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Public Relations Student Perceptions of Ethics

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Abstract. Public relations is often perceived as unethical, yet professional associations and educators position the industry as an ethical profession. The aim of this paper is to investigate the perceptions of public relations students ($N = 45$) in a communication school in Australia towards ethics. Research involving a survey and a focus group found that students perceived public relations ethics depended on a negotiation between practitioners' responsibilities to stakeholders and their client or employer organisation, and broader societal expectations. They perceived professional codes of ethics to be of limited value and the development of ethical understanding as incremental over the course of their studies. The findings suggest ethics should be scaffolded in public relations education, the social impact of public relations activity should be emphasised and the limitations of professional codes highlighted.

Keywords: public relations, ethics, profession, education, students, curriculum.

1. Introduction

The dominant paradigm for public relations positions it as a managerial, functionalist practice that serves organisational interests, although a recent socio-cultural turn emphasises its communicative, dialogic and broader societal role (Edwards & Hodges 2011). There appears to be little engagement with the business ethics literature, despite similarities between the two disciplines. One reason may be that public relations, at least in Australia, is more commonly taught in communication rather than business schools. This paper acknowledges this lack of interaction and contributes to greater engagement between business ethics and public relations in pedagogical literature. Although the public relations industry actively seeks recognition as a socially responsible and ethical profession, a U.S. industry-funded study of practitioners found that 30% had had no mention of ethics in their university studies and another 40% only had a few readings or lectures (Bowen 2006). This study investigates how public relations students in an Australian communication school perceive ethics and ethics education; the findings should be useful for public relations and business educators who attempt to engage students—as future practitioners and business managers—in considering professional ethics.

The aim of this paper is to investigate student perspectives of ethics teaching in the public relations curriculum. There are eight sections. In the first, the public relations discipline and its common ground with business ethics are introduced. Second, the significance of professional ethics for public relations education is investigated. In the third section, the perspectives of educators and alumni to ethics teaching and studies of ethics and the public relations curriculum are reviewed to establish the need to consider the student perspective. In the fourth section, the methodology for this study is outlined. In the following two sections, the findings emerging from the analysis of student perceptions of ethics in relation to professional practice and education are presented. Finally, the implications for teaching ethics are discussed. The findings suggest ethics should be scaffolded in public relations education, and that complex assessment tasks develop students' knowledge of ethical practice and awareness of the social impact of public relations and business activity.

2. Public Relations and Business Ethics

Historically public relations has been perceived as a business function, designed to serve organisational interests through "the management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Grunig & Hunt 1984, p. 6). The dominant paradigm positions public relations as a functionalist, management practice, and draws heavily on U.S. industry studies (L'Etang 2008). Its influence can be seen in definitions of public relations used by professional associations; the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA)'s definition, for example, emphasises "the effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation (or individual) and its (or their) publics" (2013, par. 6). But, public relations is often criticised as 'spin' and linked with unethical business practices. Concerns around its professional status and social legitimacy dominate the literature and many scholars seek to define public relations as an ethical practice and as a business management discipline (Hatherell & Bartlett 2006). In the last two decades new perspectives and understandings of public relations have emerged and allow a broader understanding of public relations and its societal impact. Scholars argue public relations can help business fulfill societal obligations (L'Etang 1994) or adopt an ethical role by acting as an activist for marginalised or minority stakeholders and as the social conscience of an organisation (Bowen 2008, Holtzhausen 2002).

Business ethics is concerned with determining what is "morally right and wrong" in all business activity (Crane & Matten 2007, p. 5) and the acceptability of business practices that can impact various stakeholders, including "shareholders, workers, customers, and society" (Ferrell, Fraedrich, & Ferrell 2013, p. 6). Business schools are resistant to teaching business ethics; the reasons vary, but Swanson and Fisher argue there is "an inherent bias against ethical

concepts” due to “the homage paid to conventional economics by many business educators [that] justifies promoting narrow self-interest over community goals” and “the prevailing ideology of economic self interest that downplays responsibility to others” (2008, pp. 8, 16). Despite the lack of engagement between business ethics and public relations literature, there is common ground, particularly in relation to public relations’ emphasis on the social responsibility of business towards stakeholder publics and society in general and its role in ensuring business meets those societal obligations. For example, Sen and Cowley define corporate social responsibility (as one example of organisational response to ethical issues) as the “active alignment of internal business goals with externally set societal aspirations” (2013. p. 413), a definition that is remarkably similar to public relations’ definitions, such as the one used by the PRIA. Crane and Matten acknowledge what they perceive as unfair criticism of both business ethics and public relations that suggests business ethics is merely “smart PR”, that is, a cosmetic exercise, rather than a genuine commitment to accept social responsibility (2007, p. 207).

The academic development of public relations as primarily a communication discipline with strong vocational links, and the fragmentation of communication management, with organisational communication, corporate communication, and business communication considerably overlapping the domain of public relations, have limited its impact on the business ethics literature (Hatherell & Bartlett 2006, Zorn 2002). Public relations scholars note the close relationship between corporate social responsibility and public relations, in relation to concepts such as organisation-public relations; stakeholder engagement and in terms of the potential contribution of public relations to corporate social responsibility and ethical business practice (see, for instance, L’Etang 1994, Clark 2000, Bowen 2008, and Bartlett 2011). In addition, stakeholder theory has considerably informed the public relations literature, particularly in relation to public engagement and dialogue (de Bussy 2008, Johansen & Nielsen 2011, and Piezcka 2011). Bartlett, for example, identifies public relations’ similar focus on “relationships and expectations between organizations, their stakeholders and society” (2011, p. 68). Despite these similarities, there appears to be little engagement between public relations and business ethics scholarship and there is a notable absence of public relations and communication from the social responsibility and business ethics literature (Clark 2000).

3. Professional Ethics in Public Relations

Universities seeking industry accreditation must address the ethical statements offered by the professional association in their curriculum. For instance, the PRIA accreditation guidelines state universities must develop in students an awareness of the “ethical implications of public relations practice” and familiarise students

with the Code of Ethics for individual practitioners (PRIA 2009). However, the dominant paradigm for public relations tends to present ethics uncritically as a function which contributes to both organisational effectiveness and organisational reputation, resulting in “a not entirely comfortable marriage between the priorities of organisational effectiveness and idealistic ethical communication practice” (L’Etang 2009, p. 14). Similarly, Breit and Demetrious argue the drive towards professionalisation in public relations results in “an ethical mismatch” (2010, p. 20), highlighting the client focus of the PRIA Individual Code of Ethics as problematic. Rather than considering the impact of public relations activity, the professional association “is concerned primarily with professional conduct and an individual practitioner’s relationship with the profession itself; his/her clients and the PRIA” (Breit & Demetrious 2010, p. 26). Drawing on sociology of the professions, Noordegraaf (2011) notes ethical codes are largely symbolic mechanisms to aid professionalisation. Other studies confirm ethical practice is often perceived by public relations practitioners as meeting the client’s needs rather than a broader commitment to social responsibility (Ki & Kim 2009). Indeed, Sison suggests the socialisation of practitioners, particularly in regard to “managerial/ functionalist perspectives [of public relations] constrain[s] their enactment of the critical conscience role” and limits the ability of practitioners to bring about organisational or social change (2006, p. 8).

Ethics is an ambiguous area, because it involves making complex decisions about what is “right”, and necessitates “identifying and prioritising your responsibilities to yourself as a person, your profession and the wider community and this requires a good understanding of stakeholder interests” (Breit 2007, p. 308). A study of ethics among public relations practitioners found “practitioners who advise on ethics reported that what they learned about ethical issues comes from professional experience rather than academic study” (Bowen 2007, par. 25). Yet, International Association of Business Communicators studies show that most (i.e. 65%) practitioners receive no ethics training from their employers and even more (70%) did not study ethics at university (Bowen 2006). However, research has found high levels of education (not specifically in ethics) are a predictor of strong moral reasoning test scores in public relations practitioners in the U.S. (Coleman & Wilkins 2009), suggesting higher education is significant. Similarly, Hooker, writing more broadly on business ethics, argues higher education “can and must assist with the cognitive development that enables movement towards ethical maturity” (2004, p. 82). It is important to understand, therefore, how students perceive and respond to educators’ attempts to engage them in discussions of ethics in relation to their discipline, and the significance for teaching ethics in other fields.

4. Public Relations Education and Ethics

Professional public relations associations define an “appropriate” curriculum through accreditation processes. The PRIA maintains coursework should cover the “ethical implications of public relations practice” (2009, p. 2). Beyond this, the Australian accreditation guidelines are vague about how ethics should be incorporated into the curriculum. In *The Professional Bond*, a report on public relations education, the U.S.-based Commission for Public Relations Education (CPRE) states “professional ethics is largely predicated on the personal ethics of everyone in the public relations professional community” and therefore “a consideration of ethics should pervade all content of public relations professional education” (CPRE 2006, p. 4). The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in the U.K. specifically links ethics to the outcomes of public relations activity in that it expects students in recognised degrees to learn about ethics in public relations practice as well as “ethical theories; how PR impacts upon society politically, socially, economically and morally” (CIPR 2010, p. 7).

Although discussion of ethics dominates public relations scholarship, the focus tends to be on its professional standing or status. Few studies investigate specifically the teaching of ethics. The perspectives of graduates (Gale & Bunton, 2005); and educators (Erzikova 2010, Austin & Toth 2011) have been explored, along with studies which analyse textbook or curriculum content (Harrison 1990, McNerny 1997, Hutchison 2002, Chaisuwan 2009, Austin & Toth 2011) or “test” the ethical sensitivity of students (Harrison 2002) or the impact of age and education level on students’ ethical decision-making (Tilley, Fredericks, & Hornett 2011). Gale and Bunton found the inclusion of an ethics course resulted in higher levels of “ethical awareness and ethical leadership” among alumni, and that they were more likely to perceive “personal and professional ethics as indistinguishable” (2005, p. 283). In contrast, Tilley, Fredericks and Hornett (2011) found tertiary education had a limited impact on ethical decision-making responses and concluded educators needed to rethink ethics curricula. In an international study, where a significant number of participants were based in the U.S., educators perceived the goal of ethics education was “developing socially responsible professionals” (Erzikova 2010, p. 317). The same study found non-U.S. participants perceived ethics instruction less likely to “[help] students make good choices on the job” (Erzikova 2010, p. 317). Bowen and Erzikova (2013) note a geographical divide: U.S. educators maintain a strong industry focus and link ethics to professional status, whereas European educators maintain a more autonomous position, allowing greater critical reflection around the role of public relations in responsible business practices. This difference may stem from significant differences between European and American approaches to business ethics, where the former embrace a more collective understanding of business ethics and the role of government regulation in ensuring business meets societal obligations and the latter have a stronger tradition of business ethics research and

an emphasis on individualism and individual responsibilities in relation to ethical practice (Crane & Matten 2007). This distinction may be significant for public relations, as the dominant paradigm emerged out of primarily U.S. industry studies and scholarship.

Educators want ethics to be integrated in the public relations curriculum, using “real-world scenarios that [students] may encounter”; they perceive textbook scenarios fail to introduce students to the complexity of ethical decision making (Austin & Toth 2011, p. 512). The majority of public relations textbooks isolate discussions of ethics to one chapter, or even combine law and ethics in a single chapter with a “focus more on what we legally can’t do instead of what we morally should do” (Hutchison 2002, p. 308). In terms of pedagogical approaches, Erzikova (2010) found educators perceived research papers were the least effective method of ethics instruction and that textbooks, along with trade and news articles, were the most effective. In an older article, McNerny links ethics closely with industry practice, calling for planning models and “past campaigns and practices” (1997, p. 47) to be used to embed ethics instruction in public relations education.

In one of the few Australian studies into teaching public relations ethics, Harrison investigates “ethical sensitivity” (i.e. the capacity to recognise ethical issues, to do the right thing and to not tolerate unethical behaviour) among undergraduate public relations students, in order to improve the curriculum (2002, p. 5). Harrison’s findings are mixed, but he calls for more research to understand student learning in relation to ethics:

Does the socialisation into the profession that occurs at university, particularly with a stress of needing to be “client-focused”, lead students to ignore the important questions of community service and the public interest. To put it bluntly are students more unethical at the end of their course than the beginning? (2002, p. 25).

It is clear that more research is needed to understand how students respond to ethics instruction in their public relations curricula. This study therefore addresses calls for more research into the educational experience (Gale & Bunton 2005), by investigating students’ understanding of public relations ethics.

5. Methodology

This study investigates student perceptions of ethics teaching in the public relations curriculum. It therefore uses qualitative research to develop a better understanding of the processes of interpretation and meaning-making (L’Etang 2008). Final-year public relations students in Australia were surveyed in March 2011 regarding their attitudes towards ethics in public relations. A total of 45 valid responses was received ($N = 45$). Survey respondents consisted of 31 female

and 14 male students and included 13 international students. Students responded to open-ended questions regarding their understanding of ethics, professional responsibility and how their studies contributed to those understandings. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify dominant and sub-dominant themes. Units identified as useful in contributing to students' recognition and understanding of ethics in public relations were ranked in terms of frequency.

Following initial coding of the anonymous surveys, eight students with diverse understandings of public relations ethics were invited to participate in a focus group in April 2011. Four undergraduate students (two female, two male) accepted. An independent facilitator led a discussion regarding professional and personal understandings of ethics. The facilitator's guide is included (see appendix 1). The facilitator introduced stimulus material (a short hypothetical scenario involving suicide and the PRIA Individual Code of Ethics). A small focus group is appropriate given the potentially sensitive content (Krueger & Casey 2000, Daymon & Holloway 2011). The session was recorded and transcribed. The transcription was analysed in terms of the dominant and sub-dominant themes. As a form of member-checking, a two-page summary of the analysis was offered to focus group participants to validate the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Participation in the research was voluntary and students were free to withdraw at any time. The researcher's university granted ethics approval (ethics permit 2011/009).

5.1. Scope and Limitations of the Study

This paper reports public relations student perceptions towards ethics and ethics education. It developed out of an investigation, where students were exposed to curriculum resources designed to educate them about socially responsible public relations practice in relation to suicide and mental illness. The impact of this intervention and the findings in relation to student perceptions of ethics, mental health and public relations, along with a copy of the survey instrument, are reported elsewhere (Fitch 2012). In contrast, this paper explores more broadly how students perceive ethics in the context of their understanding of public relations.

The students who participated in this research project were enrolled in a public relations degree at one university in Australia. Public relations is taught as a communication rather than a business discipline at that university, and the degree foregrounds critical theory and social responsibility. The responses of students may not therefore be generalisable to public relations education at other universities. However, by situating this study within scholarship on teaching ethics in public relations, the findings may encompass transferability (Daymon & Holloway 2011) and offer valuable insights into how students respond to ethical learning in the curriculum.

6. Student Perceptions of Ethical Responsibilities

6.1. Understandings of Ethics

In survey responses, students understood ethics as personal, social, professional, or as a dynamic interaction between the personal and the social. While a few students viewed ethics in a professional context as “respecting the code of conduct your industry follows,” many students defined ethics simply as “doing the right thing” or “mak[ing] moral judgements,” without explicitly considering how what is “right” or “moral” may be determined. One student saw ethics as “your moral compass” suggesting that ethics is about individual choices and priorities. The idea of morality permeated many definitions, with some students identifying morality as something which is determined socially rather than by the individual:

I would define ethics as a combination of societies’ laws and more importantly, morals, which may or may not be closely related to mere laws. Ethics relate to our individual responsibilities in society in general and should influence our behaviour in all aspects of our lives, including the professional.

Other students recognised ethics involves choosing between “acceptable/unacceptable behaviour” and “your idea of what is wrong and right in society; what is socially acceptable.” For these students, ethics involves a negotiation between the individual and what is socially determined as appropriate: “ethics is the ability to judge what is right and wrong in accordance with beliefs, practices and society.” Ethics, therefore, is perceived as a dynamic process, which varies according to the social values in a particular context.

Many survey respondents viewed ethics as sensitivity to, or empathy with, others: “Ethics, to me, is consideration of other genders, religious beliefs, politics, etc and the ability to maintain a compassionate view of the world.” Other students extrapolated the idea of sensitivity to others, by defining ethics as an awareness of the social impact of one’s actions or behaviour: “the consideration of how our actions will affect others.”

6.2. Responsibilities of Public Relations Practitioners

When asked about the responsibilities of public relations practitioners, many survey participants responded that their client organisation or employer should be the primary responsibility: “to look after the company they are working for—they need to have the company or organisation’s best interest at heart.” Such comments suggest that responsible practice is in fact operating effectively on behalf of clients. Other respondents saw their primary responsibility to their

organisation, but with some social obligations in terms of honesty: “to portray your organisation or client in a positive manner, but not to lie or deceive in doing so.” Responsible public relations practice thus becomes a negotiation between the ‘spin’ or positive portrayal of an organisation, and the need to remain truthful and accurate: “Public relations practitioners are responsible to find that point of balance in giving the truth to the public and putting the client in [a] positive light.” Others maintained that truthfulness overrode client obligations: “the responsibilities of the public relations practitioner are to act transparently and ethically in all dealings, and secondarily to strive for the best result for your client.” Other students perceived the practitioner’s primary responsibility was to the public rather than the client or employer: “We are responsible towards the public” and “to always keep people informed.”

For some students, the status and representation of the public relations industry was important, with the need to target publics “in a way that is ethical and does not bring the PR industry or its workers into disrepute.” This response is one of the few, which identifies obligations to the public relations profession, rather than client, employer or broader social obligations. Other students viewed practitioner responsibilities as “being organised” and “adhering to a timeline.” While such attributes are perhaps important in meeting client or employer needs, they arguably represent a superficial understanding of the responsibilities of professional practice.

Focus group participants discussed the ethical responsibilities of public relations practitioners. They perceived practitioners as responsible to themselves, their client or employer, and the public. However, they recognised the kind of client or organisation and the industry sector might influence the particular responsibilities with some sectors more concerned with protecting their image and reputation, while in the non-government sector, an organisation might focus more on a particular social issue. The recognition that context would influence public relations practice is a valuable insight, and suggests that non-government organisations might be more concerned with the needs of publics, or the social impact of their activities. This insight is confirmed by a discussion around personal responsibilities; students perceived the need to “fit” with an organisation they might work for: “depending on how you perceive ethics and morals yourself depends on how you go into the workforce and reflect that in the way you conduct yourself.” Their personal ethics would also assist in making career choices: “they decide to work in a company because they share the same beliefs and desires...they just see themselves as fitting into that company.”

Students participating in the focus group were critical of the PRIA Code of Ethics, primarily because it emphasised risk management and reputation issues rather than socially responsible practice. The students did not find the code useful as an articulation of professional ethics, particularly following the discussion of the stimulus scenario: “I don’t find any of [the code] relevant at all.” At the same time, students acknowledged the difficulty in developing a code which

realistically could offer guidance or be implemented in specific contexts. Students perceived the need to prioritise consideration of the social impact of public relations activity.

All participants agreed it was difficult to distinguish between personal and professional ethics: “you can’t really distinguish between the two” and “your individual personal ethics will have an impact on how you conduct yourself in the workforce anyway, no matter how good or bad their ethical standards are.” Ultimately, students recognised the responsibility for making socially responsible decisions rests with the individual practitioner: “the responsibility I think still stays with you.”

7. Student Perceptions of Ethics and Education

All students in the focus group were completing double majors. They perceived ethics as integral to communication studies: “pretty much for all units there have always been a couple of weeks where you do ethics.” They suggested that whereas ethics was fundamental to public relations and journalism majors, this was not necessarily the case in non-communication disciplines:

I’m also a commerce major, and in the commerce units... pretty much the only ethical example that is ever mentioned, which isn’t even mentioned often, is Enron... which I mean in its own right is a very huge ethical example, but in a business context that’s the only one they refer to. Whereas PR uses ethical examples in every unit in every semester, and in commerce it’s just this one, once off.

Participants acknowledged that ethics was a “grey” area for public relations: “where the line is pretty blurry, especially...because there’s all this stuff about being spin doctors...the uni is doing a good job to try and show us that PR isn’t just all about that.”

Focus group participants perceived their understanding of ethics as something which developed over the course of their studies, rather than through a single unit or task. They valued “the constant reinforcement...across all the units” rather than “one big ethical unit because you’re probably not going to be as effective through that.” Students perceived that ethical learning also developed out of other areas of their life: paid work outside of university, and learning to work with others from different cultural backgrounds at university. Cultural diversity in classes was perceived as important in developing an awareness of the potential impact of their communication practices on others: “you kind of have to think about things in a different way, and think about how different cultures are going to take your message, or how you have to target things to different cultures.”

Although focus group participants acknowledged that ethics was “hard”, they thought that the opportunity to apply ethics in their decision-making in practical ways at university was useful. Students perceived value in major assignments for their own ethical development: “you actually have to make a decision when you are making the campaign, instead of just talking about it theoretically; when you’re forced to do it, it becomes a lot clearer.” Such a position suggests that students gain more by working through a complex assignment, which demanded they address ethical issues (in contrast, presumably to the learning gained from a theoretical reading or a tutorial discussion): “because you don’t really learn that much until you actually put it into practice.” One student reported on a campaign unit where she had to work with a real client: “it wasn’t just an in-class assignment...so that was a lot harder, but it was a huge learning experience, you know, learning about how you work your campaign to make sure that you don’t offend certain people, or things like that.” It is precisely the complexity and the need to work through conflicting stakeholder priorities, which is where students feel that real learning—in terms of ethics—occurs.

Forty survey respondents (that is, 89%) identified at least one unit from the public relations program as useful in developing their understanding of ethical practice. The most frequently cited unit was a public relations theory unit, which introduces students to ethical theory. Other units include a media relations unit, which incorporates the resources to educate students about mental health and ethical practice; a real-client unit, where students develop campaigns for not-for-profit organisations; and a research unit, which introduces research ethics. However, all core units in the public relations major encourage students to consider the social impact and ethical implications of public relations activity. Seven students (that is, 15.5% of survey respondents) identified units from other disciplines as useful in developing their understanding of ethical public relations.

Focus group participants identified a gap between the emphasis on ethics in public relations undergraduate education and industry practice. Students thought the exposure to unethical practices in the industry was commendable on the part of the public relations lecturers as “they provided a pretty good example of what is ethical and what is unethical.” In addition, students considered that although university studies emphasised ethical practice, this was not always such a concern in industry and suggested more professional development was needed for practitioners. Participants considered ethics education an integral part of their course as: “the whole point of coming to uni is to prepare us for real-life situations, so if we’re not prepared for everything then they haven’t really done their job properly.”

8. Implications for Public Relations Education

Survey respondents and focus group participants identified a tension between practitioners' diverse obligations to clients, employers, stakeholders, the public, the profession and themselves, and recognised the need to prioritise those obligations when faced with making professional judgements. However, they understood personal or individual ethics as having the greatest influence on professional decision-making.

Students variously approached ethics as an external set of rules or principles by which they should abide; a determination of what is right, proper and acceptable; having consideration for an impact on others; or a negotiation between society and the individual. This diversity in understanding ethics may need to be considered in terms of the implications for students' development and recognition of professional responsibilities. Most students recognised that ethics involved a determination of what was socially acceptable, with a significant cohort recognising that ethics would vary due to culture and context. Therefore, students perceived ethics as a dynamic process. This finding suggests that educators should highlight the challenges in expecting codes to provide appropriate guidance (Bowden & Surma 2003). Participants perceived an over-emphasis in the PRIA Code of Ethics on risk and reputation management at the expense of social responsibility, confirming business ethics literature that argues codes are primarily concerned with reputation and legal issues (Stevens 1994).

Students recognised that ethics involved an awareness of 'others' in terms of culture, politics and so on, acknowledging that their diverse backgrounds and experiences will also inform their learning, and in turn, their understanding of ethics. Given the diversity of students and the trend in internationalising public relations education, educators should embrace cultural diversity in their teaching to develop in students an awareness of the ways in which public relations practice can be socially responsible (Chia 2009, Austin & Toth 2011). Hooker (2004) makes a similar point in relation to business ethics education. This recognition suggests that educators should emphasise the social impact of public relations activity, in line with Curtin and Boynton (2001), and encourage future practitioners to consider the potential impact on stakeholders of their decisions. It is worth noting that corporate social responsibility is often a public relations function (Bartlett 2011), suggesting the significance of these findings for business ethics education.

In contrast to the findings from Erzikova (2010), participants perceived they learnt most about ethical communication issues by completing a major assignment on the topic. For students, "the assessment always defines the actual curriculum" (Ramsden 1992, p. 187). In particular, complex assignments and real-client projects offered students the opportunity to apply their ethical learning (Fitch 2011); similarly business ethics educators identify that service learning teaches students about corporate citizenship and community service and

engagement and therefore promotes ethical learning (Floyd, Xu, Atkins, & Caldwell 2013). Focus group participants perceived the emphasis on ethics generally in their public relations studies as important and valuable. Most survey respondents identified specific units in the public relations program, which had contributed to their understanding of ethical communication issues. In addition, units from courses such as sociology, commerce and journalism were identified by some students as contributing to their understanding of ethics and ethical behaviour in public relations practice. This result is perhaps surprising, but confirms students perceive the development of ethical understanding builds on prior learning. Focus group participants identified ethics as underpinning their public relations studies, in contrast to other disciplines. It may be that the poor reputation of public relations as “spin” has contributed to the preoccupation with ethics in education and in professional associations.

Students, through both the survey responses and the focus group discussion, acknowledged the positive impact of a range of units and the diversity of the student body, along with other activities such as outside employment, on their understanding of ethics in relation to professional practice. This finding confirms that many factors contribute to students’ ethical development. From the student perspective, the capacity to negotiate ethics and professional responsibility is developmental and incremental, suggesting ethics should be scaffolded in the public relations curriculum and echoing recommendations in business ethics education literature (Swanson & Fisher 2008, Floyd, Xu, Atkins, & Caldwell 2013). In addition, educators should develop a context-sensitive approach, which addresses the reality of both multiculturalism and internationalisation in public relations today in higher education and in practice.

9. Conclusion

This study has introduced student perspectives on ethics in public relations practice and education. Focusing on the student perspective contributes to theoretical insights into ethics education. The first insight conceptualises ethics in relation to public relations, showing how ethics is perceived by students who participated in this research as integral to public relations practice. The second highlights how ethical public relations practice demands a negotiation of conflicting loyalties and stakeholder interests, by considering the social impact of public relations activity. This insight suggests that ethical practice requires recognition of public relations as an intrinsically social activity, which focuses on communicative exchange as ethical business practice. The underlying ideology of the dominant paradigm of public relations must be acknowledged, given its U.S. heritage and influence in positioning ethical practice as serving client or employer interests. The third perspective demands educators consider how they incorporate ethics into the public relations curriculum in order to develop students as reflexive

and critical thinkers. Students perceived scaffolding ethics throughout the degree, major assignments and work-integrated learning activity as useful in developing their understanding of ethics. The research reported in this paper reinforces the importance of foregrounding ethics in public relations education, the role of individual practitioners in making ethically informed business decisions, and the difficulty in relying on ethical codes, aimed to confirm professional standing and protect the industry's reputation, produced by professional associations. The student perspective offers new insights into the complex ethical challenges for public relations practice, and identifies issues for public relations educators to address in the curriculum: the 'social' in public relations activity must be considered to improve the development of ethical behaviour in future practitioners. In addition, the significance of public relations for business ethics, and how business ethics education may inform public relations education, deserves further research.

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Appendix 1: Facilitator notes for focus group

List of semi-structured focus group questions

1. What do you think the responsibilities of a public relations practitioner are?
2. What are the specific ethical responsibilities of public relations practitioners?
3. Identify which elements of your studies, if any, have contributed to your understanding of these ethical responsibilities? In which units did these activities take place?
4. Identify which activities outside your formal studies, if any, have influenced your understanding or, and attitude towards, ethical issues?
5. Can you suggest any learning activities which may contribute to your professional development as an ethical public relations practitioner?
6. How do you distinguish between personal and professional ethics?

List of semi-structured focus group questions in response to stimulus material #1 (hypothetical scenario involving suicide)

1. What do you think the ethical issues are?
2. How would you respond?
3. Do you think it is important for public relations students to be aware of the ethical complexities posed by scenarios such as this?
4. Does this scenario change your understanding of the ethical responsibilities of practitioners? Who are they responsible to?

List of semi-structured focus group questions in response to stimulus material #2 (PRIA Individual Code of Ethics)

1. How do you relate the ethical codes of the professional association to the scenario we've just discussed? Which clauses are most relevant?
2. Do you think there are gaps?
3. Are there implicit ethical responsibilities in public relations practice? Are there implicit professional ethics in the industry? Or are you suggesting personal ethics?
4. If professional, should the PRIA play a role here? If not the PRIA, how should such responsibilities be made explicit?