

‘Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown’. A qualitative study of ethical PR practice in the UK.

Daniel Jackson and Kevin Moloney

Public Relations Inquiry. DOI: 10.1177/2046147X18810732

*To cite this article:

Jackson, D. and Moloney, K. (2010). ‘Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown’. A qualitative study of ethical PR practice in the UK. *Public Relations Inquiry* 8(1) 87–101. DOI: 10.1177/2046147X18810732

*To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X18810732>

Corresponding author: jacksond@bournemouth.ac.uk

Abstract

The dynamics of ethical behaviour has long been a preoccupation of the Public Relations (PR) field, yet in the United Kingdom, there are few empirical studies of ethical practice to date. In this article – through interviews with 22 UK Public Relations practitioners (PRPs) in small and medium-sized enterprises – we address this empirical gap. We examine three dimensions of ethical practice: societal responsibilities, truth-telling and the role of professional bodies. In the literature, the PRP is often positioned as the ethical conscience of the corporation, but in Shakespeare’s words, ‘uneasy lies the head that wears a crown’. Our findings reveal a range of ethical standards, some of which would make professional bodies blush. Many PRPs aspire towards an ethical counsel role but lack agency in the face of commercial and organisational forces. Rather than challenge such forces and the system they are part of, participants talked of coping strategies. At the same time, practitioners flow between ethical identities, painting a fluid, complex and occasionally contradictory picture of ethical practice that does not fall neatly into ethical metanarratives. While deontological ethical frameworks (typically expressed through codes of conduct) have dominated the professional field, our findings

suggest that for many practitioners, such codes remain distant. Findings are discussed within ongoing debates around professionalisation, professional identity and the political economy of PR work.

‘Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown’. A qualitative study of ethical PR practice in the UK.

In September 2017, Bell Pottinger, one of the UK’s biggest and most high-profile PR firms was put into administration amid an exodus of clients and increasing losses in the wake of the scandal over its campaign to stir up racial tensions in South Africa. Upon expelling the agency from their trade association, the UK’s Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) described the campaign to be the worst breach of ethics in its history. Whilst good ethical practice rarely makes headlines, this scandal was the latest in a lengthy list of ethical aberrations to hit the PR industry, and does little to restore (the already low) public trust in the profession. In many ways, we might argue that PR is no different to any other profession, where in recent years for example, finance, banking, journalism and various sporting bodies have all experienced their share of scandals. But given its chequered history, PR often struggles to shrug off such headlines as the ethical lapses of one or two ‘rotten apples’.

Therefore, we must ask whether there are more fundamental forces at play in the profession that drive ethical behaviour. Here, we would not be the first to pursue such a venture: the dynamics of ethical behaviour has long been a preoccupation of a field ‘fraught with ethical dilemmas’ (Bowen, 2004, p. 68). But in this paper we argue that firstly, in the UK, while PR ethics often gets its share of media attention (often prompted by such ethical lapses) and scholarly inquiry, the views of the message creators, PR practitioners (PRPs), are much less heard. Secondly, the majority of existing research has explored ethics through survey methodologies, which invariably impose boundaries on the scope of enquiry and lack the richness of qualitative approaches. And third, the vast majority of empirical studies are set

within the ethical metanarratives of deontology and utilitarianism. Postmodern approaches – whilst increasingly influential in the field – are yet to be explored in much empirical depth.

Through interviews with 22 UK PR practitioners, we address these empirical gaps. We examine three dimensions of ethical practice: societal responsibilities, truth telling, and the role of professional bodies. In the literature, the PRP is often positioned as the ethical conscience of the corporation but in Shakespeare's words, 'uneasy lies the head that wears a crown'. Our findings suggest that many PRPs aspire towards an ethical counsel role, but lack agency in the face of commercial and organisational forces. At the same time, practitioners flow between ethical identities, painting a fluid, complex and occasionally contradictory picture of ethical practice that does not fall neatly into ethical metanarratives.

Ethical debates in PR

On the face of it, ethical practice would appear to be of some importance to the PR industry. Most textbooks in PR and promotional communication devote at least a chapter to covering ethical issues (e.g., Johnston and Zawawi, 2009; Theaker, 2016), with ethics also taught (to varying degrees) as part of some university courses (particularly in the US) and professional qualifications offered by industry bodies such as the PRSA (US) and CIPR (UK). But as surveys of practitioners consistently show, ethical viewpoints, practices, and procedures within the PR profession are complex and inconsistent. For instance, most surveys find that firstly, whilst ethics is acknowledged to be important in PR practice, the *management* of ethics within organisations is often limited, unstructured, and poorly communicated (e.g. Lee and Cheng 2012). Secondly, surveys typically find that *knowledge* of ethical behaviour often comes from external influences such as personal values, family upbringing, and professional work experiences, rather than workplace initiatives (Bowen et al., 2006; Kim, 2003; Lee and Cheng 2012). Here, Bowen et al.'s (2006) survey of nearly 2000 practitioners in four countries reported that 70% of participants recalled little if any academic training or study of ethics, even among those with a university education.

Finally, there are disagreements within the industry about what *constitutes ethical practice*, with surveys finding sizable proportions of respondents rejecting the ‘ethical counselor’ self-image, feeling that it was the domain of the legal department or the CEO/board (Bowen et al., 2006).

These findings suggest a lack of agreement and clarity within an industry striving towards professional status, about what is ethical practice and how it can be engendered. If we then turn to the state of academic debate on the subject, we a similar story. As with many sub-domains of PR theory, the shadow of ‘excellence’ theory looms large, and only relatively recently has the field been reinvigorated by approaches from more critical perspectives, often embracing social theory, psycho-social and cultural studies approaches.

Historically, the main philosophical fault lines of ethics in PR have been reflected in two main universalist ethical approaches: either the utilitarian, consequences-based view, based on the philosophy of Bentham and Mills; or Kantian deontology, which emphasizes duty-based intention as opposed to an action’s consequences, and the moral autonomy of the individual in their actions towards various stakeholders. As Fawkes (2015) points out, both approaches are rooted in Western philosophy and normative and positivist in approach, often emphasizing rationality, rules and procedures, especially in their application to professional ethics.

For the most part, deontological accounts hold sway over both large sections of the academy and professional codes of conduct. Much deontological scholarship positions the PR professional as the *ethical guardian/ counsel* of an organisation. This role utilises the unique understanding of publics and stakeholders that the PRP possesses to advise the dominant coalition on matters of ethics and corporate conscience, and help to align the interests of the company with those of its key publics (Bowen, 2008; Parsons, 2008; Ryan & Martinson, 1983). For excellence scholars, deontological ethics are synonymous with excellent PR practice, based on the claim that two-way symmetrical practice is both the only ethical way in which to conduct PR, and the most effective at meeting strategic goals (Grunig, Grunig and

Dozier, 2002; Grunig and White, 1992). Moreover, in this view, fulfilling the ethical conscience role is an application of the ideal social role of public relations, in which public relations facilitates dialogue that is beneficial to society in itself (Grunig and White, 1992).

Excellence scholars often look to the ‘founding fathers’ of the profession such as Arthur W. Page, Ivy Lee, and John W. Hill as embodying the ethical counsel role (Heath & Bowen, 2002; Wright, 2006). But to look back into history also reveals an alternative role model that embodies the role of PRP as *advocate*. In the first chapter of *Propaganda* (1928), entitled ‘organising chaos’, Edward Bernays (1892–1995) opens with:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the ruling power of our country.

The ‘manipulators’ he refers to are PRPs promoting an ‘orderly life’ (1923, p. 12) for their society and doing so through propaganda. In an early articulation of the advocate professional type, he argued that the PR professional ‘is the pleader to the public of a point of view’ (p. 57). These views are today controversial to much of the PR academy and to nearly all PRPs, at least in public. The latter will have noted their professional bodies have more or less airbrushed Bernays out of their disciplinary histories, and in the academy, persuasion is often marginalized as inherently unethical (Bowen, 2008; Pfau & Wan, 2006).

But empirical studies continue to suggest that many practitioners still identify with the advocacy role in contemporary PR practice (e.g. Bowen et al., 2006). Moreover, a large amount of work has gone into articulating and examining the ethical roots of advocacy PR, where asymmetry in communication can be compatible with ethical practice. One strand of this work draws upon marketplace theory – the idea that in the marketplace of ideas, organisations are entitled to have a voice, so long as

various checks and balances exist to facilitate the emergence of 'truth' amongst the competition of voices advancing various agendas (Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, 2006). Another strand – rooted in rhetorical scholarship – locates ethics in the agent not the act, encouraging communicators to reflect on their own motivations, biases and behaviours as they attempt to balance multiple demands, rather than perform idealized acts enforced by codes of conduct (Baker and Martinson, 2002; Edgett, 2002). Much rhetorical scholarship therefore draws from virtue ethics, placing emphasis on the negotiation between conflicting virtues as an ethical process, not an outcome in itself.

A strong current of recent scholarship rejects the 'metanarratives' of ethical guardians and advocate archetypes, arguing instead for a more nuanced, postmodern, and reflexive approach to ethics that more accurately captures the contradictions and complexities of contemporary practice (e.g., Fawkes, 2012; Holtzhausen, 2012). Here, ethics are negotiated within the unique circumstances of a practitioner's identity and autonomy, and within the wider political economy of their practice. Through the postmodern lens, organisational rules or external codes are therefore viewed with some suspicion: 'there can never be a justification for moral codes or sets of ethical rules because they are all socially constructed and therefore serve some hidden purpose in society' (Holtzhausen, 2012, p. 33). Liberated from normative and prescriptive codes that require rational evaluation of ethical choices, productive lines of theorizing PR ethics have emerged that embrace social theory such as Jung (Fawkes, 2015), Hermeneutics (Fawkes, 2012), and Goffman (Fawkes, 2014).

However, to date, most of this work remains philosophical, and few empirical studies have examined PR ethics through such a postmodern lens (though there is more in other professional fields), which leaves questions about their applicability to practice. Broader still, for a communication discipline that is 'arguably ... most obsessed with ethics' (Holtzhausen, 2012 p. 31), until recently, little empirical work at all has focused on ethics in public relations. Here, 'little is known about how public relations organizations manage ethics in everyday practice beyond what is glimpsed

from self-laudatory reports and the crafting of codes as overt demonstrations of a commitment to ethics' (Lee and Cheng, 2012: p. 80). Of existent research, surveys have dominated the field, often applying or modifying the PRSA code of ethics to analyse the ethical behaviour of PR practitioners with respect to the codes (e.g. Kim 2003; Wilcox et al. 2000). Others have examined the codes themselves, including their role in education syllabi (e.g. Austin and Toth, 2011; Howard, 2011). A handful of studies have applied qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations (Bowen, 2008; Place, 2015; Tilley, 2015) though again, the normative shadow of excellence theory runs through some of these studies.

As yet, however, beyond industry surveys, we know very little about the moral climate and ethical management in UK PR practice. In many regards, as an advanced industrial society where many PRPs work inside multinational organisations, we may argue they experience the same ethical dilemmas as any other similar context has already documented. This is a point we would largely concede, but it still raises questions for those outside of multinational organisations who practice outside of London and within small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Moreover, as L'Etang (2004: 228) has argued, 'British public relations developed its own unique characteristics that arose from Britain's political, economic, technological, and cultural changes throughout the 20th century'. As such, we should not underplay the role of cultural heterogeneity in PR practice.

Given the empirical deficit of UK studies, we pursue three broad research questions in this study. The first concerns the relationship between normative ethical ideals and the realities commercial and organisational pressures. Given the deepening levels of distrust in business – often prompted by scandals that have afflicted many sectors – there are growing demands to prove that they are responsible corporate citizens, behaving in the public interest as well as in the interest of business (Arthur W Page Society, 2009; Sama and Shoaf, 2008). As the public face of the organisation, public relations practitioners find themselves at the centre of this tension between doing the 'right thing' for society, and serving their paymasters – the needs of which may not always align. In this context, we ask *how UK PRPs views their societal*

responsibilities and where do these come into conflict with commercial imperatives (RQ1)?

The second concerns truth: a concept 'central to definitions and discussion of the conceptual relationship between public relations and propaganda' that speaks directly to the fault lines in the literature. Truth is directly and indirectly related to a number of ethical dimensions in PR such as accuracy, withholding of information, client confidentiality, conflict of interest, transparency, and avoidance of harm (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Parsons 2008). While professional associations implore PRPs to 'Tell the truth' (Arthur Page Society) and 'adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of clients and employers' (Global Alliance, 2009), in practice truth is often elusive, as it is influenced by perspective, opinion, completeness of information, interpretation, and perception. Moreover, in recent years PRPs have been subject to the ongoing disruptive wave of digitalization and technological convergence, the ripples of which are being felt by all forms of organized communication. Facilitated by the abundance of social media platforms, consumers now occupy the same communicative spaces as companies, products and brands; allowing them to (amongst other things) reflect publicly on the moral standards of companies, and (in real time) rebut or fact-check public every statement made by a company. We postulate that there are likely to be consequences for the concept of truth telling in light of these dynamics. Here, we are particularly interested in *how PRPs deal with matters of truth in an age of transparency and information abundance (RQ2)*.

Thirdly, we ask *what is the relationship between PRPs and professional bodies in matters of ethics in PR (RQ3)?* In the UK, both the PRCA and CIPR place ethics codes alongside training and education at the centre of their ethical leadership. Yet we know little about how contemporary PRPs use such codes in their everyday practice. Compared to the US (where most empirical data on this topic resides), there may also be subtle differences in the relationship between practitioners and professional bodies, especially given the more ambivalent relationship the two main bodies in the

UK (CIPR and PRCA) have towards the excellence project, and the apparent failure of the UK professional bodies to professionalise the industry (L'Etang, 2004).

Methodology

We conducted in-depth interviews with 22 PR professionals working in London and the south of England between February 2016 and January 2017. Our sample of PRPs was identified via a purposive sample followed by snowball sampling¹. Our participants came from both in house (6) and agency (16) PR teams, medium and small operations, corporate and public sectors and across a range of seniority status. Thirteen participants were female and nine male. Given that our interviews drew on professional experiences of ethical issues, we required participants to have a minimum of three years industry experience. Resultantly, PR experience ranged from 4 to 25 years. Most of our participants were current members of either the CIPR or PRCA and all had been members of a professional body during their careers.

All interviews were conducted by the authors, with 20 of our 22 interviews conducted face-to-face and two over Skype. All face-to-face interviews took place at the offices of our respondents. Interviews typically lasted between 50 and 90 minutes; sufficient time to establish trust and rapport, and in most cases, to penetrate beneath the professional persona and capture some more unguarded views and practices. Given the potentially commercially sensitive nature of some of the data, all participants were anonymised, and in the following discussion they are described by their generic job titles.

Our interview guide was designed to explore ethical tensions in PR from a range of angles, but only occasionally did we explicitly use the word 'ethics' in our interviews. Interviews were semi-structured and allowed for a range of topics to be discussed, including those raised by the interviewee. Nevertheless, at some point, all interviews explored participants' views on their societal responsibilities and where these come into conflict with commercial imperatives (RQ1), perceptions of truth telling (RQ2) and encounters with ethics in the professionalized realm (professional bodies) (RQ3).

Throughout the interviews, we placed emphasis on experiences, practices and routines, to move discussion from the abstract to the concrete. We found participants to be open to talking about ethical issues. Despite their reputation as front stage performers in a Goffmanian sense (see Fawkes, 2014), very few - if any - participants remained front stage throughout the whole the interview, though readers can judge this for themselves from the data we present.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and then coded through a thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis, 1998). Transcriptions were initially coded into a large number of themes that emerged in response to the over-arching concerns of the study (articulated through the RQs), then iteratively developed into consolidated themes as we worked through the dataset. Typical of rich qualitative data, other themes emerged organically that were beyond the boundaries of our initial inquiry. Both authors kept field-notes from the interviews, and these acted as points of reflection when analysing the data. In the following section, we work through the findings, organised by the three broad themes of the RQs, identifying sub-themes where they emerged.

Findings

Societal responsibilities

Fulfilling the public interest

When asked to talk about their societal responsibilities, a majority of participants articulated a professional role broadly in line with the ethical counsel normative type. One Head of Communications at a public sector organisation talked about 'building relations via honesty and transparency with our stakeholders in the community', adding that 'we have a responsibility to help people make up their minds'. A self-employed PR consultant with 25 years' experience also talked of relationship building aligned with the two-way symmetrical model: 'it's about listening, questioning, understanding, explaining to clients, customers and media'.

Another respondent rejected the persuasive advocate archetype: 'PR should not be spin; it should be a truthful approach or perspective. Where that isn't the case, it is an abuse of democracy'. They note the contemporary information environment is increasingly complex with many media channels and that 'makes the PR industry more wary of doing spin, that's a good thing for the image of PR'. Some participants placed emphasis on the relationships with journalists that PRPs cultivate in service of the public interest. For one agency PRP, it meant having 'Integrity ... in how we tell our story about what we do to the public', by 'not being dictated to by clients', and by being 'as honest as we can, which means knowing what is appropriate for audiences'. For this type of participant, PRPs 'are informers but not persuaders. We share news and information. Persuaders try to change ideas but we do not. In doing this, we adhere to the public interest'.

Implied in such an account is a clear idea of what the public interest represents across a range of circumstances, but for one PR small agency owner, this was a far more complicated picture: 'we should defend the public interest but it is often difficult to establish what it is'. For him, there are legitimate interests for clients to promote within the law and 'clients have a right to present them', but these interests can be in tension with broader societal ones. Arms manufacturers, for example, sell lethal goods but have to follow the arms sales policies of their governments even if it limits their commercial interests. Therefore 'what is the public interest is often not black and white, and then the conversation becomes about what is legal'.

Outsourcing ethics

As the previous quote implies, equating ethics with legal issues was a common sentiment, expressed by approximately one quarter of our participants, such as this senior account manager at a medium sized agency: 'on public interest as long as the info we provide is within the legal ramifications then that is fair.' There is a textbook simplicity about such an account that belies a lack of engagement with ethical

thinking, and confusion about the autonomy a professional must possess in order to act ethically, at least as viewed from a Kantian perspective. Here, we would not be the first to reveal this way in which ethical decision making is outsourced to lawyers. In the US, for example, Bowen (2008) found very similar sentiments amongst PRPs, with a range of complex reasons offered for why such practices are followed.

The other side of this coin is where legal considerations – particularly in the form of non-disclosure agreements (NDA) – impede the PRP's ability to act in the public's interest. As this senior account manager at a London agency explains:

One of the challenges is a lot of the companies you work for you sign an agreement that says I will not pass on information about XYZ to anyone, I won't discuss it with my team. Even if you then have a moral obligation to share something, legally you don't which is an interesting point to get to.

'It's always what the business thinks that wins'

This dilemma links to a broader theme touched upon by almost every participant – the client relationship – which is rife with tensions. One senior PRP with 21 years' experience across a range of sectors sees PRPs caught between their responsibility to the client/ employer and society and they therefore practice 'dissimulation' in the 'zone between'. Dissimulation – meaning to conceal one's true motives, thoughts and character and to speak or act hypocritically – is a particularly interesting verb used to describe the work of the PRP, but one which perhaps characterises an ethical dimension of the role unsaid hitherto.

Many participants – again echoing the discourse of the ethical counsel – talked about 'educating', 'managing' and 'handling' clients around issues of disclosure. One account executive at a regional agency recalled having to tell a client 'to stop digging holes' caused by untrue statements. This director at a London agency explained:

... we represent a lot of different interests, and we have to think about the long term, not today. We know that those behaviours (withholding potentially harmful information) are not in the public interest, and we constantly would counsel the client towards the public interest. And that's all we can do.

While many participants spoke of their counselling role with clients, the last sentence of this quote seems to characterise the limitations many face in the boardroom. As one senior account manager said, 'I don't think really there is that much responsibility of the PR once they have counselled the client', thereby suggesting that ethical responsibility ended with the client not the PRP.

Some participants seemed openly troubled by this. As one agency director admitted, it is often 'difficult to perform the public interest' in PR; 'there is a tension that has to exist if you are going to take on this career . . . and it's an ethical balance we have to take' like lawyers and accountants have to when deciding on which clients to take on. However, more PRPs saw the client relationship in straightforward terms: 'I should feel a responsibility to society but I don't feel it. To be a PRP we have to be for the client, the employer' (Director of Communication, large public sector body). As one account executive at a small agency explained, 'it's always what the business thinks that wins'. If the PRP is 'completely' against a client decision, there is no appeal to others in the client company: 'so they basically take away all your rights to impact the decision in any other way.' With resignation, she concludes: 'you just then have to execute it'.

Truth and lies

'My version of the truth'

When it came to the concept of truth, there seemed to be some acknowledgement that PR dealt in versions of the truth and their job was to promote their client's version of the truth. Here, many participants would fall into the advocate role type,

though often these were the same people who had earlier positioned themselves as ethical guardians.

One self-employed PR consultant did not recall 'ever having to not tell the truth' in her 25 years and said that 'any information released should be factually correct ... but there is always a caveat about how much information you are sharing'. A head of communications at a local authority was also nuanced: 'my job is not to lie' but then contextualized this with 'it is to be honest and package the truth that suits my organization. You don't tell the people all the truth all the time.' This was refined with: 'it is never right not to tell the truth but it is right to be selective'.

A senior PR executive in the public sector talks of 'defending' her employer as 'with a single version of the truth' and at times having to be 'selective' with it.

Operationally, this meant using the 'if asked' and 'don't volunteer' rules of engagement with journalists. A small agency director, with 21 years' experience, was also nuanced: 'PRPs should tell the truth but not all the truth'. Another described how he tells the media 'my version of the truth'.

Whilst the vast majority of described this type of approach to truth telling, there were some subtle differences based on the type of PR that practitioners engaged in. For example, a senior account manager at a small agency argued that in consumer PR, there was a culture where exaggerating truth claims was commonplace. Here, commercial speech allowed superlatives such as 'No. 1 in the world' and 'we are the cheapest' to be heard with maximum belief and minimum doubt. Another participant claimed that truth is a 'soft, experiential' concept in the consumer and travel sectors. A number of participants discussed how journalists were often complicit in this game. One PRP described how journalists want 'newsy stories and we want maximum benefits out of them for our employers'; adding enigmatically, 'but both sides know what is going on'.

In crisis management – even with the additional scrutiny of media attention – PRPs recalled how certain scenarios pushed them towards untruths and the 'creative' or 'selective' use of facts. One public sector PRP described how 'I've never found myself

forced to tell lies' but 'you need to find forms of words'; PRPs should be 'good at language'. For another participant, 'you don't bend the truth but timing is all'.

Clients are again central to these moral thickets. Our participants overwhelmingly viewed technological changes (particularly the growth of social media as a pivotal platform for PR work) as compelling reason for organisations to be more open with their publics, and to disclose information wherever possible. As one mid-career agency executive put it, 'You're just playing with fire, expecting the public not to find out'. And yet, many participants explained how their clients were still hesitant to disclose potentially damaging information, especially in a crisis.

For one mid-career agency PRP, 'covering up the truth is never an option, never right'. But nevertheless, he has to 'navigate a route through the tension of resolving issues with clients'. He notes 'you cannot not tell the truth but you will be selective if things are wanted to be kept quiet but need to be faced up to'. Another participant described how 'I will challenge a client about their messages and they have to prove their truth', though admitting that 'we have to be creative here and there'. One PRP working in a small, regional agency – describing a very similar scenario – was far more open about this point. While her 'duty' was to meet both client and societal needs, if circumstances meant that the client insisted on lies, 'we would have to do it'.

PR ethics and professional bodies

In the final section of the interviews, we invited participants to reflect on the relationship between their ethical practice and the professional bodies in the UK (CIPR and PRCA) (RQ3). From this data, three related themes emerged: ambivalence toward professional bodies, lack of awareness of ethical codes, and a general resistance to further regulation and codification regarding ethics.

Most of our participants were members of professional bodies. However, they struggled to articulate the role of professional bodies in dealing with ethical issues.

As one PRP put it, the topic is just not on 'PR people's radar'. Many participants admitted to knowing very little of PRs formal ethical frameworks, which was often used as an argument for the ineffectiveness of future change. For example, one self-employed PR consultant (and CIPR member) thought 'some disciplinary power might be a good thing and may strengthen the claim to be a profession' but wondered 'how aware many PR people and clients are actually of them and how they might be applied'. For a director at a London PR consultancy the PR industry is 'still pretty young and trying to figure out its role in society' at a time when 'the comms environment is shifting in favour of PR'. He supports codes of conduct that say PR serves the public interest 'because that message is good PR for the profession but there is much lip service to codes for in practice few people think hard about them'.

Some did not see the need for professional governing bodies in PR at all, while for others the current ones have enough influence. Professional codes were described as 'not good', 'not precise enough' and 'weak' by some PRPs, implying that they needed strengthening. Yet almost all participants resisted the idea of stronger oversight of their practice, including ethics.

One theme that emerged from discussions of professional bodies was participants' desire for more work to improve the reputation of the industry – the state of which preoccupied many of our participants. One mid-career agency consultant admitted to some embarrassment when publicly named as a PRP. Others characterised the public perception of PR as 'as lies and spin', 'fluff', 'dishonest', 'the Max Clifford problem' and the 'young woman image'. Many participants felt that PR was misunderstood, and that more 'leadership' from professional bodies was required to address it.

Discussion and conclusion

This small scale project explored UK PRPs experiences and perceptions of ethics, paying particular attention to their societal responsibilities, truth, and relationship with professional bodies. As such, it makes no claims to be a holistic representation

of the industry in the UK, nor does it examine every dimension of ethics in PR. Whilst we directed our focus towards those working in SMEs, particularly outside of London, respondents still largely pursued corporate and consumer PR operations. Furthermore, our sample was primarily made up of agency and in-house practitioners representing resource-rich clients, and it is from here our participants drew on their experiences. Nevertheless, three key findings emerge from our study that shed new light on our understanding of PR ethics.

The first is the *inadequacy of ethical metanarratives in capturing the lived experience of ethical practices*. In a US study – with similar qualitative methods – Bowen (2008: p. 290) found that the most ‘compelling finding of this study was the extent to which each side appeared entrenched in and committed to their view of the role of public relations including ethical counsel—or not’. In contrast, while we found evidence of ethical role identities, there were far more grey areas and in fact, some participants would simultaneously espouse ethical counsel and advocacy role types in the course of the same interview. For example, some participants rejected the concept of spin in PR and lamented its reputational links with the industry, yet when discussion moved on to matters of truth telling, they were essentially describing spinning techniques (timing, selecting facts, their ‘version of the truth’ etc.).

In such ways, our data is dripping with contradictions, fluidity and complexity, and thus echoes Holtzhausen’s (2000) description of postmodern practitioners. Identity issues also seem central to this. As Curtin and Gaither’s (2005, 2007) work has described, identity (including ethical identity) is one part of a ‘circuit of culture’, interrelated to representation, production, consumption and regulation. As such, identity is always an ongoing process, rarely static, and subject to outside influences. This was certainly the case with our participants, whose collective professional and ethical identities were characterised by uncertainty and fluidity.

These identity struggles are linked to a second key finding that emerged: *the clear tension that existed between the normative ethical principles of PRPs (and the industry at large), and the realities of working with clients*. Again, there was

considerable angst, contradiction and ambiguity when discussing these tensions. Some participants admitted to compromising their own ethical standards on the insistence of their clients. Others positioned their ethical responsibility as ending once the client had made the decision. As previous literature has argued, such practices are deeply problematic, not to mention (again) contradictory. As many scholars have pointed out (Koehn, 1994; Browning, 2015; Bowen, 2004), having one's own moral authority is eponymous with being a professional, and exclusive loyalty to a client can result in harm to other members of society.

To us, this is not a question of blame or criticism of the moral shortcomings of our participants, but instead – as Tilley (2015, p.93) argues – to emphasise ‘the “bigger picture” of their profession’s paradoxical position within competing and contested flows of power’ which occur at many levels. Commercial forces, for example, push PRPs to leave ethical dimensions unchallenged with clients, for gaining and keeping accounts is the key currency in the competitive marketplace. In in-house scenarios, individual PRPs can be disempowered by institutional structures, where their autonomy is subjugated to marketing, legal, or other communication departments (Bowen, 2008; Grunig, 2006). As Browning points out (2015), the degree to which a PR practitioner can act autonomously is frequently a matter of moral luck, as a significant aspect of their work depends on factors beyond their control. With our participants, rather than challenge such power structures and organisational cultures, instead we witnessed some of the coping strategies that Tilley (2015) has documented. For example, there was *blame* directed towards journalists for the misrepresentation of PR in public life, and the failure of the professional bodies to effectively challenge this. Participants spoke in *fatalistic* ways about their relationship with clients; and there was *deliberate ignorance* of ethical codes of conduct.

This leads us to the third key emergent finding: *the ambiguous and contradictory relationship our participants held towards professional bodies and their codes of ethics*. We witnessed a number of platitudes towards ethical codes of conduct but at the core of our findings was a disengagement with them and the professional bodies

that regulate industry standards. Of course, this is nothing new, and is in line with much literature in this field (e.g. Peck & Matchett, 2010; Place, 2015). But there was also a potential contradiction at the heart of many accounts. On the one hand participants complained about the reputation of PR, yet a) spoke of morally dubious activities using adjectives that professional bodies have spent decades trying to eradicate (e.g. 'glorified sales', 'lies', 'spin', 'fluff', 'dissimulation'), and b), were resistant to further attempts towards professionalisation that might address this reputational issue.

Taken as a whole, our findings depict an industry – despite its exponential growth – still battling towards professionalisation, typified by identity struggles, porous boundaries and lack of clear ethical standards. In many ways, it is a fairly pessimistic picture of individual PRPs navigating their way through ethical terrain, often lacking the autonomy and confidence to follow their conscience amidst a hyper-competitive environment. Ethical practice, then, is one part of a much broader process of the maturation of a professional field that wants to move forward beyond the legacy of propaganda and spin, but subject to the deeply embedded political economies of an advanced capitalist democracy such as the UK.

What, then, might take the industry forward? A first step might be to recognise that the 'crown' of ethical counsellor is an uneasy fit for many PRPs, particularly those who lack agency in the boardroom or are rank-and-file PRPs working in SMEs, who are down the food chain when it comes to the clients they work with. Studies such as ours remind us that PRPs are negotiating a range of professional roles and identities, not all of which have been articulated in the literature to date. A challenge for future research is to continue the work of Holtzhausen (2002, 2012) and others by locating and exploring professional roles as they emerge in practice. Here, the field could particularly benefit from ethnographic and observational work that can penetrate the professional personas that PR professionals often perform, and document ethical tensions and their relationship with professional identities within the context of everyday practice. Given the current balance of scholarship in the field, it would be particularly useful for such research to include non-western

contexts, which have largely eluded sustained scholarly attention. Future ethical scholarship would also benefit from continuing to theoretically expand beyond the field of PR, and towards cultural studies, sociology, psychology and political economy.

A second step the industry might take in its pursuit of ethical practice is to revisit their reliance on ethical codes of conduct. As the literature review showed, ethical codes are a central pillar of professional bodies' approaches to ethics in PR and improving the external reputation of the industry, and are supported by large sections of the academy. Yet there remain many sceptics of such a project, particularly amongst critical and postmodern-influenced PR scholars. In concluding her historical analysis of the development of ethical codes in 20th century Britain, for example, L'Etang (2004, p.185) dismisses them as 'a symbolic acquisition for use in the public relations campaign for public relations and can be seen thus far as a rather sad attempt to emulate the professions'.

From our findings, there did not appear to be a clear sense from practitioners about how ethical codes might take the industry forward. Instead, we would advocate a different type of leadership from professional bodies that moves away from externalised rationality and towards internalised guidance, thus allowing ethics to be 'de-coupled from rules and codes and re-located in the interior of the individual, becoming an aspect of their identity' (Fawkes, 2012, p.868). Such a process does not happen in a vacuum of course. University and professional training curricula need to engage with ethics and moral philosophy to a greater extent than present; this includes engaging with non-western approaches to professional ethics. Organisations themselves can also foster open and democratic environments where ethical practice can thrive (Fritzsche, 2004; Place, 2015).

A final way forward – from a global vantage point – is to recognise that there are multiple paths towards ethical practice. In describing a Jungian approach to PR ethics, Fawkes (2012, p. 868) argues:

It does not seek homogeneity but homeostasis and recognizes that values will constellate differently in different cultures; what is important is the hard work of making such values and tensions conscious, allowing aspects of the whole to enter an internal dialog through which tensions can be addressed if not reconciled. There is no fixed outcome for such ethical struggle, it is a process.

We would argue that further research can play a key role in making such 'values and tensions conscious' and visible, which then facilitates open and honest ethical reflection on the part of PR professionals and the bodies that represent them.

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¹ Based on the operationalisation of Fusch and Ness (2015), this was the number of interviews by which the authors felt that data saturation had been met.