educators collectively.

Rokeach Values Survey.

Although twelve female and five male students of varying ages and grade levels comprised the participant pool for the Rokeach Values Survey and focus group interviews, the data revealed that gender, age, and grade level differences in their responses to both instruments were unremarkable. The terminal values ranked most important overall by all students were (in descending order or frequency) health (six times), freedom (twice), family security (once), and an exciting life (once). The terminal values ranked least important overall by all students were (in descending order of frequency) a world of beauty (eight times); social recognition, salvation, and mature love (twice each); and family security and a comfortable life (once each). On the basis of
frequency alone, health and a world of beauty were the most agreed upon highest and lowest ranking values respectively. It is noteworthy that the terminal values ranked most important by students were all self-oriented values (with family security considered an extension of self).

In considering how students interpret value concepts it is important to note the perceived overlap among value concepts and the difficulty of a forced choice that the Rokeach Values Survey required, as expressed spontaneously by most students during and immediately after completing their surveys.

The instrumental values ranked most important overall by all students were (in descending order of frequency) honest (five times); loving (four times); loyal (twice); and broad-minded, courageous, forgiving, independent, logical, and responsible (each once). The instrumental values ranked least important overall by all students were (in descending order of frequency) clean (five times); logical (four times); imaginative and obedient (twice each); and broad-minded, capable, forgiving, and self-controlled (once each). It is noteworthy that honest, loving, and loyal received some degree of agreement among participants as the most important instrumental values.

**Focus group interviews.**

During focus group interviews conducted with the same pool of student participants, only one student revealed that the terminal value health was related to his/her concept of ethics, and one student revealed that the terminal value family security was related to his/her concept of ethics. No students revealed that the terminal values freedom or an exciting life were related to their concepts of ethics. However, it is
noteworthy that eleven of seventeen students revealed that the instrumental value *honest* was related to their concepts of ethics.

Students described their concepts of ethics to include the following terms (in descending order of frequency): *right/wrong/good/evil* (twelve times); *morality* (nine times); *society's standards/guidelines* (six times); and *punishment/consequences*, *correctness*, and *honesty* (once each). Overall, all students indicated an understanding of ethics as parameters of right and wrong behavior relative to others, which are both internally and externally determined for various reasons and motivations that might include the possibility of consequences. *Honesty* was the only specific behavior descriptor that was used by any student.

In analyzing findings from the focus group interviews regarding RQ1 (and subsequent RQs) it is important to consider several factors that could have influenced the findings. First, focus groups are ideally conducted in controlled, visually sterile environments. The focus groups for this study were conducted in a classroom that is familiar to the student participants. The visual cues of that environment could have prompted associations in the participants’ thought processes, and influenced responses that might have been different in a controlled environment. Second, in the classroom environment, the students could have perceived me figuratively as a teacher due to our age differences, and might have been motivated to provide the answers that they thought I wanted to hear. Finally, the participants were known to each other as classmates and, possibly, friends. As such, there was a conversational synergy within the context of group interviews that could have influenced agreement and reinforcement of responses among the participants.
Educators.

In E-interviews, seven of eight educators indicated that they define and value ethics from a combined philosophical approach of virtue, deontology, and teleology, and teach accordingly. Only one educator cited teleology as primarily important for students but deficient in textbooks. Additionally, PR educators indicated their professional, rather than personal, understanding of ethics relative to public relations practice and their teaching of that subject. Other indicators of educators' ethics concepts were revealed through descriptions of their course objectives (which stressed, in general terms, ethics as a foundation for professional public relations practice) and through their identification of the main ethical challenges in PR practice: honesty, the potentially influential role of ethical PR practitioners within organizations, and a need for systematic curriculum that addresses PR ethics.

It is important to note that although the e-interview format provided an advantage over a survey instrument in allowing for elaboration, most participants responded briefly to questions that were focused on understanding the role of education in defining ethics.

PR Practitioners.

Elite telephone interviews with three professional PR practitioners revealed that they define ethics in clear terms: honesty, transparency, and doing the right thing in relation to others. These qualities serve as both personal credos and conditions of professionalism in the public relations business environment. Two practitioners favored a virtue or principles-oriented approach as the first consideration in ethical decision-making, and the third considered consequences to be the primary consideration. All three practitioners indicated that their personal credos influence them first and foremost in their
practices, followed immediately by, and combined with, the professional standards of practice espoused by the PRSA Code of Ethics. All three practitioners provided anecdotes describing deceit and monetary greed as the driving factors in incidents they perceived to be ethical transgressions.

It is important to note that although the pool of participants for the telephone interviews comprised only three participants, the distinctly different identities of those elite participants, and their unique professional positions, provided a triangulated perspective of the agency side of the PR industry. The conditions of private telephone conversations without the interference of visual or nonverbal cues promoted focused attention on the interpretations of questions and responses.

Finally, it is also noteworthy that the students, educators, and practitioners interviewed expressed varied, but essentially similar, perceptions of the term *public relations ethics* as an oxymoron.

**RQ2: How Do Scholars and Practitioners Learn About Public Relations-Relevant Ethics?**

Another key objective of this research was seeking to understand how concepts of ethics are acquired by students and practitioners of public relations, including the influence of education in that process.

**Scholars.**

All MSU student participants of the focus group interviews stated, and repeatedly referred to, the importance of parents/family and upbringing during their early formative years as the primary origins of their personal concepts of ethics. Other contributing sources included religion, social relationships, and demographics. The university
experience was also cited as contributing somewhat generally to ethical understanding: university courses (seven times) and social experiences (six times). Specific to learning about public relations-relevant ethics, grade level differences were noted in the students' responses. All students noted that the courses, *Introduction to Public Relations*, *Principles of Public Relations*, and *Communication Research* each contained references to ethics, but that ethics were not given adequate time, explanation, or centrality in those courses. (E.g., participant Sol reported having heard that “lying is unethical,” but was unable to recall anything else; and participant So2 elaborated that “honesty and lying were touched upon … [just don’t want to get caught] but no other values or ethics were mentioned,” among other similar student responses.) Senior level students reported that *PR Cases* was the only course that brought ethics to light as a result of the situation analyses they performed in that course. Although participants reported substantive ethics content in *PR Cases*, they reported that the course taught neither heuristic procedures for analyzing or making ethical decisions nor any philosophical approaches to comprehending ethics at either the universal or particular levels. The findings indicate that ethics did not permeate the curriculum in which these students were enrolled, that the students were not exposed to scholarly inquiry of ethics until their junior or senior year (perhaps during the semester in which they graduate), and that the coverage of ethics at that time did not necessarily develop significant meta-cognition regarding ethics.

**PR Practitioners.**

All three professional PR practitioners reported that they did not learn *anything* about public relations-relevant ethics in college, but rather acquired that knowledge through a combination of their own values and on-the-job experience. This finding might
indicate two possible interpretations: (a) that, because of their ages, the practitioners’ college educations occurred prior to the introduction of public relations-specific tracks into communication degree programs; or (b) that their degree programs simply did not include any ethics content specific to public relations. Participant PRI reported that s/he was “surprised to find when I graduated that the professors didn’t really have a grasp of what the industry was really like.” Despite this unanimous claim, all three PR practitioners strongly suggested that colleges and universities should offer more specific ethics education, starting much younger.

RQ3: How Do Scholars and Practitioners Apply Public Relations-Relevant Ethics?

Another key objective of this research was seeking to understand how ethical concepts are applied in the practice of public relations – both hypothetically, by PR students, and in actuality, by professional PR practitioners. Included in this objective was the determination of heuristic methods of ethical decision-making that might be known and/or used by PR students and practitioners.

Scholars.

During focus group interviews, student participants were asked to define how they would apply ethics to the example of an actual incident involving Edelman Public Relations and its client Microsoft that had previously attracted controversy (Appendix I). Students debated the pros and cons of Microsoft’s gift of new computers to bloggers from the perspectives of whether it was an effective PR strategy and whether it was ethical, and struggled with both arguments. Two senior students found the case too challenging to even comment on. The overall opinion of the remaining student participants was that the gifting of free computers could be considered a justifiable promotional strategy not
unlike those utilized by many other product marketers, but that Microsoft should have employed other tactics (such as loaning the computers) that would not carry the risk of the reputation-damaging stigma of appearing like a bribe to bloggers and to the public at large. The case example was viewed as an ethical grey area by the students, who found it difficult to state a definitive opinion about the ethical nature of the situation for either Edelman or Microsoft.

Further, when asked to consider which philosophical approach to ethics they would apply (duty, virtue, or consequences), the majority of student participants stated that consequences would be their primary consideration – largely from the perspective of wanting to avoid the backfire of repercussions that negative public perceptions could cause them. One sophomore student replied that duty was an important consideration as well, because as a PR practitioner s/he should not expect to bring her/his personal beliefs into the situation. One senior student also considered duty to be paramount because s/he would not risk her/his job for a situation like this one, which s/he deemed not so serious.

**PR Practitioners.**

The three professional practitioners interviewed all stated that their own personal values and ethics guide their work, combined with the professional code of ethics espoused by the PRSA. All three practitioners described refusing ethically-compromising assignments or clients, or stipulating their ethical parameters and terms to prospective clients. All participants described incidents and examples of unethical behaviors they observed among other practitioners, their dismay about the poor reputation the PR industry suffers as a result of those others, and the fear that, consequently, such behaviors affect their own businesses.
Chapter 6: Discussion

This research focused on several primary issues inherent to the aggregate of ethical challenges facing public relations today: concepts of ethics regarding public relations, the role of public relations education in influencing those concepts, and the application of ethical concepts to the practice of public relations (including heuristic means of ethical decision-making). The following discussion highlights findings that are central to the key issues of this study.

The methods executed were restricted by several limitations, including time constraints on participants and researcher, access to—and availability of—participants, and the availability of one primary researcher (the author) to conduct interviews, transcribe, code, and interpret data. Although the sample set for each method was relatively small, the orientation of this study was qualitative rather than quantitative. As such, the data were considered to be qualitatively representative to the extent that logical inferences could be drawn, and upon which future research might be based.

PR students, educators, and working professional practitioners expressed similarities in their concepts of ethics as moral standards involving principles of right and wrong behavior. However, differences were noted that are significant and troubling. The student participants' expressions of ethical concepts were shallow, unsophisticated, sometimes contradictory, and confined to basic concepts that they reported having heard in their PR courses, or that they attributed to their upbringing, such as *lying is wrong*. In interviews, juniors and seniors who reported analyzing cases in an upper level course *PR Cases* did not demonstrate the ability to consider ethical concepts beyond the immediately observable external factors of the cases--concepts such as motivation,
nuances of intention, meta-questions about the role of a PR practitioner in relation to society, or related philosophical reasoning. No student reported knowledge of heuristic decision-making models, and none could clearly describe a process of how to arrive at ethical decisions.

These findings beg the question: Why were PR students and, in particular, graduating senior PR students, not able to engage in ethical consideration more deeply, conceptually, or philosophically than what they exhibited in interviews? It is reasonably likely that the students who voluntarily took time to participate in focus group interviews about PR ethics are seriously inclined toward careers in public relations, and are also invested in their educational processes. Therefore, a further question arises: What is present or missing in public relations education that contributed to this deficit of ethical reasoning capacity?

Although some students expressed that they value the consideration of consequences as an anticipated guiding principle in PR practice, that value was, in some instances, skewed toward a desire not to get caught doing anything that might have negative repercussions upon their own jobs or career status, rather than toward the impact of consequences upon any others, including various publics.

Despite the frequency with which honesty was cited as a value, some students justified the use of spin as inevitable and inherent to the practice of PR. Some students also expected that loyalty to their employer or client (not ethics) would necessarily be the determining influence in their professional behavior, which they justified in the interest of being gainfully employed. Most disturbing were most students’ statements that they anticipated not being able to bring their own ethical principles into their jobs as PR
practitioners. They stated that they expected that working in public relations would require them to create two distinctly separate ethical identities for themselves – self-determined ethics for their personal lives, and work ethics determined by employers, clients, or the industry at large. The students’ expressions were cynical, conflicted, and resigned about this aspect that they perceived to be the inevitability of a career in public relations. Although the students described having personal ethical frameworks that included the principle of honesty, their expressed understanding of the PR industry indicated that they expect that working in that industry will require them to compromise their ethical integrity. That they believed this to be true, and that they accepted it as fact, is disturbing. That it did not deter them from pursuing careers in public relations is equally troubling.

This finding aligns with Gale & Bunton’s (2005) research showing that, among advertising and public relations degree recipients, a significant difference exists “between the views of the alumni who completed an ethics course and those who had not with respect to whether business and personal ethics are the same” (p. 281), and that “those who had not completed an ethics course were more apt to separate personal ethics and business ethics than those who had completed an ethics course” (p. 281). This finding provokes the questions: *What motivates these students to knowingly choose career paths that they believe will require them to sacrifice their personal integrity?*; and, *What aspects of their public relations education contribute to this perception?* The former question could be interpreted in light of the data that nine of the seventeen students interviewed stated a desire to work in the domain of manufactured celebrity PR (entertainment/celebrity/fashion/beauty, and sports), the allure of which offers a
glamorous and exciting career choice to those who are, in fact, the consumers of that domain, and who are, consequently, subject to its influence. "The entertainment and news media are prone to portraying public relations as an image management function, with activities based on little or no substance but on an often-pleasing façade" (Bowen, 2009, p. 406). Exploration of the second question would require further study.

Most of the educators interviewed reported course objectives related to PR ethics that were similarly flat, narrowly-focused, and textbook-driven. One PR educator, however, described objectives and intended outcomes that were rich, deeply challenging, and philosophical in nature, and that provided a broader and greatly expanded context for contextualizing public relations ethics. This finding might represent and reflect perfunctory or myopic ways that ethics is presently conceptualized in PR tracks, although extensive research would be required to ascertain the exact content of all public relations education programs. Subsequent important questions regarding PR education include: *Why do PR educators (generally) not challenge students with deeper philosophical exploration about the ethical and inherently influential nature of public relations practice and professional communications?*; and *Why is the ethics content of PR tracks so sparse, despite the ethical climate of the PR industry, and recent PRSA and NCA studies and suggestions to the contrary?* These questions can be interpreted in light of several facts: The numbers of students enrolled in public relations degree programs has increased dramatically in recent years while the availability of qualified instructors has not (Van Leuven, 1999); PR instructors can be categorized variously: those who are either former or current PR practitioners without formal ethics training; those who are not well-versed in moral philosophy and, therefore, intimidated by the prospect of leading such classroom
discussions or teaching higher-order critical thinking; or those who are academicians lacking professional experience working in public relations. Although any or all of these might predispose communication departments to give scant positioning to ethics within their PR curricula, coupled with the bureaucratic and financial restrictions that often exist in public universities, extensive research would be needed to arrive at an accurate assessment of these factors.

Working professional PR practitioners displayed the most nuances in discussing ethics in practice. Interestingly, in contrast to the students’ understanding of the inevitability of the need to compromise their personal integrity for the sake of working in PR, the three practitioner interviewees reported that their personal ethics were central to their work. They reported that their personal ethical frameworks also comprised their professional ethics, and were primarily influential in their work, despite working in an industry that they felt was tainted by the unethical, but highly visible, actions of a few. The practitioners, who provided a triangulated perspective on the agency side of the PR business, unanimously reported that their on-the-job experiences navigating around and among both ethical and unethical players were more educationally enlightening than formal education. No practitioner reported learning about PR ethics in college or university, and all believed that public relations education does not necessarily produce ethically adept PR professionals. An agreement among the practitioners, unbeknownst to each other, was their perception of a conceptual and pragmatic disconnect between academia and the PR industry, such that the academy is producing PR strategists and tacticians but not necessarily PR professionals in the fullest meaning of that term, including ethics. It is ironic that these practitioners, whose formal education preceded the
recent introduction of public relations degree programs and did not include PR ethics instruction, have a more profound grasp of ethics both personal and professional than the student participants currently enrolled in PR degree programs. Although some depth of ethical understanding can be acquired through practice and experience over time, the constitutive relationship that now exists between academia and the PR industry warrants closer examination in this regard.

Much as education plays a critical role in the professions of science, medicine, business, law, finance, and education itself, the academy needs to elevate and expand its discourse about how it understands and enacts its powerful role in relation to public relations, and how it contributes to its status as less than a true profession. It behooves institutions that are on the leading edge of the communication discipline, or that wish to brand themselves as offering higher echelons of degree programs, to elevate the standing of ethics instruction within PR curricula by offering free-standing PR ethics courses and by solidly embedding ethics content into all courses. Further, integrating a philosophical orientation and teaching heuristic models of ethical decision-making would serve to help students develop a more refined, flexible, and reflexive capacity for moral reasoning.

Teaching heuristics in PR could enhance, rather than restrict, this capacity. The same heuristic model utilized with different philosophical perspectives could yield distinctly different outcomes, as could different models utilized from a single philosophical perspective, as could different individuals utilizing either of these analytical tactics. Other factors may affect the decision-making process as well, including past experience, cognitive biases, faulty logic, complexity, or demographics (de Bruin, 2007). The ability to recognize such factors and their intricacies, and to weigh them in
relation to the totality of implications in an ethical dilemma can serve to develop mental agility in moral reasoning and decision-making. Although the objective is not to necessarily become enmeshed in philosophy, the capacity for reflection that it requires, and develops, in students would be useful in elevating and broadening their perspectives about PR ethics to a level of meta-cognition.

The inclusion of free-standing PR ethics courses would send messages to students and to the PR industry about how the institutions cognize public relations and their responsibilities to that field, to their students, and to society. Not only is it a disservice to students to be under-educated in the critical area of ethics, it is a disservice to the industry, and to society at large – all three of whom constitute stakeholder groups. How can PR education espouse responsibility to publics without demonstrating the same? And how can that be any less than a moral imperative?

**Implications for future research**

Due to the limitations of this study, the findings are not quantitatively conclusive enough to apply broadly. Nonetheless, this study highlights the important need for future research, as the findings do provide a foundation upon which future research might be based. To examine and assess the congruence between PR education and practice in a particular degree program, a comprehensive study could be made of its PR curriculum, content, and pedagogy, including ethnographic classroom observation, and outcome assessment. Similarly, in this regard, a longitudinal study could be designed that documents and tracks students’ values, ethical concepts, and perceptions throughout the entirety of their undergraduate PR education and into the initial years of their professional work in public relations. To assess the efficacy of higher education in
providing PR degree programs that are comprehensive and ethically grounded, a study could be conducted to examine the course and curriculum content of a broad spectrum of colleges and universities. Similarly, a study could be designed to assess the effectiveness of PR education in a particular institution for its ability to develop refined moral reasoning skills in students. Additionally, it could be useful to conduct a meta-analytic study. Such a study would examine societal and cultural assumptions, new technologies, methodologies, pedagogical practices, and other inter-related factors that affect the teaching of public relations with regard to ethical considerations. Finally, it could be beneficial to examine the discourse on public relations practice from a meta-discursive perspective, examining the ways in which ethics are conceptualized in language among various constituencies (including students, educators, practitioners, and publics), and the discursive roles of such conversations in constructing the shared meaning and social reality of public relations ethics.

**Suggestions**

The student findings, in particular, suggest that the outcomes for undergraduate public relations courses may be, in actuality, less than what are intended or desired. It is in the interest of institutions committed to excellence in public relations scholarship to critically scrutinize their public relations curricula, course content, syllabi, and pedagogy, and to conduct PR course-specific assessment. Student findings suggest that the absence of heuristics and theoretical ethics philosophy may pose structural weaknesses to such programs. Finally, as students (unsolicited) expressed interest in more exposure to ethics discussion like they experienced in the focus groups, and in the possibility of creating
personal credos, PR educators should consider making this available outside the classroom, as well, i.e., ethics clubs or ethics colloquia could be established.

The findings of this study suggest that there is an opportunity for educators to contribute to a potential shift in the current PR paradigm, and to altering the discourse about whether ethics are optional in public relations. The question *should ethics be taught in PR?* has been supplanted with *how can ethics best be taught in PR?*

**Conclusion**

Can ethics really be taught? Scholars have explored this question from an educational perspective, among them: Marantz’s (1991) study of the implementation of a curriculum innovation using a values education program which documented that character development can be taught to children and adolescent students within the context of formal education; Piaget’s (1965) theory that cognitive and moral development occur in stages throughout childhood and adolescence; and Kolhberg’s (1981) six stage model of moral development that argued that such development continues past adolescence, into the college years, and adulthood. Kohlberg’s work provided the foundation for Rest’s (1979) development of the Defining Issues Test, commonly used to evaluate moral judgment.

To answer this question it is also necessary to consider the role that values play in informing ethics. A definition of culture implies a society organized by shared and compelling beliefs, attitudes, values, customs, and behaviors that define *the good* for its members (Samovar, et. al, 2007). Likewise, a society can be defined by what it teaches its children. Whether inculcated overtly or covertly, values are inevitably *acquired,* and
along with them, the value judgments that lead to ethical understanding. Ethics apply to all aspects of society equally, including public relations.

By providing public relations degree programs, higher education has taken upon itself a responsibility to its stakeholders (including students), and to the larger society, to advance public relations in both theory and in application. A critical component of that is the development of moral reasoning in its students at a level commensurate with the scope of public relations today and its inherently powerful capacity to influence. Such moral reasoning is not only a defining characteristic of a public relations professional, but should also be a requisite for a degree worthy of its reputation. How academia enacts its role will help determine whether ethics are optional in public relations.
REFERENCES


Newworldencyclopedia.org (2010).


Newbury Park, California: Sage.


APPENDIX A
ROKEACH VALUES SURVEY

INSTRUCTIONS:

DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON THESE PAPERS.

What is your educational level? Place a check in the appropriate line.

_____ Freshman  _____ Sophomore  _____ Junior  _____ Senior

Please provide the following information: Age_______  Gender________________

On the following two pages are two lists of values, each in alphabetical order. Each value is accompanied by a short description and a blank space. Your goal is to rank each value in its order of importance to you for each list. Study each list and think of how much each value may act as a guiding principle in your life.

To begin, select the value that is of most importance to you. Write the number 1 in the blank space next to that value. Next, choose the value is of second in importance to you and write the number 2 in the blank next to it. Work your way through the list until you have ranked all 18 values on this page. The value that is of least importance to you should appear in Box 18.

When you have finished ranking all 18 values, turn the page and rank the next 18 values in the same way. Please do each page separately.

When ranking, take your time and think carefully. Feel free to go back and change your order should you have second thoughts about any of your answers. When you have completed the ranking of both sets of values, the result should represent an accurate picture of how you really feel about what's important in your life.
A Comfortable Life
a prosperous life

Equality
brotherhood and equal opportunity for all

An Exciting Life
a stimulating, active life

Family Security
taking care of loved ones

Freedom
independence and free choice

Health
physical and mental well-being

Inner Harmony
freedom from inner conflict

Mature Love
sexual and spiritual intimacy

National Security
protection from attack

Pleasure
an enjoyable, leisurely life

Salvation
saved; eternal life

Self-Respect
self-esteem

A Sense of Accomplishment
a lasting contribution

Social Recognition
respect and admiration

True Friendship
close companionship

Wisdom
a mature understanding of life

A World at Peace
a world free of war and conflict

A World of Beauty
beauty of nature and the arts
LIST # 2

Ambitious
hardworking and aspiring

Broad-minded
open-minded

Capable
competent; effective

Clean
neat and tidy

Courageous
standing up for your beliefs

Forgiving
willing to pardon others

Helpful
working for the welfare of others

Honest
sincere and truthful

Imaginative
daring and creative

Independent
self-reliant; self-sufficient

Intellectual
intelligent and reflective

Logical
consistent; rational

Loving
affectionate and tender

Loyal
faithful to friends or the group

Obedient
dutiful; respectful

Polite
courteous and well-mannered

Responsible
dependable and reliable

Self-controlled
restrained; self-disciplined
APPENDIX B

PROTOCOL: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. The purpose is to understand how students think of ethics regarding the practice of public relations. It is part of a research project studying ethics in public relations. There are not right or wrong answers. Your responses and comments will be anonymous and kept confidential at all times. They will be used for the purpose of this research project only.

This session will take approximately 45 - 60 minutes and will be tape recorded. A written transcript will be made from it. When speaking, please do not use your own or others’ names. When speaking, identify yourself by first saying the number on the card you’ve been given (Speaker # 1, speaker # 2, etc.).

You do not have to participate in this focus group. You may stop and withdraw at any time. Nothing will happen to you if you do.

The data from this research will be available when the project is completed. Again, thank you for being here. Let’s get started.

Q1: What area of public relations would you like to work in?

Q1a: Why does that area interest you?

Q2: What does the term ethics mean to you? What is your own concept of ethics?

Q2a: How do you think you formed your concept of ethics?

Q2b: From the value survey you just completed, which values are related to your concept of ethics?

Q2c: How has your education influenced your concept of ethics?

Q3: In your college education so far, what have your public relations or communication courses taught you about ethics?
Q3a: Have you taken any courses devoted to ethics specifically?

Q3b: How has ethics been addressed in your public relations courses?

Q4: What do you think are the main ethical challenges that public relations practitioners face?

Q4a: Why do you think so?

Q5: (Present a short example of a real-life public relations situation that is in the news at the time of this interview)

How would you apply ethics in a situation such as this?

Q6: In a situation like this, what do you think should be the main considerations of a PR practitioner:

His/her duty as a professional. For example, his obligations to his client, to his firm, or to his profession.

What he/she considers to be the highest virtue possible in the situation – meaning the principles that he personally values the most.

The consequences of his/her actions? For example, the end results or effects of those actions upon others or himself?

Q7: Are you aware of any specific methods or procedures that could be used to make ethical decisions in public relations practice?

Q6a: Please describe them.

Q8: Is there anything else that you would like to share about this topic?
APPENDIX C

PROTOCOL: E-interview

Dear Instructor;

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project for my Master’s Thesis titled “Ethics optional? How ethics are understood, defined, and enacted in the practice of public relations.” Your responses to the following interview questions will contribute to our understanding of this important topic. Your personal perspective will be most appreciated - there are no right, wrong, or expected answers.

This E-interview format provides you with all of the interview questions at one time, and allows you to answer them at a time and place convenient to you. The built-in E-mail feature allows me to reply to you if necessary, perhaps asking for further clarification or elaboration.

Your participation is voluntary. There are no consequences for not participating, nor is there any compensation for participating. By previously completing and returning the Consent Form to me via E-mail, you have indicated your “Informed Consent to Participate.” Your responses will remain anonymous (other than in my capacity to identify you for the purpose of this communication), and confidential at all times, and will be used solely for the purpose of this research project. Results of the study will be available when it is completed.

If you have questions or concerns about this interview or research study, please contact Todd Kelshaw, Ph.D., Graduate Program Director and Associate Professor of Communication Studies, Montclair State University at 973-655-5162 or at kelshawt@mail.montclair.edu

Thank you.

Pru Kaufman
Graduate Assistant/Candidate for M.A. Public and Organizational Relations, Montclair State University
1. Please describe your educational and professional background.

2. Do you teach in a two or four year school?

3. Is the educational institution in which you teach a private or state school?

4. What is the name of the public relations course you teach?

5. Is the course required or elective?

6. What is the academic level of the course?

7. If required, for what degree and/or concentration is it required?

8. What are the course goals or learning objectives for the course you teach?

9. Which outcomes related to ethics do you feel are most important for your students to achieve as a result of your course? Why?

10. Does your department conduct assessment to determine outcomes for this course?

11. How is ethics (specific to public relations) included in your course syllabus?

12. How does the course you teach help students develop their own concepts of ethics regarding public relations?

13. Which (critical thinking) strategies for ethical decision-making in public relations practice does your course teach?

14. Which approach to ethics do you think is particularly relevant to the practice of public relations today?

   - **Duty** – how a practitioner understands and enacts his/her professional obligations (to a client, employer, or profession)
   - **Virtue** – the principles that a practitioner values most
   - **Consequences** – the end results or effects of an action that could be foreseen from a course of action.

15. Which pedagogical practices do you use in your course to teach ethical concepts relevant to public relations practice?

16. What do you consider to be the main ethical challenges of public relations today?

17. Is there anything else you would like to express about this topic?
Hello. My name is Pru Kaufman and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at Montclair State University. This interview is part of research I'm conducting for my master's thesis for a degree in Public and Organizational Relations. Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to speak with me today.

Q1: What is your occupation?
Q2: Please describe your professional and educational background.
Q3: Please describe the firm you work for.
   Q3a: How long have you worked for this firm?
   Q3b: How long have you worked in public relations?
Q4: What motivated you to enter the field of public relations?
Q5: What comes to mind when I say ethics?
Q6: How did your education influence your concept of ethics?
Q7: What do you think are the main ethical challenges in public relations today?
Q8: Could you describe an anecdote of any ethical challenge that you may know of in your PR practice?
   Q8a: What do you think were the main issues in that situation?
   Q8b: How would you apply your own concept of ethics to a situation such as this?
Q9: When you're faced with ethical dilemmas in your work, do you use a particular method or procedure to analyze and make decisions?
   Q8a: Please describe.
   Q8c: Where does that method come from? For example, did you make it up, learn it in school, or are you required to use it by your employer?
Q10: When facing ethical dilemmas in your work, do you draw upon anything you learned in school?
Q11: When facing ethical decisions in public relations, which one of these considerations is of highest concern to you?

Your duty as a professional public relations practitioner? (For example, how you understand your professional obligations to your client, to your firm, to your profession.)

What you consider to be the highest virtue possible in the situation? (For example, the principles that you personally value most.)

The consequences of your actions? (For example, the end results or effects that you foresee from a course of action - upon others, or yourself.)

Q11a: If “consequences upon self” is chosen...

Please elaborate by describing the nature of your self-interest. For example, concern about job status, career advancement, income, health, or other.

Q11b: If “consequences upon others” is chosen...

Please elaborate on your concern about others. For example, please identify most or all of the people who might be affected as a result of your decisions or actions? Describe the types of consequences (either positive or negative) that might be of concern to you regarding these people.

Q12: When facing ethical questions, which of the following most influences your choice of action?

Your personal credo
A professional code of ethics, or standards of practice.
Legality.

Q13: How should colleges prepare students for the ethical dimension of public relations?

Q14: Is there anything else you would like to add?
Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Prudence Kaufman successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 05/29/2010

Certification Number: 455319
APPENDIX F

RECRUITMENT MATERIAL: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

Text for recruitment of PR students

Dear Public Relations Student,

You are cordially invited to participate in a research project about ethics in public relations practice. The project is particularly interested in understanding how students think about ethics.

Share your valuable opinions and insights! Join your fellow PR students for an interesting and provocative conversation about issues relevant to your education and, possibly, your future career.

Focus groups will be conducted on the following dates and will take last approximately 45 – 60 minutes:

**Freshman PR students:**
- Monday, October x, 2010 at 3:00pm
- Wednesday, October x, 2010 at 3:00pm

**Sophomore PR students:**
- Monday, October x, 2010 at 4:00pm
- Wednesday, October x, 2010 at 4:00pm

**Junior PR students:**
- Monday, November x, 2010 at 3:00pm
- Wednesday, November x, 2010 at 4:00pm

**Senior PR students:**
- Monday, November x, 2010 at 3:00pm
- Wednesday, November x, 2010 at 4:00pm

Reply by October x to reserve a spot. You will be notified of the location with your confirmation. Thanks for participating!
Dear Instructor;

My name is Pru Kaufman. As a graduate student/assistant in Montclair State University I am conducting research for my Masters’ thesis “Ethics optional? How ethics are learned, defined, and enacted in the practice of public relations.” One of my primary goals for this study is to gain insight into how ethics are taught within public relations curricula.

For this research, I am conducting short interviews with college and university instructors who currently teach public relations. The interview will be conducted via E-mail and should take approximately 20 - 30 minutes to complete. Although you may respond to the questions at your own convenience, the interview must be completed and returned to me by November x, 2010.

Your personal perspective on this important topic would be greatly appreciated. If you would like to participate in this research, please reply to my contact information below. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Pru Kaufman
Graduate Assistant/Student
Department of Communication Studies – Montclair State University
kaufmanp1@mail.montclair.edu
Dear (practitioner);

My name is Pru Kaufman. I am currently completing my Masters Degree in Public and Organizational Relations and am conducting a study for my final thesis. One of my primary research goals for this study is to understand the types of ethical dilemmas that public relations professionals face in their work today, and how PR practitioners define and integrate ethics into their work.

For this research I am interviewing public relations professionals who work on the agency side of the industry. The short interview will be conducted by telephone during October, 2010, and will take approximately twenty to thirty minutes to complete. I would greatly appreciate your personal perspective and input on this important topic, as well as the opportunity to include you in this project. Your responses will remain anonymous and confidential. The results of this academic study will be made available to you when it is complete. If you are interested in participating, please reply to my contact information below. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Pru Kaufman
Graduate Assistant/Student
Department of Communication Studies – Montclair State University
Kaufmanpl@mail.montclair.edu
CONSENT FORM FOR ADULT PARTICIPANTS IN FOCUS GROUPS

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you fill in this form.

Study’s Title:

Ethics optional? How ethics are understood, defined, and enacted in the practice of public relations.

Why is this study being done? The purpose of this study is to understand the ethical challenges of public relations, and how teachers, students and practitioners relate to those challenges.

What will happen while you are in the study? After obtaining the consent of participants, the researcher will ask the participants to complete a short questionnaire by answering questions about their values, and about their ideas on public relations and ethics. As a group, participants will then engage in a discussion with the researcher. The session will be audiotaped. The information gathered will be used only for the purpose of academic research. The audiotape will be erased after a written transcript has been made.

Time: This study will take about 45 – 60 minutes to complete.

Risks: The risks are no greater than those in ordinary life. You may feel or experience uncertainty or confusion if asked about your opinions or personal values. If you experience any of the above, you may call MSU’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at 973 – 655 – 5211.

Benefits: You may benefit from this study by identifying and considering your personal values, by learning about others’ values, by learning about different concepts of ethics, and by discussing the business practices of public relations. Other participants may benefit for the same reasons, and because this study will contribute to an understanding of how ethics are learned and applied in public relations.

Who will know that you are in this study? You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are confidential and anonymous according to the law.
**Do you have to be in the study?**  You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you.

**Do you have any questions about this study?**  Phone or email Pru Kaufman (kaufmanpl@mail.montclair.edu, 973 – 655-7471) or write to:

Department of Communication Studies  
Montclair State University  
1 Normal Avenue  
Life Hall Room 050  
Montclair, New Jersey 07043

**Do you have any questions about your rights?**  Phone or email the IRB Chair, Debra Zellner (reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu or 973-655-4327).

It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Please initial:  
_______ Yes  
_______ No

I would like to get a summary of this study:

Please initial:  
_______ Yes  
_______ No

It is okay to audiotape me while I am in this study:

Please initial:  
_______ Yes  
_______ No

It is okay to use my audiotaped data in the research:

Please initial:  
_______ Yes  
_______ No

The copy of this consent form is for you to keep.  
If you choose to be in this study, please fill in your lines below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Print your name here</th>
<th>Sign your name here</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prudence A. Kaufman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Principal Investigator</td>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd Kelshaw, Ph.D.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Faculty Sponsor</td>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONSENT FORM FOR ADULT E-interview PARTICIPANTS

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later.
You can talk to other people before you fill in this form.

Study’s Title:

Ethics optional? How ethics are understood, defined, and enacted in the practice of public relations.

Why is this study being done?

This study is being conducted to understand the ethical challenges of public relations, and how instructors, students and practitioners relate to those challenges.

What will happen while you are in the study?

After obtaining your consent, the researcher will Email you a list of questions. You will write your responses and Email them back to the researcher. The researcher may reply to you with a request for elaboration on one or more questions.

Time: This study will take about 20 -30 minutes to complete. You are also free to spend more time answering the questions if you choose.

Risks: The risks are no greater than in ordinary life.

Benefits: You and others may benefit from this study by contributing to a larger understanding of the ethical challenges of public relations, and the role of academic instruction regarding those challenges. The results of this study will be available to you when it is complete.

Who will know that you are in this study? We will keep who you are confidential and anonymous according to the law.

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you. You will still get the things that you were promised.
**Do you have any questions about this study?** Phone or email Pru Kaufman at 973-655-7471, kaufmanpl@mail.montclair.edu, or write to:

Department of Communication Studies  
Montclair State University  
1 Normal Avenue  
Life Hall # 050  
Montclair, New Jersey 07043

**Do you have any questions about your rights?** Phone or email the IRB Chair, Debra Zellner (reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu or 973-655-4327).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It is okay to use my data in other studies:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Please initial: ______ Yes ______ No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I would like to get a summary of this study:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Please initial: ______ Yes ______ No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Please keep a copy of this consent form for your own records.*

If you choose to be in this study, please fill in your lines below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Print your name here</th>
<th>Sign your name here</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prudence A. Kaufman</td>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Principal Investigator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd Kelshaw, Ph.D.</td>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Faculty Sponsor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONSENT FORM FOR ADULT PARTICIPANTS IN TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later.
You can talk to other people before you fill in this form.

Study’s Title:

Ethics optional? How ethics are understood, defined, and enacted in the practice of public relations.

Why is this study being done? The purpose of this study is to understand the ethical challenges of public relations, and how teachers, students and practitioners relate to those challenges.

What will happen while you are in the study? After obtaining consent from participants, the researcher will ask the participants to respond to questions about public relations and ethics. The session will be audiotaped. The information gathered will be used solely for the purpose of academic research. The audiotape will be erased after a written transcript has been made.

Time: This study will take about 20 minutes.

Risks: The risks are no greater than in ordinary life. Your anonymity will be protected, and information gathered will be kept confidential.

Benefits: You and others may benefit from this study by contributing to a larger understanding of the ethical challenges and practices of public relations.

Who will know that you are in this study? We will keep who you are confidential and anonymous according to the law.

Do you have to be in this study? You do not have to be in this study. Your participation is voluntary. It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you.

Do you have any questions about this study? Phone or email Pru Kaufman at 973-655-7471, kaufmanpl@mail.montclair.edu, or write to:

Department of Communication Studies
Montclair State University
1 Normal Avenue
Life Hall # 050
Montclair, New Jersey 07043
Do you have any questions about your rights? Phone or email the IRB Chair, Debra Zellner (reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu or 973-655-4327).

It is okay to use my data in other studies:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

I would like to get a summary of this study:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

It is okay to audiotape me while I am in this study:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

The copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

If you choose to be in this study, please fill in your lines below.

Print your name here  Sign your name here  Date

Prudence A. Kaufman  Signature  Date
Name of Principal Investigator

Todd Kelshaw, Ph.D.  Signature  Date
Name of Faculty Sponsor
APPENDIX L

DATA: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

N= 17 students currently enrolled in the undergraduate public relations sequence at a large east-coast university (one freshman, four sophomores, six juniors, and six seniors). Focus groups were conducted on November 10 and 17, 2010. Coding designates academic grade level, as follows: “Fr” indicates freshman, “So” indicates sophomore, “Jr” indicates junior, and “Sr” indicates senior. Numbers accompanying each designation indicate the quantity and order of participants in each grade level. “PK” indicates Pru Kaufman, interviewer.

PK: Which area of public relations would you like to work in? Why does that area interest you?

F1: TV anchor or PR agent.

So1: Entertainment business and fashion because it’s exciting. I wouldn’t want to do corporate PR because it’s boring.

So2: Working with celebrities or a really big successful company seems most interesting. You don’t hear as much about smaller companies as you do about Tiger Woods’ scandal.

So3: Sports PR - working for a team, organization or sports network, because I love everything about sports.
So4: Celebrity PR or pharmaceutical PR. I’ve been a pharmacy tech for several years and learned a lot about it. Or, I might be a publicist for a friend who just wrote a book. I find celebrity and the star lifestyle fascinating.

Jr1: Publishing industry – books, magazines. I’ve always liked to read and to communicate, so it’s a logical decision for me. I’d enjoy representing an author.

Jr2: PR for drug companies, pharmaceuticals. I’ve always worked in pharmacies.

Jr3: Health PR, pharmaceuticals, or representing a client. I have aunts and uncles in that field and I’m interested in it too.

Jr4: Non-profit PR. I was involved with a non-profit organization. It’s not really the same sort of PR. It’s a specialty, different from the classic PR.

Jr5: My main goal is to work at a record label. I want to work closely with music artists because music is my life. I want to help bands and artists get to a higher place.

Jr6: Event planning, weddings and other special events. Being part of someone’s most special day of their life. I’d make every detail as special as I could for that person.

Sr1: I’m confused between entertainment and fashion. Maybe a sports team. In my internship at Coyne PR, I’m working with general clients, so maybe that as well.

Sr2: I’d like to have just one client. I’m not comfortable writing or speaking about a client unless I’m completely knowledgeable about that client. If I learn everything about just one client, I can do that with more ease than if I have clients from various industries, like beauty, scientific, technology.
Sr3: Unsure, but mostly interested in music, entertainment and fashion industries. My current internship is at MTV. I’m also interested in event coordinating.

Sr4: Event planning. I recently interned for an art gallery. I enjoyed the special events.

Sr5: Event planning, maybe. Communications in general. Working with people. My outgoing personality. I always have to be on the go, can’t sit at a desk for hours.

Sr6: Beauty, fashion or style PR, because I like cosmetology.

PK: *What does the term ethics mean to you? What is your own concept of ethics?*

Fr1: Moral fiber, correct, similar to political correctness. Honesty, morality. Doing things properly that society would have you believe.

So1: Right and wrong, good and evil, morals. Everyone has different morals. Your ethics could be different. Standards of what’s right and wrong in a situation. Ethics is what’s socially acceptable, what you should and shouldn’t do. Obviously you’ll be reprimanded if you do something below that, if you’re not meeting the standards.

So2: What’s morally right and wrong. Basically, that’s all you can say about it.

So3: What you should know. Standards of what is right and wrong. How one should handle a situation ethically. If you don’t think something should be done ethically, then you shouldn’t be doing it.

So4: Ethics is what is morally right and wrong, but it’s really a guideline that’s made by society and business. You just have to follow the ethics that are put in place by society. That’s the main concept of ethics.

Jr1: Taking your established morals and applying them to your everyday life.
Jr.2: The ability to distinguish between right and wrong and project that in your work and daily life. Not only your own opinion of it, but also other people’s perceptions.

Jr3: I think that most people know an idea of what’s right and wrong. What makes you feel at ease in your own mind is what you judge it by. If you’re being ethical, it feels right to you. There’s no tension. You know if you do something wrong or unethical there’s going to be tension in your mind between right and wrong. So like everything at ease.

Jr4: It’s like you have your set of ethics – what you believe is wrong or right. But then you have to go by the majority’s ethics in the everyday world of what’s generally accepted as wrong and right.

Jr5: I think I always practice what I preach. If I tell my young cousin that smoking is wrong, I can’t be a smoker, which I would never do. I can’t stand people who are hypocritical like that. So morally wrong, especially in your workplace, if your boss is telling you one thing and doing another. Honestly, when I hear the word ethics I think of anyone’s background, where you’re coming from, how you believe, how you feel about certain things, what makes you you. I can be totally wrong, but that’s the most I can think of. That’s the closest I have to it. I’ve never gone into what the word means.

Jr6: Your morals, what is considered right and wrong for you to do or to say in a place of business.

PK: As it applies to yourself, do you have a concept of personal ethics at all?
Jr6: What I personally feel is my ethics in life, in general? I was raised Christian my whole life, so God and religion are big factors in my life. That’s the main one. Self-respect, obviously, I have a lot of that. When I’m at a workplace, I always try to be nice to someone, because that might make their day. Being friendly and nice means a lot to me because I want to be the best person I can be. Respect for myself, and keeping myself on a good level, and keeping my mom proud.

Sr1: Whether something or a situation that occurs is morally right or wrong. It depends on the situation and on what you feel is right or wrong, what your moral standards are.

Sr2: Ethics is doing the right thing even when you’re pressured to do the wrong thing. Going by what is morally good, but that also depends on your morals.

Sr3: Ethics is anything that goes by what you believe. Also, I think of crisis management when you mention ethics. What do you do at a time of crisis with your company? Are you going to do what the company says to do, or are you going to walk away and go with what you believe?

Sr4: What you value most, what your personal beliefs are, what you believe is most important in any aspect of life – professional world, personal life, or just in any area. It’s what you believe to be most important.

Sr5: What you believe and value. A lot of it is about being honest, even working in the professional world, where you can’t be honest but you still have to. That’s a major part of it.

Sr6: Your morals and what you believe to be right and wrong in your personal as well as your professional life.
PK: *How do you think you formulated your concept of ethics?*

Fr1: My parents - loving, caring but stern - made sure I was always a straight arrow.

So1: How I was raised. I learned from a very young age to be respectful, what was really wrong or right. If I did something that was unethical to my parents, they made sure that I didn’t do that again. Also, I learned from my social environment, all the people who made any impact on my life – parents, teachers.

So2: Largely how I was raised and what my parents taught me about right and wrong, especially at a young age. If something was unethical to their minds, I’d get punished. I learned that I shouldn’t do that. Social environment, demographics, relationships with teachers and friends especially. You share common ethics and morals with who you’re close with. I’m from a small urban town with the majority of well-off families, successful and wealthy. You have to think of what’s right and wrong to them, compared to someone who comes from an inner city. Obviously, their ethics and morals are going to be a little bit different.

So3: My ethics were formed by just what I saw. Wasn’t anything to do with my parents, who were never married or divorced. I kind of raised myself because no one was around, so I learned all the essentials from other people. My janitor in elementary school taught me a lot. Now I notice that my ethics are a little different from most people. I have higher standards where others have lower ones, and I have lower standards where others have higher ones. I have different ways of looking at things.

So4: What my parents taught me – especially my dad. Other relationships. Not that I took their ethics, but what I learned from others put a perspective on what I
believe. I was able to look at what other people think, what I think, and formed my own that way. Most of the ethics I have right now are things I’ve thought of myself. When I was younger, my mind was like a sponge taking in what everybody said. As I got older and matured a little, I began to question what was right and wrong to me, not what everyone else said.

Jr1: I learned it from my family. In younger years, you go by what your parents and grandparents teach you. Now, my ethics have shifted a little bit because I can make my own decisions. I see things for myself out in the real world. So I take a bit from what I learned when I was younger and what I’m learning now, and blend in a constant changing pattern.

PK: So it’s in flux right now?

Jr1: Yes, I would say so. The general idea of my ethics will always be the same but I think as the world changes a little bit, you have to shift with it.

Jr2: It first started in school, when I was younger. I learned ethics because I went to a Catholic school and that was instilled in us. In high school, by getting and maintaining friendships, I established my own code of morals throughout life.

Jr3: I developed my ethics from the adults in my life - my parents, older siblings, aunts and uncles, and teachers. In high school is when I really developed my sense of morals. I started to realize that there are things like major issues where you need to know your stance on it, whether it’s right or wrong.

Jr4: What our parents believed. They teach us their belief systems, what they value, and that kind of shapes what you tend to believe or value.
Jr5: Family is a really big deal because when you’re small, everything that you do, you watch your parents and everyone who’s older than you, even sisters. So, they’re your role models. Whatever you see your mom and dad doing, that’s what you’re going to do. I never believed in Santa Claus because my mom didn’t let me believe in Santa. It depends on how you were raised, how you grow up. Things can shift when you go to middle school, with friends and peer pressure, that’s when it comes down to you to stick to your own morals. There can be friends who help change your ethic, but it all starts at home and goes from there.

Jr6: From your parents and from school. When you’re young, your parents tell you what’s right or wrong – do this, don’t do that. When you go to school, we learn don’t hit other people, do unto others as you would want them to do unto you, that’s what drilled into your head all through elementary school. You know stealing is wrong because they told you so, not because you tried it and got arrested. Where you grew up also has something to do with it.

PK: Geographically where?

Jr6: Yes, because if you don’t get a good education, maybe you won’t know that you aren’t allowed to steal, and you’re not allowed to do certain things. So the place where you grow up has something to do with it.

Sr1: It’s instilled through your parents. Your personal background is important in your ethics. Your religion is important too because at a younger age you learn what’s right and what’s wrong.

Sr2: I believe the same things. It’s a matter of when you’re growing up and learning what’s right and wrong. Eventually you can form your own rights and wrongs.
Sr3: My perception of ethics is learned, instilled at an early age by what my parents said is right or wrong. And also learned in the school environment, what we learn from a textbook.

PK: *When you refer to textbooks, is there a particular grade level that you’re talking about – college level, high school, elementary?*

Sr3: I’m basically talking about college level because that’s when ethics gets put into place, when you get older.

Sr4: A lot of it has to do with how you’re brought up. Or maybe your culture, your background. How you were raised. A lot of your beliefs and values come from.

PK: *Was there anything specific in that background that shaped your sense of ethics?*

Sr4: What our parents believed. They teach us their belief system, what they value, and that kind of shapes what you tend to believe or value.

Sr5: It has to do with how you’re brought up and what environment you’re in. Also, schooling is part of it. Like in our classes now, we’ve learned about ethics and that gives us more technical terms of what it is. But it can mean various things to different people. I think your family life and how you were raised definitely. I was always raised to tell the truth and be an honest person by my parents, so I’m used to that.

Sr6: Family-based. I grew up in a pretty strict family when it comes to expectations of school, and how to respect others as well as yourself, so that’s how I formed my ethics as I grew up.
PK: From the value survey you just completed, which values are related to your concept of ethics?

F1: Almost all, in different aspects. Honesty and salvation because I come from a religious background. Religion itself is based on ethics to some extent. Courage goes with honesty, because if you don’t stand up for what you believe in, then you’re lying to yourself. Self-esteem.

So1: Independence, honesty, and loyalty are the top three that are important to me. If you’re not doing to be honest, don’t talk to me. If you’re not going to be loyal — intimate or friendship — it’s not worth it. Independence — my parents taught me to think for myself.

So2: Prosperous life. If you can’t find joy in your life, you’re not going to be honest. Self-esteem — the most important thing is for you to respect yourself. Those two are the most important values — even before honesty. Honesty is important too, but the foremost thing is that you have to find a prosperous life; you have to enjoy what you’re doing. Then you’ll be more courageous and have more independence and you’ll find more freedom.

So3: Prosperous life, but it depends how you define prosperous. My mom has a prosperous life but she’s not happy. I have a good time and enjoy my life, but my parents don’t understand because they are not happy with theirs.

So4: Caring for family, health and helping others — are most important because you can’t do anything without being healthy. I’m always trying to please someone else, not myself, always thinking I can’t do this, I can’t hurt this person, or that
person might be affected. I worry about everyone else but I can’t find a middle ground for myself.

Jr1: Responsibility and honesty rank really highly with me. I think those are linked with my ethics.

Jr2: Respect, caring about other people you aren’t related to is a big part of my ethical perception. Taking into consideration other people’s feelings.

Jr3: Open mindedness and being able to accept that there are other people out there and being able to see their opinion as well.

Jr4: Honesty and loyalty were highest on mine. I’ve always thought that was the most important thing – to be honest and to be loyal. I learned that throughout life.

Jr5: Saved/salvation. Forgiving and self-respect were the first ones that go with ethics and how to be a good person. I try to stick with that.

Jr6: My highest rankings were loyalty and being trustworthy. Also, honor. All the things that have to do with people relying on you as a person, because I think they say something about you – you are trustworthy, people want to put their trust in you.

Sr1: Honesty. Because in certain situations in PR, you have to be honest at all times. And if you’re honest, in an ethical situation or crisis management, you’re a better person. It’s the right thing to do as opposed to wrong.

Sr2: Honesty. If you start lying about things, you’re obviously unethical.

Sr.3: Honesty. You need to start with yourself. So internal characteristics like honesty and anything that relates to that, that’s what you start with. Then you can build onto that.
Sr4: Honest was on the list and I think I ranked that one or two. So I thought of that right away. Maybe responsibility. Honest is really the one that came to mind.

Sr5: Honesty. I ranked forgiveness pretty high. A lot of them actually were related to what I think is ethically correct. A lot of them overlapped each other, like you couldn’t have one of them without the other.

Sr6: Honesty. I ranked that number one. I also ranked respect and being loving high.

PK: How has your education influenced your concept of ethics?

Fr1: Catholic High School. Religion courses helped me understand ethics more from a Catholic and Christian lifestyle. My school had a discipline program regarding cheating and behavior in school. That helped me realize how to become a man because there was always someone watching you. It sticks with you so you become more self-aware. Here at MSU I’m learning a work ethic because I have to manage my time and focus.

So1: You learn going through school that everything’s not as ethical as you want it to be – there are always cheaters, those kids in your group who don’t do any work but still get the A. I refer to that because that’s unethical. Not how it should be. School has not influenced me, hasn’t changed anything.

So2: Elementary and high school – don’t cheat, tell the truth, and treat others with respect. I learned that there are people who have lesser values than you do. You come across situations where you can’t influence your ethics upon other people, but you have to just hold your own. Understand and learn from that and be a better person.
So3: I don’t think I learned any ethics from school or education. I haven’t gained any ethics, but I’ve noticed unethical things and ethical things. It hasn’t affected how I look at ethics. I’ve never had a teacher teach me something morally.

So4: With every experience you take away something consciously or subconsciously. If you see someone get in trouble for cheating, you now know that in this class you can’t get away with it. You always pick up something, even if you don’t realize it right away. Throughout elementary, learning the fundamentals of anything – interacting with other people, grammar – you’re picking up so much about ethics, but you really don’t comprehend how much.

Jr1: In recent years the courses we’ve been taking in PR have spoken about ethics. I’ve definitely learned a lot more about it than I’d known prior. Having that information helps me decide what I feel is right and wrong.

PK: *Which courses?*

Jr1: Almost all past courses. *PR Cases* right now has touched a lot on ethics.

PK: *So what you alluded to before - about becoming aware of other things and maybe synthesizing new concepts of ethics - is this influencing your personal sense of ethics?*

Jr1: My personal ethics are pretty solid because I don’t think within myself I’m going to change what I believe. But being open-minded to things and different people, the more I learn about it, the more I have an acceptance of other things.

Jr2: Just throughout Communication Studies courses in general, ethics is always brought up in courses. Right now, in *PR Writing* we’re talking about ethics and
persuasion. Definitely makes me question how I see myself in my career and within my value system and such.

Jr3: I've always had a set of morals that I live by, but I think that when I came to college and began taking more courses, it gave me more things to think about that I need to come to an ethical stance on. There were issues that I didn't even consider until I came to college and started learning about them. It opened my mind. In PR Writing and PR Cases, we've been talking about a lot of different issues that I don't have a stance on. Taking the courses has helped me understand how my morals will fit into my ethics as I grow up.

Sr1: In PR Cases, this has been instilled upon me, because we keep on learning about different cases and scenarios, and it's all about ethics at the end of the day. So that's where I've learned more about it.

Sr2: Learning about cases and how companies and people play out in situations. Case studies, in general, you can see what went wrong and what was good, so you can learn from their mistakes, especially if it's a case of ethics.

Sr3: I agree with both. I'm also in the same class. You never realize how much a role ethics plays in the workplace, especially in these cases.

PK: So has your education influenced - has it changed - what you considered to be your ethics? Has it added to your ethics? Has it taken anything away? How has it influenced what you personally believe?

Sr1: I personally think it has some influence but not a full effect because at the end of the day I'm still going to do what I think is right or wrong. So whether a professor tells me this is the right thing to do and this is the wrong thing, if I feel
like it’s not, then I’m still going to do the opposite, what I feel is right and wrong personally. I have very strong personality characteristics. No one can really influence my opinion much, unless it’s something good and a benefit to my life. But if it’s your opinion, it doesn’t matter to me.

Sr2: What we’ve learned so far hasn’t developed my definition of ethics. But I can see it more like guidelines that we’re learning, seeing what other people do. Whether or not you agree with it, you can take it for what it is. At the end of the day, you’re still going to do what you think is ethical.

Sr3: I feel that learning more about ethics does not necessarily shape my opinion. It just adds onto it. I agree that at the end of the day I’m going to do what I think is right, not what other people instill in my head.

Sr4: I think that education plays a major role in ethics. To other people who haven’t had a college education or might not have finished high school, it might not be as important. So I think that ethics plays a bigger role to us than it does to someone who isn’t in college. I don’t think it’s changed. Maybe just gotten stronger. I’ve always had, and thought about ethics, but obviously now I know more about it. Maybe, now in college it’s more important. It was always important, but now you realize more how to be ethical, do your work, and be honest about it. College is a totally different environment than high school or grammar school, it’s definitely more important now.

PK: Do you feel that your education has given you different concepts of ethics than what you got from your background, or growing up?
Sr5: Maybe my college courses have helped me shape more of the ethics that are important in the professional world, more of things that are going to be important when I do find a career, when I’m in a professional setting. That’s where college has helped me learn those types of ethics.

Jr6: Every level of education has something to do with my ethical values. In elementary school they teach you what’s right and wrong. In middle school, it’s tested out between what you’re willing to do or not to do with peer pressure. Then, in college, you’re set out on our own. You don’t have your parents to say that’s bad. Here, if you’re caught drinking, you’re kicked out. That’s real life. The consequences are higher. It’s not ranked higher on your ethics value, but it makes it real.

Jr5: When you’re in college, it can help your ethics and help you remember what’s important because there’s no mom and dad here. What you do is your own accord, your own actions. If your ethics are strong from the start – college is when it gets strong.

Jr5: Being here in school reminds you of your ethics and what you stand for. Wherever you are, you still are where you came from. Not in a literal sense. If you were a good person at home, you’re going to be a good person at college. If you were rude at home, you’re going to bring that with you to school. If you are a good person, that stays with you while you’re at college. That means that your ethics were pretty strong.

Jr6: The diverse campus. I grew up in a very white town, Whippany. Growing up, I didn’t understand diversity. I never encountered people of a different race until I
got to college. Not that my family was racist, that’s just where they chose to move. When I came here, it was not exactly culture shock, or made me nervous. I just wasn’t used to it. My boyfriend’s family is very racist. To hear them speak about other people the way they do makes me sick to my stomach now.

PK: *What courses have you taken that talked about ethics?*

Sr4: We talked about the most recent one – *PR Cases*. We talked a lot about ethics because we looked at certain cases and how situations were approached. They were approached in either an ethical way or unethical way. That’s where honesty comes in the most – if different organizations were honest about fixing problems or making something better. The way they approached it. So far that class has been the most focused on ethics.

PK: *In your college education so far, what have your public relations or communication courses taught you about ethics?*

Fr1: Conversations with professors have helped me view ethics differently, from a more in-depth intellectual standpoint, and shaped my ethics. Dealing with other people, self-disclosure, appropriate disclosure, communication is more than speaking, includes nonverbal, how you act with people.

So1: My professor lays down everything blatantly and tells us PR is a very manipulative industry. I feel that ethics and PR is an oxymoron. It would be amazing if everyone in PR was ethical but you’re always going to have those people who are trying to get where they want to get, and doing it in unethical ways. I’ve learned that you should be honest. I’m going to go by those guidelines, but in reality I know that it’s not as ethical as it should be.
So2: PR classes have taught me that ethics is something you should have but is not necessary to have. It’s not what you have so much as what you portray that you have. You could believe something is right or wrong, but in the end your client is paying you to think and present their material/news in a certain way. Even if you disagree with it, you have to display it with their ethics, not your own. If I wasn’t a vegetarian but I worked for a company that was vegan based and had to portray the belief that killing animals is wrong, even though that’s not my belief, that’s what I’m being paid to do.

PK: Is this something that you were taught in one of your courses?

So2: Yes, in a couple of them.

So3: You’re going to have to have a certain level of respect to clients and whoever else you deal with, but at the same rate it’s a dirty game. You have to fight to get into the PR business. It’s not easy. No matter how much ethics you have. You have to take away some just to get where you want to get. Also, you can’t influence the client with your ideas because you’re getting paid. You have to represent them in a way that they want to be represented. You can’t put your own values into how you’re going to represent them because at the end of the day, it’s not you. You’re behind the scenes, it’s your client that’s being looked at by everyone.

PK: And this is something that was taught in one of your courses?

So3: Yes.

Jr1: In Pr Writing, ethics was given special attention. It was basically what not to do. Don’t be misleading, lie, use fabricated stories. Back up everything by evidence.
PK: *Why? You were told what not to do, but why? Because there are consequences, because it’s wrong, because…?*

Jr1: More so consequences. We were taught about defamation and possible law suits. It was taught more based on that there are consequences. As a PR professional you are expected to act this way, otherwise there are consequences.

PK: *So it’s really more about the consequences more so than about what’s right or wrong?*

Jr1: Yes, that’s how it’s been.

Jr2: In *Communication Research* we’re talking about ethics. It’s more to be accurate with the information that you’re giving. The professor told us that it’s constantly changing. There’s always new dimensions of ethics so it’s not like it’s a set standard that you’re always going to go by. It’s really evolving with whatever field you’re in and however people are perceiving.

PK: *In your case, it’s more about accuracy?*

Jr2: Yes, accuracy.

Jr3: In my previous communication course, we’ve briefly touched on ethics where they told us the consequences of doing unethical things in the PR industry that you’re definitely going to eventually face your consequences because the media is so prevalent. Right now in *PR Cases*, we’re focusing on how it’s always better to be truthful and give the complete story, rather than hold back information or give false information, which would be unethical. So this course I’m in right now is really focusing most of our class time on ethics, whereas in other courses, we’d
maybe do one chapter which would last one or two classes and then we’d move on. We’re basically spending the entire semester talking about ethics.

Jr4: We’re in the same PR Cases course, so I agree with that. The other thing we do in that course is discuss cases and the teacher asks us what should we have done in this situation? Everyone can give their opinion of what they would do, and unite in ethics together.

Jr5: This current course, PR Cases, is the main course that pinpoints ethics. My other courses haven’t really touched base on ethics, so I’m learning a lot about crisis management, dealing with cases, and that’s contributing to my opinion and views about ethics.

Sr1: I don’t have anything to add to that.

Sr2: In my PR courses, we haven’t learned specifically about ethics.

Sr4: They’ve taught me always to be ethical, especially in PR Cases. Looking at cases and the strategies they’ve used – crises, how to manage something. We’ve always had to state how we would go about that. We’ve been taught flat out you should be honest right away. People will respond better to that than if you beat around the bush.

Sr5: They just emphasize how important they are. They try to do that.

PK: In a general way, or in a specific way?

Sr5: In a specific way when it comes to the cases we’ve been dealing with in PR Cases, because when we read them, we see the outcomes of what happens when organizations aren’t ethical and how bad it is for that specific organization. Then we see the good in the ones that are ethical and do the right things.
PK: Would you say that this course, PR Cases, is the only course that has really addressed ethics in your sequence of courses?

Sr4: I don’t think so. Every course has touched upon it. But PR Cases has let us see situations where we’re actually seeing what’s happening when things aren’t done the right way. In the other courses, I feel like we’ve just kind of learned what ethics are.

Sr.5: We’ve looked at specific instances in PR Cases. Whereas in our other courses, we’ve only briefly gone over what is ethics, and if you be ethical or not. In this course, we’re actually looking at cases, and getting a clear idea, if the organization is ethical or not, and what would happen if they weren’t, and what was the outcome.

Sr6: In PR Writing last year we also brought up ethics - like if there’s a celebrity on TV who’s completely demolished their image - if it’s ethical for their PR agent to try to spin information in order to gain their client’s reputation back. So we learned stuff about whether or not it’s ethical to spin information just so you can save someone’s face, someone’s public image.

PK: So in that course, was it presented in such a way that you were given an understanding of what would have been the right thing to do? Or, were you just asked to inquire for yourself what would have been the right thing to do?

Sr6: It was what we would feel is the right thing to do. What’s in the best interest of a client asking a PR agent to help them gain back their original image before they had a problem.
PK: So you were asked to consider from your own perspective what might have been the right approach in a situation like that?

Sr6: Yes.

Jr6: In my PR class we had a whole chapter – 2 days – on ethics. I don’t know how to describe it. Entrapment – the media has a show called “To Trap A Predator.” If the press does it, it’s ok. If the legal system did it, it’s called entrapment. In Intro to PR we talked a lot about ethics and how reporters should be ethical.

Jr5: We haven’t gone over ethics so far.

PK: Have you taken any courses devoted to ethics specifically?

Fr1: No

So1, So2, So3, So4: No.

Jr1, Jr2, Jr3, Jr4, Jr5: No.

Jr6: I took Ethics and Business Law when I was a business major. We went over a lot of cases that had to do with ethics. It was a good course.

Sr1, Sr2, Sr3, Sr4, Sr5, Sr6: No

PK: How has ethics been addressed in your public relations courses?

Fr1: My professor said ethics is a big part of communication and in the professions, because they run hand in hand. You need to be ethically sound, can’t treat people in a certain way, can’t treat yourself in a certain way because you’re always in the public eye.

So1: My current PR course, Principles of PR, taught something about how to use ethics. Learned about what’s ethical and unethical in the PR world – what you should do and what you shouldn’t do. But when you get out there, you never know
what might happen. You might have to do something that you’re against. That can happen in any business.

**PK:** Has that course addressed specifically what's considered ethical and what's not considered ethical?

So1: Yes. The course addressed how lying is unethical. That’s what we focused on a lot – how you have to be honest to the media. That was the main ethics we focused on.

**PK:** Are there any others?

So1: That was the main thing. I can’t remember anything else.

So2: I’m in that same class and I felt that ethics was just brushed upon but not focused on like a whole lesson. It was just briefly touched upon, it was nothing majorly addressed. It was more like you have to be honest, because if you are lying, you’ll get caught, and that just causes a bigger problem. So honesty and lying was just touched upon but not any other values or ethics were mentioned.

**PK:** Lying and honesty from the perspective that you just don’t want to get caught?

So2: Yes, in a way. As well as it’s just not appropriate.

**PK:** But there was some discussion about the consequences of lying?

So2: Yes.

So3: We’re just getting into ethics for Communication Research. We discussed the 1972 Stanford prison experiment, deemed unethical. You should always go into something thinking of where you’re going with it. Because if you bring your own ethics into something that someone finds not as ethical, then it’s just going to
clash. Things will be unorganized and your message isn’t going to be brought out clearly.

**PK:** *Are you speaking about public relations or about research?*

So3: I was using research as an example but toward the end I was talking about PR.

**PK:** *So you’re saying that you can’t really mix your own ethics in with…?*

So3: A whole corporation or what’s expected of you.

**PK:** *Are you saying that you were taught this in the course?*

So3: It isn’t something I was blatantly told ‘you cannot put your own ethic…’ it’s just that after hearing that ‘you have to become one with,’ you have to do whatever your company is doing and understand where they’re coming from. So after a while, you form that idea. I formed certain ideas based on what I’ve heard in all my classes.

**PK:** *Is your idea that you probably need to have a distinction between your personal ethics and your job-related ethics?*

So3: Yes.

So4: The professor touched on it but didn’t focus on it. We just basically learned what was right or wrong – basically lying and some of the consequences of it.

**PK:** *So in this course, when you’re considering what’s right or wrong, from what perspective are you considering that? Are you considering what’s right and wrong from the client’s perspective, from the firm’s perspective, from your own perspective?*

So4: Honestly, I wish I knew more about ethics. But I can honestly say that I haven’t learned much. When we talked about lying, I just figured it meant to the
audience. The person you’re representing might know the truth but lying to their audience or viewers…I really don’t know.

PK: So it wasn’t totally clear?

So4: No, it wasn’t clear.

So3: S/he could have easily have given more description, but I know it wasn’t significant enough.

So4. I think it’s important to not do something unethical because it’s going to help you in your job. That’s just how I feel about it. It’s strange that people would have to lie, but I know that it happens a lot. People lie so that they can do better in their job. But to me, in some PR classes, like the one I’m in now, you get that sense that you might have to bend the truth. That doesn’t sit right with me. No one said that blatantly, but it seems that it’s implied.

Sr1: In PR Cases, I remember Power Point slides about ethics in a chapter, but it varies across everything. It varies across situations. So if ethics arises in that situation, then it’s discussed more.

Sr3: Ethics wasn’t brought to light until this PR Cases course. My other courses never really focused on that.

Sr1: It was maybe touched upon in Principles of PR, but it wasn’t in depth.

Sr2: Up until this point, it’s been that when we were dealing with something in class, the teacher would say ‘that has to do with ethics, we’ll cover that later on.’ Like that’s an issue of ethics and we don’t go into it.

Sr5: In some courses we might have had examples of what, in general, is said to be good and bad, and maybe asked to tell if we agree or disagree, or maybe rank to
us what is most important, sort of like the value surveys we just did. In other courses, we have situations given to us and we see what’s ethically done and what was not.

**PK:** *So there you have to make that determination for yourself?*

Sr5: Yes. I’m referring to *PR Cases*. But in other courses, we would have lists of good and bad, and if we agree or disagree. And then, maybe rank what we would say it is to us.

**PK:** *What kinds of course were those?*

Sr5: I don’t remember.

Sr6: Mostly all of the courses, the professor gives you the option to choose. In *PR Cases*, how you would go about certain situations, and then from there, you could see the consequences. That might help you choose for the next time.

**PK:** *Are you presented with a situation, and you figure out what the consequences might be? Or, is that presented for you?*

Sr5: In some cases, we would have to figure out what the consequences would be and that’s where our ethics would kind of come into play and we would think about how what we think is ethical and what is not, and figure out based on that what we think the consequences would be.

Jr6: It’s just like another chapter that they go over. It’s not predominant. We went over it briefly, but it did not stand out.

Jr5: Nothing.

**PK:** *What do you think are the main ethical challenges that public relations practitioners face?*
Fr1: Honesty. For example if they’re covering a story of a political race for a newspaper, ethically they would have to report an unbiased standpoint, that they might not agree with. You still must present it in a totally neutral format, with clarity, dignity, because it’s your work and your name on the line.

So1: Differentiating your own ethics from your work. You want to bring your ideas and ethics into your work but at the same time, that might not be what the company wants. You might get fired for that. ‘You’re not producing what we need you to produce so therefore we’re letting you go.’ So then your ethics have to be uniform with your company and your job.

PK: Are there any particular challenges, situations, dilemmas that you foresee? That practitioners have to deal with? That they would face in their work, from time to time?

So2: Maybe your client is telling you to lie for them, or you know that the organization or corporation is doing something wrong, but you don’t say it, because they say ‘if you do, we’re going to fire you.’ I think that’s a big problem that they face. It just has to do with if you can’t bring your own ethics in, but on the other hand, you don’t want to do something that you think is so terribly wrong.

So3: It’s like you’re almost stuck in a certain way because you want to do the right thing at certain times but your client or who you’re working for might want to twist it – for them to not get a bad image, because no one wants a bad image. A lot of PR is you’re the face of someone, so if something is bad you have to twist it to something good. It’s hard because you don’t want to lie but at the same time you want to keep your job, which is unfortunate. But to move on, you might have
to agree with it. It’s a challenge – do you want to go through with or take a chance of getting fired or getting in trouble?

So4: In my PR class we learned about how spin is involved a lot in PR and that how spin is basically adding icing to the cake. I think obviously spin isn’t ethical, but, to an extent, a lot of people add a little something to what they say to make it a little more exciting. I think that’s a big problem in PR because spin has a lot to do with everything.

PK: Do you have any ideas about why those situations might be – what you just described? Why do you think those are the challenges? Or why do you think those challenges exist?

So3: If you have a client who’s done something extremely unethical that’s going to be expressed to the whole media, the viewers are watching every step and will see where you fall. It’s hard to take that person who put you in a sticky situation and take that person’s life and image and turn it into something better. Spin also might have different ways it’s ethical. You’ll take a bad situation and focus on the good side of it, focus on something else, rather than what that person did wrong. You’ll try to find something they did right, and focus on that and get beyond their faults. It’s a sticky situation.

So4: Also about other options you could bring to the table along with something bad. When something bad happens it’s not ethical to bring in other situations but at the same time, that’s a good way to spin it, so that people don’t just dwell on the bad. For example, recently Christina Aguillera got divorced. If you look at everything that was said about her right after the divorce, nothing was said about her
marriage. It all focused on her upcoming shows. They were trying to shine light on her. They used the situation to push or amp her performances because there was more money to be made from the publicity.

So2: About spin – it can be good, and sometimes it can be bad. In some situations, you can draw attention to something positive that attention should be drawn to. Like if a sports figure does something bad, you can draw attention away from that. Not lying, but something that would be a better truth.

Jr1: Not to think you’re going to always adhere to these rules. You always have things going on in your personal life that can sometimes conflict with the fact that you need to adhere to those standards.

PK: *Am I hearing something about conflict or discrepancy between your personal ethics and...?*

Jr1: Yes. Between the fact that you might need to make money and you might be in an unethical situation.

PK: *So a dilemma might be a conflict between your personal considerations and the ethics of the situation that you’re in?*

Jr1: Right. Yes.

Jr2: Say you work for a company and they’re doing something that you don’t agree with, but you have to do what they want you to do to keep your job. You have to put aside your ethics just to do what the job wants you to do, to keep your job. Also honesty is a big challenge that they have to face.

Jr3: I agree with the others pretty much.

Jr4: I agree too.
Jr6: The way they have to spin things. If they have a client who did something awful, they have to spin it and make it somebody else’s fault. They almost cross the line, so that would be a hard thing. Where is the line drawn?

Jr5: Since PR and communications all relate, they would expect you to choose your words wisely because you are about speaking and listening. When speaking for someone, and you don’t necessarily believe the same thing, being able to choose your words wisely and get around that. Having people like and respect you while you hold your own ethics. You don’t want to lie or spin, so that can be tough.

Sr1: Based off your personal belief as an individual. You’re working for an organization and you might feel pressured to believe and think and do whatever they’re telling you to do because you have to do what’s right for the client. But at the end of the day, you have to do what you believe is right. I’d rather get up from the job and walk away if I’m doing the right thing, than sit there and know that I’m doing something wrong. That’s always going to be in the back of my mind and I don’t know if I could live with that. So I’d rather just do what’s right and find another job elsewhere.

Sr. 3: You never realize how much pressure is put on these people until you read these cases and try to live them. It’s easier said than done. When you’re actually caught in the crisis management scenario, what do you do? I’m still trying to figure out, do you do what other coworkers, management say to do because it will benefit the company’s image, even maybe benefit you within the company? Or do you do something that you think is right, lose out on the money, and walk away? What’s best?
Sr2: Personal issues with a case. I remember learning about one case where even the PR person had to lie. He had the choice of lying and staying with the company, or not lying and losing that client. That even goes into business ethics too, because you have to worry about the people who are working for you, if that’s your only client, or if you can afford to lose that client. So it’s personal.

Sr6: Not being specific with a certain company, trying to make a company or a person who did something wrong look better without lying. I think that’s the hardest part of it.

PK: Do you think that’s the main challenge?

Sr6: Yes.

Sr5: Also maybe when doing PR for something that you don’t believe in, or maybe you don’t think is ethically correct personally, or it’s a situation where you have to promote it. That could be a challenge for that person.

Sr6: Also, I think a major challenge is reaching the public because a lot of people can have different opinions on something and you have to reach different publics or different people and deliver the same message to them. That could be hard.

Sr4: A challenge for a PR agent is to decide which information is necessary or unnecessary to give to the public in order to succeed in a campaign.

PK: What to reveal and what not to reveal?

Sr4: Yes. What can help, or what can hurt you.

PK: Who is ‘you?’

Sr4: The client. About a product or something. You want to give out good information, not about the flaws.
**PK:** *Why do you think so?*

**Fr1:** In my opinion, in today’s society human morals have taken a backseat. The job world is becoming more cut-throat, people are looking for that good story, that hot piece of writing, whereas sometimes what actually is the truth and what is honest might not necessarily be that. People might try to take a certain standpoint to give them the edge, the upper hand.

**PK:** *Here is an example of a real-life public relations situation that has been in the news:*

**Background:**

> Edelman is the largest privately owned American PR agency, with over 3,000 employees in more than 50 offices worldwide. Edelman reported approximately $450,000,000 in net fees last year. Among the firm’s many clients are Wal-Mart, Heinz, Starbucks, Butterball, Johnson & Johnson, Con Agra Foods, UPS, Unilever, Schering-Plough and Microsoft.

> CEO Richard Edelman is credited with helping to pioneer the use of blogging for clients. He convened a global task force of senior leaders, clients, vendors, and Harvard ethics professor Elliott Schrage to create a personal code of conduct, which addressed such perpetual issues as ‘pay for play’ to new concepts like blogging.

> Edelman is also famous for inventing the flog, or fake blog. Edelman executives created a fake blog called Walmarting Across America, written by a former Washington Post employee who was allegedly paid by Edelman to write the flog.

**Case:**

> Recently, Edelman client Microsoft implemented a PR campaign to promote its new operating system, Windows Vista, that involved giving new Acer Ferrari 1000 and 5000 notebook computers to a group of high-profile bloggers. The computers were fully loaded with Windows Vista and were valued at roughly $1,900 to $2,300 each. In contrast to the norm in traditional journalism of lending new software or computers to reviewers, Microsoft gave the Acers as gifts. Professional blogger Scott Beale reported being joyful about his
Some have defended the move saying that Windows Vista could not be installed on existing computers without messing them up badly, and that the only way to switch to Vista as a new operating system was with a new computer. In a post to Long Zheng’s blog, Journalist Dan Warne, News Editor at APC, said: “It’s bizarre to me for one of the world’s largest PR companies, Edelman, to think it could get away with this. Perhaps they don’t know bloggers as well as they thought they did. As you’ve pointed out, Long, now that some of the bloggers have disclosed the receipt of the gift, the public knows. Whatever the subtleties of the offer were, it comes across as nothing more than a bribe, and that is a very bad look for Microsoft” (Ochman, 2006).

PK: **How would you apply ethics in a situation such as this?**

Fr1: For Microsoft to do this and for Edelman to accept it seems a little shady. Seems that for as much as they paid for it, they’re almost buying advertising. It’s advertising but it’s not advertising, in a sense, because a lot of people read these blogs. If the readers trust the bloggers, they’re probably going to go buy some Microsoft stuff, should the blogger swear by it.

So1: You’d have to ask: Is it ethical or unethical to be giving away computers. It could be seen as a bribe. Is what they’re doing right or is it wrong for the company?

PK: **For which company, Edelman or Microsoft?**

So1: Microsoft.

PK: **What about for Edelman?**

So1: It’s also bad for them too, I think, because it’s unethical. I don’t know much about it, but it’s something they weren’t supposed to be doing and it came off as a bribe, giving people free computers. It looks unethical on their part too.
So1: Why were they giving away free computers?

PK: They were introducing a new operating system.

So1: So, it was almost promotional? But there’s tons of other promotions held by other companies that give away products, like radio stations. I find it weird that people are taking it so harshly because it’s at a larger value and it’s from the own company. It’s still a promotional idea.

So2: I’m confused. What was the whole fake blog thing about?

PK: Edelman, the PR firm, is known for having invented the fake blog, the ‘flog.’

So2: But Edelman knew that Microsoft was sending out these free computers. Or was it someone else pretending to be Microsoft?

PK: No, it was under their own name. But their PR firm was Edelman.

So3: I don’t understand why people were outraged. Was there a certain lie or crime in it that these bloggers were not aware of? The bloggers were reviewers, basically.

So4: I guess it’s an awkward way to promote their computer. Maybe it was unclear or unfair. But at the same time, I think they’re just trying to get their product out there.

So2: If these bloggers got free computers themselves, they wouldn’t be saying the things they are. Maybe a little bit out of jealousy behind this.

So1: Microsoft should have done a different tactic.

Jr1: I think it was unethical for Edelman to promote Microsoft giving away these free computers to bloggers when they knew that the bloggers would then be manipulated into reporting probably positively about Microsoft.
Jr2: Obviously they knew that it was going to come about in the media so they didn’t mind that it was going to be known? And they said it’s ok to go ahead and do...

Jr3: I think that’s unethical and definitely seen as a bribe.

Jr4: To me, it doesn’t seem that bad. It’s a review of a computer. It doesn’t seem like it’s violating anyone, it’s just an operating system. Obviously, they want to promote it and if it in some way benefits Microsoft, I don’t think it’s that bad.

Jr2: I feel that any time there’s a new product coming out, if you don’t give it out to someone to try it, you’re not going to get feedback on it. It could have gone either way for them. They put out their product for people to review and it just happened that they came back with a positive review on it. So I don’t think it’s that bad either.

Sr1: I’m not seeing what they did wrong. How is that wrong?

Sr2: I think it would only be wrong in the sense that the professional technology bloggers would appreciate brand new fully loaded computers with every little quirk they could play with. If people go to them for any technology information, then it’s kind of giving the new computer a leg up. Because you have these people who love technology and now they’re raving about these computers. You’re not giving it to people who might hate it.

PK: So from your perspective, what are the ethical inferences or implications in a situation like this? Are there any?

Sr2: I think you would have to give it not to just people who would probably love it. You’d have to give it to more than just the technology buffs. Because you’re only getting one opinion I guess.
Sr1: I think it was a good idea they gave it to the bloggers because it will make more PR for the company. However, I don’t believe that it’s right for them to not install it on other computers, like they said, and that you have to purchase a whole new computer, because you usually don’t have to do that. You can just download the software, or purchase it at BestBuy. Telling consumers they can only get Vista through buying a whole new computer is wrong because who’s going to want to buy a whole new computer, that’s so expensive? From that standpoint, they are wrong.

Sr3: I agree that they shouldn’t only favor the technology wizards or buff’s and say we’re going to give you this new version of the computer but everybody else has to go out and purchase it. It is a good idea to get your name out there and get people to use it, but when ethics do come into play, it is wrong to not have other people experience the advantage of the new software.

Sr4: I’m confused. Edelman wasn’t ethical? That’s what I’m getting from this.

Sr3: I think ethics comes into play because who’s to say who’s a professional blogger or not? What if a normal person says ‘I’m a professional blogger’? Are you going to give them a computer as opposed to those who you consider a professional blogger? It’s about who you consider a professional blogger. It’s not fair to those they don’t consider professionals to not have the new computers. They should keep it to just a trial. And give everyone a trial as opposed to giving it for free to those they think they should give it to. That’s where ethics comes into play. I don’t think it was right for them to just hand it to somebody who
thinks they should have that computer for free. What if anyone out there just can’t afford a new computer just for that program?

Sr4: I don’t have anything to say on this. It’s too challenging.

Sr6: I agree.

Jr5: If Edelman has their morals and they want to stick to them, but they go and do something like this, then it might look like they don’t have good ethics. They’re just going after money or bribes to win people over, when it should be about the consumers and making good products. It could look like they’ve lost good ethics and put something higher than their self-respect.

Jr6: That’s a PR stunt. That’s just something that PR people do. In my PR class, we discussed Howard Stern. McDonald’s sent them a huge bag of McGriddle sandwiches and Howard Stern went on for about an hour the next day about how good these McGriddles were. A sandwich is not by any means the same thing as a computer, but it’s basically the same idea that PR have been doing forever. It’s the exact same tactic, so I feel that it’s not so much an ethical issue. Well, maybe, because you’re giving them a computer. But they could write bad things about it too. There was a reality show that came on E! this summer called “The Spin Crowd” about a PR agency in California. The camera was in their office. I saw how they tried to make the client Carmen Elektra look good, even though her product wasn’t that good. They had to get it seen in the best light. It came on right after “The Kardashians.”

PK: In a situation like this, what do you think should be the primary considerations of a PR practitioner:
• **His/her duty as a professional.** For example, his obligations to his client, to his firm, or to his profession.

• **What he/she considers the highest virtue possible in the situation – meaning the principles the he personally values the most.**

• **The consequences of his/her actions?** For example, the end results or effects of those actions upon others or himself?

Fr1: Duty as a professional should be the main driving cause of how they act. The other two options should be minor details in the back of their mind that guides their duty as a professional.

So1: The last one – consequences. You should always be thinking about what’s going to come out of it. If it’s not something good, how are you going to fix it or turn it around?

So2: The first one, duty, and the third one, consequences. I think you should think of every way possible about the outcome of your work and how that is going to affect the media and society. But I don’t believe you should bring your personal belief into it, because you’re one person and one person only thinks one way. As opposed to a large group of people where no one’s exactly the same way. So it’s hard to bring one thought process when you’re broadcasting to millions of thought processes.

So3: Consequences. I think before you do anything and act upon it, you should think about what’s going to happen if you do that, and mold what you’re going to do around that. There’s always going to be consequences at the end – small or large. If you know there’s going to be consequences, be prepared to deal with it.
So4: Consequences is the most important because you’re going to base whatever you do around that so you have to know, if something really severe would happen, how am I going to handle it? Especially in a situation like this, where the company is under duress by the public.

Jr1: Consequences. If I was Edelman or in their shoes, I would be worrying about how the public perceives us as a PR organization. It could influence their beliefs on our ethics, based on that. It could obviously be seen negatively or positively. It’s going to be seen negatively by some, so I wouldn’t worry about that.

Jr2: Consequences. Anytime you’re doing PR you need to think of the end result because if you know it will be something negative, you’re going to cause more work, more problems for yourself. So I think that’s pretty important to consider, where you’re going.

Jr3: Consequences. Because in Edelman’s case, I think they come off as kind of incompetent because if they can’t promote their product any other way than buying off bloggers, I feel that’s ridiculous. They should have thought of other ways to get their product promoted besides bribing people.

Sr3: Virtues. Because I’m going to go off what I believe is right. I always consider consequences anyway when I go with my own beliefs, so ethically speaking, I would say virtues is the best.

Sr1: I think the first choice – duty – because I’ll go with my beliefs according to the situation. If it’s a situation that not’s so serious then I’m not going to risk my job, so I would just go with the role of a PR practitioner and whatever the company stands for, what the rules are that I have to do. You’re always going to deal with
something like this, especially in PR. There’s always something arising – the
smallest thing, or the biggest thing. Unless it affects a lot of people across the
country or the whole world, I’m not going to risk my job for that. It’s not going
to personally affect me like something else would.

Sr2: Consequences. A lot of things in PR, you’re dealing with the consequences of
good and bad actions. There could be a bad consequence, so you would need to
change what you’re doing so that there would be a more positive outcome.

Sr1: I don’t understand why they would do that.

PK: Windows Vista is an operating system, not just software. It’s not like software
that you can simply install. They knew that you couldn’t simply install Vista
into an existing computer without seriously messing it up. So from that
perspective, by giving Vista to people to install on their own computers they
could have gotten plenty of bad publicity for possibly messing up people’s
computers.

Sr4: I think that’s a really tough question. All three are very important to consider.
But I would have to say that Virtues – my personal ethical beliefs – followed by
my consequences.

Sr6: All three are important but maybe consequences would be the most important.
Obviously my values and beliefs are important too, but how whatever happened
in that case would affect the public more. They don’t want to make Edelman look
bad, but they also don’t want to lose a client. So, it’s very hard.

PK: But if you have to prioritize your considerations in some way...?
Sr6: I would say consequences first, and then virtues, second. But I believe they’re both very important.

PK: *Which do you feel should be the main, or primary, consideration of a PR practitioners – duty, virtues, or consequences?*


Sr4: Consequences first, because what happens could affect you in the future. It’s not going to go away if you’re unethical in an organization. People don’t forget. You really have to think about the consequences, or else it can ruin the whole image of your organization, and it doesn’t leave, no matter how hard you try to make it better.

Jr5: It would be very easy to say that it’s duty, because that’s your job and what you’re there for. But I would go with consequences because I think your actions always have a reaction. You should be looking at the task at hand, but also be looking further toward what the result is going to be.

Jr6: Duty, because I’m a faithful employee and I wouldn’t go against my employers, or go behind their back and say I had nothing to do with this even though I’m in the middle of it. Hopefully, I’ll be a successful PR person and spin this any way I want to. It’s your job. You signed up for this. You know your ethics and values will be pushed further and further away from where you were. There are certain things I couldn’t promote, like animal testing, or killing animals. That’s pretty much the only thing I couldn’t promote because I’m an animal lover. But if it’s my job, it’s my duty.
PK: So that might be consistent with what you ranked highest on the value survey - loyalty?

Jr6: Yes.

PK: Are you aware of any specific methods that could be used to make ethical decisions in public relations practice?

Fr1: Can’t say off the top of my head. No. Just diligent work, keeping the honesty and dignity of the public in mind, going with the virtues you mentioned.

So1: Not yet. Things like that will come down the road. When you take higher level courses, you probably learn that, but not right now.

So2: No. I hope we’re going to learn more about it. It seems strange that we just touched upon it – ethics. I want to know more about it because I think it’s something that’s pretty important. I just want to learn more about it.

So3: No, because we’re only sophomores. We learned a lot about (not really ethics) how you should be to a journalist, someone like that. But we don’t really learn ethics in PR. We learn you should be respectful to a journalist, things like that. But I feel there should be more focus on ethics in PR as a whole, as opposed to all the little parts of it.

So4: No but by the time we’re seniors, we should have a different view on this.

PK: When you’re faced with an ethical dilemma, having to make an ethical decision, how do you arrive at it? How do you get there – procedurally?

Jr.5: In our classes, it’s pretty general, like you just have to make the right decision.

PK: The “how” is what I’m asking about.
Jr6: In *PR Cases*, the teacher told us that we have to analyze the situation and the different publics – internal and external. Who is going to be effected. What would save the company. Essentially save their reputation either way. Basically analyze the situation and different publics.

Sr1: First, analyze the situation and do your research before you just assume or go with what you hear right away. Then, obviously, form a meeting and discuss it with your employees and management to see what their opinions are. Plan accordingly and then implement it. It is a step by step procedure, but not like first you do this, and then you do that.

Sr3: There is no step by step way of deciding whether something is ethical. Who's to say if something is ethically correct? That's why I always go back to my own personal beliefs – virtues. At the end of the day, I have to make that choice, not anyone else. There are not any right or wrong way to go about determining what’s ethically or morally correct.

Sr1: But what if you're working with an organization? How would you go about it with an organization?

**PK:** *It's more about the process of making a decision in practice, whether you're working for yourself, in a firm, part of an agency. What do you use – how do you go about arriving at a decision? Are there steps, like a plan, when faced with a situation, this is what you do? Is there anything you know of, like a model for decision-making?*
Sr3: I stand by what I say. There is no learned, preset model. I am not aware of any. I
don’t think each individual has a step by step procedure for deciding what’s
ethical or not.

Sr3: I don’t think there’s a defined way.

Sr1: Is there really one?

PK: There are a number of models. I was just interested to know if you’re aware of
any of them.

Sr4: Formula in making ethical decisions? I guess say a method I would use is weigh
the consequences my decision would have on me, or the organization around me,
or who I’m making the decision for. So going back to the previous question,
consequences would be the most important, because it’s the outcome of whatever
decision you’re making.

Sr6: Consequences again. The impact that your decision has on how you handled
something. That could be your formula, I guess. Whatever you do, how much of
an affect it has on people. Something small, and not as important, and that
doesn’t affect many people is not going to have as much an impact as something
that a big company makes a decision. Comparing two different companies.

Sr3: A method you could use is making a pros and cons list, writing down, weighting
what is good and bad. Making your decision. If there are more cons, reconsider
what your plan is, so that there are more pros.

PK: So did you learn anything in any of your courses like “here’s a formula” or
something that you should apply? Something that you could reproduce in
different situations?
Sr6: No, we haven’t learned a formula. But the first thing is always to state the facts, list factual information and go from there. Present the public, along with being ethical, always be upfront and never hide anything because it just makes it worse in the end. If you’re upfront, and you present them with information exactly what happened, they’ll feel more comfortable and trust in you more.

Sr5: We haven’t had a broken down formula on what we would have to do, but basic, general information.

Jr6: No.

Jr5: In a job, they might give you a rulebook. Some people might say the Bible, because they might see that as a life guide. Or people would use just what’s in their head, what they’ve known from their past, what they grew up with, and what they personally think would be the best ethics guide.

PK: Is there anything else that you would like to share about this topic?

Fr1: I’d like to look into taking a course on this. It’s very interesting, intriguing to hear about world-wide issues,

So1: I’ve been taught how to act with a client or different media relations – be honest, don’t lie – certain bullet points. Know what you’re going to say but not the beliefs you should have when you go into a conversation or have to talk about a certain topic. They really don’t tell you the values. Maybe the professor doesn’t want to be put in a situation where the students might feel they’re teaching their beliefs to the class.
Sr1: Maybe there can be a course on it. I think it should be brought up in every class. In every course – instead of teachers saying we’ll talk about it at the end - actually have a discussion of it. Have a presentation and a lecture on ethics.

Sr2: If there was a course about ethics there would be a constant debate between people on what is right or wrong. There would be so many times when the teacher would say ‘go on your own opinion, or your own feel about it.’ I honestly don’t know if there would be a reason to have that class. We do have a course called Argumentation and Debate, that has a little to do with ethics, but it’s just talking your point out. A class about ethics would be repetitive.

Sr3: It’s interesting that ethics is so downplayed. We go through the case of determining what’s ethical or not all throughout our lives, throughout school, throughout the workplace, anywhere. I think it’s really learned and instilled from different environments. I don’t think a course is necessary. It’s always going to fall back on what you believe anyway.

Sr1: Debate would be interesting about different ethical topics. And then you could learn about the different models, and ways you could make a decision on what’s right or wrong when you’re working for an organization.

Jr5: It’s easy for people in college to lose their ethics along the way, especially going out to the real world.

Jr6: You should ask people if they’re interested in taking a PR Ethics course. I don’t think we have a PR Ethics course. That would be very helpful, an ethics course for PR. You should ask students what kinds of things they would like to learn about and help design the course.
Jr5: It would be really helpful if you’re going into the PR field, because that’s what you’re going to be dealing with. You should know about ethics, that your boundaries are going to be tested and that you might have to face a hard decision. That’s it’s your job or your ethics. That would be really helpful and insightful to us kids. It’s not something you think about in an organized way. It would be good to examine that.

PK: What types of things do you think you would find useful in a course like that? What would be most relevant or most useful to you?

Jr6: Current cases, like Tiger Woods. People would be interested in cases like that. I think they made it up that he’s a sex addict. We need to know about what’s going on now, especially with the Internet. That needs to be talked about. The Internet is huge. What you say on the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, what’s ok to say about yourself, or someone else?

Jr5: Current cases are what surround us. You can go onto a website and see how people’s reputations are blasted out. People who work at TMZ must has some ethics – they must know that it’s not alright to call someone fat or ugly. But they’re trying to be funny because they want viewers and need to keep you entertained. Watch E! News or Access Hollywood and see the top story. You could have students write things about what would they do.

PK: What would you think about possibly creating your own personal code of ethics?

Jr6: That’s a good idea – in the class. That is an excellent idea. I know how far I would go for a client. The animal thing is an absolute for me that I could not spin.
Jr5: I would be interested to see what other people would write down. Like, what are the top five things you can’t do, what are the main things you cannot compromise on. Compare those with other classmates. Don’t put names on them, but put them all up on the wall so everyone could read what the class wrote about their personal ethics.

Jr6: There are plenty of unethical people in the college, so that would be a really interesting exercise to see. It would be huge.
APPENDIX M

DATA: E-INTERVIEWS

Eighty-five recruitment letters were emailed to instructors of public relations courses in colleges and universities nationwide. N = eight instructors of public relations courses who agreed to participate in this research, representing the following institutions: Temple University, Iona College, University of North Carolina, William Paterson University, California Polytechnic State University, Montclair State University, and University of Alabama. Coding of participants is as follows: ED1 designates the first participant; ED2 designates the second participant, etc., without regard for order or educational institution. PK designates Pru Kaufman, interviewer. E-interviews were conducted throughout January and February, 2011.

PK:  Please describe your educational and professional background.

ED1:  Ph.D. University of Minnesota; M.A. Journalism University of Georgia; B.A. Philosophy, St. Alphonsus College. 20 years in journalism and public relations.

ED2:  I practiced law for seven years in Canada. I came to the U.S. to do an M.A. in mass communication at Arizona State University. While there, I worked in public relations at “____ of Arizona” in Government Relations, and at “_____ Community College” in Public Relations. I did my doctorate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I worked in the development office as a writer while I did my doctorate.

ED3:  M.A. in Advertising and Public Relations from New York Institute of Technology. Ph.D. in Tourism from Texas A&M University. Professional
experience includes: Two years as a marketing consultant in Japan, and two years
as a public relations account executive in Korea.

ED4: M.A. in Communications; B.A. in Public Relations.; thirty years of professional
experience, mostly business and corporate PR; I have been teaching PR fulltime
for eight years.

ED5: B.S., M.P.H., Ed.D.

ED: Ph.D. in Public Relations and Organizational Communication.

ED7: Ph.D., A.P.R., Fellow PRSA, Distinguished Educator Award recipient, author,
global public relations scholar and consultant.

ED8: Ph.D., twenty years experience in public relations and publishing.

PK: What is the name of the public relations course you teach?

ED1: Graduate level: Principles of PR, Entertainment and Sports PR, Government and
Political PR, and Media Law and Ethics.

ED2: PR Writing and PR Management.

ED3: Introduction to Public Relations and Public Relations Case Studies.

ED4: Fundamentals of PR Writing, Advanced PR Writing, and PR Management &
Problems (the PR capstone) on the undergrad level. I have also designed and
taught graduate level courses: Reputation Management, Contemporary Issues in
PR, and PR Boot Camp for Writers.

ED5: Introduction to Public Relations, Writing & Editing for Public Relations, Public
Relations Campaigns, Advanced Public Relations Campaigns, Senior Project.

ED6: Public Relations Case Studies.

ED8: *PR Writing, PR Cases* - undergraduate.

**PK:** *Is the course required or elective?*

ED1: *Principles of PR*, and *Media Law and Ethics* are required. *Entertainment and Sports PR* and *Government and Political PR* are electives.

ED2: *PR Writing* is required. Students have the choice of *PR Management* and another course.

ED3: Both courses are required.

ED: The undergraduate courses are all required. The graduate courses are electives.

ED5: Both.

ED6: Required.

**PK:** *What is the academic level of the course?*

ED1: Graduate.

ED2: Undergraduate. *PR Writing* is for juniors. *PR Management* is a senior-level course.

ED3: *Intro to PR* for undergraduate sophomore or junior, *PR Case Studies* for junior or senior.

ED4: The undergraduate courses are for upperclassmen, juniors and seniors.

ED5: Undergraduate

ED6: Undergraduate
PK: If required, for what degree and/or concentration is it required?

ED1: M.A.

ED2: Public Relations.

ED3: Public Relations track.

ED4: The degree is for a B.A. in Strategic Communication, with a concentration in PR.

ED5: Not required of non-majors. Required for journalism degree / PR concentration.

ED6: Bachelor’s Degree with a Public Relations Concentration.


ED8: B.A. in Communication/Public Relations concentration.

PK: What are the course goals or learning objectives for the course you teach?

ED1: The Principles course is an intro course, so we try to give a survey of the field. The others are hands-on professional courses. There is a small ethics component in these courses.

ED2: For PR Writing, includes “to understand the relationship between ethics and professionalism.” For PR Management, includes “to understand ethical decision-making processes and professional codes of ethics to resolve ethical dilemmas in practice.”

ED3: For PR Cases, includes “to evaluate best and worst public relations practices to help students gain knowledge to apply to future professional or academic endeavors.”
ED4: Learning objectives for *PR Management & Problems* include: “to continue development of a sense of professionalism with ethicality in the practice of public relations.”

ED6: *Public Relations Cases* uses a case-study method to teach students about theoretical and applied principles of public relations campaign management. Students examine successful/unsuccessful examples of public relations in order to learn how to plan more effective campaigns and to evaluate completed campaigns. As part of the course students continue to hone their writing skills and learn to be more critical of the role played by the media, opinion leaders, and multiple publics in the public relations process.

ED7: This course is philosophical, theoretical and strategic, rather than tactical and technical. Students will be asked to consider ethical questions of over-riding global significance. Such questions of communication ethics are predicated on the meta-question “How is society possible?” Students explore, consider, and attempt to resolve such questions of ethics in communication. Ethics must be a paramount concern to communication scholars and practitioners who increasingly will be called upon, not only to be ethical in the powerful role they have in society, but to help address a range of ethical issues of far more breadth than what is sometime narrowly perceived to be within the realm of communication as an area of scholarly inquiry and practice. Unprecedented ethical questions will arise, particularly as communication scholars and practitioners attempt to clarify their own ethical values and to reconcile these values in the global arena, and it behooves the communication scholar and practitioner to thoroughly understand.
ED8: Mainly that students be competent public relations practitioners.

PK: Which outcomes related to ethics do you feel are most important for your students to achieve as a result of your course? Why?

ED1: For Media Law and Ethics, students should be able to:

- Think critically about existing American media law and ethics including alternatives.
- Assess the applicability/inapplicability of existing media law and ethics to new media and new controversies involving conflicting rights.
- Be able to recognize when, as a working media professional, one might be headed for legal or ethical trouble.
- Appreciate how developing events, issues, controversies and court decisions in media law and ethics can affect the professional mass communicator.
- Develop one’s own system of ethics as applied to mass communication.
- Discuss the convergence and conflict between ethics and law.

ED2: The ability to recognize ethical dilemmas and apply ethical decision-making processes to resolve those dilemmas.

ED3: Understanding the importance of ethics in public relations and know the PRSA Code Of Ethics. Many PR professionals encounter situations for ethical decisions but often don’t know how to determine what’s right and wrong. I think it is important to give students a chance to get to know the PRSA standards. Thus they can use the Code of Ethics to guide their decision making in the future.

ED4: An understanding that sometimes ethical dilemmas do occur and they’re sometimes not black and white, but rather in shades of grey. Also, while something may be legal, it may not always be ethical. Beyond such formal codes of ethics, such as PRSA’s, ethics can be a matter of personal choice. In the end, it’s up to each person to decide what it right.
ED6: I’d like my students to be familiar with the role of public relations to advise or counsel their clients or organizations to be ethical. In addition to managing communication with an organization’s strategic publics, public relations officers should help the organization to be accountable for its behavior and decision, which in turn fosters the public’s perceived trust and reinforces the organization’s credibility.

ED7: Provide students with a theoretical foundation in their consideration of the ethics of communication in a technological, global and multicultural environment. Familiarize students with the literature of communication ethics and with the communication scholars who provide perspectives on these ethics. Challenge students with an intellectually stimulating classroom environment that will require them to critically examine communication ethics. Encourage students to identify and examine global societal problems to which communication and its ethics are relevant and must be addressed.

ED8: Ethics are often given lip-service. Ethics should permeate all objectives, and PR is as good a discipline as any in which to hammer this idea home. However, we are often some of the worst offenders.

PK: Does your department conduct assessment to determine outcomes for this course?

ED1: We have an exit “exam” to assess what they’ve learned over the two years.

ED2: Not at this time.

ED3: No.
ED4: No. There are university formalized student feedback procedures, but nothing within the department.

ED5: Yes.

ED6: The course itself has various assessment tools. As for the assessment at the department level, I’m not sure.

ED7: No.

ED8: Not that I know of.

PK: How is ethics (specific to public relations) included in your course syllabus?

ED1: There is a small ethics element, but more emphasis on ethics in the required Media Law and Ethics course.

ED2: In the writing class, I have a section on ethics. Students write an essay on their position as to what constitutes ethical behavior for professional communicators and persuaders. They must identify the specific, practical guidelines/principles we talk about in class that they believe should guide the behavior of persuaders. In the management class, we have a class on ethics and discuss ethical scenarios.

ED3: Topic for a class.

ED4: I cover ethics in class discussions, usually citing case studies or presenting what if scenarios. Many of these discussions take place during lectures covering legal and ethical implications. For example, I often ask students if they’d conduct PR for the NRA, a tobacco company, an alcohol marketer or manufacturer, or an organization on one side of the abortion issue. I ask students to explain their reasoning. I also ask them what ethical decision (and why) they’d make if presented with such things as: proof a client or boss lied (for example, falsifying
information for a news release), being asked to perform an unethical (but not illegal) duty on the job, or catching a peer employee in an unethical act and deciding whether or not to tell the boss. While I also cite the PRSA Code Of Ethics, I also note that sometimes there are personal choices that one has to make.

ED5: All courses.

ED6: In this class, we discuss the successful and failed public relations cases. Ethics penetrates through most of the cases. We first discuss what ethics means in general, next move to the role of ethics in public relations practices (e.g., we discussed different frameworks such as relativism, universalism, situationalism, and middle-ground), and then we use these theoretical frameworks to analyze how ethics affected the effectiveness of various public relations/communication campaign.

ED8: Often listed last – or in a separate text chapter coupled with legal issues – but again, it’s often lip-service. It is difficult to teach major character qualities, and they often get shoved aside.

PK: How does the course you teach help students develop their own concepts of ethics regarding public relations?

ED1: These courses don’t offer much of that.

ED3: In the Intro course, many students do not know about ethics and its importance in professional industries. This course introduces ethics in public relations and students discuss what this means and why this is important. Students also learn the PRSA Code of Ethics to understand its values and provisions. This course helps students to learn the importance of ethics in public relations as well as the
standards to follow for the decision making. In *Cases*, students analyze cases that raise ethical issues. Students are also asked to respond to the situations for ethical decisions and their responses are discussed with classmates. *PRSA Code of Ethics* is reviewed. This course helps students to understand ethics and also to develop their own concepts of ethics by applying the concepts to the real world situations.

**ED4:** In all my courses, I use case studies and hypothetical *what if* scenarios to spark student discussion. There are also sections about ethics in each textbook I use.

**ED5:** Excellent foundation.

**ED6:** This course helps students to reflect on and critically examine the concept of ethics as well the influence of ethics on public relations practice, especially in regard to building quality relationships with publics. Through these various cases, students have the opportunity to draw the linkage between their personal ethics and ethics in public relations as a profession. In other words, these cases serve as modules for students to gauge the effectiveness of different ethical approaches. I also ask my students to develop their own plans to address these ethical issues involved in the cases, which motivates students to think and “act” like ethical counselors for organizations.

**ED8:** My students do much original work – it’s hard to copy or take too many obvious short cuts. I try to inspire them to the joys of a job well done regardless of pay or efforts/attitude of others.

**PK:** *Which (critical thinking) strategies for ethical decision-making in public relations practice does your course teach?*

**ED1:** These courses don’t offer much of that either.
ED2: I use the PRSA ethical decision-making matrix.


ED4: I usually present a scenario and ask students what would they do and why. For example, how many would work for a tobacco company, liquor company, a casino, the NRA, an organization on either side of the abortion issue, etc. Or, what if while working for an agency, your biggest client asks you to do something that’s not illegal, but perhaps unethical? It usually sparks a lively discussion.

ED5: Part of campaign development

ED6: We discuss teleological and deontological approaches for ethical decision-making. Students have learned and examined the impact of these two different approaches. Particularly, students reflect upon whether a consequence/outcome-oriented approach justifies actions or whether the nature of actions and intention could adequately gauge the ethics of organizational decisions.

ED7: Familiarize with issues and methodology for resolution.

ED8: Not many. We are strategic thinkers. I think ethics are strategically sound, even if one is less than convinced of their moral imperatives.

PK: Which philosophical approach to ethics do you think is particularly relevant to the practice of public relations today?

Duty – how a practitioner understands and enacts his/her professional obligations (to a client, employer, or profession)

Virtue – the principles, values or ideals that a practitioner values most

Consequences – the end results or effects of an action that could be foreseen from a course of action.

ED1: I would rate these equal since it depends on the individual.
ED2: Duty is particularly relevant, but I think practitioners need to be aware of and consider each approach.

ED3: Approach based on consequences. Many textbooks discuss the standards but there is lack of discussion on consequences. I think it is important to discuss the outcomes of unethical actions.

ED4: All of them. I think students today are seeing so many examples of public entities (businesses, politicians, celebrities, etc.) who seem to do something unethical and get away with it. While ethical boundaries are for each person to decide for themselves, students need to be shown in a very real way why they should behave ethically, why it’s important, and the consequences they might face if they don’t.

ED5: All of the above.

ED6: The combination of Duty, Virtue, and Consequences. Either outcome-based or action-based alone cannot sufficiently determine the ethical nature of a decision. Instead, it is necessary to consider both aspects. A practitioner’s own values and principles can also serve as a guide in ethically challenged situations.

ED7: All.

ED8: Now this is getting interesting! Consequences is the most pragmatic and widely useful. One can try duty, although it’s highly dependent upon context. Good luck with virtue.

PK: Which pedagogical practices do you use in your course to teach ethical concepts relevant to public relations practice?

ED1: In the combined course, we combine theoretical and case study.

ED2: Lecture, readings, scenarios
ED3: Case studies, scenario-based activity and discussion.

ED4: Case studies and discussions as outlined above.

ED5: Lecture from text.

ED6: First, I ask how students think about ethics in general (e.g., Is it possible to have universal standards? If so, why? If not, why?). Next, I ask students to link ethics to public relations. I ask them to think about how they could evaluate the ethical nature of various communication practices and how they could form these standards in making these ethical decisions. Then, I introduce various public relations cases to students for them to draft their responses to address the particular ethical challenge followed by assessing the effectiveness of the actual responses described in each case. Next, I ask students how they link ethics to the public relations function. In other words, they reflect on what role public relations practitioners play in helping organizations make ethical decisions. Lastly, I encourage students to relate the impact of ethical decisions on various organizational outcomes such relationships with strategic publics, organizational reputation, organizational image, and organizational sustainability.

ED7: Lecture/deep discussion.

ED8: Good research and hard work are hard to take. I try to teach students to grill each other and earn their own stripes honorably. If they have some sort of moral framework propelling them in these directions, I think they are more naturally successful anyway. The rest we try to teach through competitive example: you are competing with other ethical champions, and you will lose out to them unless you learn from them and outperform them. That about the best I feel I can do.
PK: What do you consider to be the main ethical challenges of public relations today?

ED1: I could write a book about this. Probably honesty in representing clients and the public’s perception of the field as unethical.

EDP2: Being open and honest is the hardest thing today. PR practitioners don’t want to stand up to their clients and say no. We need to consistently do the right thing, but we tend to want to rely on our clients to decide what the right thing is.

ED3: Setting the ethical policy for social media and digital communications.

ED4: Too many examples of people “getting away with it,” especially those that are highlighted in the media. I think there seems to be a misunderstanding that when these scandals become news, it’s the norm, not the exception. Students need to be made aware that it’s news precisely because it’s something that’s happening out of the ordinary, not because it happens every day. I find that most of my students have a well-developed sense of their own ethical code.

ED5: Honest communications.

ED6: What do you consider to be the main ethical challenges of public relations today? The main ethical challenges of public relations include the following: 1. How to demonstrate the influence the public relations function can exert on organizational decision making; 2. How to develop the role of being ethical advisor or counselor as an integral part of public relations practice; 3. How to establish the public relations function as an ethical counselor among top management or dominant coalition; and, 4. How to develop systematic curriculum plans about the topic of ethics in public relations.
ED7: Having a discrete professional community with publicly declared professional values and ethics; distinguishing this professional community from inexpensive and pervasive social media communication.

ED8: We sell our hard-earned communication gifts to the highest bidder. I try to challenge students to align their personal scruples (or lack thereof, I guess) with an organizational context they can authentically back and support. That can be a win-win situation.

PK: Is there anything else you would like to express about this topic?

ED5: This is a very important topic in PR.

ED8: Thanks for the opportunity to throw in my two-cents’ worth. PR ethics is a fascinating topic.
APPENDIX N

DATA: TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

The sample set for the telephone interview was comprised of three professional public relations practitioners currently working in the agency side of the industry. Interviews were conducted during January 2011. Coding is as follows: PR1 designates an employee of a global privately owned public relations agency based in New York with multi-million dollar clients, PR2 designates a self-employed public relations consultant based in the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area, PR3 designates a former president of the New York PRSA and owner/president of a boutique public relations agency based in New Jersey, and PK designates Pru Kaufman, interviewer.

PK: What is your occupation?

PR1: I work as a member of the corporate and financial communication team at “Public Relations.” My position is Senior Account Supervisor, which is a mid-level manager. I work on four different client accounts and from a day-to-day perspective, my job is a lot of client and team management, but mixed with actual execution, which I think is somewhat unique about this mid-level position. You have a bit of everything on your plate.

PR2: Most of my work now is through a university. I try to keep at least one or two clients actively so I can stay involved in the industry and find out what some of the new techniques and thinking are, and it allows me to stay in touch with the business world. I call myself a communication consultant, more than just a PR person. IMC, integrated marketing communications.
PR3: Principal of “____ Public Relations,” which I’ve had for twenty three years.

We’re a boutique PR agency, with approximately three to five people within the organization. We’re a virtual team which means that we do have a bricks and mortar office, but we’re not all under the same roof at the same time. My two strongest constituents are senior level consultants, who’ve been with me six to ten years. That’s one difference between us and other firms, that we don’t have junior people. We’re really a senior level process.

PK: Does that inform how you handle your clients? Is the team that you would have available to a client different because of the nature of your firm, or is it fairly traditional?

PR3: It’s becoming more traditional. It was a choice of mine because I really didn’t want to have to manage a lot of people on a day to day basis. I wanted to manage my craft. Because we have the opportunity to work with senior level people in this capacity, it’s a very good business model – for the client, and also for us, as consultants, because there’s not a lot of hand-holding, we have a lot of experience. It has become much more so the business model for a number of reasons: not just the recession, even going back ten years ago, with the ongoing downsizing everywhere, a lot of people have gone off on their own. Some have discovered they like it very much, and then have built their businesses that way, not wanting to go back to a big agency or a corporation. That was a personal choice for me.

PK: Please describe your professional and educational background.
PR1: I have a B.A. in Public Communication from American University. I did not take any continuing education programs. Previously, I worked at a small agency for five years. Prior to that I was at a very small agency which doesn’t exist anymore. While still in college, I worked for “_____ Public Relations.” I’ve been in this job for about eight months, and in the PR field about six and a half years.

PK: *What clients do you have or like to have?*

PR1: We provide corporate reputation support for companies primarily in the financial services industry. We also provide financial communication support for organizations of any kind.

PR2: It almost doesn’t matter. Over the years, I’ve had so many, like consumer products, financial services, currently a credit union. It runs the gamut from manufacturer to retailer. If you know how to do PR, you can basically do work for anybody.

PR3: Healthcare is a very strong niche for us. Nonprofit, consumer products, we’ve got a very varied background. We’ve worked in education, in government with elected officials, professional services. A variety of experience, but healthcare sector – particularly in hospitals, healthcare services associations – has been the strongest.

PK: *Please describe your professional and educational background.*

PR2: I have the A.P.R. accreditation, which means I passed the ethical and professional test of the PRSA. Bachelor’s in Communication and English, and Master’s. I did some doctoral work in Organizational Management. My working background goes back to 1982, when I got my first job in advertising and PR. My first high
profile client was a national health research foundation, and I produced a couple of videos for their annual telethon.

PK: *How long have you been an independent consultant?*

PR2: Since 1989. Prior to that I worked in two different agencies as both an advertising executive and a PR supervisor.

PR3: B.A. in sociology from Montclair State University and Thomas Edison University. Currently, I’m studying for a Master’s degree in communications management at Syracuse University. I’m accredited in public relations with the A.P.R. I’ve been in PR about thirty-five years.

PK: *What motivated you to enter the field of public relations?*

PR1: I was initially a marketing major, and learned very quickly that in my school that meant statistics more so than marketing in the way I originally envisioned it. I realized I wasn’t really interested in that and moved into communications because it aligned more with my interests. Living in Washington D.C. at the time, one of the biggest firms was “_____,” and I took an internship there only because I needed to take an internship, and I liked it and thought I could do well in the industry, so I stuck it out.

PR2: 1983, I was working on the advertising side and I saw PR as a way to allow the agency to make more money if they offered more services to their clients. It would allow them to bill retainers. That was the original plan. But my entree’ was through advertising. I still dabble in advertising, because I think today you need to be more of a generalist rather than a specialist. With the economy contracting, the days of specialization are pretty much over. For anybody who
wants to get work, the more you can provide a client, the more marketable you are, and the more in demand you’ll be. I think we’re at a time when we, and the kids who are graduating today, need to know as much about communication - a little bit about marketing, a little bit about advertising, so they can make themselves more marketable.

**PK:** *So the external environment is forcing these changes?*

**PR2:** Absolutely. Companies are cutting back, looking for more productivity with less expenditure, what are they going to do? They’re going to get rid of what they consider unnecessary, to get the most for their buck in person to do advertising, PR, and marketing instead of three people.

**PK:** *Do you think this is changing the face of public relations, in a sense, or the character of it as a profession?*

**PR2:** I don’t know that it’s that that’s doing it so much as the digital world is changing the face of PR.

**PK:** *That’s a more specific content change.*

**PR2:** Right. Yes, yes. You have to have different learning skills than you did twenty years ago.

**PR3:** I was a sociology major and my intent was to work with people, looking to help create change. I was fascinated with the ways groups of people think and perceive and act. I did not finish my undergraduate degree in a traditional format. I stretched that out, going part-time. I got a full-time job as an administrative assistant for a trade association with offices in New York and New Jersey, and a lobbying division in Washington D.C., and liked it very much. They had an
outside PR and advertising agency, and decided that they wanted an in-house department. They hired an account executive away from the agency. Talk about ethical! Today, I think doing that would be unethical. But in the 70s, it was done. When they brought her on board, they promoted me to be her assistant. I got very good training in PR. She let me write, run the pressroom, and after that first trade show I got hooked on it. I loved the whole thing – working with the media, being able to put the communications vehicles together. Still, I thought I really wanted to be a social worker. What I didn’t realize at the time, now looking back, is that the two – sociology and PR – were so aligned. If you are a good practitioner, you’ve got to be more than a tactician. I know you know this. You need to really understand the perceptions of people and what motivates them to think the way they do, or to influence how they act. That’s really a big part of the PR function. I was there for several years until my first son was born. In the 70s it wasn’t so easy to commute to New York without daycare. Not that I wanted to leave him necessarily, but I didn’t have family that could help me. So I ended up staying home, and I started writing for newspapers and my previous company gave me freelance work. When they had the trade show, I’d run the pressroom. That was how it evolved. Eventually, as I had my third child, that’s when I started putting things together – how can I develop this freelance thing into a business.

**PK:** *What comes to mind when I say ethics?*

**PR1:** Doing what’s right. Making decisions that are in the best interests of all parties involved. Operating with a degree of transparency.
PR2: Honesty. Being truthful, doing the right thing. It's a sense of right and wrong. Obviously, there's your personal ethic. Then the corporation has its own ethic. I guess the society at large has another ethic. So it's just a question of you marrying up your ethic with the corporation that has a similar ethic.

PR3: It's an interesting concept because some people will look at things, like the situation I described, hiring somebody away from the agency. There are the traditional ethical things – we don't steal, we don't rob, we don't do criminal things. But there's other ethical things that come into play. There is a lack of civility between people today, the backstabbing that goes on, or some of the things I've seen agencies do, like they might suddenly try to take business away from another agency. It's anything that doesn't feel right, and you know it's not correct. It's unethical, from a very minor range to something really criminal. As a society, a big part of this, we have come to point when a lot of people aren't even thinking about whether it's ethical or not. They're just doing. There's a lack of civility. I wrote an article back in November that was a spinoff from a show that NBC did about 'is civility dead?' It's a wake-up call. We've gotten to be not tuned to people's feelings, thinking it's something minor but it hurts someone's career, hurts somebody's business. Some of the old really unethical things from the good ole boys' days might be gone, but in a lot of ways, they've been replaced by other things.

PK: How did your education influence your concept of ethics?

PR1: It didn't. There were business ethics classes that were required, but I found it to be fairly obvious and a lot of discussions basically about doing the right thing.
PR2: Not at all. Obviously, various universities teach ethics, and that may be of some help to certain people, but I think if you’re raised in a particular environment. In my case, leaving home at eighteen and having to work, I think I developed my own ethic. Some people have their own discoveries when it comes to ethics.

PR3: Formal education, and education on the job? In formal education, we never had any ethics. The only ethics training I’ve had was for the A.P.R. exam. For me, it’s just part of who I am. Many of things people have told me, especially when I was president of the PRSA in New York, I was credited for having a lot of grace and diplomacy. That is something I’ve always striven for. In my case, it’s more inherent. Education on the job – mostly that has come from competition, people trying to get business, people in the workplace backstabbing others and not being upfront. In crisis communication we always teach, and we’re taught, it’s better to step up to the plate, say what it is, if you were being offered a job that your colleague was offered. Be honest about it, don’t keep it quiet and then tell them afterward that you got the job when they didn’t. People are cowards in a lot of ways. So, it’s really more me, and not education that did that.

PK: So by the time you arrived at higher education, your sense of ethics was fairly well formed?

PR1: Yes.

PR2: Yes, but I think it’s always getting finessed and refined. If anything affected my ethics at the college level, it may have been a particular professor. It wasn’t necessarily the curriculum. He was honest, caring, and he seemed to be a better role model than other professors. People seem to gravitate toward certain
professors for particular reasons, some personal connection. I admired his ability to be open and honest, which was something I was taught as a child.

**PK:** And so it didn’t change from the time you entered and the time you graduated?

**PR1:** I would agree with that. It did not change.

**PR2:** No, it did not change. Ethics wasn’t even taught back then. I don’t know if it’s taught today. Perhaps, but I don’t think it’s very common.

**PR3:** Yes. My credo was already formulated and it didn’t change, not really. Neither was it particularly influenced one way or the other.

**PK:** What do you think are the main ethical challenges in public relations today?

**PR1:** Are you asking from an agency perspective?

**PK:** From your own perspective, whether you’re looking through the agency’s eyes or your own personal lens.

**PR1:** I think that the agency dynamic is important because there are various business interests that need to be considered when you’re working for an organization. And that’s their interests and your own company’s interests. I think that’s probably where the line gets blurry sometimes from an ethical perspective. When folks are looking for opportunities to meet their own business’s revenue needs or their billability targets, sometimes that conflicts with what the client needs. That’s certainly an industry issue. From an actual jack-of-the-trade perspective, I think it’s just an honesty and transparency issue where sometimes things are often misrepresented. For instance, a lot of quotes you might see from a CEO in a newspaper are not written by that CEO. They’re written by a PR guy. I think there are certainly blurred lines, but in general, most PR professionals and most
agencies strive to do what's quote/unquote right and do their best to operate with a high degree of integrity. That's certainly true here.

PR2: It's always the lure of money. That's always been it. There are business people who feel they can buy off somebody's honesty. I've had examples of this over the years, where people have been caught doing something illegal, and who try to hire a PR person and they feel if they give them a large enough retainer, they can buy off their honesty. That's always the temptation. You look at a retainer, and that's a lot of money, how solid is your ethical foundation? That's the big ethical challenge. There were big PR firms who did work for the tobacco companies even after the Surgeon General's report came out. That makes you question it.

PR3: This has been ongoing and still continues. There are practitioners – I'm not saying it's the majority – but let's face it, in this business, anybody in the world can go hang their shingle out. That has been a source of debate in PRSA, about licensure and other things. Licensing requires regulation and whole lot of other stuff that comes with that. In my capstone course right now, I'm looking at this. The PRSA has done a great job of advocating the job of PR. I'm not sure they've done a great job of advocating, once you have a job, once you have an agency, how that's supposed to work. What happened is companies hire agencies - not that they don't screen them, but they don't really know what to expect from a PR firm. So they hire someone who is, maybe, more of a tactician, who knows nothing about strategy, nothing about branding, ethics, legal planning, any of that. People come and they sell them this great bill of goods, and all it is is a great bunch of spin-doctor talk, and they give them a bit of media relations. That's
unethical. That’s, unfortunately, what a lot of companies feel, so this is what they’ve gotten. Now, they’re looking at other firms and other practitioners with trepidation, there’s a lack of trust. That is still a challenge to the industry. We still have this dark shadow hanging over us, that we’re not management. We should be up there with the accountants, the lawyers and all the top management, but yet we’re not. That’s partly one reason too. We’re not taken seriously because of the actions of some other people.

**PK:** *What you’ve spoken about leads to my interest in the role of education, where education coincides with the industry. What role does education play in perpetuating that?*

**PR3:** That’s an interesting question. There were things we’ve talked about in the PRSA in terms of ethics. What also needs to be stressed is, if the boss asks you to fudge something a little bit in a press release, do you? It may mean that you’re risking your job by putting your foot down, but that’s ethical. That’s where ethics comes into play. Sometimes some of that happens. Hopefully, not in too many situations, but I’m sure it does. The other thing is the emergence of Sarbanes Oxley, things like this with total transparency, that’s a very important thing. Do you remember the case with Armstrong Williams? When I’ve gone in to speak to classes that was a more current example. You would not believe the debate between students in the classroom about whether that was ethical or that was totally acceptable!

**PK:** *Where did the students come out on that issue?*
PR3: 50:50. The whole pay-for-play thing. There’s a lot of that murkiness. I think it’s getting better, but it’s not gone. In my opinion, there should be, there should be more ethics taught in college. It really should be.

PK: Could you describe an anecdote of any situation or ethical challenge that you may know of in your PR practice?

PR3: I don’t think I’ve ever had a personal experience with that. I have heard through other colleagues that they’ve been asked to enhance something. That’s another thing – how far do you go when you are putting together a communications document about a product, about how good it is, how do you stretch it? That has gone on, where firms have blown up something, professing the product is better than it really is. Frankly, in my letters of agreement with clients, we have a clause that says ‘we will not be held responsible for...’ If you tell us ‘yes, this is tried and true’ we’re taking this for gospel because you’re the client, and we do trust you. But, if we prepare a press release and put it out there, and find out several months later that you’ve lied to us, we are not responsible. Those things need to be included in letters of agreement so that nobody really thinks that they can get you to do that. To some people, it’s just a little smudging the lines. If you’re lying, you’re lying.

PR1: When I was working at “_____” in 2004 they were sued, it was quite public, for billing an inappropriate amount of hours to a large municipality which was one of their big clients at the time. There was a lot talked about how folks were encouraged to bill more hours than they were actually working to meet targets of
revenue. A couple of my colleagues ended up in prison at that time. I was not
involved in that situation.

**PK:** So they were ‘encouraged’ to bill extra hours, or were they under ‘duress’ to
bill those extra hours? How much of a choice was there for those employees if
they wanted to keep their jobs?

**PR1:** It’s hard to say, because I didn’t hear the discussions myself. The fingers were
pointing at the people who were essentially torched for the crime – the senior
people. It was never the troops.

**PK:** Can you look at that situation and identify primary issues that were operating?
Maybe greed?

**PR1:** I can make some assumptions. I assume that some of those folks’ compensation
was based on revenue generation. And this was a multi-million dollar client, and
I presume that if they fell short of their revenue targets, they weren’t going to get
the bonus they wanted. Although this is my guess.

**PR2:** About ten years ago, “____’s” car dealership had been caught turning back
odometers on used cars. So the ad agency called me in to see if I would do public
relations for the dealership.

**PK:** Was that remedial PR?

**PR2:** Yes, crisis PR. I told the agency I’d be happy to talk to the guy, so the first
question I asked him was “did you do this?” He hemmed and hawed, but
ultimately he came out and sort of implied his approval to those who wanted to do
that. So ultimately, he was culpable. I asked him if he was willing to come
forward and admit it. He said “No, your job is to cover it up.” I walked out. But
they were ready to pay me $4,000 a month to turn a sow’s ear into a silk purse, so to speak.

PK: *What happened between you and the ad agency as a result of that?*

PR2: There was nothing punitive taken. They understood because I told them I wasn’t going to jeopardize my standing, that it would destroy my career if I took on this client and it was found out that he had been doing it. That’s something I take great pride in. I quote this guy, Edmund Burke, who was an 18th century Scottish statesman: “Those who cannot control themselves from within must be controlled from without.” That’s sort of my life creed. Part of that is living an honest life, being honest with others. So this was an example of somebody asking me to look the other way and lie for them. I wasn’t going to do it.

PR2: The potential ramification to the agency was that they would lose a big client, which they ultimately lost anyway. But it wasn’t because of my particular refusal to do his work. That really was just the final straw. You know, someone who operates like that probably operates like that all the time. It wasn’t an isolated instance where he was looking to cover up or do something a little deceitful. I’m sure there were indicators all along.

PK: *How would you apply your own concept of ethics to a situation such as this?*

PR1: It was wrong, quite simply. They were not serving their client’s best interest, but rather serving their business interests before their client’s. I think that’s a clear violation of ethics for any industry.

PK: *When you’re faced with ethical dilemmas in your work, do you use a particular method or a go-to procedure to analyze and make decisions? Or is it freeform?*
PR1: I don’t know if there’s necessarily a formal process, but I will say that here, and in all the previous agencies I’ve been at, there’s typically been a pretty open line of communication to senior decision makers, if there seemed to be anything that required hand-raising.

PK: So your firm doesn’t necessarily have a protocol of questions to use, perhaps when you need to evaluate or dissect something?

PR1: To be honest with you, I’ve only been here about eight months. Because I’m not aware of it doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. We have a pretty thick handbook, but I haven’t read it in enough detail to answer your question. Some agencies are better than others. I’ve been incredibly impressed with how high the standards are here for maintaining those high levels of integrity all the way up to our very senior leadership... things like we would never consider resigning a very small client to pursue a much larger opportunity because it’s not the right thing to do [comment edited to retain anonymity].

PK: So that colors that situation a little bit too?

PR1: Right.

PR2: I always let the client know up front that I would never lie to them and I’ll be completely honest. So they know right away that that’s what the expectation is. If you tell a client up front right away that these are the things I will not do for you – I will not lie, you need to be completely transparent with the public and with their communications, and if you’re not, that’s not the way I do PR and we’re not a good match. You lay the groundwork right up front and do away with a lot of confusion down the road.
PK: *So when you’re dealing with different constituencies, weighing different factors in a situation, how do you take all that into account?*

PR2: This is all part of what you do before you actually take on a client full-time. You have to know exactly what their policies and ethics are. For example, a few years ago I did work for a title insurance company, and they had certain views about particular industry procedure. If I had disagreed with their approach, I probably wouldn’t be doing the work for that client. I think the important thing is that you understand exactly where the client wants to go as early on in the process as possible. If you’re a good PR person, you know exactly what the client wants to do and you better be in sync with them, or it’s never going to be a happy ending.

PR3: I don’t off hand. About stakeholders – here’s another thing that goes on on the agency side. Some agencies have a niche, a specialty. So when they take on clients, the clients know. But when you have an opportunity to take on a client who’s a competitor of another of your current clients, you can’t do that. There’s no *rule* that says you can’t, and I suppose that if all the parties talked and you all agreed that it would ok. But how do you start to separate some of those things? You get a media offering and either one of your clients could be the one who’s covered. How to start making decisions like that? Those are things that need to be discussed amongst the parties. But I still think that if you came into an agreement, it’s still a grey area. PRSA has tried to get somebody in each chapter to be in charge of ethics, but I’m not sure what they’re really doing. In organizations, the people in them haven’t thought about it. Maybe if somebody
creates an awareness for them, it would be like ‘wow.’ Ethics doesn’t get a lot of formal thought.

**PK:** Do you draw upon anything that you remember from your education, other than your marketing or business principles? Is there anything that you find yourself drawing upon, from an ethical perspective?

PR1: No.

PR2: No.

PR3: No.

**PK:** When facing ethical decisions in public relations, which one of these considerations might be of highest concern to you?

- Your *duty* as a professional public relations practitioner? *(For example, how you understand your professional obligations to your client, to your firm, or to your profession.)*
- What you consider to be the highest *virtue* possible in the situation? *(For example, the principles or ideals that you personally value most.)*
- The *consequences* of your actions? *(For example, the end results or effects that you foresee from a course of action - upon others, or yourself.)*

PR1: Virtue. Here’s a specific example going back to “_____”: I was working on one of the earliest social media campaigns ever, before Facebook even existed. The client was created the anti-drug campaign. I was moderating a message board for parents that provided advice on how to handle your children and their encounters with drugs. Part of my job was to read submissions and censor them, and rewrite them to align with the client’s own messaging and then post them. I was so morally opposed to it that said “I refuse to do this and if you want me to keep doing it, I’m out.” I felt so strongly that this was nothing more than
propaganda, and it was immoral, and I was willing to leave my job to stop doing it. I was only an intern, but it was my only source of income at the time. So, they just took me off that responsibility and gave me new responsibilities. I don’t think any agency would do that today. The Internet is so strong that that would just fly around, but at that time, it worked.

PK: Would there be a slightly different take on it now, since interns are asked to write blogs, maybe along the same lines? Has it gone away, or morphed into something different?

PR1: Yes. Right.

PR2: In my case, it would be virtue first, then consequences upon me personally. Ultimately, you have to live with yourself. You can always go out and get a new client, you can get a new job, but it’s ultimately whether you can live with yourself. That’s always been it for me. I’ve left companies, quit clients, when I knew it was going to hurt me financially, but I knew there was simply no way I could do anything for them.

PR3: I hate to say consequences, but in a way I think consequences covers the other two, because your actions create harm to yourself and to other people. That’s the biggest thing you want to be careful of, that you don’t hurt somebody. Supposing, through a press release – this is going back to fudging the value of a product or whatever – even with healthcare - you’re putting information out there and somebody tries something and gets hurt. Forget how you even feel about your virtue and everything, this is a terrible thing. People are being hurt by this. Certainly your virtue and your professionalism, but always, we have to put people
first. And if somebody or your self is being hurt, you’ve got to take that into account. Not because I’m afraid I’m going to get into trouble. Of course you’re afraid. Good people don’t want to be in trouble. Virtue and the professionalism are important too. But I’d be more concerned with people being hurt, having a consequence, the trickle-down effect. Look at the story of the Passaic Valley Sewer Commission. Every year I get an RFP (request for proposal) from them for PR services. I’m glad I never responded to that because I would have never gotten it, because it’s a family tree there. They’re giving all of their family and friends the jobs and they’re milking money from the public. It’s unethical and it’s unprofessional, but look at how many people are going to be hurt. Not even just the people who got the jobs, but their families and everybody else. To me, consequences would have to be the most important thing.

PK: When facing ethical questions, which of the following most influences your choice of action?

- Your personal credo
- A professional code of ethics, or standards of practice.
- Legality.

PR1: One and two. A combination of those. All three of them should play, but when it comes to legality, we would never pursue something that’s illegal.

PR2: All of the above. It’s always the personal credo, the personal has to come first. I think if you use that as your standard, everything else sort of falls into place. If you have a well-balanced sense of ethics, it’s probably not going to be illegal, and
it's probably going to parallel with what the client's ethic is. What fits me best personally, always.

PR3: Legality, I don't think it's so different from your other question. It still affects your personal credo and if you're a person who doesn't like to do things that are wrong, it's still going to affect your credo. Legality is the top one.

PK: Even though something can be legal and still unethical?

PR3: I didn't think of it that way. Then I would go with the personal credo. My first concern would always be for something legal. That would be the stop-gap. If it's legal, but it's unethical, then the personal credo would be my secondary choice.

PK: How should colleges prepare students for the ethical dimension of public relations?

PR1: They should offer real-life examples and case studies that allow students to actually really understand what they might be faced with when they're thrown into the real world, rather than reading from a textbook that describes what's right and wrong. I think there should be anecdotes and specific examples shared. Some of the examples that you and I have talked about are good examples of things that I would have liked to hear about in school, but I never did.

PR2: I think it's good to have a course where ethics is reviewed, but I think it has to come much younger. Students have to learn what's right and wrong. A few years ago I taught a course in PR at another university. I asked the question: if a student was walking out of the classroom and they dropped some money on the floor, what would you do? Pick it up and give it to the person? Pick it up and put it in your own pocket? Most of the class said they'd pick it up and put it in their own
pocket. I was *stunned* by that. They said that the person shouldn’t have dropped it. That highlighted to me the fact that a lot of young students just don’t understand their role in a free society. It always starts out where we’re all our own little government. We govern ourselves. I think that’s where it starts. Once they get to the college level, there’s only so much we can do, because ethics is such a personal thing.

**PK:** *Even though these PR students are being prepared for a profession? Their education is specific to a career choice.*

PR2: The PRSA has its own Code of Ethics – seven guiding principles, honesty, fairness, etc. We certainly could include that into the curriculum in *Principles of PR.*

**PK:** *The PRSA Code of Ethics gives examples of both improper and proper situations.*

PR2: I think that’s one practical and tangible thing we could include, the Code of Ethics.

PR3: They should have more courses on ethics, or a seminar on ethics. A lot of the kids I’ve seen are probably going into jobs where they might know that something doesn’t feel right, but if the boss says it’s ok, it’s ok. Some kids will just feel differently and stand their ground, but I don’t think that’s going to be the commonality. There should be some ethics training within their educational process. I’m not sure how many schools have a communication law course as part of their curriculum, and that would also play into it, not just because of the ethics, but understanding where you can get into trouble. You mentioned
personal credo as opposed to what’s legal. In our law class at Syracuse
University, we had different scenarios we had to prepare communications law
briefs on, and one of them was, for example: If Madonna is sunbathing on her
deck with her boyfriend, and a photographer takes a photo of her from a
helicopter, is this legal or not legal? The answer to those photography questions
is that if you’re in a public place where others can see you, then all bets are off.
You take a picture where it’s not just you who can see her. Even if you’re taking
photos at an event, you almost don’t even need the photographic release signed
off, because that’s the way the law works. But if it’s a picture of somebody who
may be in an unflattering position, you know it may be legal to take that photo
and use it, but is it really the right thing to take that photo and use it? Is that the
right thing to do? Is it ethical? There are situations like that where younger
people might come out of school and just say ‘it’s legal, or the boss says it’s ok.’
Even the legal and ethical can parallel, being part of the educational process.

PK: Would it be beneficial to offer a short of ethical toolkit – like this is how to
evaluate a situation, or follow these steps, or maybe use this model?

PR1: I think yes and no. There’s a slightly fine line because, to some extent, if you
can’t determine what’s right and wrong you’re probably in the wrong profession.
And I don’t think it is all black and white. At the same time, for folks just
entering the field, it might be useful for them to have something that’s a bit more
formalized, to review and understand before they really understand how the
business plays. It’s one of those things where if you’re in a position to be making
decisions, or in any level of authority, if you need guidelines, you’re probably not qualified to be in that position.

PR2: They have to teach it, first of all. I try to do that, I try to set an example for my clients. In a free society, the only way we maintain the type of government we have is if individuals learn what their responsibilities are, their roles in a free society. We have to have our own personal sense of ethics and if individuals understood what their role was in a free society, then that would help the industry with its quest for professionalism.

PK: Is there anything else you would like to add – generally, or specifically?

PR1: Yes. I’d be interested to know if you find any discrepancies between the professor crowd and the professional crowd. I was a communications major at American University. They were known for having a pretty good communications program, and I was surprised to find when I graduated that the professors didn’t really have a grasp of what the industry was really like. I’d like to know what you find if you do slice it that way. It would be very interesting to me. It might also be interesting for you to try to find folks who work at agencies of very different sizes, and backgrounds, because their experiences are quite different from mine - the people who are at agencies that are owned by some major holding companies, the folks working at some of the boutiques really struggling to make their numbers. I think their points of view might be quite different. Motivations would be different. Also varying levels of seniority. Since you understand the title system, it would be good for you to speak with an account
executive, or an assistant account executive straight out of college, or someone
who has about ten years more experience than me.

PR2: It’s a changing world and it’s going to require that – innovations keep coming at a
faster and faster pace – it’s important for these students to keep their education
going long after they leave school, because the education never ends. If you want
to continue to advance in the industry, you need to continue to learn.

PR3: Ethics is an area that is growing in recognition, but we’re not there yet – probably
because organizations and the people in them haven’t thought about ethics.