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Characteristics and Dimensions of Ethical Leadership in Public Relations

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This study explores the characteristics of leadership in developing and managing ethics in public relations, based on in-depth interviews with 20 public relations executives in the United States. Systematic analysis of the interview data identified multiple dimensions of ethical leadership and ethical knowledge, and suggested that ethical leadership is grounded in personal rather than professional characteristics. Personal ethics, interpersonal behaviors, and articulation of ethical standards emerged as 3 salient characteristics of an ideal leader in facilitating knowledge transfer of ethics in public relations organizations. Ethical knowledge is implicit, intangible, personal, and often difficult to identify or articulate, posing a challenge for the transfer of knowledge through structured and formalized approaches. Theoretical implications and practical recommendations are discussed.

Issues of ethical leadership dominate the public consciousness and lie simmering below the surface of the existing leadership literature, but there is little empirical research in understanding the relationship between ethics and leadership (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Brown, Trevino & Harrison, 2005; Ciulla, 2004; Epitropaki, Butcher & Milner, 2002; Weaver, Trevino & Agle, 2005). The typical response to an ethics crisis is clarion calls for more ethical leadership, with little explication of the concept beyond notions of good character,

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values, or uncommon vision. Scholars genuflect at the altar of ethics and speak with hushed reverence about its importance; in books about leadership, one encounters a few sentences or a chapter reiterating the importance of ethics to leadership. Yet there has been little sustained or systematic empirical treatment of the topic by scholars, especially on the transfer of ethical values.

Much of the discussion about ethics and leadership is philosophical or normative, outlining what leaders ought to do, consistent with the belief that ethics is crucial to leadership and vice versa. As noted by Epitropaki et al. (2002), "Terms such as moral and ethical leadership are used widely in theory, yet little systematic research has related a sociomoral dimension to leadership in organizations" (p. 304). Weaver et al. (2005) observed that, "Despite all the resources that organizations spend on formal ethics and legal compliance initiatives, and despite the efforts put into high-level pronouncements about company values, little is known about the informal factors that make one person a key ethical influence on another in the workplace" (p. 314).

The growing interest in ethical leadership has resulted in the profiling of successful leaders and laudatory articles about the importance of ethics to leadership, mainly in business (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Brown et al., 2005; Trevino, 1986; Weaver et al., 2005). There is little systematic empirical or theoretical research on ethical leadership in public relations, and our understanding of the transfer of ethical knowledge in public relations organizations is limited. This study examines ethical leadership from descriptive and empirical perspectives to better understand ethics in public relations, and to identify and explicate the characteristics of leadership in the knowledge transfer of ethics.

There are many definitions of ethics, but ethics, simply put, is about right and wrong. Ethical dilemmas emerge when values clash, and are especially challenging in a communication-centric profession such as public relations where practitioners encounter numerous publics, stakeholders, and values. Few people would disagree with Bowen's (2004) suggestion that "public relations is a field fraught with ethical dilemmas" (p. 65). As a profession, it is literally still paying the price for its tarnished history (see Jacobson, 2002; Lieber, 2005), as the public retains a long and perhaps overzealous memory of public relations' ethical violations in failing to provide audiences with truthful and accurate information. Some skeptics go to the extent of suggesting that the term *public relations ethics* is an oxymoron, given the field's associations with manipulation, propaganda, and deception. The public disdain for public relations may reflect a larger systemic distrust of government, institutions, and large businesses, but it does not detract from the fact that a better understanding of ethical leadership can help public relations professionals harness the knowledge to more effectively manage ethical challenges. The renewed interest in public relations ethics has resulted in several books, including Lieber's (2006) *Public Relations Ethics:*

A Cross-Cultural Analysis, Fitzpatrick and Bronstein's (2006) *Ethics in Public Relations: Responsible Advocacy*, and Parsons's (2008) *Ethics in Public Relations*. These books and discussions on ethics considered relevant aspects in client/agency relationships, media relations, and issue communications, but leadership in ethics has not been addressed much, if at all.

Ethics in public relations is heavily focused on codes of ethics held by professional organizations such as the International Association of Business Communicators, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), and the International Public Relations Association. Codes of ethics are formal, written guides to professional conduct that provide frameworks for understanding the obligations of people working within a profession or organization. Typically, codes spell out behaviors that are encouraged or discouraged. However, membership in professional associations is voluntary for public relations practitioners. Although members may agree to abide by a professional organization's code, codes of ethics are rarely enforced and most are too vague (Curtin & Boynton, 2002; Fitzpatrick, 2002; Huang, 2001). More recently, public relations firms have sought to write their own codes, and many now incorporate them into their organizations' mission statements along with other public pronouncements on corporate social responsibility or environmental performance. Despite ethics codes, practitioners still encounter challenges in ethical decision-making, in influencing the ethical tone of their organizations, and in gaining access to top decision-makers. Pratt (1991) suggested that the success of organizational ethics initiatives is "contingent on public relations practitioners who, as the consciences of their organizations, play an important role in ethical leadership" (p. 231). According to Paluszek (1989), ethical leadership is basic to the job description of public relations: "By the nature of our mission and training, public relations professionals bring some unique talents to ethical leadership." He asked: "If not us, who [will lead ethics initiatives]?" However, Fitzpatrick (1996) concluded from a survey of ethics officers in North American institutions that public relations professionals are not playing key roles in the institutionalization of ethics, and that public relations remains an untapped resource in ethics programs. Bowen (2008) found a state of neglect in the support and education for public relations practitioners to function as ethics counsel or corporate conscience.

More recent surveys of public relations practitioners have made inroads into the topic of ethics. Lieber (2005), who surveyed 116 practitioners, found that ethical considerations differed based on age, education, gender, and political ideology. Bowen (2006), in a survey of 1,875 communicators, found that nearly 70% had little or no professional or academic training in ethics. However, these surveys did not focus on how ethical knowledge is transmitted nor id they discuss ethical leadership. Our study aims to fill the gap by explicating the characteristics of ethical leadership in the transfer of ethical knowledge. Ethical

knowledge is crucial in that it influences managerial decisions, shapes corporate culture, cultivates the image of the profession, impinges on the credibility of public relations, and has numerous impacts on society at large.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretically, ethical leadership is premised on a two-way relationship between ethics and leadership. Ethics is viewed as an *a priori* condition of leadership, and leadership shapes the ethics of followers and organizations. Although some scholars (e.g., Minkes, Small, & Chatterjee, 1991) questioned the degree to which leaders are able to successfully influence their subordinates' ethical behaviors, there is a consensus in the business ethics literature suggesting that the authority and power held by leaders in an organization place them in a unique position to set the ethical tone of an organization, and to shape employee ethical attitudes and behaviors (Baumhart, 1961; Bennis & Nannus, 1985; Hood, 2003; Jones & Kavanagh, 1996; Kanungo & Mendoca, 1996; Koehn, 2005; McDonald & Nijhof, 1999; Mendoca, 2001; Peterson, 2002; Schein, 1985; Sims & Brinkman, 2002; Stevens, 1999; Trevino, 1996; White & Lean, 2008).

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory, which provides a framework for understanding the relationship between ethics and leadership, places much emphasis on observational learning, in that a person learns not only from direct experience but also from observing other people's actions and the consequences. This vicarious capacity refers to learning without direct experience (Bandura, 1986). According to social learning theory, leaders influence the ethical conduct of followers via modeling, a form of behavior reenactment. Through modeling, values, attitudes, and behaviors are transmitted in a wide range of settings, including the workplace. Abstract modeling goes beyond simple mimicry of observed behavior. People identify with others and internalize their role models' values, behaviors, and attitudes, or *ethical rules*, to form a mental picture of how the role model would act in various situations. Next, they apply the rules to themselves and to new situations they encounter. Modeling is dependent upon four processes: *attention, retention, motor reproduction*, and *motivation*.[1] Motivation is particularly important in ethics

[1]For modeling to occur, an individual must first pay attention to the behavior. He or she must be able to create an internal representation of the behavior observed, and to have the physical and mental abilities to replicate the behavior. The final condition suggests that individuals will demonstrate that learned behavior if incentives are present.

because employees learn expected behavior and consequences through reward and punishment.

According to Bandura (1986), leaders or individuals who have high status in a ''prestige hierarchy'' and have the ability to control rewards play a significant role in influencing modeling effectiveness (p. 207). This argument is supported by various studies that demonstrated the ability of role models to influence prosocial behavior (e.g., Bryan & Test, 1967; Jones & Kavanagh, 1996; Pelletier & Bligh, 2006; Rosenhan & White, 1967; Weaver et al., 2005). Many organizations employ mentorship programs to assign to newcomers mentors who show them the ropes. The notion of role modeling in ethics can be traced as far back as to Aristotle's concept of the master–apprentice relationship: ''The spirit of morality is awakened in the individual only through the witness and conduct of a moral person'' (Gini, 1998, p. 29). Aristotle's virtue ethics, in emphasizing the development of moral character rather than rules or consequences, offers an alternative approach to duty-based (deontological) and outcome-based (teleological) perspectives that have dominated Western ethical thought.

Social learning theory is supported by moral development theory that suggests that people tend to look outside themselves to influential referent others for ethical guidance (Kohlberg, 1969; Treviño, 1986). Kohlberg's model suggests that individuals define what is ethical and what is not ethical based on the expectations of good behavior by others within their circle of influence. Zey-Ferrell, Weaver, and Ferrell (1979) found that marketing practitioners' ethics are acquired through socialization mainly with colleagues, managers, and executives. An individual may hold a high standard of ethics personally, but adapts his behavior to imitate that of the dominant group or the group's leader. Even the ethical intentions of individuals who do not subscribe to universal moral rules are influenced by organizational team leaders (White & Lean, 2008).

The social learning approach to ethical leadership has expanded from a strictly normative perspective (focusing on the traits of transformational or charismatic leadership; see Bass et al., 1987; Bono & Judge, 2003; Conger, 1999) to empirical-descriptive work examining how members of organizations characterize ethical leadership, and how it relates to other variables in its nomological network. Ethical leadership is operationalized according to two broad perspectives. The first focuses on the leader's ethical orientation or individual traits that are salient in promoting ethical attitudes or behavior in an organization (e.g., Craig & Gustafson, 1998; Posner & Schmidt, 1984, 1992). Craig and Gustafson found that effective leaders in ethics are the ones who display a level of integrity consistent with their subordinates' expectations. Consistent with modeling, perceptions of a leader's ethicality influence his subordinates' ethical decision-making (Jones &

Kavanagh, 1996; Pelletier & Bligh, 2006). Pelletier and Bligh, who studied employees at a Californian government agency, found significant correlations between employee perceptions of their leaders' ethicality and the effectiveness of the agency's ethics program. Subordinates had higher unethical behavior intentions when they perceived their leaders to be engaged in unethical behavior than when they perceived their leaders as not being engaged in unethical behavior (Jones & Kavanagh, 1996). White and Lean (2008) found individuals who perceived a higher level of integrity in their team leader reported fewer intentions to commit unethical acts. Deviant employee behavior is partially explained by an organization's ethical climate (Peterson, 2002). Another important leadership trait is fairness in assigning rewards and punishment (Cheng, 2000; Farh, Podsakoff, & Organ, 1990; Williams 2002), suggesting that motivation helps employees learn expected behavior and consequences. Kanungo and Mendoca (1996) found that leaders who are successful in fostering an ethical work environment tend to employ a participative leadership strategy that focuses on empowerment, rather than control. Leaders who were willing to admit to mistakes and apologized are viewed more favorably by their victims than those who did not apologize (Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid, & Elving, 2006).

Second, ethical leadership is operationalized as a leader's informal but complementary role in formal organizationwide ethics initiatives. Formal instruction such as codes, scenario stimulation, and case studies is more effective when the leaders play informal roles of modeling, supporting, and reinforcing subordinates' ethical attitudes and behaviors (Pelletier & Bligh, 2006; Schein, 1985; Schminke, Ambrose & Neubam, 2005). Schminke et al. (2005) found that an organization's ethical climate is influenced by a leader's display of his or her informal actions. McDonald and Nijhof (1999) suggested that for formally stated goals (corporate codes of conduct or any written communication on ethical guidelines) to be effective, informal norms and values must first be in place to support and reinforce formal ethical policies. For example, employees must perceive congruence between informal and formal codes.

Although there is little agreement in the literature, conceptually an ideal leader in ethics refers to an influential referent other on a prestige hierarchy who possesses the power, authority and independent decision-making to define an ethical climate for their subordinates and build a favorable, moral environment through a unique set of managerial skills in organizing assignments, tracking progress, and rewarding performance to successfully shape their subordinates' ethical behavior. However, little is known about the specific characteristics that make an ideal leader in ethics more influential than another, especially in the public relations setting. As noted by Brown and Trevino (2006) "a more descriptive and predictive social scientific approach to ethics and leadership has remained underdeveloped and fragmented,

leaving scholars and practitioners with few answers to even the most fundamental questions, such as ''What is ethical leadership?'' This is one of the questions that this study attempts to answer. But before we examine the characteristics of an ideal leader in in public relations ethics, we must first understand ethics' standing in public relations. We propose two initial research questions:

RQ1: What is the significance of ethics in public relations?
RQ2: What are the characteristics of an ideal leader in public relations ethics?

Managing Ethical Knowledge

From a knowledge management perspective (e.g., Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Polanyi, 1966; Sullivan, 1998) knowledge of ethical values and moral reasoning is implicit. In contrast to explicit knowledge that can be expressed in words and takes the form of tangible intellectual assets (manuals, handbooks, patents, and codes of ethics, etc.), implicit knowledge is not easily visible and expressible. It is highly personal and hard to formalize, and as such, is difficult to communicate and share with others. Polanyi (1966) employed the aphorism, ''We know more than we can tell'' (p. 2). Implicit knowledge takes the forms of subjective insights, intuitions, and hunches; and is deeply rooted in an individual's actions and experiences as well as emotions, ideals, values, images and symbols. The nature of ethical knowledge may partly explain the challenges of transferring such knowledge within organizations. Despite its intangible characteristic, implicit knowledge remains an invaluable resource. As the real source of knowledge creation and innovation in organizations, the transfer of implicit knowledge can facilitate or trigger momentous organizational changes (Drucker, 1993, 1994; Toffler, 1990). Today's knowledge society (Drucker, 1993) is fundamentally different from previous societies because knowledge or intellectual capital has emerged as the only meaningful resource, as societies shed their ties to land, labor, and machinery.

Little has been studied about the management of ethical knowledge. McDonald and Nijhof (1999) who proposed a model of five conditions for excellence in ethics programs for business, distinguishes between formal and informal knowledge of ethics. They argued that the success of an ethics program in stimulating ethical behavior is dependent on employee awareness of formal organizational goals and corresponding informal norms. The organization must first identify the informal norms and values central to it and determine if they are congruent with or contrary to existing behavior before implementing formal ethics initiatives such as codes of ethics and

ethics training programs. Based on the knowledge management perspective, two additional research questions are proposed to examine the nature of ethical knowledge in public relations, and how this knowledge is transferred in public relations organizations:

RQ3: What is the nature of ethical knowledge in public relations?
RQ4: What are the effective ways to transfer ethical knowledge in public relations?

METHOD

To better understand ethical leadership in public relations, we conducted in-depth, telephone interviews with 20 public relations executives and former executives between April and November, 2008. The use of qualitative, interview-based research to study ethical leadership from the perspective of organization members is a well-documented methodological approach (e.g., Bono & Judge, 2003; Conger, 1999; Trevino, Brown, & Hartman, 2003; Weaver et al., 2005). The depth interview is particularly useful for understanding phenomena that cannot be observed directly by other means, when it is difficult for the researcher to be present due to an outsider's lack of access, and for understanding a social actor's own perspective, especially in an inquiry about accounts of behavior.

All of our 20 interviewees are veteran public relations practitioners who are holding or who have held executive positions in agencies or corporations and directly supervised the daily work of their staff. Many, who are high-profile members of the PRSA and the Arthur W. Page Society, are pioneers of the field. Our 20 interviewees were:

- Ann Barklew (Fellow PRSA, senior counselor of Fleishman-Hillard Inc., and former senior partner/founding general manager of the agency's Minneapolis/St. Paul office),
- John Budd (Fellow PRSA, chairmen and CEO, the Omega Group),
- Chester Burger (former president of McCann-Erickson's public relations firm, recipient of PRSA Gold Anvil Award and Arthur W. Page Hall of Fame Award, currently president of Chester Burger & Company, Inc.),
- Robert Burnside (partner and chief learning officer for Ketchum),
- Ronald Culp (senior vice president and managing director of the Midwest operations of Ketchum, former senior vice president of public relations and government affairs, Sears, Roebuck & Co.),
- John W. (Jack) Felton (Fellow PRSA, former vice president of public relations for McCormick Spice, president and CEO Emeritus, Institute for Public Relations),

- Lawrence G. Foster (Fellow PRSA, founder and vice-president of the public relations division, Johnson & Johnson),
- Alvin Golin (Fellow PRSA, founder and chairman of Golin Harris),
- Steven J. Harris (vice president of global communications for General Motors),
- Michael Herman (Fellow PRSA, vice chairman and CEO for Catevo Middle East and Africa, LCI Group, Ltd., vice chairman of international development at the Catevo Group Worldwide),
- Ann Higgins (president and CEO of Utopia Communications, Inc.),
- Thomas Hoog (Fellow PRSA, former president and CEO of Hill and Knowlton in United States, currently the senior counselor to the global chairman),
- Jon C. Iwata (senior vice president of communications, IBM Corporation),
- Kirk Stewart (executive vice president at APCO Worldwide, former global vice president of corporate communications for Nike, Inc., and former chairman and chief executive of Manning, Selvage & Lee),
- John Paluszsek (senior counsel, Ketchum, liaison to the United Nations for PRSA, ambassador-at-Large for the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management),
- Isobel Parke (former PRSA national secretary and board member, currently senior counsel and president of Jackson, Jackson & Wagner),
- Betsy Plank (PRSA's first female president, who held positions as executive vice president and treasurer of Edelman Public Relations, and director of public relations for AT&T),
- John Reed (Fellow PRSA, former head of international public relations for John Deere, worked for the U.S. government's overseas PR programs, currently chairman of Consultants in Public Relations),
- Willard D. (Bill) Nielson (former corporate vice president of communications, public affairs and corporate communication, Johnson & Johnson, previously worked with Carl Byoir & Associates and Hill and Knowlton, served two terms as president of the Arthur W. Page Society), and
- Joseph A. Vecchione (former vice president of public relations for Prudential Insurance Company).

In the following findings section, we are interested only in the characteristics and dimensions of ethical leadership and knowledge transfer, and do not need to be able to link comments to specific persons or organizations.

Because there is no single directory of public relations leaders in the United States, a list of potential interviewees was first identified among high-profile executive and board members of the PRSA, the Arthur W. Page Society, and the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations. From the initial contact, some agreed to be interviewed, but others declined. Through

the recommendations of those we contacted, the list of interviewees was expanded through a snowball sampling method to result in 20 completed interviews. For our depth interviews, snowball sampling is an appropriate sampling technique to target a small and select group of public relations leaders scattered geographically and professionally across the United States.

The depth interviews were conducted by the two researchers and a graduate student, who also helped with the transcription. The interviews range from 58 min to 1 hr 27 min each. In a structured interview with open-ended questions, interviewees were encouraged to talk at length about their experiences and views about ethical leadership in public relations, the nature of ethical knowledge, and knowledge transfer, according to their own definitions, rather than tailoring their responses to predetermined categories and questions. Member checking was used during and following the interviews. The conversations were audiotaped with the interviewees' permission and transcribed to yield a rich tapestry of anecdotes, metaphors, and pontifications grounded in interviewees' experiences with ethics and ethical leadership. The transcripts were systematically analyzed following Strauss and Corbin's (1990) approach, beginning with a process of open coding, or identifying the themes that emerged from the raw data, followed by axial and selective coding. For example, we singled out fragments that ranged from a single word (an adjective such as *honest* to characterize an ideal leader) to full pages of single-spaced text (lengthy description of an incident illustrating the modeling of ethical behavior). The process was repeated for fragments relevant to each research question. The fragments were reorganized based on common themes to answer the research questions.

The following section reports the findings, where quotation marks within text denote verbatim speech by the interviewees.

FINDINGS

RQ1: The Significance of Ethics in Public Relations

Although interviewees mostly disagreed on the extent of ethical problems in public relations and the extent to which the topic has been accorded adequate attention, they deemed ethics to be a core element of public relations work and viewed public relations ethics in the larger context of universal ethics rather than a narrow set of professional values. Interestingly, ethics is "an emotionally loaded word." In some instances, the researchers had to first break the ice, or rephrase their questions to approach ethics indirectly or in less technical terms. Beyond their initial apprehension about the topic of discussion, all interviewees demonstrated a clear understanding

of ethics as an important, if not integral, aspect of public relations. Ethics is "basic," "core," "essential," "critical," and the "foundation" of public relations practice. The import of ethics is demonstrated by interviewees' attempts to compare ethics to legal frameworks and to conclude that ethics is "a higher level form of morality." Although the laws are an enforcer of good behavior, ethics speaks to "a higher level of responsibility and accountability" that is "self-imposed," which at the most basic level is to do what is "right," "just," "fair," and to "minimize or avoid harm to stakeholders." In the words of one interviewee, "Ethics is not required, but it's something that great corporations practice."

According to an executive, "Ethics is fundamental to public relations, and it is fundamental to every profession. It is one of those essentials, whether we are talking about PR, law, or medicine." The interviewees firmly believe that, like in any field, ethics should play an integral role in the day-to-day operations of public relations organizations, especially when viewing public relations work as communications aimed at initiating and sustaining people's attitudinal and behavioral changes.

Although there was a consensus about the fundamental import of ethics in public relations work, two diverse trains of thought emerged with regard to the state of ethics in public relations. The first was highly critical of, and disenchanted with, the ethical performance of public relations practitioners, who were rated as "poor," "terrible," and "still can't seem to get it right." "Everyone talks about being ethical, but that's the problem—it's just talk. We PR folks are good at talk," said one executive. Another interviewee pointed to the lack of ethics training in the field: "We don't really give our managers or our young PR professionals training in either management leadership or ethics. That's hurting the integrity of the field, and the credibility of the field." Another, who felt that "poor ethical judgment" is affecting the profession's image, said: "We are the guardians of reputation. That's what we do for a living. As guardians of reputations, we should really guard our own reputation." Here we reproduce an excerpt that illustrates the frustrations felt by those who felt ethics has not received adequate attention:

> I have been told by several top agencies, "We'll train our people how to write a press release, we'll train our people how to deal with media. We are not going to train our people how to be ethical because we don't think that you can do it, and we don't think it's worth the money." That's very frustrating to me because there are other costs involved with being unethical. When you are not an ethical firm, you have higher employee turnover. There is a cost associated with hiring and training an employee. When you are not an ethical firm, you have higher client turnover. You lose a client that is giving you $20,000–$25,000 a month. A lot of people look at these as soft costs. They are not soft costs—they are the costs of doing business.

Others, however, believed that ethical problems were "not peculiar to public relations," and that the profession is "no more or less ethical than others." Public relations' image problem was addressed within the larger context of the general public's abysmal level of trust in institutions in general, and of business specifically, in light of the high-profile scandals plaguing the corporate world in recent years. Said one executive: "Every profession has its problems, and public relations is no exception." Those who lamented public relations' credibility issues were also quick to rise to the its defense, by attributing the problems to the public's lack of understanding of public relations; an unfair imposition of journalistic values on public relations; the highly public nature of public relations work that subjects any transgressions to intense public scrutiny; and the inherent structural problems faced by any young field. One interviewee explained: "One of the special problems in public relations is that it is a profession that is still in progress. Compared to other professions, it is still relatively young as a disciplined profession. So, it is still in the process of becoming, and we are facing many, many more new and profound challenges today than our colleagues did 50 years ago or 20 years ago." Although public relations ethics is "a relatively new" area of study, it is receiving "increasing"—although not necessarily adequate—attention from practitioners and management. However, several interviewees observed that ethics has always been a core element of public relations practice because its inception but was rarely discussed "formally" or "technically" as "ethics."

Public relations ethics was articulated according to a larger framework of universal ethics, in that public relations ethics is grounded in universal values that do not differentiate public relations from other professions. One executive explained: "I don't think the ethics of PR are any different [than] the ethics of any other profession. They are the same exact ethical approach of a doctor, lawyer or fireman. There is a universality to truth, and there's a universality to good manners." Ethics is important to public relations but "but I'm not sure that it is any more important than they are in law or accounting or finance or HR." Here we include other excerpts of conversations that illustrate the universality of ethics in the interviewees' own voices:

> I am very much in favor of high ethical standards for people in the PR profession. But I think it's not distinctive from ethical behavior by anybody. Whether it's taxi drivers not taking you on a tour of the city when you only have to go two blocks or the butcher not putting his thumb on the scale when he is weighing your meat. We are an imperfect people and we always have to be on the lookout for people who are dishonest. I don't think dishonesty is any greater or less in the PR profession than in society at large.

My own experience tells me, and what I truly believe, is that honest behavior for PR people is the same as honest behavior for anybody. And I have taken in the past various things like accreditation and I've sat in meetings of PRSA where they discussed ethics and it usually started with some guy who did something rotten like disclosing private information or whatever. But I find that it's just not different from the ethical behavior of other parts of society and other professions.

RQ2: Characteristics of an Ideal Leader in Public Relations Ethics

Three categories of attitudes and behaviors emerged from interviewees' understanding of an ideal leader in public relations ethics (in descending order of importance): *personal ethics, interpersonal behavior*, and *articulation of ethical standards* (see Table 1).

Personal ethics refers to general moral expectations of any person in any society, acting in any capacity. Unlike professional ethics that govern a

TABLE 1
Ethical Leadership in Public Relations

Characteristics of an ideal leader
Personal ethics
Honesty
Integrity
Trustworthiness
Courage
Empathy
Interpersonal behaviors
Maintains and values relationships
Fairness with others
Respect for others
Compassion
Accepting of other people's failures
Articulation of ethical standards
Verbalization of standards
Show consistency in ethical vision
Hold others accountable for their actions
Put ethics above self or company interests
Ethical knowledge
Implicit by nature
Intuitive
Difficult to verbalize
Intangible
Emotional
Related to personality/character
Not taught directly
Grounded in early childhood education and family upbringing

chosen profession or a workplace, personal ethics is a core set of values that guide a person's day-to-day actions and interactions with others. These individual values lay a foundation for professional ethics but fall short of defining which behaviors are acceptable within a workplace or profession. *Interpersonal behaviors* are actions that contribute to how leaders perceive themselves specifically in relation to other individuals and groups. *Articulation of ethical standards* refers to the means and quality of verbal and nonverbal communication initiated by leaders to set the ethical tone of an organization and/or influence their subordinates' ethical attitudes and behaviors.

Personal Ethics

An ideal leader in public relations ethics must possess a high standard of personal ethics. The most common themes are integrity, trustworthiness, truthfulness, courage, and empathy. The two most cited examples of personal ethics are integrity and trustworthiness. "First of all, a good leader has personal integrity and can be trusted, is trustworthy," an interviewee declared. Interviewees mostly viewed integrity as a disciplined adherence to a moral code of behavior and "not giving in to pressure from anyone" and "a willingness to take decisive action when someone has done something unethical." A trustworthy person is one who is "deserving of trust" and "who can be trusted with confidential information." Interviewees view integrity and trust as the bedrock of their work because a large part of public relations work involves building the image or protecting the reputations of companies and individuals.

The third quality is truthfulness, which interviewees often linked to the concept of credibility. Said one executive: "It is one thing to speak the truth, but if you don't act the truth, you are not doing what you are saying and that hurts your credibility." Truth is "one of the basic values that underlies everything," as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> You tell the truth, and you tell the truth all of the time. Rule number one, particularly in dealing with the media and the public, is that you never lie. All you have going for you is your integrity and if you lose that, you can't be effective in what you are doing. You can call it ethics, but I call it a wonderful, good practice in life—that you are honest with people. I would have sometimes some tough questions coming from the media—if I didn't know the answer, I told them. And if I was able to get the answer I did that, but I never lied. This is what I think, and the people that I worked with also adhered to the same custom, and we were respected, and highly respected. When we told them something, they believed us. Credibility is very important.

Truthtelling, however, is tempered by confidentiality in not revealing clients' trade secrets or other information, with a caveat reflecting the primacy of public interest or "only if the confidentiality does not causes harm to the public."

Courage is fearlessness in speaking out "even when what you are saying is not necessarily welcome" or "challenges the views of others," and "a willingness to admit you've made a mistake." Empathy is "putting yourself in other people's shoes" and "consideration for other people's feelings."

Personal ethics and ethical modeling. Most of the interviewees made a strong connection between personal ethics and ethical modeling. Leadership by example is supported by an existing core set of personal values held dear and consistently demonstrated by a leader. To put it in the words of a question posed by one of the interviewees: "Can you walk the talk?" The idiom, "walk the walk, talk the walk," and its variants ("walk the talk," "walk the walk") emerged consistently. The following excerpts illustrate the significance of personal ethics and ethical modeling, in that a leader leads by example and proves oneself capable of following through with ethical performance instead of subscribing to empty talk redolent of hypocrisy:

> I think the most important quality is that the individual leader has integrity. What I mean by that is that the individual leader walks his or her talk. She holds values dear to her heart and considers them life goals to live by. If she has integrity she lives out those values also in how she leads others—you see what I mean? I think other people who experience integrity like that want to follow that leader. It also helps to develop other people's leadership by example, you know, to see someone with integrity.

> I would say primarily, ethics is taught most of all by example. So, that means that in a company like ours you need to have ethical leaders, people who are ethical in their behaviors. That's the best example, and then working from those examples you can teach other people how those ethical leaders carry out ethical decisions. I think it would almost be impossible to teach ethics in an organization where the leaders were not ethical by example. I think the most powerful teaching tool is the example of the senior leaders in the company, given that you got senior leadership that's ethical.

Personal ethics and universal ethics. The emphasis on personal ethics ties in with the perception of ethics as a larger concept grounded in universal values, rather than professional values. When asked how personal ethics, the quality that most marked the ideal leader in ethics, was learned,

interviewees, without exception, harked back to their personal upbringing and familial backgrounds in explaining how they "knew right from wrong:"

> I learned it long before I started in this profession. I learned it in grade school, grammar school. I learned it from my father. What's right and wrong was taught to me very early. You either have integrity or you don't.

> I start out with the fact that my grandfather was a Christian minister. So I sort of grew up with a different kind of family ethical code of how one behaves.

Professional ethics is an extension of personal ethics, to the extent that it is difficult or impossible to separate the two domains because "personal ethics has to be married with organizational ethics." One interviewee, who refused to discuss professional values, said: "I'm not sure there's a set of ethics for your work life and a set of ethics for your personal life. You know, there's got to be a certain amount of consistency there. Otherwise you'd run the risk of being called a hypocrite." When asked to describe the relationship between personal values and work values, another executive declared: "You either have values or you don't. You don't put them on like a coat when you go to work, or take them off like a coat at the door."

Professional ethics—seen as organizational-specific rules and acceptable behavior—could be learned on the job only if there is already a strong grounding in personal ethics to build upon, as explained by one interviewee:

> Ethics is constituted of personal values and behavior. If you are fortunate with your parents, with your teachers, with your religious leaders, with your associates that you learn to practice ethics from the cradle, you bring that to your formal education and the workplace.

One interviewee used an example about writing to explain the relationship between personal ethics and professional ethics:

> You can become a good writer, you can write good in high school, and you can edit your high school newspapers and so forth but, when you write for public relations it's a different type of writing, and you have to learn those specific skills. It's the same with ethics. You bring your ethical behaviors and standards to the workplace, but in the workplace, you have to learn how those ethical standards and practices are applied to the profession you're in.

Interpersonal Behavior

According to one interviewee: "Ethics is about how you behave, how you treat other people and how you approach a business." Although personal

ethics emerged as the most salient characteristic of ethical leadership, an ideal leader must also exhibit specific values in interactions with people in general, not only his or her subordinates. Interviewees discussed a "passion for building relationships," "fairness with others," "compassion," "a willingness to accept others' failures," and "respect" for others. An ideal leader in ethics not only possesses a "strong feeling for people and other people's problems" but also "sensitivity" to their surroundings and abilities. One interviewee told the story of how she turned away business when she felt that her staff members "were not being treated with respect by the client." It is also important to know subordinates' ethical limits because "you have to know, if you are leading people, what they can accomplish and what's their best bet, and then that's the job you give them."

The following excerpt shows how one executive, through a participative approach, showed her respect for her staff, welcomed input, and offered explanations of her decisions:

> We represented a meat packing client in one of the first male-on-male sexual harassment cases, and 20/20 came after us. It was very difficult because I had some young people on my staff who felt like it violated what they stood for. I said to them, "You don't have to work on this. I believe that this is a case where the media is going after a company where the lead is already written and their minds are already made up. I think if we can help tell the true story of what actually happened there, then we will be behaving ethically." And one young woman said to me, "I don't think I can work on this because I find it sort of a repulsive kind of subject." OK. But she later became one of our team's media backup people. I said, "You really have to be sure what you believe in *per se* because I would never ask anyone to work on, number one, anything that I wouldn't work on myself; and number two, anything that isn't right."

Articulation of Ethical Standards

Another defining characteristic of ethical leadership is the ability to verbally and nonverbally communicate high ethical standards clearly for staff and clients. An ideal leader has clear and exacting "verbalization of standards" and a "consistency in ethical vision" either through "explicitly talking about applying our values in day-to-day decision making," "making public some cases of wrongdoing," or "putting signs on the wall." Regardless of the means in which ethical standards were communicated, "you want the external world and internal world to know what they mean, and how serious you are about it." One executive explained:

> Every corporation has to communicate its values. You got to put the signs on the walls, you got to have the executives saying these things, you got to do the

> business conduct guidelines but, I think for many corporations that really seriously live their values, you have to be willing to make changes in your operations and what you do. And you have to make sure that people see that connection between this behavior and these actions because we are compelled to do these things based on what we value.

Also important are a willingness to hold others accountable, and an ability to put ethics above self or company interests. One interviewee, who turned away business because she felt that a potential client was not forthcoming about the side-effects of a drug, explained: "It's just not worth it. We are not in this business just for the dollars. We're in it for what we stand for." Another executive, who fired staff members for violating her agency's unwritten code of behavior about confidentiality, explained the importance of communicating values and consequences:

> I happen to believe that if somebody does something that is so egregious that requires termination, they should be terminated. That sends a signal to other people inside the organization that that kind of behavior is not going to be tolerated. I think if you don't do that, you run the risk that people begin to think that the rules don't necessarily apply to them, and you've got a variety of other behaviors that you may have to deal with from others if they think that that particular kind of behavior is permissible.

RQ3: Ethics as Tacit Knowledge

Knowledge of ethics appears to be implicit, localized, personal, and often difficult to identify or articulate. Many interviewees could not verbalize the rules that form their ethical knowledge in public relations nor explain their process of ethical reasoning. Beyond defining basic values in terms of truth, honesty, and integrity, interviewees described ethical knowledge as "hard to pin down," "intuitive," "natural," "common sense," "emotional," "gut feel," and "not taught directly"—demonstrating the difficulties in codifying ethical knowledge. One interviewee observed: "We know what is wrong and right but it's implicit because it's not something very tangible. Although we can write about it, it is still hard to impart, explain, or teach someone that knowledge." Another executive preferred to label ethics as "instinctive but not intuitive" because "intuition does not involve rational thought." When asked to explain his ethical reasoning, one interviewee confessed: "I don't know. A lot of it is intuitive. You make a decision to do what you think is right but you can't define it." In explaining the values they

brought to the workplace, interviewees alluded to "personality" and "character." Said one executive: "We are talking about personality. Things that make the difference are intangible values. You can't measure them. You can see them and you can experience them and they are not something you put on a checklist."

Another interviewee said he "can't define it [ethical knowledge]" but has "got to thank Mom and Dad." Interviewees, in consigning ethical knowledge to the realm of the personal, naturally grounded ethics in individual family upbringing:

> I didn't learn it by its name certainly. I don't even know that I learned it. Maybe I observed it. I learned what my father did and what my mother said. When I was six, no one sat down with me and said, "Let's have an ethics talk." It was the atmosphere of the family. I can't identify any further than that. I think that as you get older and you have a proper upbringing you feel uncomfortable in certain questionable conditions.

> Ethics wasn't anything that was ever taught directly. It's things you learn as a child, and it's things you learn as you advance through your professional career to basically know what you know, to basically have some understanding about what's right and what's wrong.

> There is an implicit core of ethical decision making that we inherit partially in our genes but mostly in our upbringing, but the crunch comes when you have to take a general ethical principle and see if it applies in a specific work situation. I don't think there are textbooks that are terribly helpful in that regard. You can take the commandments and the sermons and other such principles and they are fine as principles, but when you have to apply them in a specific situation they need a lot of parsing.

> As trite as it might sound, it definitely is upbringing. That's why the home and family and neighbors and the people you grow up with are important—you absorb it. I don't think you can learn it late in life. Fundamentally, it's the golden rule taught awfully young .... It has to be taught when you are a child and absorbed as a child rather than later.

As suggested by the preceding quote, a number of interviewees believed that ethical knowledge is best imbued in childhood because by adulthood, "you either have it or you don't." One executive related how a former CEO of Citibank told him, "You get your ethics when you are young and from your family. You can't manufacture them on your own." These perceptions about the intangible and personal characteristics of ethical knowledge colored the interviewees' assessment of the effective approaches of knowledge transfer of ethics in public relations.

RQ4: Transfer of Ethical Knowledge

All of the interviewees concurred on the need for better transfer of ethical knowledge in public relations. Although many interviewees struggled to come to terms with the challenges posed by the implicit, personal, and intangible nature of ethical knowledge, they believed that transfer of ethical knowledge could still be useful, particularly for newcomers to the field.

Ethical knowledge transfer is grounded not so much as in professional values but more in the personal values that practitioners bring to the workplace. A recurring theme is the salience of personal values and family upbringing: "A young person coming into this field has to bring with him/her a set of ethics that began if not in the cradle then at the kitchen table with the effective parents, family, friends and educational institutions." Based on this reasoning, public relations ethics is merely a new application of a basic set of personal ethics, consistent with the modeling perspective, with particular attention to the process of motivation (punishment):

> People have the ethics they grew up with or the moral quality they grew up with. Then you get into situations which are business situations and the line between what is proper and what is right sometimes can be a very fine line. Most of the things that get people in trouble are the gray areas, not black and white, yes or no. And in those areas, it's a judgment call. The punishment for violations is critical because it makes everybody realize that it is more than just talk and the company is serious about doing all it can to prevent ethical violations.

The importance ascribed to personal ethics shaped by family and personal upbringing may detract from the expediency of professional training in ethics in public relations, but is consistent with the interviewees' understanding of ethical knowledge as mostly implicit, personal, intangible, and difficult to identify. Thus, modeling—instead of formal approaches through code of ethics, case studies or ethics workshops—is viewed as the most effective method to transfer knowledge about ethics. As explained by one interviewee:

> I have worked for some very, very fine bosses who through the lines and through the years took tough stands because it was the right thing to do. Sometimes it wasn't the popular thing to do, but it was the right thing to do. You begin your career working for people who are trying to do the right thing; you soon learn that is the way it ought to be.

Public relations practitioners are often driven to commit ethical lapses not because they did not know right from wrong, but because they received "pressure from unethical bosses." One interviewee noted:

> Employees generally have the ethics of their boss. Because they want to succeed, they want to keep their job and they want to get promotions. It is their bosses, the managers, the executives where the educational efforts should be made.

Consistent with modeling, many interviewees believed that mentorship is one of the more useful approaches in the transfer of ethical knowledge. Mentorship need not be a formal initiative—as noted by an interviewee:

> As soon as possible, either formally or informally, a young person coming into PR ought to find a mentor within the organization. It could be a direct supervisor or could be someone else who is available to discuss ethical issues and other things as well but especially ethical issues and perhaps explain the nuances of a situation that might not occur to a younger person with less experience.

Most interviewees were unenthusiastic about codes of ethics, which were "unenforceable" and "too general to be useful." Even those supportive of codes conceded the problem of enforcement, as explained by one interviewee:

> I am very supportive of the ethics code. The only negative aspect is that our field is not structured in a way where we can enforce it effectively. First of all, if you are not a member of the PRSA, technically you are not bound by it. Secondly, years ago we used to have a process where someone who was brought up on ethical charges could conceivably lose membership and we don't do that anymore because it seemed to be very impractical to administer that. The ethics code is there; it is a good guide, but it's voluntary. It is not enforced. It is not like the legal profession where you can be disbarred.

The few interviewees who were supportive of codes viewed them as particularly useful for young people entering the field who "need a firm set of guidelines to tell them what is acceptable and what is not." Codes are useful if they are "well-written," "addressed issues specifically rather than generally," or "spelt out the penalties clearly"—challenges that are hard to meet, as conceded by many interviewees regardless of their position on codes.

There were mixed reactions to whether ethics could be taught formally in a public relations organization through structured training programs and formal methods of instruction such as lectures, seminars, and workshops, because several interviewees grappled with the notions of ethics as a personal attribute ("You either have it or you don't") that is mostly acquired

before adulthood (''I don't think you can learn it late in life''). These traits of ethical knowledge that made it an implicit form of knowledge—''intangible,'' ''based on gut feel,'' and ''hard to articulate''—were among the reasons that, as explained by an interviewee, ''it is so difficult to say, 'Okay, we are going to have a seminar on ethics.' '' Structured training is useful for ''raising awareness about ethics,'' but not necessarily effective in instigating actual behavior change, which is heavily dependent on a person's upbringing and personal values. For example, the practice of getting employees to sign an ethics statement every year is useful to serve as ''a reminder about the importance of ethics,'' but ''does not change people's behavior.''

An ethics officer for a large public relations agency explained his agency's comprehensive program that covers ethics, legal issues, and moral reasoning:

> The way we teach ethics is first we go through a review of the legalities involved with public relations. So we go through all of the government laws that affect public relations as a form of speech—be sure that our people are aware of the legal requirements of the profession. After that, we teach them what our policies are, what policies on disclosure are, for example. Then we teach them an ethical decision-making model. Relatively simple. We also give them feedback on instrument on their style of ethical decision-making. Then the main part of that training is that we have carefully prepared about ten vignettes, case examples, and scenarios that are gray areas. And we ask people in small groups to discuss what they would do and compare notes on how they'd use that four-step decision-making model applied to this scenario. Basically what we're encouraging is that there is no easy black and white answer, but that it matters a lot that you discuss the ethics of the work that is going on and you give voice to any ethical concern that you have, and that we want ethics to be an equal part of the ongoing work process here at the agency. We don't teach it as a right and a wrong, and that you need to learn the right. We teach that it's more often a decision on what's more right than less right.

However, he conceded, ''There is no substitute for those individual leaders acting in an ethical manner .... There's just no substitute for that. First you have to have people who care about ethical behavior and want to work in an ethical way.''

Several interviewees who believed ethical reasoning can be taught formally referred to scenario stimulation, case studies, and role playing, but pointed out one main drawback: the lack of a definitive answer in such exercises—which can also be a strength:

> Some of the most powerful ways that people learn ethics and values is through scenarios and role playing and case studies. Because what you learn in those is that there is no right or wrong answer .... You have to apply judgment and

> you can't go to a rule book or a manual and get an answer because we cannot anticipate and publish, you know, every situation and circumstance that could possibly come up that requires human judgment.

This opinion reflects the use of structured and formal approaches as means to "raise awareness about ethics" and to provide employees with "tools of reasoning" rather than to instigate ethical behavior.

DISCUSSION

In a departure from the more common normative and deontological studies in public relations ethics, this study is unique in that it extends the public relations ethics literature by focusing on ethical leadership, a timely and little researched topic. The depth interviews offer a significant empirical contribution to understanding public relations leaders' perspectives on ethical leadership, ethical knowledge, and approaches to ethical knowledge transfer.

The findings convey several important implications. First, the interviewees' conceptualizations of ethical leadership in public relations as leadership by example (through personal ethics, interpersonal behaviors and articulation of ethical standards) suggests a need for a theoretical shift in public relations ethics away from a preoccupation with formal and structured approaches to transferring ethical knowledge such as codes of ethics, case studies, and ethics training programs to focus on individual accountability on the part of public relations managers and executives. Indeed, if public relations practitioners' behaviors and organizations' ethical tone is shaped mostly by leadership, public relations managers and executives must then confront the issues of ethics and moral accountability head-on, and can no longer relegate ethics solely to the realms of organizational ethics initiatives and constraints beyond their control. This is especially true when well-meaning initiatives in the shape of ethics seminars, lectures, case studies, and codes often denigrate into superfluous exercises that merely pay lip service to ethics.

Second, in articulating public relations ethics as a set of values grounded firmly in universal ethics, the public relations executives elevated public relations practice to higher levels of accountability. Our findings confirm the beliefs widely documented in the literature (e.g., Paluszek, 1989; Pratt, 1991), that ethics is core to public relations, but there is no unique ethics for public relations that is separate from the ethics of ordinary human beings in a moral society. Our interviewees subscribed to the axiom, "Human beings first, public relations professionals second." By subjecting

public relations to the same standards as any other established professions or society at large, interviewees rejected the notion that public relations ethics is merely an occupational construct shaped by tacit rules and the peculiar demands of public relations practice. This generalized approach to ethics exposes public relations work to broader and more intensive public scrutiny, and prevents practitioners from seeking refuge in a narrow, in-group set of values that are less likely to appeal to the publics and stakeholders.

Third, although the implicit, personal and intangible characteristics of ethical knowledge may explain to some extent the challenges of transferring knowledge about ethics within public relations organizations, more attention should be paid to understanding the relationship between tacit and non-tacit knowledge in public relations ethics, and in the potential for tacit knowledge to complement, support, and reinforce formal ethics initiatives. A good example is codes of ethics. From the perspective of moral development theory (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1965), codes of ethics and formalized guides do not rank high in moral development, which can occur only when people go beyond a stage of being other-directed by rules to an inner-directed stage where rules are internalized. The progression is from a heteronomous stage where right and wrong are defined externally to an autonomous stage where persons use reflective judgment to assess what is right and wrong, and are able to explain the meaning and relevance of a rule. Curtin and Boynton (2000) made a similar argument that codes may limit moral development and ''might be applied more as a professional prop than as a tool for thoughtful decision making'' (p. 416). Our interviewees' near-unanimous rejection of codes is perhaps a reflection of public relations' growth, especially when considering codes to be more useful for young practitioners than for seasoned veterans.

In addition, from the perspective of universal ethics, public relations practitioners have no special rights or moral responsibilities distinct from their rights and responsibilities as moral persons, and therefore codes of ethics are not useful and may even be pernicious. However, based on our findings, we suggest that codes of ethics, if well-crafted and well-deliberated, can still be a valuable resource, especially for younger practitioners. The current trend of codes of ethics is to shun penalties and to adopt an educational, rather than punitive, approach,[2] but more thought and energy should be devoted to the crafting of codes' language, specificity, enforcement and tone

[2]The PRSA (2009) Code of Ethics states the following in its preamble: ''Emphasis on enforcement of the Code has been eliminated. But, the PRSA Board of Directors retains the right to bar from membership or expel from the Society any individual who has been or is sanctioned by a government agency or convicted in a court of law of an action that is in violation of this Code.''

toward the fundamental goal of establishing congruence between an organization's formal policies and its informal norms, consistent with the recommendations of McDonald and Nijhof (1999) and knowledge management perspectives (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Polanyi, 1966; Sullivan, 1998). The need for congruence between formal and informal values is bolstered by our findings that support the notion of ethical knowledge as tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Polanyi, 1966; Sullivan, 1998). As suggested by McDonald and Nijhof (1999), structured and formalized training programs and topic workshops that include case studies and scenario simulation are only one part of the equation. Case studies, for example, are useful for raising awareness, stimulating reflection, and tying practice to theory (Christians, Rotzoll, Fackler, McKee, & Kreshel, 2008; Veatch, 1977) and serve as a support system for ethical modeling. The complete equation is dependent on the existence of congruence between formal initiatives and the informal values exhibited by leadership through demonstrations of personal ethics, interpersonal behaviors, and articulation of ethical standards.

Our findings, in capturing the significance of role modeling in public relations ethics, support the social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), which suggests that a person learns not necessarily much from direct experiences but from observing other people's actions and consequences. More resources should be devoted to mentorship programs in public relations, both formally and informally. Theoretically, the literature has focused on prosocial behavior, but our findings suggest that unethical leaders could also set an unethical tone and pressure subordinates into committing unethical actions. That leadership is so influential to the extent that unethical leaders beget unethical employees is consistent with the social learning perspective, where modeling not only could take the form of positive behavior but also the negative (Jones & Kavanagh, 1996; Peterson, 2002; White & Lean, 2008). More research is needed to understand the impact of unethical public relations executives on their organizations' ethical tone, and subordinates' ethical attitudes and behaviors.

Ethical knowledge is complex as it encompasses both the personal and professional domains. This study found that personal ethics, with two related building blocks—interpersonal behaviors and articulation of ethical standards—form the basis of ethical modeling, but understanding of their dynamics is still limited. For example, in explicating the role of interpersonal behaviors, Gilligan's (1982) Ethics of Care, which focuses on the importance of relationships, offers an important theoretical approach to ethics for public relations as a practice that involves multiple stakeholders.

Future research should test the role of ethical excellence in leadership and successful public relations work. The resulting three characteristics of an

ideal leader in ethics can be further empirically tested through surveys of public relations executives and experimental research methods, for instance testing the effects of an executive's verbalization of ethical standards on subordinates' ethical decision-making. Another research direction lies in empirically testing the characteristics of ideal leaders through Rest's (1974) Defining Issues Test that builds on the work of Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Although human beings share a set of universal values (e.g., Bok, 1995; Mieth, 1997), ethical leadership and public relations values may be subject to contextual expression of political environments, social norms, and cultural orientations. Hofstede's (1980) five cultural dimensions have offered public relations scholar a different prism to examine values (Kang & Mastin, 2008; Vasquez & Taylor, 1999; Wu & Stewart, 2005). Organizational culture is another important research locus, as it shapes and is, in turn, shaped by individual values and social norms. Further research can also consider replicating our study with a broader sample of public relations leaders to understand the ethical values driving public relations practices across organizational, cultural and national boundaries.

We acknowledge the possible limitations of our sample of interviewees. Due to our interest in leaders in the field, we interviewed high-profile practitioners and pioneers in the field who have extensive careers in public relations, and who currently hold or have held managerial and executive positions in corporations and agencies. They are typically older than most general practitioners (we did not specifically ask for their age), and only four of our 20 interviewees were female (reflecting the realities of public relations as a traditionally male-dominated field until recently, especially at the executive level). Few of the interviewees have formal degrees in public relations, which were largely unavailable to them as pioneers in the field, although all of them recognized the importance of public relations education and are currently playing influential and active roles in advancing public relations education and/or the profession through their positions in the PRSA, the Arthur W. Page Society, and the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations. Research with larger and more diverse samples is needed.

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