



Moral development in public relations: Measuring duty to society in strategic communication

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study employed an online version of the Defining Issues Test (DIT) [Rest, J. R. (1979). *Development in judging moral issues*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press] to gather data on the ethical decision-making process patterns of 113, U.S.-based public relations practitioners. The DIT is an instrument based on Kohlberg's [Kohlberg, L. (1969) *State and sequence: The cognitive-developmental approach to socialization*. In: E. Goslin, (Ed.) *Handbook of socialization: Theory and research*. Chicago: Rand McNally] moral development theory, a proven measure of ethical reasoning across dozens of professions. Results show that levels of moral development in public relations significantly differ based on job segment. While corporate and agency practitioners reasoned about their ethics in a statistically similar fashion, these two groups differed substantially from their academic-based counterparts.

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1. Introduction

On a fundamental level, public relations scholars and practitioners traditionally define ethical conduct as one that simultaneously satisfies three distinct duties: duty to self, client and society (Wilcox & Cameron, 2007). Seib and Fitpatrick (2006) expanded upon these duties to include employer and profession, two additional obligations intended to address a growing field and the realities of globalization (Fitzgerald & Spagnolia, 1999).

With a global marketplace comes increased ethical challenges. The stakes arguably reside at unprecedented levels for strategic communicators, as the aftershocks of an ethical mishap now resonate both worldwide and synchronously (Lieber, 2005). For an increasing number of public relations practitioners, nearly every communications decision potentially carries with it enormous global consequences (Hatcher, 2002). Such consequences require the ethical standards simultaneously capable of maintaining global public relationships (Gower, 2003) plus the delicate balance of duties outlined above.

Existing standards (e.g. Grunig's (1992) two-way symmetrical model, Barney and Black's (1994) attorney-adversary model), however, offer little guidance in understanding the actual processes of modern public relations and/or insight on decision-making patterns of the field's practitioners. These standards are typically normative, holistic benchmarks arguably based more in moral philosophy than practice. It is for this reason that ethical research analyzing alternative approaches (moral reasoning and development, cognitive processes) and fields (journalism, psychology, sociology, accounting, etc.) should be explored (Cabot, 2006).

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2. Literature review

Arguably the most well known and cited of existing public relations standards is the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)'s Code of Ethics. The Code's first iteration appeared in December 1950, its contents continuously revised over the next half-century in-line with the changing roles of the field's practitioners. The PRSA Code "emphasiz[es] serving the public interest; avoiding misrepresentations to clients, employers and others; and the continuing development of public relations practitioners" (Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Codes akin to PRSA's, Huang (2001) suggested, are crucial for public relations to be granted status as bona-fide profession. The PRSA Code, however, contains no formal means of enforcement (PRSA, 2008). Without punitive measures, code enforcement falls upon the shoulders of individual practitioners guided by subjective, ethical self-standards (Wright, 1993).

While The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Code of Ethics – adopted in 1976 and modified in 1985 – does possess enforcement and sanction methods. These methods, however, are likewise non-disciplinary (e.g. membership revocation) (IABC, 2008). Enforcement is intended only to serve informational and educational purposes (Briggs & Bernal, 1992).

Further complicating code formation is the deceptively difficulty challenge of defining 'ethical' practice across international systems. Collectivist cultures shun codes requiring individual practitioners to finger each other out for violations (Weaver, 2001). Similarly among many European-based systems, where ethics are considered private versus public realm issues (Polazzo, 2002). Related, authoritarian countries might perceive ethical codes as something often to work around versus adhere to (Husted, 2002).

Lieber (2005) attempted to address these shortcomings via exploratory, quantitative analysis of Baker and Martinson's (2001) TARES test of ethical considerations for public relations practitioners. This analysis – while statistically significant for its sampled U.S. practitioners – requires international data before true cross-cultural applicability could be argued.

3. Using moral development to explain ethics

Moral development theory avoids these pitfalls by placing an ethical premium on process versus standard. While its application to public relations is limited to Cabot's (2006) singular analysis of undergraduates, moral development theory has proven popular in explaining disparate job settings and nuances across dozens of other fields. There are over 400 published studies on Rest's (1979) Defining Issues Test (DIT) of moral development—a pencil and paper representation of Kohlberg's (1969) moral development theory. These studies encompass a wide range of disciplines (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999), including four in journalism alone (Coleman, 2003; Coleman & Wilkins, 2002; Goree, 2000; Westbrook, 1995).

Kohlberg (1969) discovered six stages of moral development among his sampled Harvard undergraduates. These stages were divided into three primary levels, consisting of two stages apiece. The first level, which Kohlberg labeled "preconventional," represents thought processes specifically related to one's own welfare. A preconventional mind adheres to rules and obeys authority strictly because of punishment or reward. This punishment–reward dichotomy determines standards of what is ultimately perceived as either "right" or "wrong."

The second level, the "conventional," defines morality as conforming to the expectations of a given society. Unlike the preconventional level, rules and authority are accepted under a notion of "doing one's duty," in performing actions that benefit all of society. Maintenance of social order is considered the highest priority in this level.

"Postconventional," the third and highest level of Kohlberg's six stages, classifies universal, shared principles as what ultimately guides moral reasoning. Standards of morality are defined by acting in accordance with communal, societal standards. These standards are inherent by nature, based on personal conscience guided by thought and judgment.

Gilligan (1982), however, criticized Kohlberg's research as being biased against women and argued that his findings did not allow for differing developmental patterns based on gender. Women, she stated, develop in an environment where more emphasis is placed on caring for others. In response to Gilligan's assertions, Kohlberg expanded his concepts of moral development. The postconventional stage was re-conceptualized to include an ethic of care. In a public relations field majority staffed by women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), this is an important research distinction.

Minnesota psychologist Rest (1983, 1979) furthered Kohlberg's work via quantification. Rest's "Defining Issues Test" presents six ethical dilemmas accompanied by twelve ranked statements. Respondents are instructed to answer these statements according to each one's perceived levels of importance in helping reach an ethical decision about the presented dilemma. The score obtained from these rankings, a *P*-index, is considered a reflection of moral development. As mentioned earlier, public relations practitioners have never been tested via the DIT.

4. Motives for research

The primary goal of this exploratory study was to collect quantitative data on the ethical decision-making of practicing public relations practitioners via a measure and method proven useful in a similar capacity for dozens of other fields. Such data would advance existing public relations theory by providing baseline information on industry moral development on individual process levels while yielding a potential alternative to existing, normative ethical models. Finally, by controlling for job setting (agency vs. corporate vs. government/public affairs vs. solo practitioner/consultant vs. academic), potentially unique aspects of industry ethics would be simultaneously explored.

5. Research questions and hypotheses

RQ1: What is the mean level of moral development among public relations practitioners?

RQ2: Are variables identified as significantly correlated with moral development in other fields significant predictors for public relations?

RH1: There are significant differences in moral development among public relations practitioners based on job setting (agency vs. corporate vs. solo practitioner/consultant vs. government/public affairs vs. academia).

6. Methodology

6.1. Research design

This study employed an online version of Rest's Defining Issues Test. The DIT presents six ethical dilemmas accompanied by twelve statements. Four of the dilemmas in this study originate from the original DIT ("Heinz and the Drug," "Prisoner," "Doctor" and "Newspaper"), are included in all versions of the test (Rest, 1979). The DIT allows for the inclusion of two additional dilemmas; in this instance they are public relations-specific ("Cookies" = the use of spyware-like cookies in a marketing campaign, and "Client" = servicing a controversial client) (see Appendix A).

While the test provides leeway to include these additional dilemmas, they are required to theoretically mirror the four "baseline" dilemmas in design. First, the added dilemmas should be true "dilemmas," in that there is no "right" or "wrong" course of action. Both of the public relations-specific dilemmas were pretested to satisfy this requirement. Second, the 12 individually ranked statements must reflect the moral development stages (2–6) suggested by Kohlberg, with at least 3 or 4 of these statements, per dilemma, based on the "highest order" stages of 5 and 6. These stages represent the following, from lowest to highest:

- (a) Stage 2—considerations focusing directly on potential advantages to the actor him/herself, and on the basic premise of fairness associated with exchange of favors,
- (b) Stage 3—considerations focusing on the good or evil intentions of those involved as well as the importance of maintaining positive relationships, friendships and approval within them,
- (c) Stage 4—considerations focusing on the maintenance of the existing legal system, roles, and formal organizational structure,
- (d) Stage 5A—considerations focusing on the organization of society via appeal to consensus-producing procedures (abiding by majority vote), insisting on "due process," as well as protecting minimal, basic rights,
- (e) Stage 5B/6—considerations focusing on the structure of social arrangements and relationships based on universally appealing concepts.

Respondents are instructed to rank the 12 statements according to each one's perceived level of importance in helping reach a decision about the presented dilemma. The statements were ranked on a 5-point scale of "Great," "Much," "Little," "Some" and "None."

The score obtained from these rankings, a *P*-index, is considered a reflection of moral development, specifically, the relative importance an individual assigns to decisions rooted in these principles. The levels serve as a manifestation of the postconventional: Kohlberg's highest stage of moral development.

To assure validity in ranking, the DIT includes a consistency check between rating and ranking to defend against random responses by the test's participants. There is an expectation that the four rating statements indicated as "most important" through "fourth most important" will be mirrored by statement rankings as having a "Great," "Much" or "Some" impact on the dilemma decision. If a pattern of inconsistency emerges between these two across multiple dilemmas, offending subjects are removed. Additionally, the test contains a number of "meaningless" questions, intended to sound impressive in presentation but holding no actual purpose. If a respondent selects answers simply based on assumed complexity versus actual meaning, the individual questionnaire is discarded. Reliability for the DIT is high, with a Cronbach's alpha score in the upper .70s and low .80s. Test re-test reliability holds similar numbers.

6.2. Survey administration

The target pool for this study was a convenience sample of public relations practitioners across the United States, with responses from 116 individuals. While this number may appear small, most studies containing the DIT employed a similar, relatively small subject pool of 50–100 respondents (Coleman & Wilkins, 2002). Moreover, this study was intended as exploratory; a sister goal was to encourage follow-up, random sampling analysis and/or further research on comparative public relations systems and/or job settings.

The use of a convenience sample is commonplace in DIT studies. This form of subject acquisition was appropriate since the study adhered to three necessary conditions justifying its usage (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). First, that the material being studied – ethical development – is difficult to obtain. Second, the ability to generate a truly random sample across multiple

public relations job sectors and via the Web is limited at best. Third, while an important topic for the public relations sector, it remains under-researched. This is the first application of the DIT to public relations practitioners.

Subjects were solicited either via personal, direct email solicitation, organization-wide solicitation, email listserv distribution or through “viral marketing” – word-of-mouth referrals – by already solicited individuals. Direct email solicited participants consisted of public relations practitioners across the United States as well as faculty at academic institutions that specialize in public relations research and/or instruction. Approximately 100 individuals were contacted via this method.

Response rate for this study was difficult to discern based on the characteristics of such solicitation methods. Email listservs are not only updated by the minute as members subscribe and unsubscribe, they are also confidential. Additionally, many current email programs filter out “group” email such as these as “junk mail,” eliminating the message before it ever has a chance to reach a target respondent’s email inbox.

6.3. Instrument design

Values were assigned for the six dilemmas. A decision to take action was coded a “1,” “2” for undecided, and “3” for “can’t decide.” Responses left blank were coded as “cannot decide.” The 12 statements per dilemma indicating their importance in influencing the overall decision were coded as “5” for “Great,” “4” for “Much,” “3” for “Some,” “2” for “Little,” and “1” for “None.”

At the conclusion of each dilemma, respondents were instructed to rank four of these 12 statements as “most important,” “second most important,” “third most important” and “fourth most important.” Variables for these rankings correspond to the statement numbers selected to fill these four designations.

In order to test the validity of the statements written by the author to represent stages 5 and 6 of Kohlberg’s Moral Development scale, bivariate correlations were performed. If all six dilemmas are consistently measuring the same theoretical constructs, significant correlations are expected between stage 5 and 6 questions from each dilemma and those from at least two other dilemmas. These correlations were produced by this study.

The level of moral development, or *P*-index, was calculated using the following method:

- (a) A review of the four statements per dilemma indicated as “most important,” “second most important,” “third most important” and “fourth most important.”
- (b) If a stage 5 or 6 statement was selected under one of these four designations, they were assigned the following values: most important = 4, second most important = 3, third most important = 2, fourth most important = 1. These values were summed together for each dilemma, for all six dilemmas for a range of 0–10.
- (c) The total summed score was divided by the number of dilemmas—in this instance, six. This quotient, multiplied by 10, is considered an individual’s level of moral development or *P*-index.

Study responses appeared in a digital format consisting of eight individual databases per subject. The databases were combined to create a single database file. In the interest of maintaining confidentiality, respondents were identified across all eight databases only by IP address. Individual IP addresses were cross-compared to ensure that each respondent sufficiently completed the study from start to finish. Incomplete surveys were removed from the subject pool. This initial step of data purging reduced the response rate from 175 to 131 individuals.

As discussed earlier, the DIT includes a number of consistency checks for responses. Participants that failed these checks and/or did not complete sections sufficiently were removed. This second step of data purging reduced the sample from 131 to 116 respondents.

Mean substitution was performed where appropriate. No more than 3% of the statement rankings accompanying individual dilemmas were mean substituted. Similarly, maximum mean substitution for the variables of age was 7%, location 3%, and gender and race 1% each. Time spent (seniority) in public relations required a mean substitution of 14.6%. Early technical difficulties associated with this particular variable prevented it from coding properly. While this error was quickly located and corrected, respondents affected by this technical glitch nevertheless required mean substitution.

6.4. Respondent characteristics

Of the sample of 116, 64% were female, 36% male. Age ranged from 22 to 67 years, with a mean of 42 years old. Racial makeup of the 116 respondents was 91% white, 4% black, 2% mixed, with 3% identifying themselves as “other.” Forty-eight percent possessed a graduate degree, 22% had taken some graduate courses, 28% obtained only a bachelor’s degree, and 3% attended some college and/or attained a high school diploma.

In-line with [Department of Labor \(2003\)](#) findings that ex-journalists are actively sought to staff public relations positions, 40% of the 116 sampled came to public relations with an employment background in journalism. Nineteen percent of the respondents worked in an agency setting, 36% for corporations, 6% operated as solo practitioners or consultants, 8% served in a government or public affairs environment, and 32% were from academia. Individuals were placed into these categories based on self-identified job title. Participants tended to be more experienced, with 75% of respondents serving a minimum of 6 years in the field (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1
Years experience in public relations

| Years experience | Percentage of respondents (rounded) |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Less than 1 | 9 |
| 1–5 | 16 |
| 6–10 | 31 |
| 10–15 | 14 |
| 15–20 | 9 |
| 20+ | 22 |

Table 2
Mean *p* scores for individual dilemmas

| Dilemma | Mean <i>p</i> |
|-----------|---------------|
| Heinz | 4.86 |
| Prisoner | 4.35 |
| Doctor | 5.91 |
| Newspaper | 5.05 |
| Client | 5.78 |
| Cookies | 4.29 |

Table 3
Mean *p* scores for individual job settings

| Dilemma | Mean <i>p</i> |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| Agency <i>n</i> = 20 | 39.5 |
| Corporate <i>n</i> = 39 | 39.8 |
| Solo/consultant <i>n</i> = 6 | 52.2 |
| Govt./public affairs <i>n</i> = 9 | 47.7 |
| Education <i>n</i> = 34 | 49.3 |

Twenty-three percent of the 116 originated from the Midwestern United States, 22% from the South, 22% from the Southeast, 13% from the Northwest, and 10% from both the Northeast and Southwestern United States.

7. Testing the research questions

RQ1: What is the mean level of moral development among public relations practitioners?

On the Defining Issues Test, the score that constitutes moral development is the *P*-index, often referred to as the *p* score. The mean *p* score for the 116 public relations respondents was 45.41 (S.D. = 13.18), with a score range of 8.33–73.33.

In a mega, combined sample of 45,856 DIT's taken between 1989 and 1993, the mean *P*-index score was 39.1 (S.D. = 14.84), with data approximately normally distributed ranging from 0 to 91 (Rest et al., 1999).

Individual analyses were conducted on the six dilemmas and the *p* scores obtained for each of them. The “Heinz and the Drug” dilemma produced a mean of 4.86, the “Doctor” dilemma 5.91, “Prisoner” 4.35, and “Newspaper” 5.05. The public relations-specific “Cookies” and “Client” dilemmas yielded averages of 5.78 and 4.29 (see Table 2).

RQ2: Are variables identified as important in predicting moral development in other fields significant predictors for public relations?

Correlations were performed between overall *p* scores and the variables of age, gender, and education. No significance was found between any of these variables and moral development levels.

RH1: There are significant differences in moral development among public relations practitioners based on job setting (agency vs. corporate vs. solo practitioner/consultant vs. government/public affairs vs. academia).

Mean *p* scores for individual job setting groups were 39.5 (S.D. = 3.05) for agency practitioners, 39.8 (S.D. = 2.78) for corporate practitioners, 52.2 (S.D. = 4.98) for solo practitioners/consultants, 47.7 (S.D. = 4.31) for government/public affairs practitioners, and 49.3 (S.D. = 2.80) for individuals in academia (see Table 3).

With moral development levels for agency and corporate-based practitioners nearly identical, both groups were combined to create a new job setting variable. This decision was made both for statistical reasons combined with the two groups possessing similar, on-the-job requirements.

Correlating the original job setting variable (of separate groups for these two environments) with the new, grouped entity yielded a powerful .972 correlation, significant at the $p < .01$ level. A Levene's Test of heterogeneity of variance was .430, indicating normal variability between groups using this new variable.

A follow-up ANOVA was conducted accompanied by a Tukey HSD procedure to determine which of these job-setting groups were significantly different from one another based on *p* scores (see Table 4). Significant differences in moral development levels between agency/corporate and academic practitioners were found, with academic practitioners scoring higher in this category.

Table 4
ANOVA of job setting and *p* score *n* = 68

| Source | Type III SS | MS | d.f. | <i>F</i> |
|-------------|-------------|--------|------|----------|
| Job setting | 1694.693 | 564.99 | 13 | 3.86* |
| Error | 9365.111 | 146.33 | 64 | |
| Total | 145183.333 | | 68 | |

**p* < .05 (two-tailed).

Researcher selection of a parametric statistic for a smaller-size, convenience sample was based on guidance from the DIT manual: “If the purpose of your study is to compare two or more groups on moral judgment, then computing average *P*% or *D* scores for each group and running *t* tests or ANOVA tests is appropriate” (Center for the Study of Ethical Development, 1990).

8. Discussion

This study yielded tangible data that a duty to society rationale is, in fact, a part of everyday public relations. With a combined *p* score (45.41) solidly above the mean of other vocations and groups (Rest et al., 1999), these findings are a first step in quantitative evidence of the fundamental duties (Seib & Fitpatrick, 2006; Wilcox & Cameron, 2007) seen as stalwarts of the field. Moreover, with a *p* score well above Cabot’s (2006) sampled public relations undergraduates, ethical reasoning appears to build in tandem with job tenure.

While the majority of the analyzed variables failed to yield significant associations with practitioner *p* scores, a handful of key findings emerged—data useful to advancing industry theory. Moreover, these findings are a decent starting point for follow-up random or systems-level, public relations DIT sampling.

For this sample, job setting emerged as a potentially key variable. Agency and corporate practitioners comprise the majority of the vocation and likewise this sample (54%). Although with different job settings and client expectations, both groups reasoned about their postconventional duties in near-identical fashion. A devil’s advocate might expect global business realities to force in-house practitioners to sacrifice duty to society for allegiance to their sole client and paycheck. Similarly, agency practitioners – in a high turnover, billable environment of servicing multiple clients simultaneously – could potentially sacrifice postconventional justifications for preconventional, duty to self-responsibilities of survival.

Comparing these individuals with other public relations job settings produced results resembling DIT studies from other fields. In specific, educational levels indirectly correlated to greater *p* scores (Rest, 1986) through its relationship to job setting. Higher *p* scores for sampled academics likely stemmed directly from this variable; most possess a graduate degree versus their agency/corporate counterparts whom, on average, possessed a bachelor’s degree alone.

A careful distinction should be noted, however, that a higher *p* scores equates only toward a preference for postconventional reasoning (Rest, 1986). Fields scoring highest in the DIT mega sample (Rest et al., 1999) might be postconventional in job description alone (i.e. medical doctors). Moreover, public relations academics do not exist on an island; a wide number have a hand in actual practice either via part time or consulting roles. Thus, wide-sweeping, *p* score job setting distinctions should be made only with caution.

9. Limitations of the study

While placing the study online allowed for a cost-effective and widespread reach to potential respondents – the positives of this medium – it also had its drawbacks. Response rates were difficult to discern based on the technological limitations outlined earlier.

The results of this study should also be viewed with caution before considering them as a benchmark for the public relations industry as a whole and/or a comparison to other vocations. Alluded to above, the stages identified by Kohlberg (1969) and Rest (1986) as most important – the postconventional – may not be viewed as such by all who complete the test. Related, while this study adhered to rules established by the DIT that allow for two custom dilemmas, stage assignment – even with the multiple pilot tests and consistency checks – still have room for Type 1 error.

Third, akin to any self-reported study, there is no way to perfectly gauge the concept/s being analyzed. Despite a discovery of significant associations and correlations, this study does not come with a guarantee that a participant’s response on ethical dilemmas and statements is indicative of how they react on the job.

Finally, being an exploratory study, participants were drawn from a convenience versus probability sample. Therefore, the variability of the statistics in this study cannot truly be estimated without a follow-up random sampling.

10. Conclusions

While research and dialog on ethics seems commonplace for today’s public relations, it is important to note that such efforts remain neophyte at best. Only recently have decades old industry codes transitioned to ethics being centerpieces in both public relations practice and curricula. With public relations’ biggest days of growth and maturation arguably still

to come, future ethical research is essential to better understand the field. Especially in a now global public relations environment where generalized ethical standards and codes no longer apply. Applying proven measures and theory from other fields to public relations is one such solution. Moral development theory is an ideal supplement to industry standards for duty, the DIT a terrific lesson plan in both undergraduate and graduate public relations education.

This research likewise needs to extend its reach. Logical next steps include: (a) a cross-cultural, DIT study that begins to address the global realities of the vocation; (b) qualitative interviews to illuminate cultural nuances; (c) accompanying ethical instruments to highlight contrasting definitions of ethical norms; and (d) additional variables of analysis to better explain the industry.

Appendix A. Additional public relations dilemmas

A.1. Client dilemma

A small Latin American country is trying to gain popular support across the United States for its new democratic government and policies. Believing this support will help in gaining entry into the U.S. marketplace and the much-needed revenue to help build its infrastructure, the country turns to public relations for help.

The country is also under scrutiny for accusations of human rights violations and has been reprimanded in the past for similar actions.

Espen-Rogers Communications, a large global public relations firm based in the United States, is approached by this Latin American country, asking to be taken on as a client. Should the firm agree to service this client?

A.2. “Cookies” dilemma

Kelly Smith, Public Relations Manager at a leading car company, is about to launch a new marketing campaign. As part of the campaign, she has been asked by her supervisor to consider using “cookies”—files that secretly track a person’s Internet browsing habits. These cookies contain very detailed, personal information about these individuals, knowledge that would then be used to market the car to them by email.

Using cookies in marketing campaigns is both legal and a common practice. Consumers groups, however, have been strongly outspoken against marketers using cookies, accusing them of intentionally invading a person’s privacy just to sell products. Bad publicity has resulted.

Knowing that some of the competition is already using cookies in their marketing campaigns, should Kelly follow suit? Or, afraid of possible repercussions to both her company’s image and personal job security, kill the campaign it before it starts?

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