

The Moral Development of Public Relations Practitioners: A Comparison With Other Professions and Influences on Higher Quality Ethical Reasoning

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This study gathered baseline data on the moral development of 118 public relations professionals. The respondents scored 7th highest among all professionals tested. They performed significantly better when the ethical dilemmas were about public relations issues than when they were not, indicating domain expertise on ethical issues. No significant differences were found between men and women, or managers and nonmanagers. There were significant correlations between moral reasoning and several variables including political ideology and fundamental/liberal religious views.

The entire mass communication industry, including public relations, advertising, and journalism, has been occupied with its own ethics movement—college ethics courses have tripled; ethics is a staple at annual conferences and in academic and professional literature (Lambeth, 1998). Moral development is defined as how people’s thoughts about ethical issues change over time, partly in response to the development of other portions of the individual—for example, the intellect—and partly in response to the environment.

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Instruments that measure moral development have been administered to tens of thousands whose professions require them to make moral choices, including doctors, nurses, dentists, accountants, military personnel (Rest, Bebeau, Narvaez, & Thoma, 1999), and myriad others, including journalists (Coleman & Wilkins, 2004) and advertising professionals (Cunningham, 2005)—but not public relations professionals. This study helps fill that void by gathering baseline data on a national sample of 118 public relations professionals to compare them to others and to discover what correlates with high quality ethical reasoning in this population.

This project is the first to empirically measure the moral development of working public relations professionals. Others have relied on anecdotes (Lukaszewski & Frause, 2002), case studies (Curtin & Boynton, 2001; Patterson & Wilkins, 2005), and normative theory (Baker & Martinson, 2002; Bivins, 2004; Bowen, 2004a; David, 2004; J. E. Grunig, 2001; Leeper, 1996). There has been no attempt to gather empirical data systematically (Wright, 1985) and profession-wide, although there has been some preliminary exploration of moral development in public relations students (Cabot, 2005).

The ethical choices public relations professionals make are crucial to the profession's credibility. With specific information about the influences that significantly correlate with higher levels of moral development in public relations professionals, scholars can focus their efforts on those factors that appear to have the most impact. By expanding on existing understandings of professional ethical reasoning, the results can inform the teaching of public relations at the university level (C. A. Pratt & Rentner, 1989) and add to a growing body of work on moral development that has implications for psychology and philosophy (Audi, 2003; Wilkins & Coleman, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory

The study of moral development began with the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1932/1965), who theorized that moral development occurred in hierarchical stages. He studied boys playing marbles and found the way stations of moral growth. As the boys aged, their understanding of rules changed according to a pattern. Younger children were aware of a codified set of rules but played individually. The rules themselves were sacred, emanated from authority figures, lasted forever, and applied to all—absolutely. In later stages, the boys internalized the rules and the reasons for them. They assumed responsibility not only for following the rules, but for making sure the spirit of the rule was followed, too. This paralleled Rawls' (1971)

concept of distributive justice and its principles of maximizing liberty and protecting weaker parties.

Piaget (1932/1965) inaugurated the idea that moral development proceeds in stages and others followed, including Kohlberg (1981, 1984), who applied Piaget's framework to Harvard undergraduates and concluded moral development moved through six hierarchical stages—three main stages of moral development, each of which could be subdivided into two parts. The stages ranged from idiosyncratic, through self interest, to conformity to group norms and social expectations, and finally to the application of universal principles. Kohlberg's formulation focused on rights and justice, and was criticized by Gilligan (1982) because women systematically scored lower than men on Kohlberg's test. Her study of women making moral choices about abortion uncovered the idea that moral weight should be given to caring for others. She suggested that the moral adult was the person who could reason about both rights and connections or relationships to others. Kohlberg revised his framework to include an ethic of care along with his rights-based reasoning; since then, women and men have scored about the same (Thoma, 1986).

Piaget (1932/1965), Kohlberg (1981, 1984), Gilligan (1982), and others had all studied moral development by observing people or interviewing them in depth. Although their data were rich, they were hard to analyze and limited by small samples. It wasn't until a paper-and-pencil test measuring moral development was invented that research expanded. Rest (1979) used Kohlberg's framework as the basis for his test that was subsequently found to be both a valid and reliable measure of individual moral development. The instrument, called the Defining Issues Test (DIT), results in a *P score* measuring the percentage of time that people use universal principles in their reasoning. A *P score* of 40 means the highest stage is used about 40% of the time, with lower stages being used 60%. Rest and colleagues (Rest, 1979, 1986; Rest et al., 1999) also reconceptualized Kohlberg's idea of hard-and-fast stages using schema theory. Schemas, which are expectations about the ways events usually unfold, are developed through previous interactions (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). People also hold schemas for ethical problems that they use when making decisions about new dilemmas (Rest et al., 1999). Rest and colleagues theorized that schemas activate understandings from long-term memory to help people process new information. If a person has acquired a schema for the highest stage of ethical reasoning, statements at that stage on the DIT will activate those schemas; otherwise lower stage schemas are used. Rather than being "in" one discreet stage or another, Rest and colleagues (1999) theorized that people are primarily in one stage, but can use ethical reasoning from lower or higher stages as well. Rather than a staircase with steps, moral development is seen as a shifting distribution.

When analyzing results from the DIT and interpreting them in light of work by Kohlberg (1981, 1984), Rest (1999) developed three moral schemas that parallel the stages of moral development outlined in Kohlberg's work. They range from less to more sophisticated, from more self-focused to more universal.

Kohlberg (1981, 1984) called the lowest level of moral development the pre-conventional stage; Rest's (1999) reconceptualization of the stages as schemas resulted in it being renamed the personal interest schema. This level of moral development is defined by simple obedience to the rules, and then the emergence of self interest; in other words, following the rules primarily when it is in one's own interest. People who use the personal interest schema make moral decisions based on reasons that emphasize self-interest and punishment for wrongdoing. In the latter half of this stage or schema, reciprocity and fairness begin to emerge in a self-serving way. At the next level, the maintaining norms schema, in Rest's (1999) terminology or conventional stage in Kohlberg's (1981, 1984), reasoning focuses on conforming to preexisting rules and norms. Authority here is vested in the social group(s) to which the individual belongs. The second half of this stage includes the notion of social systems, or doing what is expected to maintain social order. Thinking at this stage acknowledges the role of duty. Research suggests that most people operate at this level of moral development most of the time (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984). Finally, the third stage of moral development, which both Kohlberg and Rest call post-conventional (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984; Rest, 1999), places universal principles at the forefront. People who use this schema are concerned about the reason for the rules and are willing to challenge both social norms and self interest for a more universal understanding. At this level, there is an awareness of the process by which rules are arrived at, as well as the content of the rules. In this stage's first half, people are aware of concepts such as a social contract that demands citizens uphold laws even if they are not in an individual's immediate, short-term interest. Thinking at this stage includes understanding that some rights are beyond debate, for example, life and liberty. The second half of the postconventional level is characterized by the adoption of universal ethical principles that guide choice even if laws are violated. Those at this stage had internalized such principles and applied them evenhandedly.

Empirical Evidence

The DIT has been administered to more than 30,000 people in more than 400 published scholarly studies and books. The test derives important explanatory power through comparisons: one profession compared to others;

subgroups within professions compared to others. Empirical work using the DIT (Rest, 1986; Rest et al., 1999) has found that moral development is influenced by education and a variety of other internal and external factors. This study also tests these influences on this group of public relations professionals. Among the most significant are:

- Women and men score equally well on the DIT (Rest, 1979; Thoma, 1986). In some studies, women have scored somewhat higher than men. The fact that both genders score equally in moral development measured this way obviates one of the consistent problems in Kohlberg's (1981, 1984) work, the fact that men tended to score higher than women using Kohlberg's in-depth interviewing methodology. The DIT carries with it no such bias.
- Education, but not necessarily specific instruction in ethics, also promotes moral growth (Rest, 1979, 1993; White, Bushnell, & Regnemer, 1978). In general, the more education a person has, the higher he or she is likely to score on the DIT. This finding helps to explain why professions that require extensive education, such as seminarians or medical doctors, tend to score higher than those with less education, such as undergraduates or adults in general. Level of education is a better predictor of DIT score than age, although some levels of education are not complete until people reach a certain age.
- Religion, as reported by participants themselves, has a negative effect on DIT scores. More fundamental or conservative religious beliefs have been correlated with lower levels of moral development in numerous studies (Lawrence, 1978; Parker, 1990; Rest, 1979, 1983, 1986). Similarly, Glock and Stark (1996) found that orthodox Christian beliefs were highly correlated with social intolerance, and Ellis' (1986) work led to the conclusion that religiosity leads to an extreme disregard for the rights of others. Participants who characterize themselves as fundamentalist, regardless of specific faith, tend to score lower on the test. This finding, which is consistent across many studies, at first seems counterintuitive. Some scholars theorize that a higher ethical orientation requires critical and evaluative reasoning that may be opposed to fundamental religious beliefs, particularly the sanctity of rules (Parker, 1990). Good ethical thinking requires critical analysis of the rules themselves.
- Political ideology: Because it is based on the work of Kohlberg (1981, 1984), and hence emphasizes rights and universal principles, the DIT is a measure of what philosophers call *social ethics*. Because of this intellectual backbone for the test, participants who characterize themselves as more liberal, as opposed to more conservative, politically tend to

score higher. This finding is consistent across several decades of American political history (Rest et al., 1999).

- Professional Organizations: Moral judgment development is correlated with peer interaction such as participation in clubs and special activity groups, and service in leadership roles (Harris, Mussen, & Rutherford, 1976; Keasey, 1971). Much of this work has been done with children, rather than adults, so these findings may not hold.
- Autonomy also is a crucial variable in Kohlberg's (1981) theory; it is important for individuals to feel autonomous to attain the postconventional stage of moral development. McNeel's (1994) data suggest that choice, a construct related to autonomy, is important in moral growth.

Empirical Evidence of Media Professionals

Although working public relations professionals have not been administered the DIT in published studies, some work has focused on public relations (Cabot, 2005) and business students (Loescher, Hughes, Cavico, Mirabella, & Pellet, 2005). In his study including undergraduate journalism and public relations majors, Cabot found levels of moral reasoning consistent with that of high school students. "An undeniable conclusion is that these students demonstrate relatively unsophisticated moral reasoning. The mean P score of 31.18 is well below the mean P score of 43.2 which undergraduates in other studies previously produced" (Cabot, 2005, pp. 329–330). Business students fared little better (Loescher et al., 2005). In a study designed to examine the impact of teaching ethics across the curriculum, the target group of business students scored "lower than that found in Rest's study for seniors in high school" (Loescher et al., 2005, p. 44). Both studies concluded that moral development for college students is a complex phenomenon that is certainly influenced by social and cultural factors not easily captured in the classroom. These studies of students make it more imperative to study professionals. A recent study of professional journalists using the DIT found them to be able and subtle moral thinkers (Wilkins & Coleman, 2005). Journalists' reasoning about ethical issues involving journalism was superior to their reasoning about general ethical issues, indicating professional domain expertise.

Ethics in Public Relations

Most of the work on ethics in public relations has been qualitative and theoretical, as part of an effort to develop a more sophisticated and focused theoretical base (Cabot, 2005). For example, Bowen (2004b) expanded the 10th principle in J. E. Grunig's (1992) excellence theory and developed a

normative model for decision-making. This conceptualization afforded a central role to autonomy, just as Kohlberg's (1981, 1984) theory did. Barney and Black (1994) contributed the attorney–adversary model, which sees public relations' role as similar to an attorney in advocating for the client. It assumes that if competing messages and viewpoints are represented, the truth will emerge. In contrast, Nelson (1990) saw the public relations person's primary duty as being to society and community, an outlook that could emphasize either conformity or an adherence to more universal principles. Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) offered a professional responsibility model that includes the duties to minimize harm, display respect and dignity toward people, and communicate the pros and cons fairly—a framework that clearly places an emphasis on reasoning employing universal principles.

A parallel line of research involving the TARES test (Baker & Martinson, 2001) asks individuals to evaluate advertising or public relations messages on five philosophically-based criteria: truthfulness, authenticity, respect, equity, and social responsibility, all of which have been acknowledged as universal ethical principles (Gert, 1988). Like the work of Kohlberg (1981, 1984) and Piaget (1932/1965), the TARES test reflects a social ethic. In an on-line survey of public relations practitioners using TARES questions, Lieber (2005) found that practitioners considered the impact on the audience in their thinking, and “possessed a pattern of ethical consideration closely resembling moral knowledge” (p. 301). That study also showed that age, education, and political ideology significantly influenced ethical thinking, findings consistent with those from decades of research using the DIT. A different study also found age correlated with better ethical reasoning (Kim & Choi, 2003), in line with DIT findings.

Some work has been done on the value of codes of ethics in fostering ethical public relations with mixed results. Wright (1993) pointed out that there are many strengths in these codes, but that they are unenforceable, don't have the teeth to reward or punish people for their behavior, are most influential with people who are already ethical, and have minimal effect on those who really need them.

Ethics training was one of the factors that encouraged ethical behavior in a case study of a pharmaceutical corporation lauded as a global leader in ethics (Bowen, 2004b), and a course in ethics corresponded with ethical awareness and leadership in another study (Gale & Bunton, 2005). Ethics education, including professional-development seminars and college courses, led the list of suggestions for improving public relations ethics by Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members (C. B. Pratt, 1991). That study also suggested that public relations practitioners think the ethics of their top management is higher than their own ethics (C. B. Pratt, 1991).

Thus, the totality of work on the moral reasoning and moral development of public relations professionals or students is equivocal. Academic theory suggests that moral decision-making by public relations practitioners requires the application of universal ethical principles, but the results of the few empirical studies conducted on students or anecdotes involving professionals provide less consistent results. Public relations practitioners must concern themselves with truthfulness and accuracy while also considering their clients' wishes. Previous studies would suggest that investigating the reasoning of public relations practitioners by collecting baseline data will not only provide a measure of moral development of the profession at large, but also allow scholars to examine the influences on that development and to begin to compare the results for public relations professionals with the results for other media occupations. Therefore, we ask the following research questions and make one prediction based on the literature:

RQ1: How do public relations professionals score on the DIT compared with other professionals?

H1: Public relations professionals will have significantly higher moral development scores for public relations dilemmas than nonpublic relations dilemmas.

Past studies show that expertise in a domain leads to better ethical reasoning.

RQ2: Are there significant differences between subgroups of public relations professionals, including women and men, managers and nonmanagers?

This research question derives from studies of subgroups. Since Gilligan (1982) contested the finding that women scored lower than men on Kohlberg's test, it has become traditional to ask about gender differences, even though no systematic bias has been found with Rest's (1999) DIT. The rank in an organization question derives from studies showing that management may compromise ethics (Rest et al., 1999), and the conflicting finding that public relations professionals believe managers have higher ethics (C. B. Pratt, 1991)

RQ3: What variables are significantly correlated with high moral development in public relations professionals?

The variables tested included political party and ideology, religious beliefs, job autonomy, organization size, taking an ethics course, attending

professional seminars, the importance of ethics codes, belonging to professional organizations, length of time working in the field, degree of market competition, age, education, gender, and factors derived from questions about influences on ethical reasoning drawn from previous studies, including theoretical work such as the TARES test. This research question reexamines findings that identified religious beliefs, autonomy, age, and education in other populations as influential on moral development. The other variables are exploratory.

METHOD

Sample

This study used a random sample from the 400 largest public relations firms listed on the Web site of *O'Dwyer's Directory of Public Relations Firms*, http://www.odwyerpr.com/pr_firms_database/index.htm, as the universe. O'Dwyer's (2005) used outside certified public accountants to determine firms' rankings; criteria include net fee income from billing records and income tax returns, and number of employees from payroll records. The names, phone numbers, and addresses of the top 400 firms were entered into a database; a random number generator was employed to select a random sample of enough firms to result in approximately 100 completed DITs, which is similar to the sample sizes of other DIT studies with which this one will be compared. This method resulted in a sample that included firms that differed by size and geographic location. The top 400 firms were used because it was determined there were many independent practitioners or firms with fewer than five employees in the entire field, which would not be cost efficient. As with all research, this study was limited by costs and time. The strength of this sampling strategy, while eliminating independent practitioners and very small firms, is that it included medium-size organizations, those firms with billings of less than \$1 million per year, and public relations departments of advertising agencies. By choosing the top 400 firms, this study measured the ethical reasoning skills of public relations practitioners who worked on campaigns most likely to affect international, national, regional or other large audiences, versus local audiences or employees of certain organizations or companies. These firms' accounts included Exxon-Mobil, Glaxo-Smith-Kline drug company, Reebok, and similar large companies.

This strategy also excluded nonprofit organizations and in-house corporate communications employees, who should be included in future studies; however, research limitations recognize that one study cannot do everything. Instead, this sample included firms that did very different sorts of work, from media relations, to business-to-business communication, to

work with multiple Fortune 500 and Fortune 100 companies, and to firms that specialized in public relations for a niche clientele such as the pharmaceutical and computer industry. By sampling across agencies, respondents varied by age, education, experience, and political and religious affiliations, all variables previously linked to ethical reasoning (Rest et al., 1999).

E-mail letters were written to top managers of the public relations firms explaining the study; up to three follow-up phone calls were made asking for participation. In studies that employ the DIT, samples of 100 or fewer are the norm; this study produced a sample of 118. The researchers traveled to the firms to collect data in person. Respondents took from 25 to 60 min to complete the instrument; providing respondents with the necessary environment to complete it means taking them away from their daily work routine and remaining in the room to answer questions. The researchers administered the surveys during lunch and provided pizza or sandwiches.

Random sampling of individual members of PRSA or other organizations was not feasible, or even appropriate, in this study. The primary ways random samples are collected are by mail and phone; a mail survey would have generated too low a response rate, as this survey took 30–45 min to complete and was on a sensitive topic. A phone survey would have introduced too much random error because the dilemmas require reflection and the ability to consider response choices; having choices read over the phone does not let respondents consider them in the way they could if they saw them together and compared their importance. Instead, the surveys were administered in person at site-visits to public relations organizations, an approach that almost all DIT studies have followed for more than 30 years. As a check on the data, the demographics of our sample of public relations practitioners were compared to the only study we could find that randomly sampled PRSA members (Sallot, Cameron, & Lariscy, 1998) and found to be generally consistent.¹

Because of the sampling method in this study, findings should be considered suggestive, rather than definitive; however, that should not discount the importance of the results for several reasons. The purpose of this study is descriptive and explanatory, focusing on gathering baseline data on an unstudied population and understanding relationships between moral development and other variables in this profession. Never in the history of moral development research has there been an attempt to generalize to the population in the same way as electoral polls and surveys. Of more than 400 DIT

¹Our demographics compare favorably to those of the random sample of 251 PRSA members in the Sallot et al. (1998) survey, where 55% were women (60% in our study); 95% were Caucasian versus 83% in our study. Sixty-two percent had bachelors degrees versus our 66%.

studies, almost none are random samples, and almost all were administered in person by researchers. Thus, these methods are appropriate for comparison with studies of other professional populations using the DIT. It is not the intention of this study to generalize to the population in the sense that random sample surveys do; our purpose is to explain relationships and for general comparison, which Babbie (1990) said is appropriate. Science is a cumulative process and consistent results from a number of samples can provide important knowledge (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). As is traditional with DIT studies, generalizable statements become possible after many smaller studies of different participants from the same profession have been conducted over time. All the populations we compare with our DIT results were collected in this manner, not with large random samples; therefore, the comparisons are fair.

Instrument

The DIT (Rest, 1979; Rest et al., 1999), an instrument that has been given to hundreds of different professional populations in its 35-year history, was used to operationally define moral development. It poses six ethical dilemmas and asks respondents to rank 12 statements after each dilemma according to how important each was in making a decision (5-point scale, *no importance* = 1 to *great importance* = 5). These statements reflect schematic thinking at one of Kohlberg's (1981, 1984)/Rest's (1999) six levels. For example, "What would most benefit society?" is a universal principle at stage 6. Next, participants rank their top 4 statements from the 12. From this ranking, each participant's P score, or percentage of the time they use principled ethical reasoning, was calculated. If a stage 5 or 6 statement was ranked as "most important," it was scored a "4;" if a stage 5 or 6 statement was ranked as "second most important," it was scored a "3." This continued with "third" scoring 2 and "fourth" scoring 1. Statements at lower stages scored zero. Scores were summed across all dilemmas and divided by .6 (Rest et al., 1999). The P score reflects the relative importance the person gave to principled considerations, that is, judgments at Kohlberg's/Rest's highest category (Rest & Narvaez, 1998).

To assure validity, the DIT guards against participants randomly checking off responses with a consistency check between the ratings and rankings. If respondents are too discrepant in their ratings and rankings, the questionnaire is discarded. The DIT also contains a number of meaningless items, that is, items written to sound impressive but which do not mean anything. If a respondent is picking items on the basis of their apparent complexity rather than their meaning, the questionnaire is discarded. With the DIT, it seems that respondents cannot fake high without also raising their scores on meaningless items (Davison & Robbins, 1978; Rest, 1979).

The DIT has been tested for reliability and validity in more than 400 studies (For more on this issue, see Rest et al., Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999, Chapter 4). It correlates highly ($r = .78$) with other tests of ethical reasoning and developmental measures, and has been shown to measure moral development; not intelligence, education, verbal ability, or some other construct. Test-retest reliability correlates in the .70 to .80 range, and internal consistency in the .80s using Cronbach's *alpha* for internal reliability (Rest et al., 1999).

The DIT can be modified to replace two of the original dilemmas with domain-specific dilemmas; the DIT creators encourage this, saying domain-specific dilemmas can be more predictive of behavior (Rest & Narvaez, 1998), and say that the substitution of only two dilemmas does not affect comparability with other studies. This study included two dilemmas for public relations professionals—one involves whether to tell hired experts about potential abuse of an herbal medicine; the other about whether to confirm or deny leaked information about a school closing. The four original DIT dilemmas are about whether a high school principal should censor a student newspaper; whether a neighbor should turn in an escaped prisoner who has led a model life; whether a doctor should help a patient commit suicide; and whether a man should steal a drug to save his dying wife.

Independent Variables

In a separate questionnaire that was included after respondents answered the DIT, 37 statements taken from the TARES test (Baker & Martinson, 2001, 2002) and other studies that investigated the influences on public relations professionals' ethical reasoning (Bowen, 2004b; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; Parsons, 2004; Thomsen, 1998). Sample statements include, "If it will help my firm's relationship with the client," "Would I want others to do the same thing," "If I'm creating false impressions with selective information," and "Codes of ethics." Respondents rated the importance of each statement on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *not important at all* to 7 = *very important*). These statements were submitted to factor analysis to discover the underlying concepts, then indexed and correlated with the P score. We refer to these as *ethical influences*, as do many authors of these studies (See Table 1 for wording of statements significant in factor analysis; contact authors for wording of other statements).

The separate questionnaire also included measures of autonomy, religion, and political identification taken from the General Social Survey, a personal interview survey of U.S. households conducted by the National Opinion Research Center annually since 1972. The autonomy index included: "How independent does your job allow you to be?" "How much say do you have over the assignments you work on?" and "How much are

TABLE 1
 Factor Loadings of Questions About Influences on Ethical Reasoning in Public Relations
 Including TARES Test Statements (Cronbach's Alpha)

	<i>Factor 1: Business Concerns ($\alpha = .84$)</i>	<i>Factor 2: Internal Motives ($\alpha = .83$)</i>	<i>Factor 3: Truth & Respect ($\alpha = .83$)</i>	<i>Factor 4: Religious Influences ($\alpha = .90$)</i>	<i>Factor 5: External Influences ($\alpha = .61$)</i>
Increase sales, visibility	.861				
Help relationship with clients	.836				
Help recruit new clients	.692				
Short term profit	.651				
Impact on my career	.572				
What if media find out	.446				
Client's right to promote legal product	.441				
Advice from legal	.428				
If I am hiding, following orders	.405				
Would I want others to do same thing		.715			
Do I feel good about this		.642			
If I have considered equally all publics		.614			
Have I considered others as much as myself		.592			
Put interests of public ahead of own		.566			
If this is what I would want if I were on other side		.548			
My own sense of right and wrong		.510			
If I believe in product		.481			
If it's right thing regardless of whether I have right to do it		.424			
If I am concealing important information			.790		
If my message intends to mislead			.782		
If I'm creating false impressions			.553		
Seeking input from those affected			.525		
If I'm facilitating mutual understanding			.501		
If it's deceptive, overtly or covertly			.479		
Teachings of my religion				.907	
Religion as basis for ethics				.894	
Codes of ethics					.719
Standards of employer					.477
If I have stereotyped					.40

Note. Principal axis factoring with Varimax rotation.

you allowed to take part in making decisions that affect your work?" (7 = *A lot* to 1 = *None*). Religion questions were: "Would you describe yourself as extremely religious (7) to extremely nonreligious (1)?" and "Where would you place your religious beliefs from extremely fundamentalist (7) to extremely liberal (1)?" These two questions did not correlate highly enough to support creating an index, so they were analyzed separately. The political ideology question asked: "Where would you place your political views from extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (7)?" The political party question said, "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?" ranging from *strong Democrat* (1) to *strong Republican* (7). Age, race, and education data also were collected. Participants gave job titles and indicated whether they were managers with "yes" or "no" response choices.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Data were collected from 129 public relations professionals; 11 were purged for highly rating too many meaningless statements or inconsistencies in ratings and rankings, resulting in a usable sample of 118. The 9% purge rate is consistent with other DIT studies. In this sample, the average age was 34.5 years old and ranged from 21 to 64. Eighty-three percent reported their race as Caucasian, 7% as African American, 7% as Asian, and 3% as Hispanic. Sixty percent were women; 66% had a bachelor's degree; 9% had some graduate training, and 22% had a graduate degree. Only 2% of those taking the DIT had "some college or a high school degree." Seventy-five percent said they had taken an ethics course; they reported attending an average of two professional seminars in the last year. These demographics compare similarly to those of the random sample of 251 PRSA members in the Sallot et al., (1998) survey.

Thirty-five percent of the respondents for this study said they were Republicans and 47% were Democrats; the rest were Independent. On a 7-point liberal-to-conservative scale, the average was 3.36 ($SD = 1.4$). Regarding religion, on a 1 to 7 scale, where 1 was *extremely religious* and 7 was *nonreligious*, the average was 3.75 ($SD = 1.8$). Using the same scale, with 1 = *fundamental* and 7 = *liberal*, the average score was 4.8 ($SD = 1.65$).

The respondents reported working in firms that ranged from 10 to 2,500 employees, with an average of 129 ($SD = 310$). On a 1 to 7 scale, with 7 being *the most competitive*, the respondents rated the competitiveness in their area as 5.8 ($SD = 1.15$) on average. Experience ranged from 1 to 35 years, with an average of 8 years in the business. Fifty-two percent said they

had some management duties; 62% of the managers were men. The mean autonomy score on a 7-point scale of the two indexed questions was 5.14 ($SD = 1.35$; Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). On the same scale, the mean response to the question "How important are codes of ethics such as those from PRSA and IABC (International Association of Business Communicators)?" was 3.9 ($SD = 2.1$).

Public Relations Dilemma Decisions

On the dilemma that used hired experts to promote an herbal medicine, 66% of respondents said they would tell the experts about the potential abuses; 17% said they would not tell the experts. The school closing dilemma was almost perfectly split between the three decisions; 31% were for confirming the story, 32% said they would deny the story, and 37% couldn't decide.

Factor Analysis of Ethical Influences

Principal axis factoring with varimax rotation was used to analyze responses to the 37 statements designed to measure ethical influences in public relations, including items from the TARES test. Requirements for factor retention included an eigenvalue of 1.0 and a minimum of three items with a primary loading of at least .40 and no secondary loading difference greater than .15. One factor, the religious influences factor, was defined by two variables that loaded cleanly on it; because the loadings were so high (.89 and .91) and the Cronbach's α was .90, we retained that factor. Five factors resulted that accounted for 47.5% of the total variance. They were indexed and labeled *Business Concerns* ($\alpha = .84$), *Internal Motives* ($\alpha = .83$), *Truth and Respect* ($\alpha = .83$), *Religious Influences* ($\alpha = .90$), and *External Influences* ($\alpha = .61$)² and used in correlations to answer RQ3 (See Table 1).

²The alpha level for the external influences index is below what we would like; however, alpha is largely a function of the number of items in an index. In this case, there are 3 items, which is relatively few. Generally, increasing the number of items increases alpha. Also, reliability can only depress relationships, implying that relationships we do find are stronger than they appear to be. Thus, alpha is a conservative estimate (Lord & Novick, 1968). Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman (1991), said reliabilities of .80 or higher are optimal but that reliabilities of between .60 and .69 are "moderate" and suggested that the cutoff should be below .60. We chose to retain the external influences index in the spirit of this exploratory research; this index did show a significant negative relationship to ethical reasoning. We chose to err on the side of caution, retaining a construct that, although numerically moderate, is of extremely high importance in practical, real-world terms. As such, it should be studied in more depth in future work.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: How do public relations professionals score on the DIT compared with other professionals?

These public relations professionals ranked seventh highest of all professionals who had taken this test. Their mean moral development score, or P score, was 46.2 ($SD = 13.65$). These professionals ranked below six other professions, including four with higher education levels (Table 2). These public relations professionals were not significantly different from three groups above them (nurses $t = .036$, $p = .97$; dental students $t = .39$, $p = .69$; journalists $t = 1.71$, $p = .088$) or the group just below them (graduate students $t = .57$, $p = .57$). They were significantly lower than practicing physicians ($t = 2.34$, $p < .05$) and all those above that group, and they were significantly higher than undergraduates ($t = 2.32$, $p < .05$) and all those below that group.

H1: Public relations professionals will have significantly higher moral development scores for public relations dilemmas than nonpublic-relations dilemmas.

TABLE 2
Mean P Scores of Various Professions

<i>Profession</i>	<i>P Scores</i>
Seminarians/philosophers	65.1
Medical students	50.2
Practicing physicians	49.2
Journalists	48.68
Dental students	47.6
Nurses	46.3
Public relations	46.2
Graduate students	44.9
Undergraduate students	43.2
Accounting students	42.8
Veterinary students	42.2
Navy enlisted men	41.6
Orthopedic surgeons	41.0
Adults in general	40.0
Business professionals	38.13
Business students	37.4
High school students	31.0
Prison inmates	23.7
Junior high students	20.0

This hypothesis was supported; when the P score was broken down into public relations and general dilemmas, these public relations professionals in this study did significantly better on dilemmas in their field than other types of ethical problems. The mean P score for the four combined nonpublic-relations dilemmas ($M = 39.4$, $SD = 15.1$) was significantly lower than the mean P score for the two combined public relations dilemmas ($M = 59.8$, $SD = 21.5$; $t = 9.52$, $df = 117$, $p < .001$), supporting this hypothesis.

RQ2: Are there significant differences between subgroups of public relations professionals, including women and men, managers and nonmanagers?

There were no significant differences in moral reasoning between men ($M = 46.38$, $SD = 14.46$) and women ($M = 46.1$, $SD = 13.18$; $t = .100$, $df = 116$, $p = .91$), or managers ($M = 46.6$, $SD = 13.3$) and nonmanagers ($M = 45.77$, $SD = 14.1$; $t = -.332$, $df = 116$, $p = .74$).

RQ3: What variables are significantly correlated with high moral development in public relations professionals?

The variables tested included political ideology and party identification, religious beliefs and fundamentalism, job autonomy, organization size, taking an ethics course, attending professional seminars, belonging to professional organizations, length of time working in public relations, degree of competition, age, education, and gender, and the five factors representing ethical influences.

There were significant correlations between moral reasoning and six variables—political ideology, organization size, belonging to professional organizations, fundamental/liberal religious views, and two of the factors—truth and respect, and external influences. Those who rated their political views as more liberal were significantly more likely to have higher P scores ($r = -.351$, $p < .001$). Those who worked in larger organizations were significantly more likely to have higher P scores ($r = .189$, $p < .05$); belonging to more professional organizations was significantly associated with lower P scores ($r = -.262$, $p < .05$). Those who said they held more liberal religious views were more likely to have higher P scores than those who rated their religious beliefs as fundamental ($r = .346$, $p < .01$). The depth of one's religious conviction, as measured by the question "How religious are you, extremely to not at all?" was not significantly correlated with moral reasoning ($r = .077$, $p = .41$). Those who said *truth and respect* issues were important to them had significantly higher P scores ($r = .216$, $p < .05$). Those who said *external influences* were extremely important had significantly lower P scores ($r = -.181$, $p < .05$). There were no significant correlations between moral

reasoning and age, education, party identification (when controlling for political ideology), having taken a course in ethics, number of seminars attended, how long one worked in public relations, or how competitive the area was.

DISCUSSION

These public relations professionals are good ethical thinkers, showing similarity to other professionals with comparable levels of education such as journalists, nurses, and dental students. This is good news for a profession that is often characterized as engaging in unethical practices. As predicted by the moral development literature, the women in this sample—who constitute the majority of public relations professionals, as well as the majority of survey respondents—scored equally well in comparison to men. In addition, these managers scored about the same as nonmanagers on the DIT. Taken in total and in light of the existing literature, it appears that the public relations professionals who work in these firms, including the managers, are able ethical thinkers. The lone peer-reviewed DIT study that focused on public relations (Cabot, 2005) found that public relations students were far less able. Although this study cannot answer the question by itself, it is possible that over time, professional work in the field promotes moral growth. The so-called feminization of public relations does not appear to threaten these trends in any way.

The Impact of Politics and Religion

The fact that higher levels of ethical reasoning correlated with self-reported liberal bias is again consistent with other DIT studies, both empirically and philosophically. In addition, it makes logical sense. The DIT is a test of social ethics, hence the American version of political liberalism—which finds a role for government intervention on various social issues—would support thinking that includes consideration of issues such as “what is good for society,” one element of principled ethical thinking. These public relations practitioners also scored as predicted when religion was the issue. Those who characterized themselves as more fundamentalist regardless of religious sect scored significantly lower in moral reasoning. This finding is consistent with many other DIT studies. Again, because high levels of ethical thinking demand critical analysis that allows individuals to question both rules and authority, such a finding is both logically and empirically consistent with the literature on the subject. It also is important to point out that the strength of one’s religious conviction was not implicated here; being deeply

religious did not predispose one to lower moral development scores the way being fundamentalist in one's religious beliefs did.

Truth and Respect Issues

Public relations professionals see their role as connecting clients to the larger world, primarily through journalists or the news media. To accomplish this function, they need to maintain the trust of both parties, but particularly the trust of journalists who are already skeptical of both their institutional role and their individual motives. Consequently, honesty and a lack of willingness to deceive those who receive information is critical in effective public relations practice. The respondents acknowledged this. Their reluctance to deceive melds universal ethical principles with excellent professional practice, for both the short and long run, in some important ways. As one firm owner noted in a comment to the researcher, "We have fired clients at this firm, but we have never fired a journalist."

External Influences

Looking for external guidance in the form of rules—whether in codes of ethics or through employer-established standards—did not correlate significantly with strong ethical reasoning for these professionals. Reliance on externally imposed standards—whether in the form of religious teaching or other sorts of professional dogma—may, in fact, indicate a somewhat lower critical thinking ability among these public relations professionals. Because high-order ethical thinking is strongly related to cognitive development, reliance on external rules may retard this cognitive growth process.

Other Significant Influences

As for the significant correlations between higher moral development and working for larger organizations or belonging to fewer professional organizations, we have no literature to help explain this. Research on organization size in business has found the opposite of our study. More research to investigate this finding is needed.

Thinking Like a Professional

The fact that these public relations practitioners did particularly well on scenarios that involved public relations is significant for philosophical reasons, as well as professional ones. Whether mass communication should be considered a profession, as opposed to a trade, has been

debated in the literature for most of the last 50 years. Philosophers who investigate what constitutes a profession generally agree that profession-specific training and a profession-specific body of knowledge are essential before any group of workers attains “professional” status. One of the real stumbling blocks for public relations to attain professional status has been its relatively weak claim to a profession-specific body of knowledge. These findings—that these public relations practitioners exhibit domain expertise when it comes to ethical reasoning—are empirical evidence that they do, indeed, appear to call on a profession-specific body of knowledge. Just as one expects physicians to know something about how biology affects the human organism or expects attorneys to have some understanding of how case law is influenced by precedent, it is reasonable to suggest that public relations practitioners have some understanding of how their acts influence others in society. This sort of thinking may be considered profession specific, and the results of this study indicate that public relations practitioners are expert at it.

Although a single study is certainly not enough to support a strong claim to professional status, it begins to build an empirical case for such an assertion. This should be good news to public relations practitioners who are trying to shed the image of “flackery” while claiming a seat in the management boardrooms of many corporations. Thinking ethically has always carried with it a level of responsibility. Perhaps it also can be a way for the profession to the claim the authority that will support responsible conduct.

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