

Public Relations Students' Ethics: An Examination of Attitude and Intended Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

This study examines public relations students' attitudes and intended behaviors toward ethical dilemmas. Findings indicate significant differences between how students rated the ethical nature of a dilemma and the likelihood they would engage in similar behaviors in 6 of 10 scenarios. In most cases, students indicated a higher likelihood to engage in the questionable behavior than their ethical attitude toward the behavior. Female students rated all dilemmas significantly less ethical than did male students.

Today's public relations students will be tomorrow's public relations professionals. According to Keith, Pettijohn and Burnett (2008), "It is likely the ethical perceptions and standards students bring to their new jobs will largely influence their behaviors" (p. 81). Thus, understanding students' views about professional ethics may help predict student's actions as future PR practitioners. Toward that end, a national survey of Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) members was conducted to gauge students' attitudes and intended behavior toward professional ethical dilemmas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

When examining ethics, it is important to consider the theoretical linkage between attitudes and behavior. The Theory of Reasoned Action posits that attitude (a favorable or unfavorable evaluation) toward an action combines with subjective norms (how one perceives what others will think) to determine behavioral intent (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). This theory suggests that not only do personal moral evaluations affect behavior, but also do the expectations of friends, parents and peers. In the PR workplace, colleagues, supervisors and industry leaders may influence ethical decisions and actions. Therefore, industry standards and expectations, as learned in the classroom, might also be a source of subjective norms for students when faced with morally questionable situations. Because this study measures both attitudes and intended behaviors toward ethical scenarios, this theory may be helpful in interpreting the results.

Ethical Scenarios

Some claim that ethics cannot be taught, but are situational. Patterson and Wilkins (2011) explained, "Thinking about ethics won't necessarily make tough choices easier, but, with practice, your ethical decision-making can become more consistent" (p 3). Resolving dilemmas is common practice in public relations. Therefore, scholars agree that one of the best ways to prepare for issues management is to engage in ethical discussions.

Not only are ethical dilemmas useful in practice, but scenarios also have been recognized as a foundation for ethics research. Use of scenarios allows a researcher to standardize the stimulus across respondents and makes decision-making more realistic (Alexander & Becker, 1978; Chonko, Tanner & Weeks, 1996). Lane (1995) studied the reaction of business students to marketing dilemmas in response to suggestions that some students are prepared to act unethically to gain competitive advantage. He found that females and older students responded more ethically in a majority of situations. Likewise, Malinowski and Berger (1996) found that undergraduate women and older students responded more ethically to hypothetical marketing moral dilemmas. Fullerton, Kendrick and McKinnon (2013) also found similar results among advertising students when exposed to ethical scenarios. This study also found discrepancies between students' attitudes and intended behavior.

The current study uses ethical scenarios that might be faced in the workplace to measure PR students' attitudes toward ethically difficult situations and corresponding intended behavior. Although it is difficult to accurately predict behavior based on attitudes and reported intent, this study can enhance our understanding of how students approach potential ethical dilemmas.

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TABLE 1 <i>Ratings of Ethical Scenarios vs. Likelihood of Engaging in Questionable Behavior</i>			“How ethical do you feel this situation is?” (1=Unethical / 7=Ethical)				“How likely do you feel you would do this?” (1=Unlikely / 7=Likely)					
SCENARIOS	% Unethical % Unlikely respondents selecting 1, 2 or 3 on 7-point scale	% Ethical % Likely respondents selecting 5, 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale	MEAN	UNETHICAL %	ETHICAL %	STANDARD DEVIATION	VARIANCE	MEAN	UNLIKELY %	LIKELY %	STANDARD DEVIATION	VARIANCE
02-Client overbilling	p<.01	1.31	95.0	2.3	.903	.816	1.44	92.5	3.6	1.04	1.10	
03-Discard focus group results	p<.01	2.56	72.9	9.5	1.42	2.02	2.74	66.7	14.8	1.58	2.50	
04-Fantasy football	p<.01	2.82	65.8	11.5	1.40	1.96	2.45	73.3	12.8	1.59	2.52	
05-Book more expensive air ticket for Flyer Miles		3.39	50.5	21.4	1.52	2.33	3.34	49.4	24.4	1.65	2.74	
06-Posing employee as disabled		1.89	83.6	7.6	1.43	2.05	1.82	83.7	7.1	1.40	1.97	
07-Omit negative information in a press release	p<.01	2.08	82.4	5.7	1.31	1.72	2.50	71.5	11.6	1.50	2.28	
08-Copy speech from YouTube		1.40	92.6	2.3	.96	.939	1.42	91.6	2.7	.997	.995	
09-Highlight environmental initiatives		4.85	21.3	58.6	1.75	3.06	4.89	21.2	60.7	1.78	3.18	
10-Copy proposal from previous employer	p<.01	2.16	80.1	7.4	1.37	1.89	2.31	75.9	9.5	1.45	2.12	
AVERAGE SCORE		2.63					2.71					

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1. When presented with ethically questionable scenarios about PR practice, how do PR students rate the ethical nature of the scenario? Do their ratings vary by year in school, gender, race, GPA, major or whether or not they have held an internship?

RQ2. When presented with ethically questionable scenarios about PR practice, how likely are PR students to personally engage in the behavior described? Does likelihood vary by year in school, gender, race, GPA, major, or whether or not they have held an internship?

RQ3. Is there a difference between how students rate the ethicality of a scenario and their likelihood of engaging in the questionable behavior?

METHOD

After obtaining appropriate Institutional Review Board approvals, a nationwide online survey of public relations students was launched on October 25, 2012, and data collection continued through December 3, 2012. In partnership with PRSA, an email invitation was sent to 6,612 usable addresses of PRSSA chapter members at 327 universities.

Email recipients were directed to a Web site where they completed the questionnaire. Participants responded anonymously to questions about PR education, career preferences and ethics. As a participation incentive, students could enter to win one of two iPads.

Instrument

The questionnaire included 10 ethical scenarios. The majority of these dilemmas were similar in wording to scenarios on PRSA's website "Educators' Ethics Case Studies and General Case Studies" <www.prsa.org/aboutPRSA/ethics/resources>. A few dilemmas were adapted from similar studies on advertising students' ethics (Fullerton, et al., 2013; Keith, et al., 2003).

Respondent Profile

A total of 789 students from 226 universities responded to the survey. This represented a response rate of 11.9%. Females accounted for 88% of respondents. The majority of the students were White, non-Hispanic (77.9%), 6.8% were African-American, 6.3% were Hispanic, 3.8% were Asian-American, 0.6% Pacific Islander, 0.4% Native American and 4.1% indicated "other." About 2% were international students. Almost two-thirds (61.8%) were seniors, followed by juniors (26.2%), sophomores (11.8%) and first-year students (.3%). Students mean age was 21.5 years. Self-reported overall GPA was 3.39 and 3.52 in their major.

The majority of students were majoring in PR (66.8%), followed by communications (11%), strategic communications (8.5%), journalism (4.8%), marketing (1.6%), advertising (1.6%), graphic design (.4%), IMC (.1%), business (.5%), English (0.5%) and sports communication (0.5%). Slightly more than two-thirds (68.9%) of the respondents reported having held an internship. Almost 9 out of 10 (87.1%) wanted to work in the public relations field after graduation.

FINDINGS

RQ1. Student respondents were provided with 10 ethically questionable scenarios and asked: "Using your own values, how ethical do you feel this action is?" Students selected their responses on a 7-point semantic differential scale anchored by Ethical (7) and Unethical (1). Table 1 provides the mean, percentage responding ethical and unethical, standard deviation and variance for each of the 10 scenarios.

Students found the client overbilling scenario to be the most unethical (M=1.31) and highlighting environmental initiatives of an oil company to be the most ethical (M=4.85). The mean score for all 10 scenarios was 2.63, indicating that in general the students found the scenarios to be rather unethical.

Upperclassmen were less likely than sophomores and first-year students to say it is ethical to discard focus group findings (senior M=2.42;

junior $M=2.41$; sophomore $M=2.70$; first-year $M=3.04$; $F=(4,605)3.55$; $p=.007$). Upperclassmen also found posing an employee as disabled to be less ethical than younger students (senior $M=1.73$; junior $M=1.79$; sophomore $M=2.06$; first-year $M=2.1$; $F(4, 602)=2.35$; $p=.05$).

Women significantly differed from men in their ethical ratings of client overbilling (female $M=1.27$; male $M=1.56$; $F(1, 606)=6.80$; $p=.009$), leaving negative information out of a press release (female $M=2.03$; male $M=2.44$; $F(1, 602)=6.60$; $p=.01$), using a speech from the web as their own (female $M=1.35$; male $M=1.77$; $F(1, 602)=12.41$; $p=.001$) and copying a previous employer's proposal (female $M=2.09$; male $M=2.61$; $F(1, 602)=9.50$; $p=.002$). In all cases, women were significantly more likely than men to find the dilemmas less ethical.

There were significant differences among college major groups in their ethical feelings about playing fantasy football at work. Marketing majors ($M=3.30$), advertising ($M=3.34$), business ($M=3.50$) and sports communication majors ($M=4.66$) were more likely to find this practice ethical compared to PR ($M=2.80$), communications ($M=2.54$) and journalism ($M=2.57$) majors ($F(10, 581)=1.991$; $p=.032$).

A Pearson correlation test revealed weak but significant inverse relationships between GPA and two ethical scenarios: lying to a reporter to protect a client ($r=-.102$; $p=.012$) and using a previous employer's copy of a proposal as your own ($r=-.091$; $p=.025$). As GPA increased, ethical ratings decreased (rated as less ethical) in both cases.

Students who had held internships ($M=2.47$ v. 2.76) were less likely to feel that discarding unfavorable focus group findings was ethical ($F(1,608)=5.15$; $p=.024$). There were no differences found among racial groups.

RQ2. After rating the ethical nature of each scenario, the students were asked: "How likely do you feel you would be to do this or something similar if you were put in the situation described?" The students marked their scores on a 7-point semantic differential scale anchored by Very likely (7) and Very unlikely (1). Table 1 provides the mean, percentage responding likely and unlikely, standard deviation and variance for each of the 10 scenarios.

Students were most likely to highlight an oil company's questionable environmental initiatives ($M=4.89$) and least likely to plagiarize a speech from YouTube ($M=1.42$). The average of all 10 scores was 2.71, which indicates that in general the students reported it was rather unlikely that they would engage in the behaviors described.

First-year students were significantly more likely to discard unfavorable focus group results (first-year $M=3.36$; sophomore $M=2.88$; junior $M=2.53$; senior $M=2.80$; $F(4, 605)=4.92$; $p=.001$) and copy a speech from YouTube (first-year $M=1.59$; sophomore $M=1.51$; junior $M=1.38$; senior $M=1.18$; $F(4, 597)=3.05$; $p=.016$) than their more senior peers.

Men were significantly more likely to engage in ethically questionable behavior than were women in 7 of the 10 scenarios, including client over billing (male $M=1.69$ v. 1.41 ; $F(1, 605)=4.84$; $p=.028$); fantasy football (male $M=2.81$ v. 2.40 ; $F(1, 607)=4.37$; $p=.037$); posing an employee as disabled (male $M=2.12$ v. 1.78 ; $F(1, 601)=3.85$; $p=.05$); omitting nega-

tive information (male $M=2.85$ v. 2.45 ; $F(1, 603)=4.72$; $p=.03$); copying a speech (male $M=1.71$ v. 1.39 ; $F(1,597)=6.87$; $p=.009$); highlight environmental initiatives (male $M=5.33$ v. 4.81 ; $F(1, 598)=5.80$; $p=.016$); and using a former employer's presentation (male $M=2.67$ v. 2.25 ; $F(1, 598)=5.48$; $p=.02$).

Marketing majors were more likely than other majors to play fantasy football (marketing $M=3.30$; advertising $M=2.55$; public relations $M=2.41$; communications $M=2.14$, journalism $M=2.17$; $F(10, 582)=2.28$; $p=.013$). Marketing and advertising majors were more likely to omit negative financial information from a press release (marketing $M=3.70$; advertising $M=3.77$; public relations $M=2.47$; communications $M=2.25$; journalism $M=2.25$; $F(10, 571)=1.93$; $p=.039$).

A Pearson correlation test revealed weak but significant inverse relationships between overall GPA and two ethical scenarios: discarding focus group results ($r=-.090$; $p=.027$), and copying a speech from YouTube ($r=-.093$; $p=.023$). As GPA increased, likelihood to engage in these behaviors declined.

Students who had held an internship were more likely to play fantasy football at work (2.56 v. 2.21 ; $F(1, 610)=5.89$; $p=.015$). No significant differences were found among racial groups.

RQ3. A paired samples t-test revealed significant differences between how the students rated the ethical nature of the PR scenarios and how likely they were to engage in the behavior in 6 of the 10 dilemmas (See Table 1). This finding reveals that generally student attitudes toward an ethically questionable action and behavioral intent to perform that action are inconsistent. Only playing fantasy football at work was considered more ethical than their likelihood of doing so. For the other significantly inconsistent dilemmas, including lying to a reporter, client over-billing, discarding focus group results, omitting negative information in a press release and copying a proposal from a previous employer, the students indicated that their likelihood to engage in the act was higher than their ethical attitude toward the behavior.

DISCUSSION

Students in this study rated the ethical nature of a workplace dilemma and the likelihood they would engage in similar behaviors significantly differently in 6 of 10 scenarios. Thus, students' attitudes toward ethically questionable actions and behavioral intent were often inconsistent. In most cases, students indicated a higher likelihood to engage in the questionable behavior than their ethical attitude toward the behavior. Theory of Reasoned Action might help explain the inconsistencies when one considers the role of social norms. The scenarios that students' said were unethical, but they were more likely to engage in, were those scenarios mostly related to behavior that might be quite common in the workplace and therefore acceptable to peers and supervisors, such as lying to a reporter, discarding focus group results or omitting negative information in a press release. By contrast, playing fantasy football at work was something supervisors and peers might frown upon and therefore students claimed that they would not perform such action, even though they did not find it a

serious ethical breach. This analysis of the inconsistency between ethical attitudes and behaviors may suggest the important role of social norms in ethical behavior, a phenomenon also uncovered by Fullerton, et al. (2013) among advertising students.

Differences were found among subgroups of students in this study. Similar to other research (Fullerton, et al., 2013; Lane, 1995; Malinowski & Berger, 1996; Peterson, et al., 1991), female students rated all dilemmas significantly less ethical than did male students. They also were less likely to indicate that they would engage in the ethically questionable behaviors. Students with a higher reported GPA also rated some of the scenarios as less ethical. First year students were significantly more likely to engage in some of the questionable behaviors including plagiarizing a speech and discarding focus group results. Students with previous internship experience were significantly less likely to indicate they would conduct a second focus group to produce more favorable results.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Although researchers based scenarios on previous research (Fullerton, et al., 2013; Keith, et al., 2003) and PRSA cases, it is possible that students could have been previously exposed to these or similar situations. However, Patterson and Wilkins (2011) suggest that thinking about ethical dilemmas in advance can make ethical decision making more consistent. Thus, previous exposure to ethical cases may actually enhance the accuracy for

predicting intended behavior. Such cases reflect common ethical dilemmas in the field and provide an excellent resource for educators. However, it is possible that the use of different ethical scenarios might produce different results.

While the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) can help explain discrepancies found in this study between student attitudes and intended behaviors, it cannot be fully tested with the available data. Future studies might add a subjective norms scale to each scenario to measure how respondents think others would view their actions. Similarly, this study may suffer from a social desirability limitation (Babbie, 2001).

Researchers have suggested that the use of ethical scenarios can be an effective way to teach PR ethics and have suggested that ethical tools be incorporated into all PR courses (Hutchison, 2002). Educators can use the scenarios provided in this study to stimulate classroom discussion. They can poll their students to see if their attitudes reflect those of students nationwide. It is possible that when ethical dilemmas are presented in class, professors may get reactions that are divided among gender lines. It may be important for educators to engage students in a discussion of why there may be gender differences in public relations ethics and if such gender differences would be found in practice. Identifying differences among groups of students in regards to their ethical stance might aid professors in teaching and practitioners in managing various types of young people.

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