

Are We Teaching Them to be CSR Managers?

Examining Students' Expectations of Practitioner Roles in CSR

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INTRODUCTION

While public relations practitioner roles are well documented in research and are indicative of whether practitioners participate in the strategic decision making of organizations, there is little research on roles that public relations practitioners perform in organizations' corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Today, CSR is considered an integral part of organizational business strategy, identity, and reputation (Kim, 2011). The strategic function has also become salient in public relations research and practice as evident from the growing discussions in academic and trade publications (e.g., Starck & Kruckeberg, 2003; Stohl, Stohl, & Towsley, 2007).

And yet, less is known about public relations practitioner roles in CSR with the exception of a study by Kim and Reber (2008). The profession has long advocated for the establishment of public relations as a strategic management function and calls for practitioners to strive for managerial roles in organizations (Dozier, 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 1992). However, most practitioners in Kim and Reber's (2008) study reported that they play no or limited role in their organization's CSR.

Additionally, while public relations research has examined the factors that shape practitioner roles, less is known about how these roles are formed in CSR. In particular, there is a lack of research that examines what roles practitioners see for themselves in organizations' CSR. Dozier (1992) suggested that some public relations professionals lack strong professional-role expectations, which could be a function of their education, professional experiences, and values.

Therefore, this study examined the roles that public relations students expect to play in CSR and how these perceptions are influenced by their education, professional training, and personal and professional values. Such investigation of the attitudes and opinions of future public relations practitioners is important to academic institutions that can use these findings to inform their curriculum and teaching. Also, such endeavors are vital to the organizations that these graduates will serve in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Practitioner roles in CSR

Public relations practitioner roles have been categorized into two broad categories: managerial and technician (Dozier & Broom, 1995). While managerial roles are often associated with significant decision-making power and autonomy, practitioners in technician roles are primarily responsible for day-to-day, operational matters such as writing, editing and production of publications.

Public relations practitioners are encouraged to strive for managerial roles by getting involved in management's decision-making and leading an organization's strategic initiatives (Dozier, 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 1992). One such strategic function in organizations that has gained progressive importance is corporate social responsibility (CSR). In this function public relations has an important role to perform. This is primarily due to the fact that public relations practitioners are often expected (or prepared) to act as an organization's social conscience and counsel management to act as responsible citizens (Bowen, 2007).

And yet, a survey of 173 members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) revealed that practitioners' involvement in CSR is often limited in power and authority (Kim & Reber, 2008). Several participants acknowledged that they performed no role in their organization's CSR. Practitioner roles as described by other participants were categorized as: significant managerial, philanthropic, value driven or ethical, and communication.

As this research revealed, there is a clear divergence between the normative public relations theory and much of the public relations practice. However, no previous study has explored why such gap exists. Therefore, this study started its investigation by first exploring

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the CSR roles that students expect to perform as future public relations practitioners using the following research question:

RQ1. What practitioner roles— managerial, communication-technician, ethical, philanthropic, and no role) – do students expect to play in CSR?

Personal and professional values

Personal and professional values have been found to have enduring influence on individuals' decision making and professional-role expectations (Allen & Davis, 1993; Dozier, 1992; Lauzen 1994). While professional values describe what individuals expect from a profession, personal values influence how they see themselves in a particular profession and what roles they aspire to perform as practitioners (Allen & Davis, 1993).

In public relations, professional organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) have established Professional Codes of Ethics with the aim of developing professional values among members. Students get acquainted with these codes via class-room education, workshops and seminars, and socialization with peers and professionals.

In addition to professional values, practitioner behavior is also influenced by the values and ideals inherent to the individual (Allen & Davis, 1993). From social psychology perspective, scholars have explored the ways in which personal values relate to individuals' beliefs pertaining to desirable end-states (e.g. pay) or behaviors (e.g. professional-roles) in work (Elizur, 1984; Hofstede, 1991). Along similar lines, Lauzen (1994) explained that practitioner-role expectations and aspirations are a function of a 'career anchor,' which is a combination of abilities, attitudes, values, and motives that together define an individual's professional self-identity. As a consequence, research has found that not all practitioners aspire to perform managerial roles (McGoon, 1993).

Personal characteristics have also been found to influence practitioners' attitudes towards CSR. Hemingway and MacLagan (2004) explained that individuals' personal values identify how strongly they associate with CSR policies and actively participate in it. Therefore, this study examined the following hypotheses:

H1. Students' professional values are positively related to their expectations of a managerial role in CSR.

H2. Students' personal values are positively related to the level of importance placed on PRSA professional values.

H3. Students' personal values are positively related to their expectations of a managerial role in CSR.

Public relations education and professional training

Scholars have recommended that public relations majors should be introduced to core competencies in ethics with an emphasis on public relations management by imparting them knowledge of strategic planning, management styles, interpersonal and leadership skills, professional etiquettes, and other management abilities (Hutchinson, 2002; Van Leuven, 1999). In essence, scholars urged that academic institutions should teach students the

skills that will prepare them for managerial roles in their professional careers.

However, despite the recommendations from the academic community and commissions on public relations education, institutions of higher education are not compelled to adhere to such models of teaching public relations ethics (Ehling, 1992). Therefore, standards vary across institutions for educating and training future practitioners (White, Oukrop, & Nelson, 1992). The effect of such divergence in teaching public relations ethics and strategic management skills is that practitioners often report that they are satisfied with performing technician roles (McGoon, 1993).

In addition to academic training, professional experience acquired during internships, part-time jobs, and/or prior job experiences can also shape students' professional-role expectations (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 1999; Kim, 2006). Therefore this study examined the following hypotheses:

H4: Students' academic and professional training are positively related to the level of importance placed on PRSA professional values.

H5. Students' academic and professional training are positively related to their expectations of a managerial role in CSR.

METHOD

Participants and setting

Undergraduate students enrolled in upper division public relations courses at a large state university in the Southeast U.S. participated in the study.

Survey materials

The questionnaire comprised of four primary parts: academic and professional training, personal values, professional values, and practitioner role expectations in CSR. Following Kim and Reber's (2008) typology, the CSR practitioner role expectations portion had five components: managerial, communication-technician, ethical, philanthropy, and no role. These five components were derived from forced choice responses among statements regarding students' professional-role expectations in CSR.

Academic and professional training contained ten questions relating to: years of school, number of public relations courses taken, membership in professional organizations including Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), number of CSR/ethics courses taken, number of professional development workshops or seminars attended, level of familiarity with PRSA code of ethics, and number of months of professional experience including internships. Because each item in the set of questions about academic and professional training recorded responses at different levels (e.g. multiple choice with two or more options, text responses, etc.), z-scores were used to standardize each response and then summed to obtain a single measure of academic and professional training for each student.

Personal values were assessed using Kahle's List of Values (LOV) scale on a nine-point Likert scale (1= very unimportant and 9 = very important). Statements included: sense of belonging, excitement, relationships with others, self-fulfillment, being respected, enjoyment, security, self-respect, and sense of

accomplishment. Respondents were also asked to indicate the value that they considered most important.

Following Auger's (2010) study, a scale to measure professional values of students was constructed comprising of six statements derived from the professional values section of PRSA code of ethics including advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness. The statements rated in importance on a nine-point Likert scale (1 = very unimportant and 9 = very important) included: truthfulness and accuracy of information provided, mutual understanding and relationships among institutions, faithfulness to clients/public interest, conflict resolution, honesty and accuracy, and preserving intellectual property rights.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics and linear regression was used for data analysis. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the strength of relationship between variables. Finally, the internal validity of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha reliability test.

FINDINGS

Sample description

A total of 198 completed surveys were obtained from students majoring in public relations. Most participants in the study were juniors (n = 88, 44.4%) and females (n = 179, 90%). The large amount of female participation is justified in a field that is dominated by female practitioners (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). On average, participants had taken about four public relations courses, were not a member of PRSSA (n = 124, 62.6%) or any other professional organization (n = 152, 76.8%), were somewhat familiar with the PRSA code of ethics (n = 63, 31.8%), had not taken any CSR/ethics classes (n = 167, 84.3%), had attended on average about two professional development workshops/seminars, and had an average of four months of professional experience.

Practitioner roles in CSR

To each of the seven statements corresponding to the five practitioner roles, participants could assign values from one (least agreement) to five (most agreement). Due to force choice options, the range of scores for each practitioner role for each student should fall between 7 and 35 with an average of 21. Among the various CSR roles, managerial role obtained the highest mean (M = 24.6, SD = 5.7); significantly higher than 21 (t = 8.9, p < .001, d = 1.3, large effect). Students seemed to agree that as future professionals they would like to be involved in their organization's CSR as items indicating no role obtained the lowest means (M = 17.7, SD = 4.8) (Table 1).

Table 1. Practitioner Roles in CSR

	M	SD
Managerial	24.57	5.65
Ethical	22.52	4.59
Communication-Technician.....	21.26	4.84
Philanthropic.....	18.92	6.10
No role.....	17.74	4.78

Professional values and managerial role expectations in CSR

Scale reliability for professional values scale was found to be 0.83 measured using

Cronbach's alpha. Correlated with practitioner roles, specifically managerial role resulted in significance (p < 0.01). Thus, H1 was supported (Table 2). However, when managerial role expectations was regressed against individual items, just one professional value was found to be significant, that of "Honesty" (p < .05).

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations Between Variables

	Personal Values	Acad/Prof Training (with 3 items)§	Professional Values	Managerial Role in CSR
Personal Values.....	1.000	-	.613**	.150*
Acad/Prof Training (with 3 items)§.....	-	1.000	.201**	.104
Professional Values613**	.201**	1.000	.181*
Managerial Role in CSR150*	.104	.181*	1.000

Personal and professional values

Among the nine personal values, respondents ranked "Warm relationship with others" (n = 59, 29.8%), "Fun and enjoyment in life" (n = 35, 17.7%), and "Self-fulfillment" (n = 33, 16.7%) as most important and "Excitement" (n = 5, 2.5%), "Being well respected" (n = 8, 4%), and "Self-respect" (n = 9, 4.5%) as least important values.

A reliability analysis of Kahle's LOV scale resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86. When correlated with the PRSA professional value scale, a significant relationship was observed (p < 0.01). Therefore, H3 was supported (Table 2). Further, when professional values scale was regressed against the individual items in the personal values scale, two values were found to be significant, those of "Warm relationship with others" (p < 0.01) and "Self-fulfillment" (p < 0.05). Studies have shown that while "Warm relationship with others" is an extrinsic value, similar to such goals as financial success, appearance, and social recognition, "Self-fulfillment" is an intrinsic value the advances goals related to autonomy and competence (Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). Since PRSA professional values can be seen as satisfying and advancing both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations of individuals, it is not surprising that both extrinsic and intrinsic values were found to have significant associations with participants' professional values.

Personal values and managerial role expectations in CSR

When Kahle's LOV scale was correlated with managerial-role expectations of students, a significant relationship was observed (p < 0.05). Therefore, H4 was supported (Table 2). Further, using linear regression, only "Warm relationship with others" was found to have significant association with students' managerial-role expectations (p < 0.01). Again, as explained by Sheldon and Kasser (2008), "Warm relationship with others" is an extrinsic value that satisfies individual' motivations of financial success and social recognition, values that can be advanced by performing managerial roles in an organization.

Academic and professional training and professional values

A reliability analysis of the academic and professional training scale resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.60. When academic and professional training responses were correlated with the PRSA

professional values scale, three of the ten measures were found to be significant: PRSSA membership ($p < 0.1$), membership in other professional organizations ($p < 0.01$), and whether the respondent wants to pursue a professional career in public relations ($p < 0.01$). When these three were summed and correlated with the PRSA professional values scale, significant relationship was observed ($p < 0.01$). Therefore, H5 was only partially supported (Table 2).

Academic and professional training and managerial role expectations in CSR

Surprisingly, no significant association was found between any of the items in the academic and professional training scale and students' managerial role expectations in CSR. Therefore, H6 was not supported (Table 2).

CONCLUSION

Findings show that as future practitioners, students clearly expect to lead an organization's overall decision-making on behalf of CSR issues. The students' preference to play a managerial role in CSR is an optimistic sign for the profession that has always advocated for a seat at the management table (Dozier, 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Additionally, these results show that CSR is gaining acceptance and interest among public relations students and academic institutions.

The study also found that personal and professional values have significant association with students' managerial role expectations in CSR. Research has shown that individuals often use a 'career anchor' (a combination of psychological factors including personal and professional values) to define their professional-role expectations (Lauzen, 1994) that could also be a factor of their personality and value system (McGoon, 1993).

Interestingly though, students' academic and professional training was not found to have any direct relationship with their professional role-expectations in CSR. Instead, professional values mediated the relationship between these two variables. A possible explanation of this finding is that education and training shape individuals' professional values, which are a stronger determinant of the roles they expect to perform in their future career. However, more importantly, these results could also suggest that academic institutions need to find additional ways in which they impart CSR knowledge to students and prepare them for their future career in CSR. A majority of the participants in this study indicated not taking a CSR/ethics class, which could possibly explain this finding. Hence, it is imperative that institutions embrace meaningful ways to instruct future professionals to be CSR managers by introducing courses in CSR and using a case-based approach to educate students about the challenges and opportunities in the field.

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