Ethical Conflict and Job Satisfaction among Public Relations Practitioners

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This study attempted to explore the linkage between ethical conflict and job satisfaction, causes of ethical conflicts, and consequences of job dissatisfaction among public relations practitioners. The findings show that many practitioners confirmed the existence of ethical conflict in their workplace and suggest that ethical challenges are largely triggered by top management’s ethical standard. Although practitioners resolved conflicts by leaving their companies, they also recognized the hope in resolving the ethical challenges that they had faced. Participants emphasized the importance of an environment of open communication, the support of internal stakeholders, and a high professional standard.

Job satisfaction has been a considerable organizational research topic that is generally used by scholars as an index to measure the desirability of certain work conditions (Pincus, Knipp, & Rayfield, 1990). Indeed, job satisfaction is important because it reflects the quality of work life and psychological well-being of workers (Pugliesi, 1999), which may be closely related to the steady prosperity of a profession.

Job satisfaction is composed of various dimensions, e.g., payment, relationship with co-workers and supervisors, societal recognition, the work itself, and so forth (Spector, 1997). Many scholars (e.g., Hamermesh, 2001; Spector, 1997) have explored factors of job satisfaction. As one of those factors, ethics has been investigated in job satisfaction studies of business ethics, medical studies, and public service studies (Bullen & Flamholz, 1985; Saks, Mudrack & Ashforth, 1996; Koh & Boo, 2001). Since a high ethical standard is required in any kind of profession, it is meaningful to investigate the linkage between ethics conflict and job satisfaction in a particular profession.

Public relations scholarship has given intermittent attention to job satisfaction. For instance, scholars investigated job satisfaction to examine public relations professionalism (Shin, 1989; McKee, Nayman, & Lattimore, 1975; Pratt, 1986), practitioners’ roles and participation in the decision-making process (Broom & Dozier, 1986), organizational communication structure (Grunig, 1992; Pincus, 1986; Pincus & Rayfield, 1989), public relations models (Karadjov et al., 2000; Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Kim & Hon, 1998) and the gender gap (Rentner & Bissland, 1990). However, the ethics issue has not been a focus of any previous studies on job satisfaction among public relations practitioners. Thus, this study is one of the first to examine voices from real workplaces. This research depicts the types of ethics concerns or distresses that public relations practitioners experience and how the experience affects the quality of work life in the public relations profession.

The results of this study have the potential to contribute to the field of public relations in several ways. Assuming that both ethics and job satisfaction are important for the prosperity of a profession, the findings shed light on the importance of ethical public relations practice. The results of this study also address the organizational factors triggering ethical distress and dilemma.
Literature Review

Public Relations and Job Satisfaction

Although public relations scholarship has been concerned with job satisfaction issues since the 1970s, scholars consistently focused on the job satisfaction among public relations practitioners to advocate the values and status of public relations as a unique profession (Shin, 1989; McKee, Nayman, & Lattimore, 1975; Pratt, 1986). As vocational prestige is gained from its professionalism, scholars and practitioners in the 1970s and 1980s were especially eager to define the public relations role as a professional role for society. McKee et al. (1975), in what is perhaps the first study on job satisfaction in the field of public relations, found that public relations practitioners are more satisfied with professional jobs rather than craft jobs such as message production through publicity. Olson’s (1989) survey of San Francisco Bay Area public relations practitioners and journalists reported that public relations practitioners are more satisfied with their job than journalists, and their job satisfaction is closely related to the autonomy of their jobs. Broom and Dozier (1986), in their role study, found that practitioners taking on managerial roles are more satisfied with their jobs and that the level of participation in the decision-making process is a link between managerial roles and job satisfaction. Renter and Bissland (1990) reached similar results from their nationwide survey, indicating that public relations practitioners are more satisfied with a managerial role and autonomy in their work.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Kim and his colleagues (Kim & Hon, 1998; Karadjov, Kim & Karavasilev, 2000) found that practitioners pursuing the two-way symmetrical public relations model, with a high professional orientation, are more satisfied with their profession. These studies noted that a general relationship between job satisfaction and professionalism exists in the international setting. Those streams of research demonstrate that job satisfaction study of public relations was conducted to defend public relations’ occupational progress as a profession.

Meanwhile, the linkage between ethics issues and job satisfaction has not yet been explored, although ethics is regarded as an essence of professionalization. Professionalism is frequently used to provide a rationale for ethical behaviors in public relations (Pratt & Rentner, 1989; Day, Dong, & Robins, 2001).

Public Relations and Ethics

Public relations practitioners work in a world full of complexity, uncertainty, competition, and contradiction. As Pearson (1989) noted:

Public relations practice is situated at precisely that point where competing interests collide. Indeed, public relations problems can be defined in terms of the collision or potential collision of these interests. Serving client and public interests simultaneously is the seemingly impossible mission of public relations practitioners. (p. 67)

Indeed, ethics is important in public relations, for several reasons. First of all, the public relations industry already has a tarnished historical reputation as a “spin doctor” profession; thus, it needs to show a new standard to society. Second, the complexity of a business environment requires public relations practitioners to make careful ethical decisions among conflicting interests. Lastly, the personal conduct and beliefs of public relations professionals can have an
impact on a societal level (L’Etang, 1996). Therefore, ethics is the nexus of public relations practice and its professionalization.

In spite of the importance of ethics, empirical research in public relations ethics is still fairly minuscule, and public relations ethics has not yet addressed empirical studies from various perspectives. Almost 20 years ago, Pratt (1991) noted that there was a paucity of empirical evidence on the ethics of public relations practitioners. However, the situation does not seem to have improved much.

Scholars have conducted several empirical studies on public relations ethics. Most of the empirically investigated studies examined practitioners’ moral values (Ryan & Martinson, 1984; Wright, 1985; O’Neil, 1986; Boynton, 2003; Kim, 2003) or some ethical decision-making process (Bowen, 2004b; Lieber, 2008); but little to no research viewed and measured ethics as a part of practitioners’ actual behaviors. Kim (2003) explored how Korean public relations practitioners’ ethical ideology is related to their ethical standards regarding current ethics issues among the profession, and Bowen (2004a; 2004b; 2005) investigated how organizational culture affects the ethical decision-making process in issue management. However, research has not yet addressed the impact of ethical practice on the work life of public relations practitioners, even though the impact of ethical practice on the profits of businesses and shareholders and on society is more important than the impact on public relations professionals’ lives.

**Ethics and Job Satisfaction**

Scholarship in business ethics research has conducted numerous studies to investigate the determinants of ethical behaviors. These factors commonly include personal attributes (e.g., religion, nationality, gender, age), education, personality, employment background (e.g., work experience, tenure in current job), belief system (e.g., Machiavellianism, locus of control, ambiguity), reference groups (e.g., peer group influence, top management influence, reward system), and others (e.g., codes of ethics).

Organizational factors of ethical behavior/ethical decision-making are also a focus in business discipline (Koh & Boo, 2001; Chen, Sawyers, & Williams, 1997; Cowton & Thompson, 2000; Schwartz, 2001; Trevino et al., 1998; Loe, Ferrell, & Mansfield, 2000). Generally, seven organizational factors that influence ethical decision-making were found: ethical climate (Ambrose, Arnaud, & Schminke, 2007; Deshpande, 1996), code of ethics/ethical policy (Chen et al., 1997; Cotton & Thompson, 2000; Schwartz, 2001; Trevino et al, 1999), reward system (Trevino, 1986), ethics training program (Delaney & Sockell, 1992), organizational structure (Ferrell & Skinner 1988), and peer group influence (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985). The existence of both code of ethics and top management’s use of rewards and sanctions for code adherence increases ethical decision-making, as opposed to the existence of ethics codes only. Company ethics training programs have a positive effect on ethical behavior (Delaney & Sockell, 1992). Ferrell and Skinner (1988) reported that higher levels of organizational structure formalization are related to greater perceived ethical behaviors. Reference groups or interaction with significant others also affect ethical decision-making (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985).

On the other hand, very little research has investigated business-ethics consequences, such as employees’ job satisfaction, stress, motivation, commitment, and job performance, in comparison with the many studies to explain organizational factors of ethical behaviors in business (Bullen & Flamholz, 1985; Saks, Mudrack, & Ashforth, 1996; Koh & Boo, 2001). Among the consequences, job satisfaction has mainly been explored in business and organizational behavioral sciences because the satisfaction that workers derive from their jobs
might be viewed as “reflecting how they react to the entire panoply of job characteristics” (Hamermesh, 2001, p. 2). Thus, the linkage between ethics distress and job satisfaction among public relations practitioners will account for the importance of ethics in the public relations profession.

**Research Questions**

RQ1: Do public relations practitioners face an ethical challenge?

RQ2: To what extent are practitioners’ perceived ethical conflict and their job satisfaction linked?

RQ3: In what cases do public relations practitioners perceive ethical conflict?

RQ4: What are the primary consequences of practitioners’ perceived ethical challenges and job dissatisfaction?

**Methodology**

An open-ended question was adapted to collect qualitative data, for three reasons. First, open-ended questions allow researchers to closely explore the different dimensions of respondents’ experiences (Sproull, 1988). Open-ended survey responses also can capture the diverse reality of the participants, which numeric data do not demonstrate (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, open-ended survey questions offer greater anonymity to respondents and often elicit more honest responses than individual in-depth interviews or focus group interviews (Erickson & Kaplan, 2002). Participants may feel more comfortable answering questions about ethical conflicts in an anonymous setting. Lastly, it is generally more cost-effective to collect participants’ rich descriptions and opinions, in comparison to in-depth interviews or focus groups. For those reasons, the open-ended question survey would be more helpful in collecting data for the purpose of this study.

Online survey data were collected using a random sampling from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) membership database. Independent PR consultants, firm owners, and educators were excluded from the sample. The first email invitation to the survey was sent on August 19, 2008, and the data collection continued until September 28, 2008, through the Web site www.surveymonkey.com. The response rate was about 5.6% (343 out of 6,126), and 30.6% (105) of the total participants answered the open-ended question. Thus, 105 answers became the total sample for this study.

The question asks participants when it is they perceive ethical conflict and to what degree is it related to their satisfaction with their work. The unit of analysis for the current study was survey participants’ text answers – experience and opinion, as described in their own words, which were categorized and analyzed as data (Harding, 1986; Hon, 1995).

Regarding the profile of practitioners who responded to the open-ended question, most (79.3%) of the respondents were women, and the average age was 43.56. Respondents in their 20s accounted for 15.4%, while 14.4% were in their 30s, 44.2% were in their 40s, 18.3% were in their 50s, and 11.2% were in their 60s. While 46.2% had a college degree, 50.9% had a master or higher degree. This is compatible with the profile of the total sample of 343 participants, presenting that 62.4% have a college degree, and 36.7% have a master or higher degree. Average experience in public relations industries was 15 to 16 years.
Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience of ethical conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No: I have rarely faced ethics conflicts.</td>
<td>34.3% (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes: I have experienced ethics conflicts.</td>
<td>65.7% (69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100% (105)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequence of the conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I left the employer (turnover).</td>
<td>21.7% (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ethical conflict is very closely related to my job satisfaction.</td>
<td>34.78% (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ethical conflicts hurt my workplace well-being.</td>
<td>11.6% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The causes of ethical conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. When the bosses or top management make and enforce ethically inappropriate decisions</td>
<td>21.7% (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Being forced to be silent.</td>
<td>10.14% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. When I was not given the option to discuss the ethical issue</td>
<td>10.14% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Lack of professionalism</td>
<td>10.14% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Feeling of unfairness or injustice</td>
<td>4.35% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.35% (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.80% (4)</td>
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Table 1. The linkage between ethical conflict and job satisfaction

RQ1: Do public relations practitioners face an ethical challenge?

RQ2: To what extent are practitioners’ perceived ethical conflict and their job satisfaction linked?

While only 34.3% (36) respondents answered that they rarely faced ethical conflict, 65.7% (69) respondents said they had experienced an ethical conflict. Participants who have not experienced the ethical dissonance simply said, e.g., “I have rarely been in that situation.” However, people who suffered from such conflict sometimes emphasized their feelings with capitalized characters in the text, such as “VERY” and “EXTREMELY.” The ethical concerns seem, at times to be so serious that practitioners undervalue what the respondents find satisfying in their work. One participant said:

I see so much potential for satisfaction, but the reality is that my boss thinks that they can pull wool over the eyes of the public when something is not flattering to the company’s self-image … It creates dissatisfaction and discomfort for me with my peers.
Although it is not easy to say that adherence to ethics can increase the level of satisfaction in public relations practice, an ethical challenge seems to clearly lead to job dissatisfaction. One person said:

There is a very strong relationship between ethical organizational standards and my job satisfaction. In situations where I took issue with the ethics of the organizations, I was extremely dissatisfied with my work and my organization, to the extent of having medical and emotional ailments as a result of the dissatisfaction.

RQ3: What are the primary consequences of practitioners’ perceived ethical challenges and job dissatisfaction?

Participants said that they left their former employers to avoid ethical conflicts. The conflicts mainly occurred when public relations practitioners’ individual moral standards conflicted with the employers’ style of running the business. Practitioners in this category preferred to leave their workplace rather than go along with what they perceived as unethical practices. One respondent explained his/her case as follows:

I have recently left the company. One of the reasons I left my former employer was because I didn’t feel they behaved ethically. This wasn’t linked specifically to my PR work, but more to the way to management was running the organization, how they were making decisions, and how they were treating staff. I felt their behavior was not always professional and ethical. It became frustrating to the point where I was no longer happy there.

However, this does not mean that practitioners are passively dealing with the ethical conflict; in fact, turnover might be the very last choice to PR practitioners, who try to do something to change their organizations, but, if unsuccessful, they leave. As one respondent noted, “When I have felt ethical conflict, if I felt I could not change it or felt it was a core part of the business and corporate beliefs, I found new employment.”

On the other hand, eight practitioners substantially described how the ethics conflict had a negative impact on their workplace well-being and job satisfaction. They experienced mental and emotional suffering from the conflict. Practitioners expressed the suffering using words such as “stress,” “unhappy,” “anxiety,” “discomfort,” and even “having medical and emotional ailments.”

As many of the job satisfaction studies have reported in the previous literature (Pugliesi, 1999), dissatisfaction may affect the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of public relations practitioners. The stress from workplace dissatisfaction might even threaten their personal lives.

RQ4: In what cases do public relations practitioners perceive ethical conflict?

In spite of the wide variety of factors triggering ethical conflict, the respondents generally described five causes of ethical conflict. Fifteen (21.7%) respondents frequently mentioned that the lack of ethicality in their bosses and top management affected ethical concerns. Practitioners said that they experienced ethical conflict when their bosses forced them to behave unethically.
Supervisors’ unethical thoughts and decisions can definitely challenge employees’ ethical standards in the workplace. In particular, this problem limits public relations’ input in strategic decision-making. It is difficult for public relations practitioners to offer advice to the top management, if CEOs ignore the value of public relations and are not willing to listen to advice or adhere to ethical business practices. This issue may also be directly related to the level of ethical influence on public relations practitioners:

I feel like, in some organizations (ones with little communication among the staff), the role of the communicator is looked down upon. I do my best to be strong ethically, but feel pressure from top management to shut up; and if I do chime in, I’m discounted. I always find a way to stick my voice … I don’t think they (top management) listen to me; and on some projects, I let them crash and burn, as I no longer take ownership of things I can’t control.

Seven (10.14%) respondents said that they had struggled to tell the truth because they are sometimes forced to keep silent, to only partially disclose information, or even to lie. Although telling the truth is emphasized in public relations ethics education, the challenges that practitioners actually encounter are complex. The line between being ethical and being unethical is sometimes unclear; e.g., keeping silent is regarded as proper by some public relations practitioners, while others think that it is definitely unethical. This complexity in telling the truth is one issue in public relations ethics. For example, one practitioner explained that, regarding a merger and acquisition, “[the] (new) reporting relationship” and “the level of public disclosure” kept him/her up at night. The stress was directly linked with job dissatisfaction and exhaustion.

Seven (10.14%) respondents also emphasized an open communication environment as offering hope in resolving the ethical conflict. Respondents believed that candid discussion of their ethical concerns with their bosses would resolve the conflicts because top management’s support for organizational ethicality is related to the open communication environment. Unethical or less ethical top management seldom listen to employees’ dissents, which respondents said are based on (professional) knowledge. Thus, such open communication makes it possible for public relations practitioners to influence dominant coalitions. One respondent emphasized the importance of an openly communicative environment, as follows:

My ability to resolve ethical situations is very much impacted by job satisfaction … If I worked in a situation with open and flexible management, we could discuss and make shared decisions based on what is right for the client (based on industry knowledge, not gut feelings). So … the communication concerns make it more difficult to make ethical decisions.

Although public relations practitioners may want to exert an ethical influence on top management, 4.3% (3) respondents mentioned that it is a complex process to do so. Furthermore, obtaining internal support from other departments within the organization (i.e., legal department) is difficult, as is gaining access to top management.

Additionally, 7.5% (5) practitioners stressed that ethics should be at the heart of the identity of the public relations profession because ethics come from knowledge of what is right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate. They said that ethical performances would make their
practice professional and enhance the professional image. One shared his/her experience in terms of professionalism:

At my previous job, I worked at a small privately owned PR agency. Sometimes the owner/president would have me work on her personal affairs instead of for our clients. I felt that I was being taken advantage of and that it was unfair to our clients. She also used her “connections” to get new business … Sometimes I felt as if PR were more of a hobby for her than a profession and that she wasn’t serious about it. She was not a member of PRSA. I never told her how I felt and only worked there for a year and a half.

Conclusion and Discussion

According to Maslow’s (1943) theory of human motivation, a human being’s highest need is self-fulfillment or to become actualized in what he or she is potentially. This is the final stage in which people want to achieve through their job. Ethical issues in workplaces may function as a critical standard by which a person estimates the quality of self-actualization in what he or she is doing. Thus, ethics and job satisfaction are inherently related in the public relations profession, which emphasizes ethics as its professional responsibility.

This research contributes to the body of knowledge of public relations in two ways. First, the proven linkage between ethics and job satisfaction indicates that the public relations profession cares about ethical concerns; many of the respondents make an effort to tell the truth and help their supervisors to make ethical decisions. Second, the qualitative data depicting causes of ethical conflict would be good resources from which further research can be generated. The findings of this study suggest a causal linkage between an organizational environment and ethics issues in public relations. Ultimately, this data suggest how to solve ethical conflicts and foster ethical practice in the public relations profession.

These findings illustrated that the ethical dilemmas or conflicts that practitioners confront in the workplace are numerous. More than half of the respondents answered that they have felt ethical conflict in their workplaces. They noted that the ethical distress was closely related to their satisfaction with their work. The results indicate that the ethics issue needs to be seriously addressed in both the industry and academia of public relations. The findings are unique in that they depict how ethical concerns influence the work life and well-being of public relations professionals.

Respondents noted that the ethicality of top management was the main cause of ethics conflicts, and problems might have been resolved if the issues were openly discussed and employees’ input were valued. This suggests the importance of an open communication environment. The findings are consistent with the perspective of the Excellence Study, in which scholars argued that a horizontal and openly communicative structure is necessary for organizational effectiveness (Grunig, 1992; Pincus, 1986; Pincus & Rayfield, 1989). The findings also demonstrated that the open communication structure is indispensible in helping organizations make ethical decisions because employees’ input is valued in this type of organization. By neglecting to value employees’ or public relations practitioners’ input, the public relations’ role as a corporate conscience would not function well.

Meanwhile, practitioners who have recognized ethical conflicts were more likely to leave their companies because the conflicts affected their mental and even physical well-being in the workplace. This finding provides a rationale as to why ethics should be emphasized within the
profession and public relations professionals’ job satisfaction levels need to be considered along with ethical conflict. Ignorance to negative outcomes could result in a collective debility in the public relations profession. Although the practitioners who face ethical conflicts move to other employers, turnover is not an ultimate remedy to solve ethics issues in the long run.

In conclusion, the answers not only suggest the clear linkage between ethical issues and job satisfaction, but also demonstrate the complex relationship between ethics conflicts and job satisfaction among public relations practitioners. This is an area where future research is needed.

**Limitation and suggestions for future studies**

This study has revealed several limitations, which leads to future studies within this area. First, only 30.6% of the survey participants answered the open-ended question. This is because the question was a part of the large questionnaires, and answering the question was not mandatory. The online survey allowed participants to more easily skip the question, and it was not possible to ask for further description of their answers, which might have offered richer information. That is one of the inherent downsides to open-ended questions. Thus, future studies must center on open-ended questions in the survey design. Otherwise, other methods, such as a focus-group interview or an individual in-depth interview can be adopted. Second, the cases in which practitioners experience ethical distress were not specifically identified for the purpose of observing their relation to job satisfaction. It would be interesting, for future research, to collect the cases in which public relations practitioners experience ethical conflicts, dilemmas, and distress.

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**References**


