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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150525/Comm.v23.1>

ISSN 2415-0525 (Online)
Communitas 2018 23: 1-17

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ART OR DARK ART? MORAL FAILURE AND ETHICAL OBLIGATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

ABSTRACT

Ethical failures are not just philosophical problems, but also economic problems that hold significant social and political consequences for the social and communal contexts in which these are enacted. Recent ethical scandals such as Bell Pottinger and Cambridge Analytica have reawakened public debate on ethical standards in professional practice. While some research on PR roles has been conducted in the South African context since 2002, there are no formally documented studies regarding the moral philosophy and ethics of PR practice in South Africa. This article seeks to determine how South African PR practitioners respond to their ethical obligations. Research findings confirm that partisan values still dominate and that contexts of practice do not facilitate ethical practice by meeting ethical obligations through ethics of care and communality. The findings seem to indicate that the roots of ethical failures in the industry run deep. South African PR practice will continue to be regarded as a “dark art” unless it can free itself of moral constraints inherent to the reflexive modernist PR practices and assumptions that prevail. To facilitate a transition away from compliance to codes of conduct towards greater moral accountability, moral character in role enactment must be engaged with on a more profound level.

Keywords: public relations; ethics; moral framework; communality; ethical PR practice; Ubuntu; communitarian ethics; moral accountability; Bell Pottinger; Cambridge Analytica

INTRODUCTION

The world, and business in particular, seems to be in great need of ethical reconsideration and moral regeneration. As highlighted by Fiordi (2012), “the erosion of moral standards appears to be deepening” and these ethical failures are not just philosophical problems, but also economic problems that spill over into the social realm where these decisions are enacted. Consequently, ethical business failures are not

simply enacted in financial and economic contexts, but also hold significant social and political consequences for social and communal contexts.

Most recently, the failure of British firm Bell Pottinger to uphold the highest ethical standards in the practice of public relations, and to uphold the standing of the profession as a whole, proved so damaging to its reputation that it culminated not only in the termination of its membership of the UK Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA), but also in its business failure when it was forced to close doors within weeks of the scandal, and despite its best effort to repair its tarnished professional image. However, the moral and business failure of Bell Pottinger cannot simply be understood as a failure to adhere to industry codes of conduct, but should be understood at a much deeper level as a failure of moral philosophy that resulted from a lack of respect for communal values and the societal context in which Bell Pottinger plied its “dark arts”.

Similarly, Facebook has had to apologise publicly for the emergent Cambridge Analytica privacy scandal that is embroiling the network in a legal and regulatory nightmare. It involves the collection of personally identifiable data of up to 87 million Facebook users, which was allegedly used to covertly influence voter opinion on behalf of political clients (BBC 2018).

Both these scandals are significant for reintroducing public debate on ethical standards in professional practice, especially within the social media and online interaction spaces. Both these failures also demonstrated that codes of conduct are not sufficient to protect business enterprises against moral failures. In this regard, Rossouw (2013) argues that to facilitate a transition away from compliance to codes of conduct, moral character in role enactment must be engaged with on a more profound level than codes of conduct compel practitioners to do. However, in a world of global expansion and heightened public awareness of ethical issues, “moral intuition and ethical standards are neither intuitive nor standard” (Robbertson & Crittenden 2003: 391). Ethical dilemmas can be regarded as systemic as well as specific, inherent in the way contemporary organisations operate, or choose to function, as much as in the particular nature of the professional practice (Harrison & Galloway 2005). In the wake of the Bell Pottinger scandal a growing number of calls have been made from within the industry to drive professional accountability and ethics by including it as a formal measure of effectiveness. However, while several studies on PR roles have been conducted in the South African context since 2002, there are no formally documented studies available that investigate the moral philosophy and ethics of public relations practice in the country. In an effort to address this knowledge gap, this article seeks to determine how South African public relations practitioners respond to ethical obligations in their practice.

MORALITY AND ETHICALITY

Over the last few decades, communication practitioners have increasingly found themselves subjected to what Ryan and Martinson (1984: 27) refer to as individual relativism. Individual relativism requires that “each individual must establish his or her

own moral base lines” by constantly weighing and trying to balance their own position with the needs and expectations of the company, and with their responsibility or accountability to act in the interest of the greater good (*ibid.*). Individual ethics depends on the extent to which an individual judges a certain issue or action to be morally important. Individuals can adopt either relativism or absolutism as a moral perspective for ethical decision-making (Han *et al.* 2013). Relativists deny the existence of universal and absolute ethical principles, and tend to understand and apply their ethical standards based on their society, culture and system, whereas absolutists prefer to consistently apply ideal standards when making moral judgements (Han *et al.* 2013: 557). These authors note that relativism may impede moral judgement, while absolutism may increase moral tension. Sparks and Pan (2010) suggest that ethical value judgements are neither absolute nor relative, but instead range along a continuum of ethicality where individual ethical values reflect a personal evaluation of the degree to which some behaviour or course of action is ethical or unethical. The existence of degrees of moral status best explains the forced trade-offs among “the urgent interests of different beings” (Metz 2012: 389).

As noted by Green (1993: 221), efforts to construct morality “on the foundations of a rationally justifiable principle or sets of principles” no longer hold, because there is a tendency to favour the “situated and particular over the universal and general”. As such, scientific and moral knowledge is not based on an ahistorical framework or philosophy, but rather results from dialogue and inter-subjective agreement about which criteria have greater value and relevance. Green (*ibid.*) suggests that the rejection of unitary narratives and justifications opens the way for acceptance of plurality and difference, and has assisted in establishing “otherness, difference and marginality” as valid modes of approach to experience. De George (2006: 381) argues that by embracing other modes of experience practitioners can expand their views on justice and raise their consciousness by considering various points of view using a variety of criteria.

Ethics of inter-subjectivity may assist in calibrating personal ideals of morality in relation to a concern for the wellbeing of others. Becker (2013: 20) stresses the usefulness of viewing ethics as a relationship of the self to the other that does not reduce the fundamental being of others to something that is to be understood. Becker (2013: 20-21) relates the responsibility for the adoption of the perspective of the “other” to Levinas’ (1991) ethics of inter-subjectivity, which alternates between “duty-based norms about how to meet the needs of the other, and spontaneously responding to the face and the voice of the other and the expression the other’s needs in this encounter”. The complexity of accountability, from this perspective, is vested in not simply assuming ethical responsibility for the “Other” but also in assuming broader responsibility that extends to the “Other’s other”. Levinas (1991) suggests such a stance requires a process of substitution where the self is put “in place of the other by taking responsibility for the other’s responsibilities” (in Becker 2013: 20). Becker (*ibid.*) notes that the responsibility for the Other is not based on the notion of “transactional symmetry or reciprocity” that has consistently been advocated for in most of the body of knowledge about modernist PR theory and practice. Instead, ethicality stems from the dialogical nature of the relationship in that symbolic interaction only becomes

possible through closeness or interaction with the other and cannot be accomplished through monologue communication of information. Becker (*ibid.*) suggests that while the voice of the other must be heard, the ethics of responsibility will determine the judgement that prevails. It is therefore unavoidable that decision-makers in business settings experience ethical conflicts “between their given accountability and duty to various stakeholders in situations involving conflicts of interests, but also with regard to their organisation’s interests and their personal interests” (Han *et al.* 2013: 553).

Holmström and Kjaerbeck (2007) view contemporary ethical ideals such as social responsibility, dialogue and symmetrical communication as a response to the challenges of modernisation and globalisation. Based on the work of Luhman, Holmström and Kjaerbeck (2007: 7) see an “evolution in the perception of legitimacy and in the legitimising practice of organisations”, which is evident in the progression from reflexivity to reflection. Reflection involves an attempt to see the world through the eyes of others in order to understand other perspectives and other perceptions of reality. This stands in stark contrast to the narrow and explicit view offered by reflexivity where the organisation is “characterised by blind self-presentation from within” (Holmström & Kjaerbeck 2007: 9). This also facilitates a degree of openness that is not possible for organisations with mono-contextual worldviews, and the shifts in perspective from a functionalist to a co-creational perspective, in which the co-creation of meaning and building of relationships is emphasised.

APPROACHING ETHICAL PRACTICE

Exercising sound moral judgement in situations of self-imposed moral dilemmas require an “integrated moral/ethical stance based on experience, expertise, a highly developed awareness of social demands and an apparently over-arching comprehension of the balance between personal, company, social and client needs” (De Araugo & Beal 2013: 358). Tran (2008: 161-162) suggests that ethics appeal to individuals with a strong sense of role morality and which entails three types of ethical considerations, namely moral awareness (recognition of moral problems), moral dilemmas (moral judgements) and moral laxity (moral failures).

Modernist approaches to public relations practice are based on the premise that most practitioners have assumptions about the social role of public relations. It is evident that traditional public relations takes a decidedly modernist perspective (Holtzhausen 2000; 2011; 2012; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002; Mumby 1997; Toth 2002) in which control and certainty, clearly measurable objectives, and two-way communication culminate in clear ethical judgements (Boyd & Van Slette 2009: 329). However, Boyd and Van Slette (*ibid.*) suggest that a postmodern lens may be more suited to situated and cultural style public relations practices.

Although there is no single postmodern theory, Holtzhausen (2012: 13) argues that as a philosophy it stands critical of modernist thinking that pursues a single dominant truth or ideology (Westernism), and which marginalises those who do not prescribe to this ideology. From this perspective it is also clear that there are no neutral approaches to the practice of public relations, because it is deeply embedded in the

social and cultural values of the societies in which they originate. Postmodern public relations practice forces acknowledgement of some of the deficiencies of traditional public relations, and questions some of the assumptions and exploitative practices on which these are based. Berger (1999: 245) describes these practices in the following terms: "...ideological distortion must be enacted, and must be sustained on a terrain of struggle, consisting of multiple sites in which competing world views intersect to establish meaning, and gain consent for particular outcomes". In this regard Mumby (1997: 23) argues that "far from marginalising communication as a human activity postmodernism contributes to a more insightful understanding of the processes through which communication, identity and power intersect".

Dutta-Bergman (2005: 281) suggests that the (ethical) challenge particularly relates to share of voice because "understandings of civil society do not take into account the marginalisation of voices which is accomplished through the exclusionary practices of capitalism". Dutta-Bergman (2005: 287) thus argues in favour of a public relations role in society where the practitioner acts against marginalisation and silencing, and facilitates the expression of marginalised voices. Holtzhausen (2012: 102) notes that while the traditional role of public relations practitioners has been to uphold the status quo, "the modernist class struggle becomes a postmodern struggle for asserting one's values in the face of dominant social values", thereby creating possibilities for social change. Holtzhausen (2012) thus suggests that the activist role has become the postmodern equivalent of traditional role-based agency.

Botan (1997: 151) regards ethicality as closely related to the nature of the professional role that is enacted by the public relations professional. Botan (1997) argues that traditionally public relations has been practised at the technician level, which can be regarded as less ethical because of the contractual basis of the role, which reduces the professional to a "hired gun" (Botan 1997). According to Botan (1997: 195), this approach negates both the ethical role of the practitioner, and the dialogic approach to practice because the practitioner is required to cede "unquestioned authority to decide major ethical issues" to someone else. As a result, Botan (1997: 196) argues that the notion of ethical public relations is equated to "being loyal to the client or employer's strategic interests, or being good at the craft". Edgett (2002: 23) however suggests that the function itself is neither good or bad, but rather that it is in the manner in which the function is carried out in accordance with "some philosophical framework that goes beyond codes of practice (that) determine the rightness or wrongness of actions". Botan (1997: 196) contends that whereas traditional approaches to public relations instrumentalises and relegates publics to a secondary role, dialogue elevates publics to the status of communication equal with the organisation, thereby recognising a multiplicity of viewpoints and the right of informed choice. Botan (1997: 197) distinguishes two broad classes of public relations roles, namely technical or strategic/managerial roles: as monologue communicators, technicians see "communication partners as the means to an end", while a dialogical view as enacted by strategists sees "communicative partners as ends in themselves". In this regard Hutton (1999: 209) suggests that "the central organizing theme of public relations theory and practice" is in fact relational.

ETHICS IN PRACTICE

Hodges (2006: 85) contends that a culture of practice consists of systems of occupational practices that are legitimised within particular communities of practice. As such it represents the life worlds of practitioners (their own cognitive processes, thoughts, values, previous experiences and knowledge), which are then subjected to the effects of “occupational socialisation”. Each of the body of knowledge, or moral philosophy, provides its own basis for rationalising and legitimising human motivation in decision-making and action. Werder (2008: 122) suggests that the subjective norm results from the individual’s perception of the social pressures to perform in accordance with the expectations of particular referents. The practice of public relations and communication has a long history in which partisan values have dominated the practice. This approach stems from the well-established notion of PR agency that requires practitioners to symbolically (re)-present their clients (self)-interests. However, as public relations paradigms have evolved, the focus has shifted away from a strict preoccupation with organisational and managerial interests towards a more reflective and inclusive approach to PR practice (Edwards 2012) that both questions and resists normative practices and existing power structures. Accordingly, a postmodern perspective on morality places the burden of ethical decision-making solely on the individual professional that must question and resist existing power structures and decision-making practices (Holtzhausen 2015). As such PR practitioners are called on to serve as the ethical conscience of their business organisation, and to increasingly provide management with ethical counsel (*ibid.*). Ethics in this context should be viewed in reference “to questions about human flourishing, about what it means for life to be well lived”; while “morality designates something narrower, the constraints that govern how we should and should not treat other people” (Appiah 2008: 37). From this perspective, ethical conscience resides in “a professional who raises concerns when his or her organisation’s actions might bring about potential ethical problems leading to troubling consequences for various parties, who may be individuals, groups, organisations ... both within and outside the organisation” (Neill & Drumwright 2012: 221).

Scholars such as Hurn (2008) argue that ethical principles are devised mainly from the fundamental beliefs and value systems developed within a culture, and as such ethics attempts to tell us what is and what is not morally acceptable within a particular society or culture. Organisations that are dominated by exchange relationships and are often unwilling to incur costs to build communal relationships, incur greater costs from negative publicity, unfavourable legislation, and other reputational costs that result from non-communal relationships (Grünig 2000). Edwards (2005: 269-288) suggests that rapid changes in the context of practice require reconsideration of the nature of exchange relations between social agents, and the social contexts that mediate their interaction. Grünig (2000) first emphasised the importance of communality as a professional value when he suggested that collaboration, collectivism and communal relationships should be at the core of what is valued as a profession; and that it should guide professional PR practice. Mourkogiannis (2014) sees morality as reflected in a deeply felt awareness of the self, the circumstances and the potential of the calling. Thus any discussion of the value of ethical communication practice for society must

begin with a concern for the nature and integrity of community. Based on the ethics of care, a communal moral framework is based on three principles, namely that any claim of truth is to be validated through co-operative enquiry; that communities of co-operative inquiry should validate common values that become the basis of mutual responsibilities of all community members; and that all citizens should have equal access and participation in the power structures of society (Tam 1998). These premises “downplay the values of individuality, autonomy, and personal rights, so prevalent in other ethical theories, in favour of a focus on the virtues and actions that support the interests of society as a whole” (Bennett-Woods 2005: 32).

UBUNTU AS MORAL FRAMEWORK FOR SOUTH AFRICAN PR PRACTICE

South African roles research conducted by Tindall and Holtzhausen (2011) support several previous studies that point to the importance of socio-cultural influences, such as the historical perspectives, worldviews, culture, and ethnicity unique to a particular context of practice. These findings suggest that roles should be considered in relation to the context in which they are performed. Their 2011 study suggests that the enactment of the cultural interpreter role is influenced by the practitioners' worldview. South African practitioners included in their study were able to perform this role more often because of their balanced Euro-Afrocentric worldview, which is more inclusive of multiple perspectives and is therefore more beneficial in diverse multi-cultural environments such as in South Africa.

The applicability of Ubuntu as a moral philosophy for public relations practice in South Africa may reside in “the emphasis all explanations of Ubuntu place on its nature as a communitarian ethic, and (which) is often contrasted with ‘Western individualism’” (West 2014: 48). Previous research in this area has contributed by providing an introduction to the concept and several interpretations of how Ubuntu could apply to business and business ethics. As a communitarian philosophy that stresses the importance of interpersonal relationships and values, such as harmony and care, Ubuntu is clearly relevant to the South African business sphere. Ubuntu is based on the maxim, which Metz (2012: 391) notes is usually translated as either “a person is a person through other persons” or “I am because we are”. Metz (2012: 348) argues that the more a “being is capable of being part of a certain communal relationship, the greater its moral status”. Metz (*ibid.*) therefore grounds moral status in relational properties and proposes a modal-relational approach that reflects salient sub-Saharan moral views of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu as a philosophy is characterised by virtues such as tolerance, harmony and compassion towards the other, as well as inclusivity and the embracing of social justice (West 2014). All of these can be regarded as pertinent to postmodern communication management and practice. As a communitarian philosophy, Ubuntu emphasises strong connections between people, encouragement of collaboration, diminished emphasis on self-serving individualism, and the valuing of the greater good in ethical decision-making (Bennett-Woods 2005). This approach to moral philosophy also resonates with Levinas' (1991) ethics of inter-subjectivity, which is based on the relationship of one to the Other, and the Third Other, and the notion of

substitution, as discussed above. By following an ethic of caring, relationship-building and community, public relations practitioners who situate themselves in the complex social environment of their communities and stakeholders allow others direct access to their institutions (Holtzhausen 2015). Building social capital in any society begins with a commitment to support the collective interests of the community (Heath 2000), therefore any discussion of the value of ethical communication practice for society must begin with a concern for the nature and integrity of community. Ultimately, a communitarian philosophy like Ubuntu can have the greatest value for the philosophy and practice of public relations if it strengthens the democratic process through values of collaboration and collectivism.

However, Mersham *et al.* (2011) argue that South African public relations has yet to realise its full responsibilities to the urban and rural classes of Africa. These scholars point to the tremendous gap that separates public relations practice from the needs and aspirations of millions of people in Africa, and which in their view can only be met through establishing communal relationships and approaches to public relations practice within the African social and political context.

While there are no formally documented studies available regarding the moral philosophy and ethics of public relations practice in South Africa, there is some personal and anecdotal evidence that South African practice seems to reflect some of the values that underlie Ubuntu. Because the trustworthiness of anecdotal evidence and personal experience cannot be verified, this is a limitation to the understanding of how ethical public relations practice is approached in the South African context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is exploratory in nature and utilised a qualitative research design. A qualitative research design allows for an in-depth investigation to determine how South African practitioners respond to their ethical obligations in their public relations practice. The sub-questions were as follows:

- ◆ How do ethical dilemmas affect South African public relations practice?
- ◆ How do South African public relations practitioners respond to the ethical dilemmas they face in their practice?
- ◆ How is the modal relational framework of Ubuntu reflected in South African public relations practice?

The population of this study was PR practitioners who are employed in both South African agency and corporate contexts. Non-probability purposive sampling was utilised, and semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants. The purposive non-probability sample included 12 female PR practitioners who are representative of all South African race group designations. The selected PR practitioners had between four and seven years' experience in the field at the time of the interviews. Seven of the interviews were conducted with practitioners who are employed in agency contexts, while the other five interviews were conducted with

practitioners who are employed in client systems. The use of open-ended questions allowed for follow-up questions that assisted in developing in-depth understanding of the participants' responses. All participants consented to voice recording of the interviews. Notes were also taken during each interview, and voice recordings were transcribed to assist with the process of data analysis. Data analysis consisted of thematic content analysis of the transcribed material and this process assisted in the identification of similar themes, categories or relationships in the participants' responses. Reliability and trustworthiness were assured by adhering to all academic conventions to ensure qualitative measures of quality, namely transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability (Starman 2014: 6).

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

The research findings offer many valuable insights into the South African PR professional context and the nature of the ethical dilemmas that South African PR practitioners face. In general, practitioners demonstrate a sound understanding of what constitutes morality and how ethical considerations should inform their response to ethical dilemmas. However, despite this high level of awareness and knowledge of the concepts that underlie ethical PR practice, client systems still tend to dominate the process of ethical decision-making. As a result, the participants stress the importance of aligning individual and organisational values with societal values. The majority of the participants indicated that misalignment of these value sets constitute their main source of moral tension and role strain. As one participant states,

It is a constant changing field and constant changing environment. I think people are becoming a lot more aware of how quickly communication can go wrong. It's sharing information, looking at what works, not only in South Africa also in other countries ... and just trying to identify issues and how these issues were dealt with. An important part of communication is listening and having an understanding of ethics and the importance of being an ethical company and an ethical person.

Tendency towards moral relativism

It is evident from the research findings that a number of participants are adopting moral relativism as a moral approach. This is evident from the importance that is attached to the constantly weighing and balancing of their own position with the needs and expectations of the company, and with that of society at large. However, reference was also made to the moral tension that arises as a result of organisational culture, policies, procedures and red tape. The research findings further indicate that practitioners grapple with establishing their own moral baselines, especially in contexts where there is preference for consistently applying ideal standards when making moral judgements. As one participant notes

You do go into it knowing that you are going to be representing a brand which may or may not stand for the same things as you do. And although you said that you would like to be as transparent as possible ... you can only be as transparent as the company wants you to be.

In these instances, it is clear that the practitioner's role is often negated to that of paid consultant, gatekeeper and advisor, whose role is limited to promoting other people's interests. Such an instrumental view of the role negates any notion of ethical practice. Instead, subjective norms for acceptable behaviour is then established based on the individual's perception of the social pressures to perform in accordance with the expectations of particular referents. As one respondent noted, "...I basically have to come up with solutions that work for agency as effectively as possible to meet client expectations". Another respondent who states that, "At the end of the day you don't really represent yourself, you represent another stakeholder, who is your client", also supports this perception. The duality and ambiguity of individual relativism is experienced because "...at the end of the day you are representing your own personal brand as well as the agency that has employed you. Consequently, I do hold myself accountable for everything that goes out...".

These responses from the research participants suggest that practitioners are grappling with the ambiguity of relativism and are experiencing systemic challenges in establishing their own moral base line, especially in those contexts of practice that require practitioners to unquestioningly represent their client's interests. The findings indicate that this is more often the case in agency contexts.

Alignment between practitioner, company and society's values and needs

A minority of the participants indicated concern for the alignment of their personal moral frameworks with others in their context of practice. In this regard a participant noted, "... so I think the most important things are that your practice aligns to both your legal and your value frameworks. I hope we are hired by X because we are honest and are people of integrity." However, the majority of the practitioners still seem to rely on ideal standards or external frameworks to guide their ethical conduct and moral judgements, thereby relinquishing decision-making to others. This approach is typical of modernist practice where ethical practice is equated with being loyal to the employer or client by serving their strategic interests, or being good at the craft. It is evident that the majority of practitioners do not yet accept personal moral responsibility and that a level of subjugation to either management's or client's interests directs their ethical role performance. In some instances corporate culture and policies and procedures dictate their behaviour: "(we get)... a lot of guidance from global, this is how you say it, this is why you say it, and this is what not to say". In some instances, blind obedience to authority is demanded from practitioners: "I am the client and you will do this because I am paying your salary... you will do exactly as I say".

Practitioners do experience potential moral conflict but are hesitant to voice their moral concerns. The respondents indicated that they are expected to comply with a culture of practice that is legitimised in their contexts and that is reportedly communicated to them through extensive training, internal communication and induction programmes. There is, however, awareness amongst some of the practitioners that regardless of whether the ethical dilemmas are systemic or specific to the individual, practitioners do need to engage in deeper levels of self-reflection, and truly question themselves

and what they believe in: "...communication practitioners need to try their best to find jobs whose value systems are closely linked to their own because it will make doing their jobs easier and they won't have to question their own moral code". As was noted by one respondent,

It is quite challenging sometimes because you find that what you value isn't necessarily what the organisation values. You would value people and they would only value the bottom line... so you have to ask yourself questions like, 'Do I really belong here or can I go somewhere else?'

While partisan values still seem to dominate South African practice, there are limited indications that some practitioners are starting to question and resist normative practices and existing power structures, in line with more postmodern PR practice.

Responding to ethical dilemmas

This dominance of partisan values in South African practice is also reflected in the practitioners' responses to ethical dilemmas and the justifications that they offer for apparent moral laxity in responding to such dilemmas: "...sometimes they are going to have to do things that they as human beings don't necessarily like or agree with". Another respondent added, "...sometimes you are going to have to compromise some of your own principles because you might have a demanding client". Moreover, their moral compromise is also justified by comments such as,

[s]o I think at the end of the day, your values are your values, but you can't push your values onto your company or clients and so ... sometimes you just have to bite your tongue ... even if you don't agree with them. I mean if it's not harming anybody or it's not illegal and is just your matter of opinion then you kind of have to go with the flow.

It is evident that absence of moral fit between the practitioner and the context of practice results in moral tension for practitioners and that most practitioners are responding to this tension with moral relativism that may affect their moral judgement. By not voicing their concerns, they are subjugating their moral judgement to others. In considering the practitioners' responses, most moral tension seems to be experienced in instances where personal values are not aligned with organisational values. Most practitioners are aware what these moral tensions are, and also of the importance of understanding what has value for others, especially in the communal contexts of practice. They are, however, struggling with how to respond to this tension in contexts where they are constrained by modernist assumptions, assertions and accountabilities.

One of the participants stressed the dilemma posed by the modernist notion of agency, pointing out that their role expectations are informed by the fact that they are paid to act on behalf of others and to further their interests, "but where I draw the line is lying and covering up the truth". The existence of some personal moral baseline is also alluded to by a comment such as,

sometimes you've just go to put your foot down and say 'Guys ... this is not on and is not cool' and if you have that relationship with client, they should never take offence. They should know where they have crossed the line.

These findings point to the existence of moral tension in South African contexts of practice. This tension results in role strain for the practitioners because the contexts of practice are not conducive to ethical role performance. South African contexts of practice are still characterised by modernist assertions such as partisan values, subjugation to authority and power, and instrumental approaches to practice that regard the practitioner as a tool for achieving strategic objectives for clients, instead of a being regarded as a source of valued ethical counsel. Most practitioners appear to be responding to these ethical dilemmas through silence and subjugation, and although some are speaking out, others are resolving moral tension by a propensity to leave contexts where they experience a lack of moral fit. As a result, some practitioners are becoming acutely aware of some of the limitations modernist assumptions have for ethical practice.

The PR practitioner and accountability

A significant number of the participants regarded themselves as accountable for serving the needs of others, but their accountability is mainly viewed as linked to their role as a brand custodian and the responsibilities that the role holds. Their notion of accountability is therefore limited and does not extend beyond their immediate role responsibility. Only two respondents mentioned the importance of personal accountability but this was in reference to the value they attach to their personal reputation.

Accountability to Self

Most of the respondents perceived themselves as being accountable for the manner in which they serve their stakeholder interests. They regard themselves as the custodian of the brands that they work on and they value this as a trusted position that requires accountability to both the client and the employer: "I think that I do need to be accountable because at the end of the day you are representing your own personal brand as well as the agency which has employed you". This sentiment is also shared by another participant who stated, "I don't see myself as a 'passing the buck' person, and I think you grow by being accountable".

There are differing viewpoints about how accountability is facilitated by the industry. A few of the respondents made it clear that the industry is demanding, and that stepping into the industry meant that practitioners need to be clear on their own moral baselines, and the difference between what is right and what is wrong: "There shouldn't be any blurred lines or grey ... it's either white or black". However, there were other practitioners who emphasised the relativity of practice, "... there are great cross sections where we all know what is good and what is bad, but then we lose ourselves in the grey areas". For some, personal judgements are those that prevail, "... I need to judge how the situation is for me to actually be responding in the right way".

Accountability to others

The findings indicate that while there is moral awareness of the needs of others, the conceptualisation of others is more indicative of a reflexive than a reflective approach to PR practice. Only two participants indicated the importance of adopting a more reflective approach, with one of them stating, "I definitely think it is a strategic role

in moving away from the inside-out approach and use a more outside-in approach and actually listen to what it is our audiences are saying...". While the participants demonstrate moral awareness and understanding of organisational and societal values, none of the respondents who were interviewed pointed to its importance, or seemed to reflect on the complexity of facilitating stakeholder relationships within a broader societal context. Instead they tend to assume a narrow and reflexive view that limits their responsibility to representing and acting on behalf of the organisation, and its clients. This limits their complexity of accountability because they are only assuming ethical responsibility for the direct "Other". This is evident from the fact that the majority of the participants describe their own roles using traditional terminology such as brand custodian, gatekeeper, informer and relationship manager, and that their primary role focus is their relationship with their clients and employers.

Although one participant made mention of a 360-degree approach in serving stakeholder interests, the majority of the participants had specific traditional views of whose interests they serve, namely government, media, employees, consumers and their clients. A few participants acknowledged the importance of broader stakeholder interests, while marginalised stakeholders are not even considered. This suggests that South African practitioners do not appear to acknowledge the complexity of their accountability, and still see their accountability as narrowly defined by the institutions that they serve. Given this limited view, the participants' responses do not reflect a deeply felt awareness of the self, the circumstances and the potential of the calling, or a consideration of the nature and integrity of community. It would appear as if the practitioners have not yet embraced postmodern notions of ethicality, such as otherness, difference and marginality as modes of experience, despite their stated commitment to serving the needs of others.

While the importance of dialogue is acknowledged, this dialogue is aimed at establishing transactional symmetry between the practitioner and the client, rather than a relational-modal approach aimed at collaboration and collectivism. Predominately, agency participants are concerned with building transactional relationships with their clients. Preference is expressed for monologue engagement that is directed towards educating and informing the client, or providing trusted counsel. Compared to agency participants, the participants from client contexts expressed more concern with serving the interests of a broader stakeholder base and advancing accountability in their stakeholder communities than the agency participants. The participants working in client systems also appear to adopt a more communal and socio-cultural style of practice in which relational capital is more valued than the agency participants who appear to adopt a more managerial and transactional approach in which client retention and the bottom line is valued. Alignment of personal values is also more important to the participants from client contexts than the participants from agency contexts. The participants from agency contexts exhibit a greater likelihood of adopting subjective norms for acceptable behaviour as a result of organisational pressures to perform in accordance with the expectations of clients.

CONCLUSION

Research findings confirm that partisan values still dominate South African public relations practice and that contexts of practice do not facilitate ethical practice by meeting ethical obligations through ethics of care and communality. In addition, practitioners are increasingly subjected to moral tension that leads to role strain. In the absence of clear ethical judgements, practitioners are subjected to increasing moral relativism. This means that practitioners must constantly weigh and try to balance their own position with the needs and expectations of the company, and their ethical obligations with their complexity of accountability.

The findings from this study seems to indicate that the roots of ethical failures in the industry run deep. Serious concern must be raised in respect of individual practitioners' lack of personal moral accountability and the deficient ethical cultures that prevail in their contexts of practice. South African PR practice will continue to be regarded as a "dark art" that lacks legitimacy and value for society unless it can free itself of moral constraints inherent to the reflexive modernist PR practices and assumptions that prevail.

To facilitate a transition away from compliance to codes of conduct towards greater moral accountability, moral character in role enactment must be engaged with on a more profound level. What is required is a moral philosophy for public relations practice that can restore the tainted image of industry through values of collaboration and collectivism, and an ethics of care. As a communitarian philosophy that stresses the importance of interpersonal relationships and values such as harmony and care, the relevance of Ubuntu to South African public relations practice should be considered. Any discussion of the value of ethical communication practice for society must begin with a concern for the nature and integrity of community. Until South African PR practice can embrace communal relationships and approaches to public relations practice within the African social and political context, it will not be in a position to meet its moral obligations to bring about social change and democracy to millions of Africans by embracing other modes of experience that expand their views on justice, and raise their consciousness. Only then can South African practitioners reclaim the art of PR practice.

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