EUPRERA, Istanbul, September 2012

“Researching the Changing Profession of Public Relations”

THE ETHICS OF CODES: A DEPTH APPROACH

Johanna Fawkes, PhD
Charles Sturt University
Australia
jfawkes@csu.edu.au
ABSTRACT

Public relations ethics places considerable importance on professional codes of conduct, as operated by national and international professional bodies, despite the fact that they are rarely deployed in a regulatory capacity. They therefore run the risk of being seen as aspirational and reputational rather than tools for generating ethical practices. This paper argues that existing approaches to PR ethics are tired and thin, with inadequate philosophical underpinning and a reliance on ‘empty’ Codes consisting of ethical edicts which practitioners have learned to ignore as transgressions go unpunished. But in a climate where governments and business are experiencing unprecedented loss of trust (Edelman, 2012), professional ethics are once more in the spotlight.

The paper returns to the literature of professions, showing that the claim to ethical standards is one of the pillars of the claim to autonomy, implying that the failure to engage meaningfully with ethics threatens the ‘professional project’. The role of codes of ethics in establishing professions is briefly explored, suggesting they share certain characteristics across professional groups, namely the claim to ‘serve society’ which some writers see as a founding myth of professions. Traditional and emerging approaches to public relations ethics are critiqued before the discussion of public relations codes of ethics. This notes the ubiquity of the Excellence approach as contrasted with the ethics of advocacy largely espoused by practitioners and some PR academics; the question of whether inadequate ethics do more harm than good to a profession is raised in this context.

Finally, the paper argues for a depth approach to ethics, in which the person and the collective are encouraged to reflect on their ethical being, not just doing, shifting the focus from acts to agents. Unlike many recent debates on the subject, it argues that PR ethics does not begin and end with who you work for.

Key words: Professional ethics; public relations ethics; codes of ethics; Jung
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, as in Brecher’s (2010) claim that professional ethics “instrumentalise moral concern; and in doing so, both take morality out of the picture and depoliticise the object of what might have been moral concern” (p353).

The theoretical frameworks for viewing professional ethics have evolved from the trait approach of the early 20C, which consisted of descriptions of tasks and roles, 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 (1989), McIntyre’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.

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). He notes that codes tend to be formal objects which play a part in relationships between professional groups, and may lead to the extension or diminution of membership to try and manage unethical colleagues. It is also worth noting Abbott’s emphasis on the individuality of codes; that is they are intended to affect the individual behaviour of members of a profession, rather than reflect on the profession as an entity.
Abbott also points out that this individualism, especially in Anglo American approaches, is reflected in the case by case application of sanctions and disciplinary measures, rather than any continuous monitoring of collective ethical behaviour. Freidson (2001) suggests that professional codes fall into three types of obligation: a) obey law/regulations; b) practice competently and c) reflect values in behaviour, such as care, trust. Again, this sounds splendid until one stumbles over concepts of ‘integrity’ and ‘values’ and it is typical of discussion of codes that virtues are invoked rather than examined.

Kultgen (1988) condemns the use of codes as ‘primarily a public relations document’ (p362) but Davies (1997) approves: “Probably the most obvious use of a company code of ethics is as part of a public relations exercise” (p98). At a more theoretical level, Bartlett, Tywoniak and Hatcher (2007) have analysed professional organisations using the new sociology of institutions (NSI) to suggest such bodies act as entrepreneurs using discourse and rhetoric to influence the social construction of legitimacy. Ethics, codes of conduct and similar claims can be seen as part of this discourse, especially given the lack of rigour or sanctions usually involved. Taking a semiotic perspective, Wernick (1991) shows how a wide range of institutions have learned to deploy signs and symbols for promotional purposes and it seems reasonable to include professional codes of conduct in this category.

So what are the common rhetorical and symbolic contents of codes exactly? Kultgen (1988) offers an extensive list of extracts from a wide range of US codes of conduct and it is worth quoting some of them to illustrate dominant themes. The principal objective of the medical profession is to render service to humanity with full respect for the dignity of man. (American Medical Association)

- The duty of journalists is to serve the truth.... (Sigma Delta Chi)
- Engineers uphold and advance the integrity, honor and dignity of the engineering profession by using their knowledge and skill for the enhancement of human welfare (Engineers' Council for Professional Development)
- Psychologists respect the dignity and worth of the individual and strive for the preservation and protection of fundamental human rights. (American Psychological Association)
A profession exalts service to the individual and society above personal gain. (American Personnel and Guidance Association)

The distinguishing character of a profession is that its members are dedicated to rendering service to humanity. Financial gain or personal reward must be of secondary consideration.... (American Football Coaches Association) (Kultgen, 1988, pp74-5).

From this one can identify a number of tropes – the invocation of values like democracy, freedom, service to society, commitment to truth, dignity and the rights of the individual, as well as humanity at large. This commitment is sometimes called the ‘service contract’ (Cooper, 2004). An image emerges of a champion of human rights, a defender of society, a servant of the greater good, who consistently (it is reiterated above) places the interests of others, including financial interests, above ‘his’ own. Yet various writers (Kultgen, 1988, Harrison and Galloway, 2005; Parkinson, 2001; Pater and Gils, 2003) find that members of professional associations pay little attention to their codes and over the past few years the professional reputations of bankers and politicians (Arthur W. Page society, 2009); NASA scientists (Robinson, 2002, cited in Robinson, 2005); Roman Catholic priests, medical staff (Kaye, 2006) and others have been exposed as lacking precisely these commitments. Kultgen suggests one explanation for this gulf is that the functionalist ideal-typical approach, as described first by Larson (1977), forms a narrative which is convenient for professions.

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 pronouncements and the functionalist typification endorses the view that professions are oriented to service rather than to profit or the interest of any patron group. Handsome rewards are required to entice recruits, compensate for the cost of education, and provide equipment and trappings for effective practice. It is simple justice that those who serve well should be paid well. But they serve to serve, not to be paid. (1988, p 120).

An idealised self-image thus becomes an obstacle to ethical practice, not a guarantee. Another reason for the discrepancy between claims and actions may lie in what McDowell (1991) calls ‘the professional dilemma’, where the professional has the dual
role of independent counsellor and interested supplier of goods. He offers examples of surgeons recommending unnecessary operations (in a privatised system), lawyers recommending cases that will increase the income of the legal firm but are not in the client’s interest, and (presciently) financial advisors selling products that benefit the advisor more than the customer. Naturally public relations counsellors fall into this trap too, recommending campaigns/activities in which they have a financial interest.

McDowell (ibid) highlights opposing views of professional ethics from the perspectives of professional and client:

One widely held, or at least publicly proclaimed, by professionals themselves is that they are conscientious experts devoted to improving the lot of both society and their clients. .... Another view, found broadly among members of an increasingly cynical public, is that professionals are a rapacious, greedy, often incompetent lot who are frequently overpaid to do more damage than good. My starting point is that both views are accurate, or at least contain some truth. The average professional is a typical human being which means a bundle of contradictions, containing within himself or herself the capacity for genuinely virtuous and altruistic activity, as well as the capacity for mean, selfish, and greedy activity (p3).

This paper endorses that starting point in the complexity and contradiction of human behaviour rather than in the idealised rhetoric of codes. Brecher (2010) is particularly scathing about the moral vacuity of codes,

Hence, of course, the existence of codes of ethics, as if acting morally well were some sort of add-on to the specific demands of being a nurse, lawyer, doctor, teacher or whatever, rather than something demanded simply by one’s being a person. Codification, furthermore, opens the door to measurement and quantification: whether or not a nurse is working ‘ethically’ all too easily becomes a matter of checking, and checking off, against a list of rules, while the rules themselves remain morally and politically unexamined (p354, emphasis in original).
It should also be noted, however that while most codes stress the abstract ideal, others over-emphasise the specific situation, betraying their roots in the trait approach to professions, with definitive guidance for a range of situations, e.g. regarding confidentiality, poaching clients, conflicts of interest. Harrison and Galloway (2005) suggest this has an infantilising effect:

Ethical nostrums designed to address professional practice issues often rest on the bedrock assumption that clarity is the chief question. … The assumption has been that if only practitioners knew what was ethical (or not), if only they had a practicable ethical model to apply, they would be able to choose to operate in an ethical way: and would, in fact, do so (p1).

Another reason for disregarding codes may be their remoteness from the everyday dilemmas of practitioners, and their imposition from above, produced by professional bodies rather than the membership. Messikomer and Cirka (2010) argue that “For a code to achieve ethical validity, and realize the potential to be a living document, the code development process must be participative, the content must be values-based, and leaders must be authentic ethical managers ...” (p59). They suggest that, despite Newton’s (1994:86) plea for a shift “from dead rule to living dialogue” the latter is only possible with the active participation of those trying to live by its principles. Instead, most codes abdicate responsibility for the profession from the collective to the individual. Abbott (1983) suggests that the demand for individual conformity with codes of ethics may actually be a substitute for more rigorous regulation (including self-regulation) of the profession as a whole. Thus the individual is held responsible for professional standards while the professional body avoids the important, if less charismatic, dilemmas of mediocre practice, overcommitment of time, and maldistribution of effort that many sociologists see as the basic issues of professional control. In fact, it often tries to deny the existence of corporate professional obligations altogether’ (p 879).

He calls this ‘regressive ethics’ (ibid) and in this sense, codes can stand in the way of discussion, either by infantilising those bound by codes so they are unable to make autonomous ethical decisions or by devolving responsibility from professional body to member. And of course the professional body is between the rock of maintaining
membership and the hard place of maintaining status in society. A punitive approach to enforcing ethics alienates the former; a lax attitude, the latter. Nevertheless, the promise to maintain ethical standards is part of the ‘deal’ guaranteeing professional autonomy. This is what professional bodies protect. To do so they attempt to control the behaviour of their members, though as Kultgen points out they have limited means for so doing.

By and large, the mechanisms are not sufficient to enforce a high level of either competence or morality. In the first place, the mechanisms do not reach most practitioners. Only a minority of professionals belong to professional associations. …. Participation in professional associations is time-consuming and dues are substantial, so active membership is an act of supererogation. Membership is not a condition of practice, so termination of membership is not a severe loss. Expulsion is a threat only to those least likely to suffer it, those who already identify strongly with the profession (1988, p136).

There are also alternative approaches to ethical decision making such as the Potter Box (McElreath, 1996), but those are outside the scope of this paper. It should also be remembered that professionals may also be subject to employer codes of conduct, as not all professionals work independently – though this conflict is also outside the scope of the paper

**Professional ethics in public relations**

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) echoing Kultgen (1988) on professional codes and the ideal-typical approach. Consequently, the dominant 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.
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. Discourse ethics (Habermas, 1979, 1996) has been cited extensively (Haas, 2001; Pearson, 1989) to support symmetrical communication; despite very different philosophical origins, both Habermas and the excellence approach marginalize persuasion as inherently unethical (Pfau & Wan, 2006) and the latter relies heavily on codes to uphold these exalted standards. It is worth noting here that the approaches described so far tend to rely on rational evaluation of choices to ascertain ethical outcomes and often look to rules and codes for guidance (though this often lies in the application of philosophical ideas to professional ethics, not their origins).

While Habermas offers one source of philosophical engagement with communication ethics, McIntyre’s (1984) revival of virtue ethics offers another, which has been
embraced by the rhetorical school of public relations, also US-centered (it is rarely taught in the UK or Europe, according to Tench & Fawkes, 2005). Virtue ethics represents a major shift in its focus on character and reflection rather than regulation, suggesting a negotiation between competing virtues as an ethical process not outcome, and locating ethics in the agent not the act. Rhetorical approaches to public relations ethics often deploy aspects of virtue ethics (Baker & Martinson, 2002; Edgett, 2002; Harrison & Galloway, 2005; Pater & van Gils, 2003). Ideas of advocacy are found here, as rhetoric is less hostile to persuasion and seeks to balance multiple demands rather than perform idealized acts. Heath (2007) explores the tension between the symmetry proposed as the basis of ethics in the excellence approach and the ethical aspects of advocacy, noting Grunig’s (2001) acceptance that not all ethical dialogue can be symmetrical, or there would be no room for debate. Rather, argues Heath, ethical advocacy requires equal access to the structures and platforms of debate. Porter (2010) goes further, suggesting that ‘rhetoric provides a framework for ethical public relations’ (p128), demonstrating, like the Bowen quote above, that ethical approaches to public relations are framed by competing theoretical lenses.

However, the strongest articulation of advocacy ethics is based in marketplace theory rather than virtue ethics (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006). This model recognizes that public relations often plays a more asymmetrical or persuasive role than is encompassed by the boundary spanner, is strongly located in US jurisprudence and while it is uncritical of free market morality it does acknowledge the need for awareness of factors such as access, process, truth and disclosure (Fitzpatrick, 2006). This image of the lawyer has permeated much discussion of PR ethics despite the disparities in training, status and the very different courts of law and public opinion. It is also offered as a solution in discussion of whether it is ethical to work for tobacco, arms or oil industries – a debate which galvanizes practitioners but which is rarely raised in literature. The concept of the ‘amoral’ hired hand is powerful in practitioner discourse (see, for example, Pearce, 2012) and at odds with the ethical guardian ideals promoted by Excellence approaches (see Fawkes, 2012c for more on this tension).
New directions

All of the approaches discussed so far have their origins in western philosophy and treat ethics as normative and positivist, often with an emphasis on rationality, rules and procedures, especially in their application to professional ethics. In recent decades this position has been challenged by feminist ethics (Benhabib, 1992; Gilligan, 1982), postcolonial (Appiah, 2005) and postmodern perspectives (Bauman, 1993), among others. Moreover, the western domination of ethical thought has been challenged by the introduction of Asian ethical approaches to professional ethics (Koehn, 2001). Some of these ideas have recently made an impact on public relations ethics (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Holtzhausen, 2012) but generally these new (er) directions are rarely reflected in PR text books or chapters on ethics. There is not space to elaborate each position, but they may be very broadly summarized as rejecting rationality as the primary indicator of ethics and embracing unconscious, emotional and mixed motives, as challenging universal values based on patriarchal attitudes (and research methods) to include virtues of care and responsibility, as rejecting universal values as hegemonic and ideological and as arguing for co-construction of meaning, and hence, ethics. These approaches strongly challenge unexamined cultural assumptions about ‘good’ and ‘ethical’, though they also seek to avoid reductionist cultural relativism where ‘anything goes’.

Twenty years after Bauman’s (1993) key work, *Postmodern ethics*, Holtzhausen (2012) develops a postmodern approach to public relations ethics. The ‘Urmythos’ of codes that Kultgen (1988) refers to above is exposed as ideological, “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). Her postmodern approach to ethics usefully rejects ‘metanarratives’ such as ethical guardian or advocate, embracing instead the contradictions and complexity of contemporary practice. As she says, drawing on Bauman (1993), “The postmodern rejection of universal ethics thus focuses on the moral responsibility of the individual to the Other without an institutionally created ethical framework” (p.33). This also echoes Gilligan’s (1982) development of a feminist approach to virtue ethics based in the duty of care rather than justice and Buber’s influential I-thou concept (1957).
These approaches resonate with recent empirical work (Kang, 2010) which explores the experiential aspects of ethical conflicts in public relations, through a survey of PRSA members. Over 65% of respondents reported experiencing ethical dissonance, including being forced to be silent and being unable to challenge unethical decisions from above. Some left their organizations; others suffered a range of stress symptoms. It seems the codes were of little use as “keeping silent is regarded as proper by some public relations practitioners, while others think that it is definitely unethical” (p154). Such experiences call for a new approach to public relations ethics, moving from external codes to internal guidance. Before addressing such possibilities, it is necessary to examine how codes function in this field and compare them with the templates established by scholars of professionalism.

**Codes of ethics – the global export of excellence ideals**

Public relations codes of ethics are largely based on the excellence approaches to the field, explicitly or implicitly. Public relations codes have been studied in the US (Ki & Kim, 2010; Parkinson, 2001), Australia and New Zealand (Breit & Demetrious, 2010; Harrison & Galloway, 2005) and in a global context (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009). Parkinson (2001) suggests that the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) code of ethics is strongly influenced by the excellence model in its emphasis on symmetry and avoidance of persuasion. He argues that this in turn has influenced models exported around the world: the Global Alliance approach to ethics is broadly similar in tone and content, for example (Breit & Demetrious, 2010). Yet the absence of detailed discussion of ethics from the core excellence texts (J.E. Grunig et al., 1992; J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984) is striking: codes are presented as sufficient to handle the complex conflicts of duty which constitute real ethical debate. Moreover they are rarely used as a disciplinary tool making them doubly idealistic, not to say hypothetical, both in content and application.

As suggested earlier, Parkinson (2001) found that the PRSA professional codes were designed more to improve the reputation of the profession than to control its standards of behaviour.
PRSA has adopted "codes of ethics" which describe how public relations practitioners want to be perceived by the general public. In short the codes are neither professional nor ethical and until fundamental changes are made those who seek the status of a profession for public relations are doomed to failure. (p28)

This echoes Larson’s view that codes tell the public ‘what the profession wants to be, not what it is (1977, px) and is consistent with the critique of codes offered in chapter 4. Breit and Demetrios (2010) also report that practitioners in New Zealand support the existence of a code of conduct but rarely consult it for guidance in ethical issues. Alternatively, some public relations codes have evolved from the trait approach to professions and tend to offer definitive guidance for a range of situations, e.g. regarding confidentiality, poaching clients, conflicts of interest (Harrison and Galloway, 2005). Both Ki and Kim and Breit and Demetrios analyse professional bodies’ websites (the former also analyse public relations firms’ sites) to conduct content analysis of ethical claims. It is interesting to note that Ki and Kim (2010) found practitioners identified professional ethics with key words such as ‘expertise, strategic, dedication, hard work, accountability, independence’ (p231) not all of which can properly be described as ethical statements, though they do note the disparity between the terms claimed as ethical by practitioners, which emphasise expertise and outcomes, and the values promoted by the PRSA code of conduct, which ‘stresses social responsibility, balance and honour’. Parkinson is particularly critical of the PRSA exhortation to act in the public interest which he finds contradicts his view of public relations as essentially advocacy. This highlights the difficulties in reconciling the Excellence and advocacy approaches to ethics, alluded to earlier.

A brief scan of three codes (Global Alliance, the UK’s Chartered Institute for Public Relations and the Public Relations Institute of Australia) reveals a number of commonalities, illustrating Parkinson’s point about the global export of one perspective. Firstly, Breit and Demetrios (2010) analyse the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication (GA) website for ethical statements and find that, like so many other codes, the main narrative is promotional.
Another feature of Global Alliance Background statement is the author(s)’ intent to create a dichotomy between legitimate and illegitimate public relations practitioners: “Many non-professionals say they are in PR but their actions are damaging our reputation as a profession. We need to show our professionalism by means of Global Standards enacted by national associations” (Global Alliance/History 7/28/2009). The significant aspect of this descriptive material is the intense desire of GA to “show professionalism” in the area. The problems that beset public relations in its struggle to maintain professional status are not new. (n.p.)

However, they do not appear to have consulted other documents on the website, such as the Global Alliance Guiding Principles for the Ethical Practice of Public Relations, which starts with the preamble:

A code of ethics and professional conduct is an individual matter that should be viewed as a guide to make sound values-based decisions. Ethical performance, not principles, is ultimately what counts. No one can dictate precise outcomes for every situation. However, we can apply common values and decision-making processes to arrive at a decision and justify it to others. In making decisions, we should be guided by a higher sense of serving the public as a whole as opposed to specific constituencies on an exclusive basis. Consideration should be given to the protection of privacy of individuals and respect for the spirit as well as the letter of applicable laws (Global Alliance, 2003)

There are three points worth stressing here: a) the emphasis on ethics as a personal matter; the preference for performance over principles (which appears to disregard the idea that performance is usually informed by principle, however unexamined); and c) the exhortation to serve the public over other interests, reinforcing the confusion identified in Parkinson’s critique.

Similar issues arise in the UK CIPR code, by which members agree to:

   a) maintain the highest standards of professional endeavour, integrity, confidentiality, financial propriety and personal conduct; b) deal honestly and fairly in business with employers, employees, clients, fellow professionals, other
professions and the public; c) respect, in their dealings with other people, the legal and regulatory frameworks and codes of all countries where they practise; d) uphold the reputation of, and do nothing that would bring into disrepute, the public relations profession or the Chartered Institute of Public Relations; e) respect and abide by this Code and related Notes of Guidance issued by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and ensure that others who are accountable to them (e.g. subordinates and sub-contractors) do the same; f) encourage professional training and development among members of the profession in order to raise and maintain professional standards generally.

These are almost identical to Friedson’s (2001) typology cited above and can be summarised as: be good, be professional and protect the organisation. The detailed explication of the code follows the trait approach describing relationships between clients, issues of confidentiality etc, harking back to the early 20th century, an approach critiqued by Harrison and Galloway (2005). Interestingly, there are clauses about misrepresenting clients which, if observed, would put an end to the ‘front organisations’ or ‘astroturfing’ so regularly exposed by websites in the US and UK.

The Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) is broadly similar though more of the clauses relate to business practices regarding fees, misrepresentation and other aspects covered by the trait approach. As Harrison and Galloway (2005) suggest, this implies that practices which are not specified are acceptable, and that codes function as explicit instructions, leading to infantilised responses. Moreover, there is no sanction against those who transgress these edicts: fewer than three or four complaints a year were received by the PRSA, PRIA and Public Relations Institute of South Africa, with slightly more at the CIPR, most of which related to contractual issues between practitioners rather than societal responsibilities (Global Alliance, 2003).

**A depth approach**

All the above codes, particularly those which set out how to conduct business relationships, suggest that emphasis on best practice constitutes ethics. They also imply that ethical decisions can be made on the basis of rational evaluation of one’s own and others’ virtue in a given situation, the most common cited being honesty, fairness,
integrity. As suggested earlier there are limits to the virtue ethics approach which are not reflected in these codes; why those virtues and not others, such as Gilligan’s (1982) emphasis on care? And why are these virtues presented as unproblematic in phrases like the Arthur Page Society’s “Tell the Truth” or the Global Alliance’s “Adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of clients and employers” (Global Alliance, 2003). The only one which hints that these might be conflicted issues and turns inward comes from the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) which suggests “Be honest not only with others but also and most importantly with yourselves as individuals” (ibid). The difficulty in dealing with honesty as an absolute ethic in public relations is illustrated by the 2007 debate at Westminster University (UK) where the motion ‘PR has a duty to tell the truth’ was defeated (Goldsworthy, 2007). There, practitioners argued against honesty as an absolute truth suggesting the virtue of loyalty to client trumped it, illustrating the limitation of competing virtues as the basis for professional ethics.

All these codes and principles share a reliance on external guidance for ethical decision making. The inner dynamics of ethics have been relegated to religion or mysticism and appear to me to be wholly absent from debate. Yet, surely, it is the physical, social even spiritual experience of discomfort which prompts many of us to consider the ethical nature of our acts. Kang (2010) found practitioners who experienced ethical conflict manifested a series of physical and emotional symptoms and often changed employers to resolve their inner discomfort. One of the prime exacerbating factors was the inability to discuss ethical issues openly with management. The final section highlights one avenue for opening such debate, though scholars such as Curtin and Gaither’s (2007) circuit of culture and Pieczka’s (2010) reinterpretation of dialogue offer other approaches.

**Jungian ethics**

In Fawkes (2010) I considered public relations from a Jungian perspective, proposing that the idealisation of the excellence approach constitutes the field’s ‘persona’, or public face, while the critics emphasize the hidden or ‘shadow’ aspects of persuasion and sometimes propaganda. Jungian approaches are predicated on the concept of opposition-in-unity, as in Eastern concepts of Tao, I-Ching, yin-yang: these are divided
aspects of the whole. A Jungian ethic, as I explored there, implies the recognition that both are contained in the one psyche or group (Jungian ideas are often extrapolated to collective levels); that blaming the other perpetuates the divide and stunts moral growth. It does not seek homogeneity but homeostasis and recognizes that values will constellate differently in different cultures (see Fawkes, 2012b); what is important is the hard work of making such values and tensions conscious, allowing aspects of the whole to enter an internal dialogue through which tensions can be addressed if not reconciled. There is no fixed outcome for such ethical struggle, it is a process. A Jungian approach, therefore, seems harmonious with the cultural and post-modern approaches outlined above, with important differences: Jung does believe in universal psychic structures, which he calls archetypes, and in teleology, or purposefulness, views which are not widely shared by postmodernists.

The implications for this paper are that externalized, idealised codes of conduct represent the socialised or bourgeois norm; a Jungian ethic requires a struggle to realise one’s own nature, not to conform to the majority view. This struggle to become the self one is meant to be is called individuation and requires the subject to recognize that the aspects of other people which he or she finds most loathsome are actually shadow projections, disowned elements of the self which are forcibly attached to groups or individuals so that the subject need not confront their hidden desires. The erotic ambiguity of the homophobe is one example in individuals; the casting of race, gender, sexuality, disability or other group identity as Other illustrates how this works on a larger scale. In terms of ethics, this is where the ‘bad apples’ come from, those few irresponsible practitioners who give PR, banking, the clergy such a bad name.

Individuation requires the development of a mature approach, in which the individual or group owns these dissociated elements and starts asking questions like: what actions in the individual/organisation/profession have created a culture where such behavior is seen as acceptable? Are we susceptible to particular temptations which have been denied rather than engaged with critically? So, groups dealing with financial transactions might heighten their awareness of fiscal irresponsibility and the desire to transgress; groups dealing with the vulnerable might reflect on the danger of abusing their powers and so on. In the public relations field, my sense is that we want things to
be better, to emphasize the positive, to stress the ideal over the real. The temptation is to believe our own propaganda and blame those who don’t for their ‘cynicism’. Like all such denials, it becomes a block to dialogue. Codes thus embody that denial and act as obstacles to ethical dialogue.

The key argument presented here for embarking on such a dialogue is the concept that through this process a new professional ethic can emerge. A Jungian ethic would not lead to a new code of conduct, nor even a decision-making model, though there might be some similarities. I imagine a set of questions along the lines of

*For individual practitioners*

- Am I comfortable with this decision? If not, why not? It is because my pride/self-image/security is threatened or do I fear harm will come from it?
- Am I prepared to raise this discomfort? If not, why not? Am I in a position of power or powerlessness? Am I abusing that position/abdicing responsibility?
- Who do I blame for ethical failures? What does this say about me?
- Is there a ‘safe’ forum for expressing doubts? If not why not?

*For PR as a whole*

- Might the professional body provide a safe forum?
- How invested is it in protecting the image rather than changing the reality?
- What do the ‘bad apples’ tell us about the profession as a whole?
- How can we raise issues of wider ethical concern?

Individual and collective ethical dialogue would offer a release of the tension between the idealised self-image underpinning the promotional aspects of the professional body and its codes of conduct and the actual experience of ethics in the workplace. Instead of the contempt for those trumpeting impossible ideals, on the one hand, and the ‘disappointment’ of those upholding such ideas, on the other, as evidenced in the Westminster debate, a new ethic would recognise the reality of both as aspects of the whole. A Jungian approach would mean shifting away from rationality and certainty and becoming prepared to live with internal conflict for a period, both in the group and the member. Thus, an ethical approach starts with the recognition of conflict as an
essential human experience, rather than looking to codes of ethics as means of avoiding conflict. To repeat one of Jung’s comments on individuation as an ethical process,

If a man is endowed with an ethical sense and is convinced of the sanctity of ethical values, he is on the surest road to a conflict of duty. And although this looks desperately like a moral catastrophe, it alone makes possible a higher differentiation of ethics and a broadening of consciousness. A conflict of duty forces us to examine our conscience and thereby to discover the shadow. This then forces us to come to terms with the unconscious (Jung 1949/1990, p17).

**Conclusion**

In the case of public relations, the professional bodies in the Anglo-American sphere have been largely promotional, speaking up for the ‘community of practice’ and extolling members’ virtues and contribution to society. Economically, they must be seen to be acting in the interests of members in order to maintain existing membership and attract new members. At the same time they must reinforce the claim to be treated with respect by society by stressing what Kultgen calls the ‘ur-mythos of the... professional’s service to humanity’ (1988, p120). Codes of ethics are seen as embodying this claim but the paper concluded they are primarily of reputational purpose, in professions generally and public relations in particular.

The paper suggests that public relations texts are over reliant on outdated approaches to ethics and have not yet engaged seriously with emerging ideas from non-Western, non-rational perspectives. The emphasis on codes generated by the Excellence approach, which has influenced global ethics in public relations, was seen as inadequate to address the ethical needs of practitioners.

In this perspective, ethics is seen more as a process than a series of behaviours, a way of describing relationships with others and with oneself. Most approaches to PR ethics imply a rational evaluation of ethical choices, though newer approaches such as those found in cultural and postmodern ethics reflect a more fluid, nuanced concept of ethical agents. It is these newer ideas which resonate with a Jungian idea of ethics, which also rejects social convention as a moral arbiter but still seeks some kind of universal meaning. A Jungian ethic argues that dualistic right/wrong, good/bad binaries must be
abandoned if ethical self-appraisal is to be honest. Dialectic gives way to dialogic – including internal dialogue with different aspects of the self, allowing for mixed motives and self-delusion in ethical decision-making. Rules will not suffice; one must look inwards not outwards for ethical guidance, suggesting a depth approach for opening deeper dialogue within individuals and, more importantly, the profession as a whole.
References


