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Hired Guns and Moral Torpedoes: Balancing the Competing Moral Duties of the Public Relations Professional

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Abstract

Public relations helps an organisation and its publics adapt mutually to each other. However, this does not mean that the profession is value neutral or anything goes. There will be cases where professionals have to make discretionary ethical decisions and negotiate their roles and responsibilities, especially when faced with novel or difficult issues. In this conceptual paper, we describe how the notion of professional role morality not only shapes the individual struggles that practitioners endure but also highlights the organisational structures that foster or shun ethics in the decision-making process. Thus we provide a means of assessing professional action that balances the urge to become a hired gun who simply abdicates personal responsibility and completely adopts the employer's moral viewpoint on the one hand, and moral torpedoes who rely exclusively on their personal views without any concern for wider implications on the other. Investigating role morality as played out in public relations is important because it may explain why practitioners often find themselves at odds with their best moral judgments. Here we present five fictionalised narratives to illustrate the conceptual issues and highlight the most significant moral distinctions that have practical consequences for both the theory and practice of public relations.

Introduction

The absence of a single, clear function for public relations means that practitioners in the field sometimes lack unambiguous guidelines for ethical decisions and continuously negotiate their roles and responsibilities, especially when faced with novel or difficult

issues. Hence we need to explore how practitioners create and invent their social roles in organisations through interactions with others—a topic not much covered in current public relations ethics research. Applying the notion of role morality not only describes the individual struggles practitioners endure, but also highlights the organisational structures that foster or shun ethics in the decision-making process. Thus, some practitioners become hired guns who surrender total moral abdication in favour of the employer while others turn into moral torpedoes where there is exclusive reliance on personal views without concern for the wider implications.

Bivins (1987) points out that “What is rarely discussed is the painstaking and often circuitous route that each of us must take if we are to arrive at anything resembling a correct moral judgment” (p. 195). He acknowledges that each practitioner's experiences are larger than their personal ethics because any ethical decision in an organisation involves a complex, complicated process. Practitioners rarely focus on themselves alone; they constantly help organisations manufacture compromises between personal beliefs and professional responsibilities.

Public relations practitioners are influenced and controlled by the organisations that employ them. Their individual ethical decisions are also social performances staged for practitioners, clients, organisational superiors, and the general public. Unclear role expectations cause psychological tension in practitioners that obstructs their ability to make a clear moral decision. Interaction with superiors, subordinates and peers; friends, allies and rivals; business customers and competitors; regulators and legislators; the media; specific publics and society at large all shape the

occupational moralities of professionals (Jackall, 1988). Therefore, investigating role morality as played out in public relations is important because it may explain why practitioners oftentimes find themselves morally at odds with their best moral judgments (Gibson, 2003).

Role morality and public relations

When we take on a professional position, there are three sources of moral guidance: our own personal morality, a professional code, and the corporate or institutional code of conduct. Most of the time there will not be a significant difference in what they tell us to do, but there are novel and difficult issues that sometimes call for discretionary judgment, and these grey areas are not always covered by codes. Moreover, there are times where the three sources give cross-cutting and potentially conflicting advice, and hence we should look at them so that we have a way of working out what we ought to do when faced with troubling cases.

First, it is worth noting that when we go to work we often take on a role. It may be more or less rigid in what it tells us to do. Consider, for example, a customer service agent who responds to complaints by telephone. She is given a diagnostic flowchart by her employer, and a script to follow when she hears certain prompts. When someone calls in she is not acting for herself, but more as a voice for the company, and we can imagine that a sophisticated voice recognition system could do the same job. She may follow up on the complaint with a letter, but when she signs the letter she is doing so as an agent of the company, and in any subsequent litigation she is immune since the company is the main actor, not her. When she leaves work, though, essentially she takes off the company hat and puts on her own, so that in conversation or letters she is speaking for herself and morally responsible for what she says and does in a way that she is not when at work. In her job she has become inured to the anger of the callers, and has abdicated her own judgment in favour of company policy. On the other hand, if she met the callers socially she might

be more sympathetic and concerned. She may disconnect herself so completely from her job that she does not even identify herself with the person who routinely signs dunning letters. She has developed the ability to compartmentalise her life to the point that she abdicates total responsibility to her employer. This is a less dramatic, but parallel case to faithful soldiers who carry out orders without question. However we should note that although she has abdicated responsibility, it isn't that she has none—she has a degree of power but has chosen to not use it. To look at this more closely, let us examine role morality in more detail.

We all have roles in our lives—parents, friends, teachers, community members or employees. Some we cannot avoid, for instance, being a child, but most of the others we take on voluntarily, and often we take on the duties, standards, relationships and constraints that are conventionally associated with the role. Thus if we become parents, there are standards of decent parenting that we buy into and serve to frame our actions. Professional roles are more complex, in that they emerge from a social contract that gives the profession particular rights and responsibilities in exchange for improving our welfare overall and there is normally certification that recognises the specialised training, distinctive skills and competencies involved. The societal mandate distinguishes professions, since we can think of say, surgeons or fire-fighters acting in role but not burglars or marathon runners since they are acting for self-benefit rather than society's. We endorse surgeons cutting into people and fire-fighters destroying property as part of their job, whereas we don't give those rights to ordinary citizens.

We can also see the societal undergirding when things go wrong, in that professionals are described as 'betraying the public trust'. In recent financial crises, for instance, the lack of transparency and dubious accounting methods were seen not only as personal on the part of some 'bad apples' but more as a systemic problem where many who were entrusted with looking out for the public interest had instead abandoned that obligation in favour of

immediate self-interest. Accountants, for example, had a duty not only to make sure that the books were in order, but that society was being served by the financial methods being used. So although we tend to think of professional obligation mainly in the public sector, it actually applies wherever public welfare is at stake, whether the case involves lazy regulators, careless doctors, dishonest judges, or the makers of poorly designed airplanes; that is, in cases where failure to live up to a reasonable moral standard affects us all.

The role of public relations can be thought of as professional in that it is socially endorsed to promote information and commerce, and it usually requires special training and expertise. Public relations practitioners, through the use of strategic campaigns, have the power to influence public opinion and frame public discourse. However we might think of public relations as more like teaching, than, say, medicine, in the sense that members see themselves as either on or off duty. A doctor who happens to be at the scene of an accident has a moral and professional obligation to offer assistance, and similarly a police officer has a duty to intervene if she sees a crime in progress. On the other hand, a teacher who corrects the mistakes of someone overheard in casual conversation is likely to be considered meddling and bad mannered instead of helpful. What we find, then, is that society places more emphasis on some professional roles than others, and some skills are appropriately confined to a professional setting. This is not as obvious as it sounds at first, though: for example, lawyers generally only have duties to paying clients, not the general public, based on the reasoning that it is better to support the lawyer/client relationship in an adversarial legal system than complicate their role with more extensive duties. This delineation suggests that as a society we either implicitly or explicitly shape the professional's duties.

One of the hallmarks of a professional appears to be that he or she wields power by virtue of the office. It might initially seem

that public relations practitioners have little power, but that is not so. The power might not always be direct, but in fact they can be highly influential. Mayer (1987, p. 78) has described ten kinds of power, including:

- a. Formal authority. The power that derives from a formal position within a structure that confers certain decision-making prerogatives. [...;]
- b. Expert/information power. The power that is derived from having expertise in a particular area or information about a particular matter. [...;]
- c. Associational power (or referent power). The power that is derived from association with other people with power. [...;]
- d. Moral power. The power that comes from an appeal to widely held values. Related to this is the power that results from the conviction that one is right. [And;]
- e. Personal power. The power that derives from a variety of personal attributes that magnify other sources of power, including self-assurance, the ability to articulate one's thoughts and understand one's situation, one's determination and endurance and so forth.

Viewed in this light, we can see that someone in public relations has much more power than one might imagine. Practitioners can control the flow of information and shape it in various ways by means of their privileged access to the source and outlets. Moreover, they are often in positions of credibility and authority that automatically give weight to the message they convey.

Professional codes

Professional societies normally distinguish themselves by creating a code of behaviour for members who are acting in a role, and typically they police themselves so that failure to comply with the code will result in professional censure or expulsion. One way of approaching role morality, then, might be to act in compliance with the professional code. If used in that sense,

it would be appropriate for someone to ask his neighbour for financial advice, and hear the response “Would you like me to answer that as your friend or as an accountant?”

However, we should not be too quick to bifurcate behaviour into that which is either governed by roles or not, since there are two other levels at play. The first is a baseline of conventional morality that is often assumed by codes. That is, they rarely mention that murder, theft and blackmail are wrong, if only because these are taken as axiomatic. Nevertheless, it shows us that codes operate on the surface above a bedrock of an underlying moral code. To be sure, these basic moral claims will be very general and offer little specific guidance, but we cannot ignore them when we make moral assessments of professionals at work, since as it turns out, there are some times when role morality conflicts even with widely held values that we might assume to be foundational. For example, in the notorious Tarasoff case a psychologist felt that it was more important to maintain confidentiality with a client than warn a potential victim of a direct and immediate threat of lethal harm that he was told about in a therapy session (*California Reporter*, 1976). In another case, lawyers for a convicted killer knew that an innocent man had been sentenced for their client’s crime but kept quiet for 26 years based on their understanding of their professional obligations (CBS News, 2008). Similarly, a Jesuit priest heard the confession of a criminal to a fatal stabbing, but didn’t come forward to free a wrongly convicted man until the perpetrator had died and he felt he was released from his oath of confidentiality (*The Independent*, 2001). So while many moral issues may at first strike us as intuitively clear, there are often strong arguments to be made on both sides, especially when we take into account the professional institutions of therapy or legal representation. Therefore we have to recognise that even our most basic moral assumptions may be debatable when we talk about roles and the needs of society.

In cases where there is a conflict between acts-in-role and conventional morality, we might assume that conventional morality would always win out but based on the societal mandate for professional behaviour—e.g., maintaining lawyer/client confidence—but this may not always be appropriate or desirable since maintaining a general principle may be more important than disclosure of any one illegal act. A deeper level of analysis of professional public relations behaviour is therefore vital since we are often in the zone of discretionary behaviour that falls between complete role morality and total personal autonomy.

A useful tool in formulating our assessment is to use a four-part analysis (Luban, 1988). Rather than just looking at whether the code requires non-disclosure we have to assess all four elements that we have discussed so far:

- a. The institution chartered by society (public relations)
- b. The role of the individual (consultant, lobbyist)
- c. The obligation implied by the role (loyalty, truthfulness)
- d. The act implied by the obligation (free flow of information, advocacy, message strategy).

This is less intimidating than it might appear at first. Once we have established that the practice of public relations has significant functions within our society it justifies the place of advocacy. The next two steps bring in the issues of personal discretion: advocacy involves loyally promoting the client’s cause using your craft and expertise on behalf of the client, and the last part deals with the means to bring that about. In precise terms, then, the question is not one of blindly doing as one is told at work, but whether the elements involved can be morally justified both individually and collectively. When we look at arguments that purportedly justify role morality, we have to look at each part of the claim, and the links between them. The role might not always be vital to the institution, for instance, or the particular act (writing copy that makes a dubious scientific claim, say) may not be vital to the role since

there could be other ways that the message could be conveyed.

One way of applying the four-part test would be to use a utilitarian calculus at each stage—in effect, saying that the benefits outweigh the harms. We would identify the institution and see if it serves the ends of society in the way that it ought to, and then look to see if the moral problems associated with each of the other elements are offset by the overall increase in welfare. In colloquial terms, not every battle is worth fighting, and not every hill is worth dying for; the four-part framework gives us a way to determine when compliance, dissent, or active opposition are appropriate.

Most moral decisions are taken against a backdrop of immediacy, and naturally someone could not be expected to make a fully-fledged deliberation every time a value-based choice has to be made. Yet the first two steps, at least, can be assessed reflectively over time, and would rarely be called into question. The more problematic ethical cases will typically be those that do not challenge the institution or its roles, but the individual's action when they take on those roles.

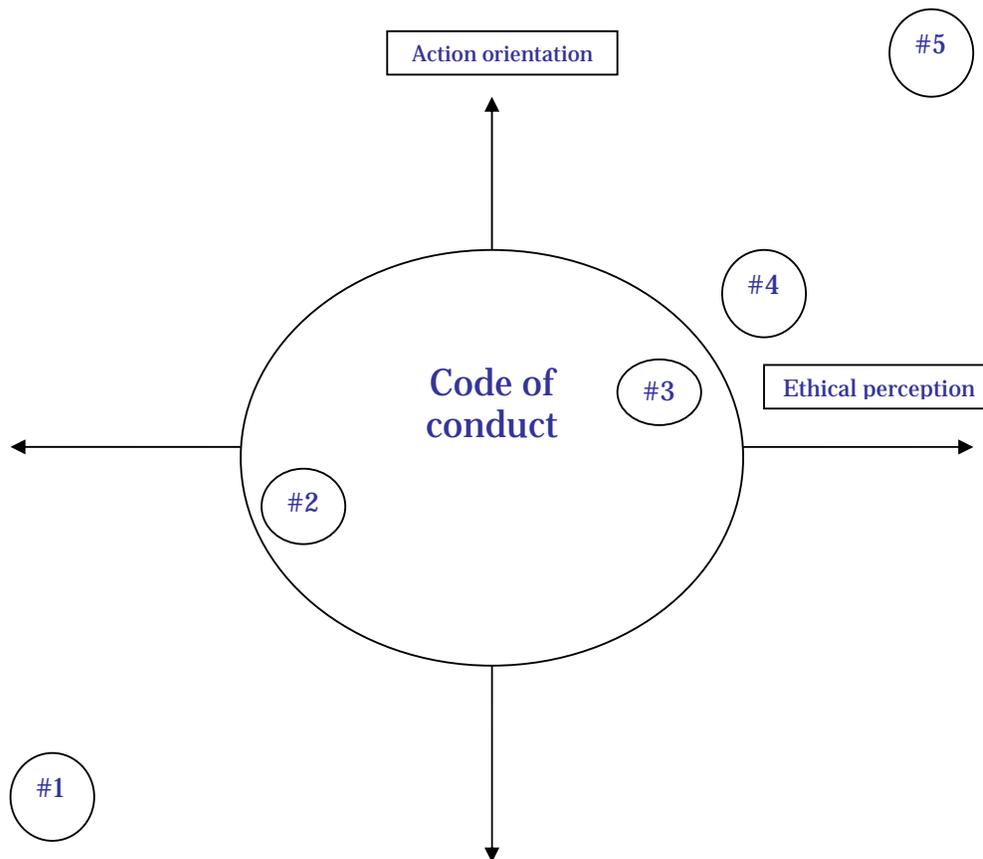
The tensions that are found between the individual and the role may be demonstrated graphically (see **Figure 1**, below). We have used two axes: one is the personal perception of ethical issues, and the other is the orientation to action. Many people could be unaware of the ethical dimension of decisions, and hence essentially amoral in their day-to-day actions. Others may be aware, but lack the motivation to change things.

As the diagram shows, actions in role are often contained within the sphere of professional codes, but some will inevitably extend beyond them. Importantly, the diagonal line acts as a diagnostic tool to highlight whether the case is one that would

warrant any action; one that should be addressed by any public relations professional; or one that depends on an individual's own discretionary judgment.

Our methodology is to outline the issues using several hypothetical cases to illustrate the issues and draw out the significant distinctions. The cases are mapped by number onto Figure 1 to enable comparison. Case studies have been shown to have significant pedagogical utility by allowing students to develop critical thinking skills by looking at moral dilemmas in a narrative format. The method is well established in medical, legal, business, and communication education (Kruckeberg & Bowen, 2004; Maclagan, 2003; Thacher, 2004; Weber, 2007). Indeed, Miller (2009) notes the long history where “the telling of stories has been the chief means of moral education in all classical and heroic societies” (p. 291). Here we follow Heath (1992; 1994) who has discussed the value of applying narrative to public relations in some detail. In his words: “Much of the discourse used by public relations relies on narrative... The story not only gives perspective to the facts, but also provides values that allow receivers of the message to judge those facts and draw conclusions” (Heath, 1992, pp. 57–58). Moreover, there appears to be little pedagogical difference between using real and hypothetical stories. Hodges (1997; 2002) in particular calls attention to the special need for good cases in advertising and public relations, which often present a challenge due to client-agency confidentiality (for a contrasting view, see Pauly & Hutchison, 2001). Our argument is more analytical and theoretical than the typical case study analysis. In this paper, we identify the nature of the distinctive ethical problem that arises in public relations professional practice in order to develop a framework that can subsequently be used for a broad range of actual problems.

Figure 1: Tensions between individual perceptions of ethics and the role



#1. Kent the press secretary

After serving as the president’s press secretary for almost three years, Kent reflects back on his time in the White House and the demands of his position. He constantly defended the administration’s decisions despite personal concerns about the truthfulness of the message. Kent never questioned his employer but rather chose to be loyal to the administration’s requests. Because he engaged in a preliminary stage of evaluation in which he determined that the administration merited advocacy, he felt it was not his job to be objective about the so-called facts but rather to promote the president’s positions and policies. However, soon into his tenure as press secretary Kent realised that he was not a valued member of the team but rather a mouthpiece for the administration.

Kent’s reflection on his tenure as press secretary is interesting because it demonstrates how a lack of autonomy hinders the advocate’s

capacity to make independent decisions. In this particular case, Kent had engaged in a process of pre-assessment that deemed the client and its cause worthy of advocacy; thus, his role implied certain moral responsibilities (a-c, above). His primary responsibility was to communicate on behalf of the administration and to promote the president’s agenda.

The position of press secretary, a specialised area of public relations, is considered an essential role because it keeps the public, via the press corps, updated on the administration. The role implies advocacy where the objective is to persuade a targeted audience to accept the point of view of an individual, organisation or idea (Edgett, 2002). However, Kent was charged with sticking to the talking points and answering questions that would put the president, his administration, and its policies in a good light. When Kent realises he lacks the autonomy necessary to make rational ethical decisions, he cannot ethically carry out his

obligation to his position (d, above). Kent has to confront conflicting loyalties to the president and the public. He realises that he is no longer serving the public interest appropriately because he is not acting as a responsible advocate and lacks any power to change the situation. Since he does not have access to the key decision makers, he cannot act as an objective counsel and thus becomes a talking head for an administration that he believes is manipulating the truth. He thus has no ethical obligation to continue in the position as his employer has made demands that effectively undermined the legitimacy of the role.

#2. Alice the public relations manager

Alice is the public relations manager at a large state bank. She has worked for the bank for five years and manages the company's media relations. Despite the economic crisis, the bank, which employs about 4,000 people, is still turning a profit, yet the bank president decided to accept millions of dollars from the federal government as an abundance of caution. In keeping with its tradition of rewarding its top-performing employees, the bank is spending tens of thousands of dollars to send 100 employees on an all-expenses paid trip to Jamaica. When the local newspaper is tipped off about this story, the reporter contacts Alice for answers. Alice calls a meeting with the bank's CEO to discuss a strategy and to develop talking points. Alice knows it is essential that the bank provide a prompt statement. The CEO tells Alice to ignore the reporter's request for an interview and instructs her to not release a response statement. Alice expresses unease to her boss who thanks her for her concern and then tells her that he is not going to be bullied by the media. Realising that her job may be in jeopardy if she fails to comply, she suppresses her moral qualms and gets on with her job knowing full well that she should be providing a statement to the media because this story will still run in tomorrow morning's paper.

In this case Alice is put in a difficult position because she knows that it is her responsibility to maintain the integrity of her relationship with the media and other stakeholders including

customers, government officials and shareholders, among others, by being open and honest in her communication. Yet, her boss's order not to answer questions from the media trumps her personal judgment. Alice believes it is in the bank's best interest to be open and transparent about the company reward programme and the relief fund. However, Alice can exercise little power in this situation. As a corporate employee, Alice feels loyalty to the bank and decides this is not the issue that will define her professional career, even though she is uneasy with the boss's decision. Instead of developing a strategic message plan that would provide further context to the situation, Alice is willing to compromise. She is confident she could not have handled the situation better and is proud of herself for speaking up in the first place.

#3. Camilla the public relations coordinator

Camilla works for a full-service global public relations firm where she has worked on various clients in the consumer brand category. One of her largest accounts is a leading low-price retail store. Camilla has worked on this account for two years and has helped the client promote new product lines and improve customer relations. Now the client wants to incorporate new media into its public relations mix to further promote its image to a new customer base. Camilla's team discusses various ideas to reach out to new customers via the Internet. The client suggests a blog that highlights a couple travelling across America who always stop at the retail giant. The team thinks this is brilliant, especially since the timing is perfect—summer is right around the corner. The couple, though, would be fictitious and their encounters carefully scripted. Eventually, the client requests Camilla to write the copy for the blog since she has worked on the account the longest and therefore understands the consumer base and the culture of the company. As Camilla starts to draft the first entry, she is troubled about her task because she knows that it is deceptive. She confronts her boss about her apprehension to this tactic. Her justification is based on the *Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Code Provisions* for free flow

of information, disclosure of information, and enhancing the profession.

In Camilla's case, she is asked not only to go against her own personal values but also the values put forth by the profession as stated in the PRSA Code of Ethics. As an agency practitioner she feels obligated to her client but at the same time she recognises that deceiving the public is unethical and could be detrimental to her personal career and her client's reputation. Under the agency model, professionals act in accordance with the client's requests where the advocate's degree of autonomy is reduced. Such a reduction may significantly hinder the advocate's capacity to make independent decisions. However, Camilla does not absolve herself of moral responsibility for the client's ethical shortcomings but rather exerts moral and personal power by making a case as to why she should not create copy for a fictitious blog (Bivins, 2006).

Since public relations practitioners are morally obligated to various groups—client, public, profession, self—such situations cause psychological tension for the individual who must grapple with the decision. Furthermore, the organisational culture of the agency also eased Camilla's situation. If her boss had less moral awareness, Camilla may well have been asked to choose between her job and her values.

#4. Dan the director of public relations

Dan is the director of public relations for a large international oil and gas company. Recently he has worked hard to develop and launch a campaign promoting the company's new green approach. The campaign, which includes social media, television sponsorships, and traditional print advertisements, has received quite a bit of media attention for its focus on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the development of advanced energy technologies so that the company can play a significant role in positioning the global community for a better future. A few months after the launch of the green campaign, Dan realised that the new CSR campaign was simply a greenwashing campaign to make the company look environmentally friendly. The other side of the story was all of a sudden quite

clear to Dan. Even though he had worked for the company for years, he failed to see how the company suppressed alternative options in favour of the policy that would increase the company's profit. Ultimately, Dan feels the green campaign is sufficiently immoral and decides to go against corporate interests by outing the company's parallel activities.

Thus, Dan's role as director of public relations requires him to advocate a position that he personally disagrees with, to the point where he is thinking of making his dissent public—in other words, blowing the whistle on his employer. This would break the bond of loyalty to the organisation, but may potentially be justified in terms of protecting society at large. How should he start to think about the issue?

In a definitive article, Bok (1980) suggests that there are three elements to whistleblowing: dissent, breach of loyalty, and accusation. In each area, she cautions that the whistleblower must examine the consequences of his or her act and determine whether breaching confidentiality will be worth the personal and professional costs that it is likely to incur.

Whistleblowing is motivated by dissent; unless there is a disagreement on some factual matter or likely outcome, there is no reason to 'go public'. It is therefore incumbent on the whistleblower to check the accuracy of the information. A professional has a duty to be loyal to the clients and thus any breach of that loyalty must be a last resort, in the sense that all the standard means available to address the problem must have been attempted and exhausted. For example, a professional might allow the company every opportunity of remedying the situation or disclosing information themselves in their own way prior to disclosure. Moreover, because the purpose of whistleblowing is to motivate the audience to some reaction or change, the charges have to be credible, specific, pertinent and timely. There must also be a direct causal link between those accused and the problem. Further, the motives for the breach must be open and defensible, so that it is clear that the employee is not acting from personal malice or for selfish reasons.

Thus we find that the conditions for whistleblowing are quite restrictive. Nevertheless, there are possible situations where it would be not only permissible but obligatory for the professional to expose grossly unfair dealing, illegal acts, or to prevent injury and deception of unrepresented parties.

Whistleblowers have a high ranking on both their moral perception and their action orientation (that is, they are in the top right quadrant of the diagram). They feel that taking no action is equivalent to complicity and they are usually convinced they are morally justified. In a *GQ* magazine feature article (Hylton, 2006, ¶15), Joe Darby, the Abu Ghraib whistleblower, explains why he does not regret exposing the atrocities at Abu Ghraib:

You have to understand: I'm not the kind of guy to rat somebody out. I've kept a lot of secrets for soldiers. In the heat of the moment, in a war, things happen. You do things you regret. I have exceeded the proper use of force myself a couple times. But this crossed the line to me. I had the choice between what I knew was morally right and my loyalty to other soldiers. I couldn't have it both ways.

#5. Elise the non-profit practitioner

Ever since Elise was a student, she wanted to work for a non-profit organisation because it would enable her to pair her communication skills with her desire to give back to the community. Currently, Elise is the communication director for the local blood centre where she is charged with promoting the centre's blood collection efforts, its research programmes, and various special events. While at a recent blood drive, Elise noticed a young child who had multiple bruises. She also witnessed what she considers to be abusive actions by the child's mother. Since it is quite clear that the child is in danger, Elise takes it upon herself to contact child services even though this is outside her professional duties as defined by her position and profession.

Here the moral issue is not with Elise's employer, but is one encountered in the course of her work. A wrongful accusation is likely to

damage her personal reputation and that of her employer. In some cases professionals who could potentially come across these cases, such as social workers, nurses or teachers, are what is known as 'mandatory reporters' who are obliged to report suspicions (typically bruises or evidence of neglect). That is, the moral burden is lifted from them because their behaviour is mandated by virtue of their occupation. The difficulty in our case is that Elise is working from her own discretionary judgment and could justifiably claim that it wasn't her problem. Nevertheless, she is aware of an apparent great harm and has the power to intervene. Her professional code is silent on the issue, and hence she cannot look to it for guidance. Although we do not offer any particular advice in this case, it suggests two things: First, that professional roles do not allow people to abdicate their moral responsibilities just because they are at work, or shield them from difficult moral dilemmas. Secondly, the nature of moral quandaries is often that they are opaque and incremental—we tend not to realise we are dealing with one until we are caught up in it.

Implications for training and research

The analysis so far has shown that professional morality for public relations practitioners is complex and multifaceted. It interweaves professional duties and personal values, encouraging some actions and suppressing others. Appropriate training, then, will necessarily examine all four aspects of professional acts-in-role. We suggest that moral compartmentalisation, in the sense of being able to wear 'two hats', is untenable, and the idea that one can operate with one set of values in the workplace and another (more moral set) in one's personal life defies evidence and goes against the very notion of personal integrity—i.e., wholeness. Thus any ethics training should address both the nature of the profession and individual values.

The foundational issues of the validity of the profession and its societal mandate can be focused early on to ensure that the values of the employee and employer correspond. Hence if it is appropriate to say that the profession

involves advocacy, and society mandates this because it fosters transparency and encourages free information flow and commerce, then it is not the job of employees to constantly assess every case they encounter; if candidates are uncomfortable with those basic moral tenets of the profession then it would be wrong for them to engage in it.

A more demanding concern is that since ethics within the profession are often discretionary, it is important to find ways that will allow individuals to explore their own intuitions and reactions in a safe setting. In essence, this kind of training would let professionals work out what the code demands of them, what power they actually have both as individuals and in role, and what situations require active intervention. Here we can draw on work by social psychologists and other experts.

Making sense of this moral maze

The individual experience of ethics within organisations needs further research. Because of the role they play in many organisations, public relations practitioners are particularly susceptible to these types of pressures. Interactions with superiors, subordinates and peers; friends, allies and rivals; business customers and competitors; regulators and legislators; the media; specific public and society at large—all shape the occupational moralities of professionals. Research on public relations ethics has typically tended to focus on individual decision-makers without much regard to the power and influence of the profession and institutional pressures on the individual. May (1996) proposes that we move away from the individualistic model of the isolated, autonomous professional struggling to decide what is right because this is an unrealistic picture of what is actually happening in organisations. In its place, he suggests:

A communitarian, group-oriented picture of professional ethics ... that is informed by the insight that professionals increasingly work for large organisations in which they often face a conflict between acting in an

ethically principled way and being personally secure. (p.108)

Approaching public relations ethics research in this way would enable scholars and practitioners to address questions that applied-ethical theories have been unable to answer. More empirical research describing group practices of decision-making will help us understand the organisational contingencies under which practitioners work to resolve ethical problems. Fresh talk about and interpretations of ethical encounters will stretch the traditional boundaries of cases and examples, and create a more realistic picture of professional life.

Despite the vast literature on ethical awareness and standards, we do not know enough about how actual practitioners struggle with these concepts in their own organisations while solving everyday problems. Continuing this discussion is significant to achieving the balance of personal and role morality in public relations. Researchers need to peek behind the door to learn more about how group processes articulate, influence, encourage, promote, manipulate and control the ethical practices of public relations professionals.

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