Saints and sinners: Competing identities in public relations ethics

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ABSTRACT

Public relations ethics is confused and often superficial in its approach, relying heavily on traditional theory, with only occasional reference to more recent developments in professional ethics, particularly feminist and global ethical perspectives.

This paper argues that the central ethical tension facing public relations as a field lies in its divided ethical identity, in particular between the idealized codes of conduct influenced by the US-based excellence project, which conjure images of wise counsel balancing duties to client and society, and practitioner-led expectations that they are advocates and should privilege clients over society. The paper touches on the wider context of professional ethics in the early 21st century from western and non-western perspectives, in order to frame current debates in public relations' ethics. Taking a Jungian approach, it suggests that the saint/sinner models represent opposing aspects of an ethical identity or archetype which can only be resolved through self-acceptance and a willingness to embrace contradiction.

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1. Introduction

Holtzhausen (2012) declares that "Public relations is arguably the communication discipline most obsessed with ethics" (p. 31), but this fascination seems curiously unreflexive and disengaged with current thinking in professional ethics. This paper suggests that public relations has difficulty entering ethical debates when its scholars and practitioners are divided in their ethical self-images between those who identify primarily with the excellent description of the practitioner and those who see themselves as advocates (Bowen, 2008). I suggest that the 'ethical guardian' images espoused by scholars reflect idealized, almost saintly aspects, whereas the advocacy role is often interpreted as exonerating practitioners from societal responsibilities. The state of public relations' ethics is briefly located in the wider context of professional ethics, to illustrate the degree to which the field engages with wider theoretical discussion, and to problematize the reliance on codes. The main focus is an examination of the schism between ethical identities promoted by texts and professional bodies and those embraced by practitioners. Ideas of identity and ethics are explored, drawing on the 'circuit of culture' approach suggested by Curtin and Gaither (2007). Overall, it takes a Jungian perspective, conceptualizing dominant images of professional ethics as archetypes in order to understand the cultural complexes they manifest. A holistic resolution, drawing on dialogic rather than dialectic process, is also informed by a Jungian non-dualistic approach. The level of analysis is meso-level, looking at the profession as a whole, as opposed to macro-level, societal issues or micro-level questions of individual morality (McDonald & Nijhof, 1999; Mount, 1990).

A brief consideration of terms: most of the literature cited here uses the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' interchangeably, though some distinguish between individual and social duties (though even here there is confusion about which aspect deserves which label). Appiah (2008) draws on Aristotle's idea of eudomania, or what it means to live well, as the basis for ethics, reserving the term morality for normative ideas about 'how we should and should not treat other people' (p. 37).

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The words originally meant the same thing in Latin and Greek (Proulx, 1994) and they are used interchangeably here. While many of the texts and concepts cited are of US origin, attempts are made to critique assumptions regarding their implied universality, seeking a wider engagement with ethics as a cultural variable.

2. Professional ethics – an overview

Discussion of professional ethics tends to reflect the larger divide in the sociology of professions between what Sciulli (2005) calls functionalist and revisionist; the first consisting of those who see professions as maintaining the status quo and playing a positive role in social development (such as Durkheim, Parsons) and the latter who follow Weber in critiquing these claims and perceive professions as bureaucratic mechanisms to promote exclusivity and monopolistic practices (Larson, Johnson, Friedson, for example). Functionalists can be said to envisage professional ethics as embodying the profession’s commitment to social value and also to offer a protection for ignorant clients. Revisionists see professional ethics as empty and self-promotional. Kultgen (1988) has suggested that: “The Urmythos from which all of the myths in the professional mythology spring is that professions are oriented to the service of humanity. Professions avow in their official pronounce-ments and the functionalist typification endorses the view that professions are oriented to service rather than to profit or the interest of any patron group” (p. 120).

The theoretical frameworks for viewing professional ethics have evolved from the trait approach of the early 20th century, through adoption of utilitarian (based on Bentham and Mill) and/or Kantian deontological discussion of consequences and duty. It is these approaches which inform most thinking on professional ethics (Lefkowitz, 2003). In the late-20th century, there was a flourishing of new ideas about ethics, including Habermas’ discourse ethics (1979), MacIntyre’s (1984) revival of Aristotle’s virtue ethics, feminist ethics (Benhabib, 1992; Gilligan, 1982), postcolonial, identity and Asian ethics (Appiah, 2005; Koehn, 2001), postmodern ethics (Bauman, 1993) and others.

2.1. Professional codes of ethics

Most professions or aspiring professions prefer to set store in Codes of Ethics than engage in philosophical debates (Larson, 1977). As Abbott (1983) says, “Ethics codes are the most concrete cultural form in which professions acknowledge their societal obligations” (p. 856). Kultgen’s (1988) analysis of American professional codes found they set out criteria for the ideal–typical professional, but as Larson (1977) points out the display elements of the ideal–typical constructions ‘do not tell us what a profession is, only what it pretends to be...’ (p. xii). Revisionist critics highlight their vacuity, like Brecher (2010), who notes that “such codes reflect exactly the ambivalence of professionalization itself: their function is at one and the same time to hold professionals accountable and to protect them from moral accountability” (p. 353). It is worth noting that codes tend to be addressed to individuals not professions, making the member responsible for maintaining collective standards (Abbott, 1983; Mount, 1990).

Pieczka and L’Etang (2001) comment that public relations texts view the issue of professionalism largely from a functionalist perspective, extolling public relations’ contribution to society; “the way in which profession is understood in our field reflects the view largely abandoned by the theorists of the professions since the 1970s” (p. 228). Consequently, the prevailing notions of ethics evaluate the degree to which PR enhances social cohesion (e.g. Bowen, 2007), following the Durkheim view of professions (itself a distortion of Durkheim’s writings, according to Turner, 1992). The next section looks at the main approaches to professional ethics adopted by public relations.

3. Professional ethics in public relations

3.1. Traditional approaches

Most public relations textbooks (e.g. Chia & Synnott, 2009; Johnston & Zawawi, 2009; Theaker, 2012) offer readers a choice between ethics based either on the consequences of actions as the ground for ethics (Bentham/Mills’ utilitarianism) or the duty of professionals to groups such as clients, patients or society generally (Kantian), or even more often, an ad-hoc combination of both. There are problems with both, too complex to explore here, such as the appearance of impartiality in calculating relative harms and goods issuing from actions (Lucas, 2005) and the inflexibility of Kantian ethics in managing conflicts of ethical duty. There is some scholarly engagement with Kantian approaches, notably from critical scholar L’Etang (1992) and excellence supporter Bowen (2007) who, unsurprisingly, come to differing conclusions. While L’Etang suggests that codes of ethics do not stand up to Kantian principles, Bowen declares that excellence ethics conform closely to Kant’s imperatives, finding that “ethics is a single excellent factor and the common underpinning of all factors that predict excellent public relations” (p. 275). Most writing from the excellence perspective on ethics draws on the systems theory (McElreath, 1996) which underpins this approach. For example, Bowen (2008) asserts that systems theory “provides a normative theoretical framework to explain why public relations is the best suited function to advise senior management on matters of ethics” (p. 273). This is the discourse which generates the ‘ethical guardian’ image, which persists as an idea, despite L’Etang’s (2003) challenge that public relations practitioners do not have the training to take on such a role and Bivins’ (1993) challenge to public relations to define the ‘public interest’ it claims to serve. Discourse ethics (Habermas, 1979, 1996) has been cited extensively (Haas, 2001; Pearson, 1989) to support symmetrical communication; despite very different philosophical
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